Title	In pursuit of middle knowledge: An enquiry into painting as a means of understanding the presence of death denial in social norms by providing a secular space for critical reflection on the relationship with death, dying, and the dead body
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Publication Date	2024-04-24
Publisher	NUI Galway
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/18171

In Pursuit of Middle Knowledge:

An enquiry into painting as a means of understanding the presence of death denial in social norms by providing a secular space for critical reflection on the relationship with death, dying, and the dead body.

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Submitted in part fulfilment of the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Studio Art
University of Galway and Burren College of Art

Burren College of Art, 2024

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Acknowledgements

This project is as much for myself as it is for you. It is for those of us who have been touched by death, but it is especially for those of us who have not yet been touched by the profound and complete absence it leaves. Record the voices of your mother and father, your brothers and sisters, your children, your friends. Record them before they are sick and near the end — you will forget what they sound like sooner than you think. Remember that death is not outside your body, death is a part of you, and you are designed to die (amongst many other things you are designed to do) and it is acceptable to be terrified of this. Thanks to death one can find purpose in life, even if it is only appreciating that life is brief, and I am grateful to death for bringing me this project, but I hope my death is patient and will allow me more time for now. I am not eager to meet it.

This project did not begin here, it has been a lifelong investigation that will not end with the conclusion of this programme, but it would not have been possible to exist in the form it does now without the support of my partner Adam Dutton and the guidance and encouragement of my advisors Conor McGrady and Dr Eileen Hutton. All of the faculty at the Burren College of Art have had an effect on this project: Dr Ainé Philips, Dr Ruby Wallis, and Dr Miriam de Burca, and I would like to thank the staff of BCA: Dr Lisa Newman, Robert Wainwright, my partner Adam Dutton, the late Martin Nilan, Julia Long, Martina Beuselinck, Ann Hogan, Karen Quinn and President Mary Hawkes-Green for their support and comradery. This project was not without extended moments of strife and without my friends I would not have persevered. They all have their own areas of expertise, beyond bringing levity into my life. So thank you to Aisling Jelinski, Gilad Nilo, Llewyn Maire, Shirley O'Connor, Yachin Chang (张雅琹), and my fellow peers in the PhD programme at

BCA, who can certainly commiserate with navigating a doctorate in the fine arts. There are not many schools who would embrace a painting practice such as mine and I am grateful to Dean Conor McGrady and BCA for accepting my application into the programme and allowing me to paint the way I paint.

Abstract

This practice-based PhD is an enquiry into painting as a means of understanding the presence of death denial in social norms by providing a secular space for critical reflection on the relationship with death, dying, and the dead body.

This thesis posits that painting might create a space of critical reflection, reimagining still life as a type of experiential painting. These paintings contribute to discourse regarding pre-modern art history and a new approach to still life painting since it has adjusted the relationship between painting and the object by using a multi-pronged approach in the studio, using a material link between theme and making. The paintings employ objects to continue to inform the work in an optic, theoretical, and material way and use the sight-size technique, like a more typical still life painting might employ, however the paintings are repositioned on to the floor to reflect the viewer's body and therefore role in interacting with the painting. This creates a type of experiential painting that could serve as a critically reflective space, addressing death denial by way of triggering mortality salience and hence the dual defence method with relevant themes.

The studio research practice developed a multi-pronged approach to still life painting that expanded understanding via experimentation with material in order to approach the painting as an object with specific intent to interrogate the research question, particularly in its exploration of the concept of the visual void. Additionally, both the painting and the act of painting became an application of Maurice Blanchot's cadaver in *Two Versions of the Imaginary* via the use of the historic *en grisaille* technique, allowing the painting, as both an object and an action, to be an exercise in middle knowledge: a state of complete repudiation and acceptance of death. This research project explored relevant philosophical psychology and historical literature in order to understand the nature of modern death denial in Western society, specifically focusing on the phenomena of psychic numbing and its relationship to avoidant behaviour and related social systemic causation regarding fear of death, dying, and the dead body. It attempts to remain secular in execution and avoids overt reference of an afterlife or perceived moral judgement in dying which might be used to ameliorate fear of death or inflate death denial.

This work aims to assist in development of psychic imagery beyond death denial (and psychic numbing) behaviour in that it may present an opportunity for realisation of said behaviour by the viewer -— by inducing discomfort — or provide the opportunity for more advanced critical reflection on the viewer's relationship with death, dying, and the death body.

Documentation of the exhibition that embodies the contribution to knowledge and understanding

A Waiting Shroud Series I: Standing (2020) oil on canvas and dried flowers, 140cm x 210cm

Mummified goat leg displayed on salt, documentation photographs, and graphite studies of shrouds

Detail of salt crystals on the hoof of the mummified goat leg.

A Waiting Shroud Series II: Standing (2022) oil & imitation gold leaf on marble material, 140cm x 210cm

A Waiting Shroud Series III: Seated II (2023) oil, acrylic, & imitation gold leaf on paper,

350cm x 410cm x 570cm

Casts of L'Inconnue de la Seine in lead, beeswax, bronze powder, and paraffin wax

Detail of beeswax and paraffin & bronze powder casts of L'Inconnue de la Seine

A Waiting Shroud Series III: Seated (2023) oil on marble material, 140cm x 210cm

Complete installation of *A Waiting Shroud Series III: Seated* - including the chair

Cast of L'Inconnue de la Seine in lead and silicone mould of a pig's heart

Cast of L'Inconnue de la Seine in lead

Silicone mould of a pig's heart

Part One:

The Reflective Analysis of the Theoretical & Historical Context of the Research

Introduction to Part One

      This practice-based research project is an enquiry into painting (as an action) and paintings (as object) as a means of realising the presence of death denial in Western (i.e. countries in Western Europe and the United States but might apply to other countries currently under the United States' cultural hegemony) social norms, by providing a secular space for critical reflection on the relationship with death, dying and the dead body.[1] Writings and case studies by historians, anthropologists, and psychiatrists have been consulted for their expertise to inform and effect experimentation in the studio, resulting in a process that engages with Turn-of-the-20th-Century painting as a means of spotlighting persisting late 1800s thought in contemporary times, particularly in the context of death denial policy and behaviour. The paintings developed as a result of this doctoral enquiry aim to use — in order to analyse — this methodology of layering, mimetic representation (as in an image that is made to capture the appearance of the natural world with acceptable accuracy, albeit somewhat subjective to aesthetic taste): the retinal and textural nature of paint that allows for the convincing construction of illusory form as it appears to the eye, as demonstrated by painting throughout history. To use it in a mimetic way is to attempt to represent nature as it presents in physical space, including colour, texture, and perceived weight (or movement depending on the subject) with curated intent, and a finish driven result. Paintings that use mimetic representation present to the eye as physically present by optical illusions situated in rules of nature – it is optically real but cannot exist. With this method, work might imitate conflicting psychic imagery or psychic inertia (or psychic numbing), like what might be encountered in the paradox of the cadaver as an example, which will be further contextualised in Chapter Three. Paint possesses a tactility and retinal capability that has made it a long-used medium with a variety of methods of use. The retinal, almost deceitful, nature of paint might be ideal for exploring the tangible but unknowable nature of death.

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[1] The use of secularity in the research enquiry is primarily to stress the avoidance of Western pseudo-Buddhism, mindfulness, an afterlife, or other religious theory that might be used to alleviate fear of death or even exacerbate death denial. To research and discuss death denial while devoid of theistic symbolism is possible, especially through the lens of contemporary psychology, which is where this project draws great influence. It is important to emphasise that painting can bring about great emotional upheaval. This should not be mistaken for theistic symbolism, or post-religious themes, imparted by the researcher. However, the researcher, can recognise that some of the historical artworks discussed were produced in the context of certain forms of theistic symbolism. Technique of historical painting, not the theme of historical painting, is emphasised, with the content of the work being influenced by the studio process discussed in Chapters Six and Seven.

This body of work situates itself amongst other critically engaged contemporary artwork, ideally mimetic representational paintings, that approach death as a subject in some way. In specific terms this field addresses the quotidian death in the West and the idea of the void as it relates to mortality salience and is critically addressed in a secular way.[2]

There are many artworks —historic and contemporary— that might address death thematically, but typically focus on violent or wrongful death, political death, disease, extinction, or otherwise sensational death (Figure 1; Figure 2). Often there is focus on the psychological effects attached to death and dying such as trauma, memory, or the passage of time (Figure 3). These types of deaths are often focused on as they have other themes or issues to address and sometimes exemplify a common death denying thought process: death as an outside, malignant force (Kübler-Ross, 1969, p. 7). Other death focused artwork might critique current body disposal practices in the West and might offer more ecological solutions via trans-disciplinary studio practice (Figure 4).

Left: Fig. 1. Lee, M. (2022) *Carriers.* [online image].

Right: Fig. 2. Richter, G. (1988) *Dead*. [oil on canvas]. At: New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

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[2] The West being the typical geopolitical term meaning nations and states deriving their political, religious, philosophical, and economic beliefs from the traditions of Western Europe like the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, and France. Typically, the term is used to describe American and Western European interests and influences (Krupansky, 2018).

Left: Fig. 3. Bai, M. (2019) *Conjuring of a future full of pasts*. [online image].
Right: Fig. 4. Lee, J. R. (2016) *Infinity suit*. [online image].

      This field not only lacks paintings – photography and installations would appear to be the most prevalent – but also lacks a specific, critical fixation on the everyday, or as referred to in this project: quotidian – death and the individual's reaction to it. Focusing on the quotidian death instead of related trauma or sensational or perceived wrongful (as in an accidental or violent) deaths narrows the breadth of the complex theme of death to the more typical death that would be experienced by the average citizen in the West and specifies the gap in the field of artwork that this project aims to contribute to. To engage this type of death, the practice expanded on formal elements of still life (the genre of painting an arrangement of objects) and moved away from the everyday object or scene that might signify the act of dying or the deceased. Instead, elements of anonymity and universality of the body were re-interpreted as still life. In addition: the physical positioning of the painting and sight-size technique (painting an object or figure at life size) is used so as to engage the viewer's reflective role in relation to the painting. However, the nature of painting being one of discovery as one observes and interacts with a subject for an extended period of time, inherently removes certain elements of control which allows for instinctive and reactionary spontaneity to the subject in order to develop the —a hallmark of creative practice. This method of painting, informed by theory, creates at least one neutral double of an existing object.

This practice uses a multi-pronged research method engaged with the material to develop an understanding of materials of preservation, Western funerary practices, and decay in a physical sense and subsequently applying that knowledge to the studio process. These prongs of research inform the painting both as a noun and a verb: how the paint is applied, the colour palette used, the size and composition of the image, and finally how it is hung. Each of these decisions are put into effect to be disseminated by the viewer and to provide depth of understanding for the creator as the image is being made. Ultimately, these paintings seek to expand the psychic state of middle knowledge: 'a state hovering between complete acceptance and repudiation of the imminence of death' (Weissman & Hackett, 1961 p. 250). They explore the image in both a psychological and retinal way, visually building with *Two Versions of the Imaginary* by Maurice Blanchot (1955), and philosophical psychiatric theory on the death denial (and related psychic inertia) phenomena, which this project suggests matured during the turn of the 20th century and continues in the conditions of current Western, neoliberal societies.

Chapter One: Why Death, Dying, and the Dead Body

Engaging with philosophical and psychoanalytical writing on death, in addition to relevant artwork that references death, makes apparent the massive scope of related themes. While conducting this research, it became necessary to interrogate which aspects of death needed to be scrutinized and how fear related to different aspects of death. The scope of death is far too broad to be dealt with generally. Firstly, the quotidian, or average death in the West became the death of focus.[3] To proceed with critical intent of the paintings being developed, the term 'quotidian death' began to be used order to name and discuss the specific type of death to which the enquiry is referring. This is to set this death, and the theoretical approach of the work, apart from other deaths such those that are political or violent in nature. In this way 'quotidian death' would refer to the death of a perceived elderly person in the hospital or hospice, the death that one might expect from someone in Europe or the United States who lived the typical lifespan of approximately 80.1 and 76.33 years (Eurostat, 2024; Data Commons, 2022). This would exclude 'wrongful' deaths such as death of those perceived as young, which is considered unusual in modern Western society, or death by way of physical violence. It is less present in the field of contemporary, critically engaged artwork, which tends to focus on the violent, political death, or related phenomena such as memory. It is also the death that death denial tends to affect in social norms, both the funeral home and the hospital or hospice (Ariès, 1981) – which is logical in its own way, since it is the death most in the West will experience.

Fear would seem to differ depending on the stage of death discussed (Barnes, 2017) be it the process of dying or dying people (Ariès, 1981), the (assumed) void that is the absence of consciousness (i.e. death) (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pszczynski, 2015), existential fear of being forgotten (related to complete extinction/annihilation) (Lifton, 1979), and disgust (fear) of the corpse (Becker, 1973; Lifton, 1979). Each of these fears are complex enough to warrant individual study, which is not feasible for a practice-based project such as this; however, this diversity of fear regarding death made it apparent that the work must not

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[3] Death and fear of death is not only massive in scope but is also tied to regional culture and history. It is not feasible for this project to comprehensively examine fear of death on a worldwide scale as visual language used by regional art practices are not universal since they are also tied to regional culture and history. Additionally, the researcher acknowledges the reality of being raised in the West and has thus experienced life in this culture exclusively.

only focus on the quotidian death with specificity, but it also must engage specific aspects of death that death denial and existential anxieties affects. Fear of the corpse, fear of the void (death), and fear of dying (as in both the process of dying and the dying person) became regularly recurrent themes whilst reviewing expert writing on death terror and death denial.

Death denial would seem to have similarities to psychic numbing as it is in response to encountering something that triggers thoughts of death, dying, or the dead body. Lifton explains the phenomena of psychic numbing in his book *The broken connection:*

> Anxiety, or the possibility of anxiety, can bring on that [psychological] inertia, can readily lead to psychic numbing. Rather than experience anxiety, the mind constricts. The symbolizing process, or at least elements of it, shut down... so we may say that anxiety produces a disorder of feeling and action: one either feels and does too much or too little. Images either abound in unmanageable excess or are closed down to the point of virtual disappearance. When tension gives way to anxiety, something fundamental is lost. What is lost... is an equilibrium of feeling, imagery, and action… The numbing is bound up with death equivalents, and we shall see it to be a key to psychiatric disturbance in general. What is involved is not so much the failure of vinegar to be converted into wine as a shutting down in the production of both. (1979, pp 130 – 131)

As explained by Lifton, it is not merely the feeling (or clinical disorder) of anxiety but also the potential of feeling anxiety that can initiate psychic numbing, implying that one might engage in avoidant behaviour to evade the chance of distress as caused by anxiety. While avoidance can be used in a beneficial way on occasion, it is important to recognise the difference between protection of the self and the loss of equilibrium of feeling, imagery, and action.

> We know very well that to repress means more than to put away and to forget... It means also to maintain a constant psychological effort to keep the lid on and inwardly never relax our watchfulness… Therefore, in normal times we move about... without ever believing in our own death, as if we fully believed in our own corporeal immortality. We are intent on mastering death... A man will say, of course, that he knows he will die some day [sic], but he does not really care. He is having a good time living, and he does not think about death and does not care to bother about it – but this is a purely intellectual, verbal admission. The affect of fear is repressed. (Becker, 1973, p. 17)

When this project discusses death denial it specifically addresses behaviour that denies death in places where death should be, which is ultimately unhelpful to the psychic processing of death and related complexities. A few examples of this behaviour as it presents in the West could be:

1. Transforming the macabre into the more generalised meaning of grim or gruesome, which, outside of what is considered acceptable entertainment, has become taboo to discuss in everyday life as it might elicit thoughts of death (Gorer in Ariès, 1981, p. 578). This disallows meaningful discussion of death outside of the actual event of dying or at the funeral, in which it may not be allowed to prevent emotional discomfort for a member of the conversation.

2. Language that is intended to appease the dying (or deceased) but in fact serves to disacknowledge either the feelings or realities of the dying's condition. Funeral services that choose to not speak the word dead, death, or dying in any discussion of or service in memory of the dying/deceased, choosing to instead use vague euphemisms. Commonplace vocabulary that diminishes the experience of the dying could be the use of the term battling regarding disease, as though dying is a contest to win or lose, which in turn equates death as personal failure (Ariès, 1981). Misplaced hopes of improbable cures of terminal diagnoses which can be seen as wishes for the dying to get well soon, or discussion of an intangible will to live that are intended to soothe the dying, the entourage of the dying, or the bereaved. One might hear sentiments similar to: the dying was so healthy, and did the dying have any pre-existing conditions? Both inappropriately frame health as a moral quality, implying death has no part of a healthy or moral life; it is only for the chronically sick and frail, or perhaps someone who is considered morally bankrupt, or lives life in a riskier manner as deemed by others. This framing of death as not a part of life, or as a punishment, is a consistent mindset of death denial noted by Kübler-Ross in her 1960 interviews in the hospital:

> ...death is never possible in regard to ourselves. It is inconceivable for our unconscious to imagine an actual ending of our own life here on earth, and if this life of ours has to end, the ending is always attributed to a malicious intervention from the outside by someone else... we can only be killed; it is inconceivable to die of a natural cause or of old age. Therefore death in itself is associated with a bad act, a frightening happening, something that in itself calls for retribution and punishment. (1969, p. 7)

3. Funerary practices that serve to separate the bereaved from the dead either psychically or physically. This could be softening the appearance of the corpse to appear asleep as opposed to dead (Lifton, 1979), or maintaining cemeteries in an unchanging form (i.e. no exposed dirt on new graves) in order to imply that 'nothing goes on here' (Matthews in Kübler-Ross, 1973, p. 175). This can also be seen in the erasure of dying in the home as a common practice and if death has occurred in the home: the corpse is removed by a funeral service promptly, reducing time spent between the bereaved and the dead body (Doughty, 2014). These practices can hinder emotional processing of grieving, psychic imagery

regarding continuation (Lifton, 1979), physically remove spaces to mourn in public – despite the funeral home being one of the currently acceptable places to mourn – or erase the reality of the frequency of death.

4. The funeral industry as a participant in the free market without public services offered by the state or another institution. This does not place emphasis on appropriate care or guidance of the bereaved or dying; it instead creates competition for acquiring corpses (Ariès, 1981; Doughty, 2014) and therefore financial security.

5. Medical intervention without consent from the dying or, in some cases, the entourage (Kübler-Ross, 1973). This can include sedating the dying if they are difficult to manage, ignoring Do Not Resuscitate requests, and the bereaved or medical staff, unable to accept a terminal diagnosis, scheduling unwanted procedures on the behalf of the dying (Dalton, 2023).

Each of these things would seem to be typically done to avoid emotional distress or the possibility of emotional distress and are usually with the living's comfort in mind over the dying's comfort or needs, which is a popular mindset only since the turn of the 20th century (Ariès, 1981). While it is reasonable — in fact it can be argued as necessary — to believe that the fear of death cannot always be at the forefront of the mind and that it must be repressed in order to perform everyday tasks (Becker, 1973; Lifton, 1979), death denying behaviours and policies do not allow for the presence of death when it is the pressing matter at hand:

> …the paradox lies in attempting to live the examined life without examining death. This particular sequence of diminished death awareness, from adolescence to young adulthood, probably extends to other culture–we need much more study of such matters everywhere–but there is good reason to believe that the… suppression of death imagery… constitutes a cultural suppression of life's possibilities. (Lifton 1979, p. 87)

Fear of death would not seem to inherently lead to a clinical phobia or clinical anxiety such as Thanatophobia or Existential Death Anxiety. Typically, a disorder would require a threshold of distress that significantly disturbs a person's quality of life be it cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour (according to the World Health Organization). These clinical conditions are complex, however, due to the typically repressed, natural fear of death considered by some as transdiagnostic and effect a multitude of disorders (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pzszczynski, 2015). While death denying behaviour could be the result of such

disorders, the breadth of death denial in the infrastructure is so widespread between differing Western countries it would seem to suggest it is born of more typical fear as most of the population would not seem to suffer from clinical death phobia.

It is believed by academics in the field of death philosophy that one of the major difficulties of the human psyche is being aware that death exists and is unavoidable. It is framed as a uniquely human condition due to the current understanding of psychology. (Becker, 1979) Death is not understood fully, even to the extent that the moment of death can be debated with our current understanding of what the body goes through while dying in addition to our ability to keep a body functioning via technological stimulation without brain function that would typically be considered alive (Ariès, 1981). The fears that surround death are multifaceted and encounter complicated and varied psychic imagery which is itself supremely complex as it is tied into a unique upbringing and cultural environment (Lifton, 1979; – Pyszczynski 2015). Ernest Becker asserts in his book *The Denial of Death* his belief that this not only unites psychiatric disorders and compulsions (effectively replacing Freud's preoccupation with sexuality as the primary motivator in human behaviour), but it also unites the social sciences. He claims death terror (as he coins the fear of death and sometimes related death denial behaviour) as a defining aspect of the human identity (half animal and half symbolic - the condition of individuality within finitude [1973, p. 26]) and as such a motivator for human action throughout history. This assertion is not widely accepted by experts performing psychiatric research (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pzszczynski, 2015, p. 4), but it is supported by a growing number of social psychiatrists and this project. The paradoxes involved in these phobias, and their dual nature as a typical fear experienced by the general population, are frequently referred to in this supportive writing and studio process. It is distinctive from death denial as this specific fear or anxiety is the accused cause of psychic numbing as discussed above:

> This self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of a small god in nature… (but at the same time) …man is a worm and food for worms… he is out of nature and hopelessly in it, he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish... His body is material fleshy casting that is alien to him in many ways –the strangest and most repugnant way being that it aches and bleeds and will decay and die... He has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness... and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and the have to live with…everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness–agreed madness, shared madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same. (Becker 1979, pp 26—27)

If one is to ask a person what it is about his, her, or their death that elicits fear, common responses include: (Lifton, 1979; Greenberg, Solomon, and Pzszczynski, 2015; Barnes, 2017)

- Pain of dying
- Fear of being sick
- Fear of losing control of the body
- Fear of decomposing
- Fear of contracting illness from a dead body
- Fear of not existing (this includes fears of missing important things i.e. seeing offspring achieve milestones in life)

These various responses would seem to filter into three categories: death (being without consciousness – the void), the process of dying (or the dying person), and the dead body (and what happens to it/who it is). It is important to understand the differences between these fears as it allows the context of how they developed to be revealed and considered regarding death denial behaviour.

Fear of not existing (the void) or loss of consciousness
Death

Psychiatrists involved in the recent research project *Thirty Years of Terror Management Theory* (sometimes referred to as TYoTMT) posit that the core fear of death is that a person will cease to exist (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pzszczynski, 2015). This fear, or sometimes anger, can manifest in fear of missing out on important life events of offspring or loved one (Lifton, 1979). This fear can be considered a reasonable one, not one that has been developed over time like the fear of the process of dying or the dead body as proposed by various experts in this field (this will be further discussed in Chapter Two). This void of not existing after death is presumably the same void as before life, but it is much less common to be afraid of pre-existence, though it can happen (Barnes, 2017).

Fear of pain and/or embarrassment of vulnerability during final days
(Nature's rule over the body)
Dying

Fears that revolve around the pain or embarrassment of dying (being sick, losing control of the body), or encountering someone who is dying could be attributed to a conflict of self-awareness and nature: death might remind our self-awareness that we are animals, not any different from other creatures on Earth. Some in psychology, like Becker and researchers continuing his work in TYoTMT, would argue that nearly anything that reminds a Western mind of this fact such as defecation, sex, and other compulsive bodily functions or secretions is rejected.

Fear of the Cadaver/Decomposition
(Immortality symbolism breakage)
The dead body

An additional fear that is common enough, but notably seems to have a stronger hold in the United States, and less of a hold in countries such as Ireland or Sweden, is the fear of the dead body. There are specific fears of the dead body spreading disease or that the body is thought of as unclean or unsafe for someone not specifically trained to handle it. [4] This is a relatively new fear as it was common up to 100 years ago in the West for the dead body to be washed, cared for, and spent time with, within the home before being passed on for funeral preparations (Doughty, 2014). A notable expression of this behaviour is the Irish Wake, in which the body can be kept in the home for a public gathering to offer condolences. Outside of cultural changes or the influence of modernism, the cadaver presents a specific imagery confusion: it is at once both someone one knows and not that person. This paradox of existing and not existing at once is discussed in Maurice Blanchot's *Two Versions of the Imaginary* becoming a key part of the painting practice and will be further developed in Chapter Three and Part Two as it became a core element of the method applied to the painting practice.

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[4] Since corpses do not cough, sneeze, vomit, or move, concern over the dead body's ability to spread disease that the living version of the same body might have possessed, especially within the first few days of death, is unlikely (Doughty, 2014).

Decomposition of the body is, again, currently symbolic of the body as ultimately a part of nature (Becker, 1973). This has been further complicated by some contemporary Western and Christian religious practice that associate the dead body with immortality (Lifton 1979, p. 109) denying the body its nature as something that decays. Symbolically, the immortality of the deceased's believed soul is projected upon the cadaver via practices like cosmetic embalming.

Delineating the manifestations of fear in their casual and clinical forms, is critical to the interrogation of the research question since it aides in developing specific visual language to engage or address those fears in some way. In the beginning stages of this project, the amelioration of fear of death was discussed as a possible goal, but upon developing further understanding of the sources of various fears and the nature of repression of these fears for daily function, the amelioration of fear of death seemed overly general and unnecessary (if not impossible). What would seem to hinder the ability of the human mind to engage with the symbolic imagery which it is capable of (Lifton, 1979) is human-made behaviour that is changeable. While self-consciousness might cause great distress, it is not a distress that cannot be better understood and managed, as TYoTMT investigates.

Chapter 2: Historical & Critical context: modesty in the late 1800s and its contribution to Western death denial

Technology & Progress | Man vs Nature: A potential maturation of god mind vs animal body conflict

When one reads Becker's *The Denial of Death,* he offers his insights into the paradox of a person's awareness of their future death; he continuously breaks down the binary opposition of what is referred to as the symbolic mind (or god brain– i.e. creativity) and the animal body (that is able to die): '…he is out of nature and hopelessly in it.' (1973, p. 26) To a creature that is self-aware and can comprehend the inevitability and, in part, finality of death but is still subjected to die, no matter how creative, creates an internal struggle, which results in the body feeling almost alien to said creature according to Becker and his collection of philosophers. Specifically, he points to bodily functions being framed as repugnant and its fate grotesque because it can feel pain, excrete, and decay. Because of this, 'man seeks to control the mysterious processes of nature as they manifest themselves within his own body. The body cannot be allowed to have ascendancy over him.' (Becker 1973, p. 33)

In a modern case study, Goldenberg notes that Death Thought Accessibility is increased when subjects were reminded of bodily products, perceived disgusting secretions and fluids, and the physical aspects of sex: 'Mortality salience increases denial of similarities between humans and other animals, disgust in response to bodily products, distancing from... animalistic activities (such as sex) and even avoidance of physical sensations.' (2015, Greenberg, Solomon, and Pzszczynski p. 24)

The recent trans-disciplinary case study, which is intended as a continuation of Becker's work, would seem to support the more philosophical depiction of the god brain at odds with the animal body which has similarities to commonly known qualities of European modesty in the late 1800s, particularly in the rejection of physical compulsions and products of the body. The Experimental Social Psychology study: *Thirty Years of Terror Management Theory* documented how thoughts of death affect behaviour and hypothesized behavioural tactics to cope with death thought found in social norms. These authors posit that a foundational cause of such existential anxiety and denial of death is the result of living in a

symbolic world that rejects the animal nature of the body (Becker, 1973; Greenberg, Solomon, and Pzszczynski, 2015). This terror associated with the body as an animal doomed to perish and the subsequent separation of the mind as spiritual and immortal is often proposed as a fundamental source of existential death anxiety and many psychological disorders in contemporary Terror Management Theory, illustrating the continuation of nineteenth century thought into today. *A Body in Terror: Denial of Death and the Creaturely Body* by Jamie L Goldenberg similarly concludes that the vulnerable body is a continual reminder of mortality (2012).

While it cannot be stated with absolute authority, it is not difficult to imagine any person throughout history feeling such a way, however, casual observation (and even intimate knowledge) of life and history would infer that little in nature, including humankind, exists in a static way. Psychoanalytic or philosophical writing can present theories proposing the way the mind thinks with the implication that the mind has worked in such a manner consistently throughout time, unchanging regardless of the various conditions wherein people have lived and died. There are cultures outside of the West that do not find bodily functions as repulsive — in modern cities in the People's Republic in China there are toilets with no doors, defecation can be public — do they not suffer from the same paradoxical god brain versus the animal body complex, or are their repulsions of a different function but essentially the same in nature? Do those who posit this crisis of this binary nature infer that someone in the European Bronze Age struggled with the same internal conflict? In following this train of thought: at what point did it become common belief that the nature of the body was the foil to self-consciousness or perhaps, at what point did it become something that caused anxiety and psychic inertia to the point of social dysfunction in the shape of death denial? Perhaps there is a time in history when this phenomenon seemed to culminate into what has been seen for the past fifty years: widespread death denial in the places where death is meant to be.

A candidate for an environment that might have cultivated such a mindset (in the West) could be Europe around the turn of the twentieth century. The modern era's conception of progress aimed to overcome certain difficulties with nature via its upturn in technological achievement, which, if following the internal struggle of creativity versus mortality, might cause a man to imagine himself able to overcome the reality of his being an animal subjected to the rule of nature (i.e. death) (Ariès, 1981). Technology allowed for a better understanding of diseases: how to treat them and how to protect others from contracting them. This

understanding and application of medicine would seem a reasonable catalyst of restructuring some degree of philosophical thinking in Europe, leading to changes in the hospital, the modern funeral industry, and moulded today's death denial. During her interviews of dying patients and hospital staff, Kübler-Ross observed that 'We live in the illusion that, since we have mastered so many things (in medicine), we shall be able to master death, too.' (Kübler-Ross, 1973, p. 175) This logic could be applied to the dead body as well through improvements to embalming made during this era, which would protect the corpse from decay. Some of the issues surrounding embalming will be further discussed in Chapter Three. For now, let us hypothetically say that throughout history, a person at any time might have felt their self-awareness and mortal, animal body at odds, that they were not in fact one, would not one success of human-made technology over a law of nature (i.e., the force that ultimately determines the animal body must die) after another widen this divide? One might be able to convince themselves that it could be possible for improvement in technology until the erasure of the most feared rule of nature, death, was de-mystified.[5] If one is not able to accept that imagination – the god brain as Becker refers to it – is limited by being an organ in the body, just as the eye can only perceive a range of colours due to its physical structure, then the perception of the body, the self, and future death would seem inherently skewed towards existential crisis. This perspective is not intended to diminish the capability of the imagination or the value of the self, just as the limited colour that is perceivable can be awe inspiring and interpreted for creative work, it instead resituates the god brain as a part of the body to relieve such conflict.

The Middle Age's macabre transferred from the decaying body to the dying person
Separating the dying and the dead body from the entourage

A possible example of the god brain, animal body conflict having influence on the mentality of a culture was the late 1800s era's use of the macabre of the Middle Ages. Instead

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[5] Examples of this in 2023 can be found in the death denying technological and medical experiments being pursued by the super-rich such as Bryan Johnson, who has spent two million dollars a year on plasma infusions from his son's and father's blood in an effort to preserve his youth and extend his natural life expectancy (Kirkey, 2023) and billionaire and self-proclaimed anti-death activist Peter Thiel's investments into many cryogenically freezing corpses, including his own, for later revival. While Thiel has doubts on the success of the procedure, he plans to follow through regardless due his being 'against it (death).' (Brown, 2014)

of preserving the historical macabre in the context of the decaying body, Europeans of this era instead impressed upon the importance of the beautiful dead body and the macabre element was applied to the dying body. While studying trends of death and dying in France from the 12th to the 20th century, Philipe Ariès notes this shift:

> In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the decrepit old man of the late Middle Ages was replaced by the handsome patriarch of Jean-Baptoste Greuze, an image more suitable to the romantic theme of the beautiful death. But in the late nineteenth century, we see a return of the hideous images of the era of the macabre… The difference is that now everything that had been said in the Middle Ages about decomposition after death is transferred to the period before death, the agony. (1981, p. 569)
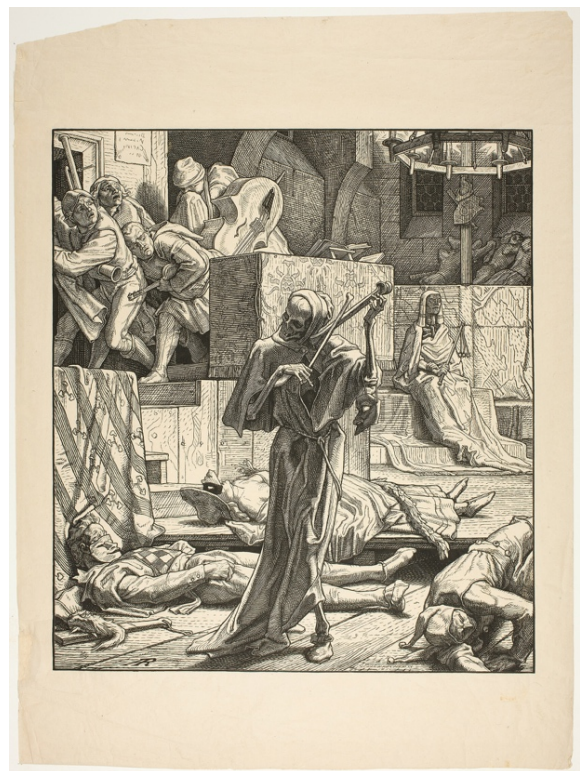
Left: Fig. 5. Dürer, A. (1513) *Knight, death, and the devil.* [engraving]. At: New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Right: Fig. 6. Rethel, A. (1831) *Death the strangler, the first outbreak of cholera at a masked ball in Paris*. [Woodcut on cream wove paper]. At: Chicago: Art Institute Chicago.

Ariès finds in literature and hospital records from the time a shift in how dying is presented and how it is reacted to by the hospital and the entourage:

> Death no longer inspires fear solely because of its absolute negativity; it also turns the stomach like any nauseating spectacle. It becomes improper, like the biological acts of man, the secretions of the human body. It is indecent to let someone die in public. It is no longer acceptable for strangers to come into a room that smells of urine, sweat, and gangrene, and where the sheets are soiled. Access to this room must be forbidden, except to a few intimates capable of overcoming their disgust, or to those indispensable persons who provide certain services. A new image of death is forming: the ugly and hidden death, hidden because it is ugly and dirty. (1981, p. 569)

This disgust of the animal body, which has been applied to many acts of the body by previous modesties, is now applied to the dying body. In the context of a communicable disease — this era did suffer tuberculosis — this is a reasonable practice to adopt as it could prevent the transmission of disease, however this was applied to many dying in the hospital and endured beyond the struggle with endemics to those dying from uncommunicable diseases or other conditions. Outside of practical protection from contagions, this practice separates the dying and the entourage which allows emotional avoidance of innumerable complexities involved with dying and grieving.

The late 1800's 'ugly and dirty death' as coined by Ariès (1981, p. 568) resulted in changes to social, hospital, and funerary habits many of which continue into contemporary times. A significant change began with the practice of hiding a terminal diagnosis from the patient. Both the entourage and the medical staff kept this information from the dying patient, believing if the patient was unaware of their fate, then suffering or awkwardness might be avoided for everyone involved. Literature at the time also showcases the mindset as Tolstoy writes of them in *Three Deaths:*

> ... he does not really need to be warned. He already knows. But his public acceptance would destroy an illusion that he hopes to prolong a little longer, and without which he would be treated as a dying person and obligated to behave like one. So he says nothing. And everyone becomes an accomplice to a lie born of this moment which later grows to such proportions that death is driven into secrecy. The dying person and those around him continue to play a comedy in which "nothing has changed," "life goes on as usual," and "anything is still possible." (Ariès, 1981, p. 562)

Through this work Ariès presents a change in power dynamic between the dying and the entourage, instead of the initiative and power belonging to the dying person it has been reversed. Tolstoy's dying characters are infantilised:

> ...it is the duty of the entourage to keep the dying man in ignorance of his condition. How many times have we heard it said..., "At least I have the satisfaction of knowing that he never

felt a thing." "Never feeling a thing" has replaced "feeling his death to be imminent." Dissimulation has become the rule. (1981, p. 562)

Previously, the dying person dictated the terms of their end of life and used the knowledge of the final days for personal needs and socialising, but with death hidden from the dying and the room of the dying person considered inappropriate for others to visit, the dying person is isolated, infantilised, and agency is removed. The death no longer becomes about the dying person; instead, it becomes curated for the entourage to avoid as much emotional difficultly as possible. This isolation and infantilising of the dying person might create an environment where psychic numbing could thrive. This phenomenon continues into the treatment of the dead body if altered to appear sleeping as opposed to dead or if altered to attempt to prevent decay. The goal of such proceedures is again to avoid as much emotional difficulty as possible. If no one acknowledges dying outright and refuses to speak of it, the symbolising process necessary to process the death could halt.

This scenario would seem to recall the rejection of the animal body (unsightly/excreting) as is represents a reminder of nature's rule over the body (death) which would cause distress, which in turn might bring about anxiety. The separation of the dying from the entourage is to avoid this unbalanced response (i.e., panic, or paralytic). This potential loss of balance in action might then cause the mind to constrict and psychic numbing occurs to avoid such discomfort (Lifton, 1979). The late 1800s determined being unaware of actively dying was ideal for both the dying and the entourage, which can be seen in its modern form as dying in one's sleep or otherwise being unaware of the final stages of dying (i.e., being sedated medically). The dying person does not know what is going on and therefore does not have to engage in potential distress and the entourage can emotionally rest knowing that such potential distress was avoided. 'What today we call the good death… the death that gives no warning. "He died tonight in his sleep: He just didn't wake up."...' (Ariès, 1981, p. 587) This rationalization is partly why Ariès coins the name 'The Invisible Death' (1981, p. 557) for death in the 21st Century.

European modesty in the late 1800s (as in avoidance of the difficult or what is deemed inappropriate) in a general sense could be compared to the psychic numbing response to psychic inertia as it is described by Lifton. This sentiment of not being aware and avoidance might appear in a different manner when compared to the past — it can appear, however, in a near identical way in some cases — but the pattern of psychic numbing to avoid either anxiety or a loss of equilibrium due to anxiety persists.

The 20th Century continued this tendency of separation as modesty by reframing the funeral as a private act instead of the previous tradition of public ceremony, effectively categorising mourning as unsightly. While waning religious practice in the Western population could be partially credited to the death denial phenomena, it does not change the fact that other effective rituals have not replaced it for the general population. Death is still denied in modern secular places like the hospital and funeral homes. Geoffrey Gorer documents this change during the beginning of the 1900s into the 1960s in the UK, documenting that death was no longer marked by ritual of any kind (secular or otherwise), funerals were rarely attended, and outside of the death being announced (softened by sentiments like 'Jesus took her') it was never discussed again due to it being 'too painful' (Ariès 1981, p. 576). Mourning and funerals now become an uncomfortable, private act no longer open to the greater public. The dead body at the funeral either hidden from view or altered to appear less dead. Again, the potential for emotional difficulty cultivates psychic numbing and more elements of dying and death tradition or ritual are denied from the public sphere:

> It is quite evident that the suppression of mourning is not due to the frivolity of survivors but to a merciless coercion applied by society. Society refuses to participate in the emotion of the bereaved. This is a way of denying the presence of death in practice, even if one accepts its reality in principle. (Ariès, 1981, pp 579—580)

While in the 1880s it would appear that the relationship with the animal body and god mind might have become disjointed in part due to technological advances, it would also appear that this belief in technology's ability to overcome nature has continued into the future. Today in the West, death has been virtually eliminated from daily life and technology has advanced to a degree in both reality and fiction to the point where belief in the power of technology would seem to have no limitation, as seen in investments into cryogenic freezing of corpses and experimental plasma infusions by the super-wealthy (Brown, 2014; Kirkeg, 2023).

> Our modern model of death was born and developed in places that gave birth to two beliefs: first, the belief in a nature that seemed to eliminate death; next, the belief in a technology that would replace nature and eliminate death the more surely. (Ariès, 1981, p. 595)

It is important while discussing the technological advancements of medicine to not mistake criticisms of the hospital as a critique of research that aims to keep people healthy.

The desire for self-preservation is normal (not death denial as defined above) and technology allows humans the opportunity to continue to overcome disease and injury. Any critique of medical practice is from the perspective of rejecting death at *all* costs (procedures deemed unnecessary by the dying person) or framing the quotidian death as personal failure (i.e. the reframing of having cancer as a battle to live or die). Lifton acknowledges a maturing of many hospitals' approach to dying by the time he published his work *The Broken Connection* in 1979: 'The recent trend toward death awareness gave rise to… absolute candour, an understandable... reaction to long-standing policies of lying and deceit.' (1979, p. 109) This 'policy of deceit' would seem to refer to the established practice of the late 1800s and turn of the last century (and even later) hospital practices of hiding a terminal diagnosis from the patient. Kübler-Ross found in her 1965 interviews of the dying and hospital staff how this evolved into sedation of dying patients if they became too difficult to manage for staff and even the outright denial that there were even dying in the hospital (Kübler-Ross, 1973; Kübler-Ross in Ariès, 1981). In *The Hour of Our Death* Ariès is critical of the transfer of death to the hospital, unconvinced that doctors are willing to be the modern era caretakers of the dead (hence the development of the secular funeral home) since medicine's purpose is to combat death, which would seem to be a contributor to various death denial practices:

> The transfer of death to the hospital has had profound consequences. It has accelerated an evolution that began in the late nineteenth century and pushed it to its logical conclusion... The doctor cannot eliminate death, but… it has become possible to delay the fatal moment; the measures taken to soothe pain have the secondary effect of prolonging life… Sometimes this prolonging of life becomes an end itself…What interests us is that medicine can cause someone who is almost dead to remain alive almost indefinitely: and not only medicine but the hospital itself, that is, the whole system that turns medical activity into a business and a bureaucracy that obeys strict regulations regarding method and discipline… Death has ceased to be accepted as a natural, necessary phenomenon. Death is a failure… When death arrives it is regarded as an accident… (Ariès, 1981, pp 585 – 586)

The issue of dying in the hospital is a complex one, especially regarding the criticism of the ideal death as not knowing that one is dying as the concept of less pain seems a kinder fate. Is it denying death to provide physical comfort for the dying or is it foremost an issue of consent? The question of the hospital can lead one to ponder the delineation of what aspects of the extension of life breaks down our ability to symbolically process dying and what does not. The query at times might seem impossible without appropriate expertise in medicine and psychology.

Denying Death in the Western Funeral Industry

The softening of death imagery presents as death denial in a variety of ways in the cemetery and the funeral home. In particular, embalming is particularly disruptive to psychic imagery (Lifton, 1979, p. 109) and became more common practice in the mid-nineteenth century. It was later believed by some to have been perfected by Alfredo Salfia in 1920 with his work on two-year-old Rosalia Lombardo (Piombino, 2008), who will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Three. The altering of the corpse with application of makeup and the physical support of the eyes to remain 'full' and sewn shut, along with the mouth, is intended to make a corpse seem 'more alive' and asleep as opposed to the more sunken corpse (to spare the bereaved of distress) outside of effecting decay like embalming intends to do. The softening (denial) of death symbolism can be found in the cemetery in the form of the medieval macabre skulls transformed into cherubim (Figure 7), artificial grass over freshly lain dirt to hide the newly buried, or not being allowed to witness the lowering of the casket into the grave (Kübler-Ross, 1973). While some of these are more subtle than others, they do not go without effect on the psyche and consistently deny death in places where death should be. Cosmetic medical processes like embalming are widely criticised by those who write on death denial. Lifton notes that the desire for immortality has been shifted onto the corpse due to the embalming practice, which has confused the psychic imagery of what exactly our rituals are symbolising as the immortal thing that connects us to those who survive us:

> ...the American emphasis on cosmetic embalming can confuse the matter considerably, as a number of writers have pointed out. They 'play down the death of the person and... create the illusion of a living being... [who] will receive his friends on last time, in a flower-laden room and to the sound of sweet or serious --never gloomy--music… The psychological confusion here is the reliance on the dead body for the symbolisation of continuity and immortality. It is the confusion of the literal and the symbolic. (Lifton, 1979, p. 109)
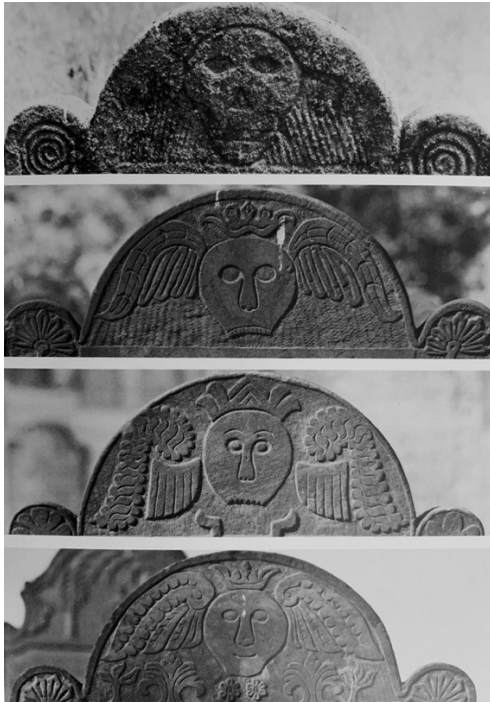
Fig. 7. Ariés, P. (1981) *The hour of our death.* [photo reproduction].

Embalming would seem to cyclically inflate death denial culture and difficulty psychically encountering the dead body. It both creates more death denial and as death denial grows it begets more traditions akin to embalming. Softening the corpse, immortalising the corpse, and separating the entourage from any ritual care of the corpse in such a way would seem to risk a person's connection with their own mortality and the finality of the deceased person. Once again threatening an existential anxiety that would seem to bring on psychic numbing, which would in turn continue avoidant practices like death denial.

> Without some ritualized connection with the dead, man becomes rootless, severed from the great chain of being, vulnerable to the cast variety of human and animal ghosts that populate his imagination and symbolize his dread of total severance from fellow human beings. (Lifton 1979, p. 99)

This continued softening and removal of the dying and the dead body has created a significant omission of death from the living in everyday life and, in tandem with death denial in the funerary industry and ritual, it has created a paradox of living observed lives without observed death. Chapter Three will continue discussion of the cadaver's effect on psychic imagery and its further application to the practice-based research.

Synchronicity in Studio Practice —Similar psychology that might be reflected in painting methods of the era

Painting in late 1880s saw alumni from the École des Beaux-Arts and related schools begin experimentation with Impressionism and Pointillism, however this project is taking a critical view of the popular mindset of the European at this time. Therefore, art movements on the fringes of what the Academy would accept into the Salon are not necessarily the pieces on which to focus. This is not to say they do not represent the era in a relevant way, but the qualities of the Modern Art movement will be applicable later. At this time the technical method of painting that was taught by the École, and related schools, particularly the emphasis on form, the use of layers, mimicry, and the finish of the painting will be addressed. Technical painting methods in this practice influenced by this era are used in part to analyse and critique late 1800 Western thinking and the use of layers to cover, refine, and construct a convincing reality that echoes nature as it presents itself to the eye. Subject matter in this time might be relevant in some way, however this becomes quite varied, while the basics of technique and mimicry used is relatively consistent throughout, hence the focus on technique over content.

The finish (*fini*) of the painting was a debated thing at the time. (1971, Boime) Moving out of fashion was a surface described as *polie et blaireautée* at the time which is commonly translated as polished and licked but literally translates to polished and badgered as a *blaireau* was a badger-hair brush used to smooth out any brush stroke left after a painting session (Boime, 1971; Krüger, 2013). The painters of the École sought out a concept of truth via the finish of their paintings and some had begun to turn on the idea of badgering the surface, feeling that such paintings became too static. Technical methods from this era include sight-size drawing, dividing the object in light from object in dark with a clear termination line, emphasis on form over detail, and specific stages of indirect painting (i.e., drawing stage or *croqis* with a subsequent underpainting, or *en grisaille*, and finally a glaze or a direct *impasto* layer to finish).

These methods value the design of the painting over a direct copy of nature, but the believability of such an image existing within the rules of nature was emphasised. It did not seem to be common practice to use the photograph to inform paintings as of yet, although examples do exist such as Alphonse Mucha:

Fig. 8. Panepinto, L. (2020) *Mucha's reference photo and poster side by side*. [online image].

The École developed techniques, although not specifically known to this day, are known to have intended to make relatively quick, optically accurate representations of nature in repeatable, reliable steps. It is thought that the typical academic drawing of the figure was limited to twelve hours according to École scholar Ramon Hurtado (2024), who specialises in replicating the technique of Gérôme and maintains a digital collection of academic methods for educational purposes. A common technique that predated the atelier but was a reliable method of mimicry used by many painters in history, was to create a monochromatic or *en grisaille* (in grey) underpainting.

To paint *en grisaille* is to–from an observational painting perspective–strip away distraction and understand the subject's surface in a physical space. *En grisaille* allows the painter to focus on the way light interacts with a surface and where those surfaces turn to and from the light and to and from the painter. *En grisaille* in the context of commonly understood turn-of-the-century painting is incomplete, somewhere in-between the empty canvas and final product, which suited the desire to explore (through the act of painting) the duality of the symbolically confusing landscape of death denial as this project interrogates. This technique would seem to make a painting that both accurately represented the subject

being painted while at the same time looking nothing like the real-life subject matter, which would seem to mimic the general mindset of European or American late 1800s desire to curate and refine many aspects of life and their psychology.

To emphasise again, as it is commonplace for those who paint with optic mimicry (a similar term to mimetic representation in that the goal is to make a painting look the way nature appears to the eye) today, the goal of such techniques was not to identically copy the subject matter. Including detail in a painting was not believed to be a critical element of imagine making that would create a convincing illusion of reality. Form (i.e. the three-dimensional volume of a thing), paired with accurate shape, was believed to communicate the image in a convincing and aesthetically pleasing manner. If one was to hold a still life of the era against the original set up, one would be able to see how a painting might mimic the set up without copying it verbatim. It instead creates its own reality within the painting, contextualising the values, hues, and chroma (or saturation) into a believable space as one might perceive nature to be. This is how the viewer might come to admire the resemblance of a thing in a painting more than they might in the original, as Pascal despairs in Blanchot: "'What vanity is painting which wins admiration for its resemblance to things we do not admire in the original!'" (1953, p. 260) It is because a reality has been specifically curated to be admired using familiar visual vocabulary that make it easily absorbed, something this is somewhat straight forward to do when applying to the creation of images but is complex, or impossible, when applied to the body as the death denying practices of the late 1800s placed on the dying and the dead body. Every step in the method of painting practice had a purpose that informed the step after it and aimed to make each layer of the painting more convincing than the last. These steps essentially broke the subject matter down into, digestible aspects of form through examples that escalated in advancing stages of rendering, allowing the artist to understand and replicate the subject while applying design choices at each step. While it may or may not take more than three steps to perform, it is essentially three conceptual steps, as we can tell by Charles Bargue's lithograph course published in separate volumes between 1866 and 1871.
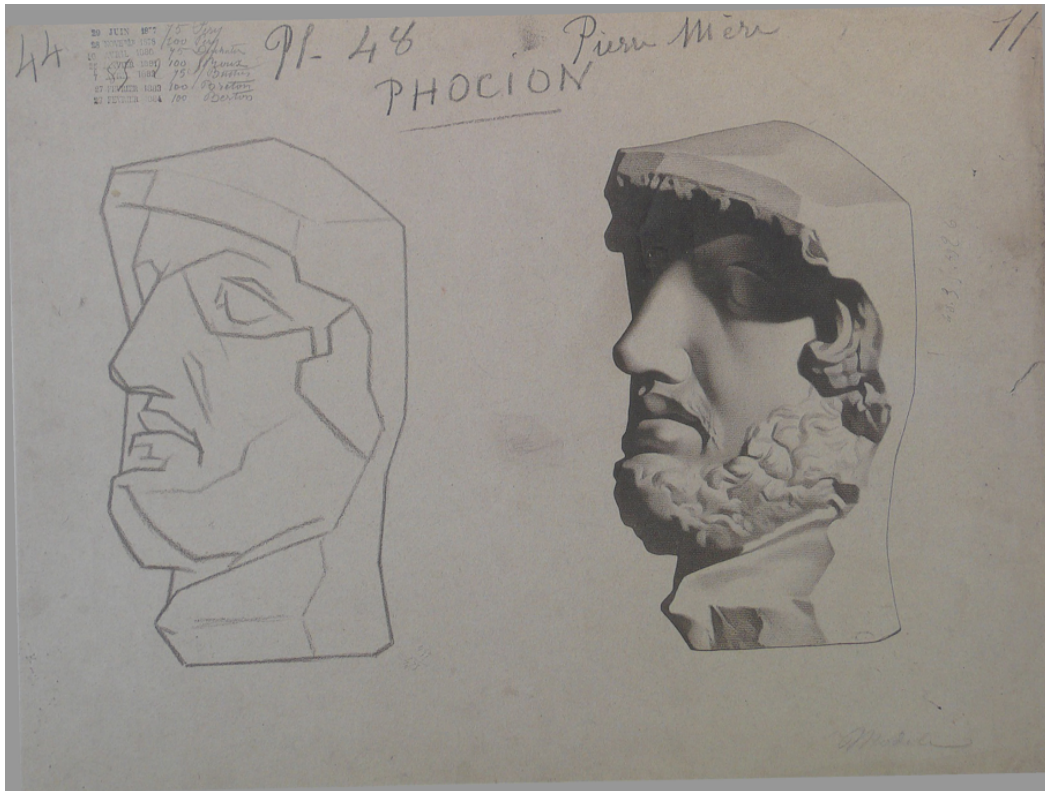
Fig. 9. Bargue, C. (1866) *Plate 1, 48: Phocion.* [reprint of lithograph].

The drawing at particular stages allows the artist to understand the subject two-dimensionally via shape as seen to the left dividing the subject into objects in light and objects in shadow. Shadow shapes were rendered in the second stage and objects in light, including further shapes in light, were rendered in the third and final stage as seen in the image on the right. The same rendering philosophy in Bargue's lithographs could be applied to the painting with the *en grisaille* technique (i.e. rendering the painting in monochrome), which allows the artist to understand the subject three-dimensionally via exclusively value. The glaze (or final *impasto* layer) allows the artist to understand the subject's hue and saturation, separate from value.

If one were to compare this method of painting to the psychology discussed previous, and later on in Chapter Three, one might see a familiar desire to curate and beautify, perhaps to make something more palatable if so desired (although it should be noted that Realism was a popular movement at the time and did not always aim to make reality more palatable). There is also an admiration for nature's rules and the desire to understand in order to replicate said rules — unlike the approach to the dying as previously discussed — however the rules of light or texture might be more agreeable rules than those akin to excreting or dying. To make

a method as replicable as possible but flexible enough to accommodate multiple schools of thought has the feel of something technological, efficient, and appropriately strict. The desire to cover in order to hopefully improve with each layer of the painting, culminating in the *fini*, would seem to encompass the mindset of the time in multiple facets of behaviour in this time, including the desire to cover the unwanted complications of the dying.

A key aspect of the successful optic mimicry of such curated spaces is the interplay between form and void in painting. The straightforward, commonplace example is the delineation of object in light turning into the termination line into object in shadow. This contextualisation of shadow as void (which is more compressed in value) emphasises the breadth of value in the objects in light, which completes the illusion of volume and the interaction of light with a surface. It is a microcosm of creation from the void and disintegration into the void in an effort to replicate how someone perceives volume. This optic illusion in painting of the period depended on this void/form relationship and the success of this illusion was achieved via understanding it conceptually and applying information to communicate it, not necessarily if it was perceived by the painter's eye.

The more straightforward application of said methods during this era can be seen in the Realism, Symbolism, and Naturalism movements between the years of 1840 into 1930. However, they can be found elsewhere, as the method would seem to apply to paintings outside these genres, like Surrealism or Impressionism. Each method relies on mimicry as a vehicle for its particular message in addition to its other cultural purposes in the framework of historic Europe (i.e. the possible representation of an aesthetic of the state of France as debated by the July Monarchy and bourgeois of France – the Salon being designed to obtain bourgeois support [Boime, p. 14, 1971]). Mimicry in the case of Realism (1840–80) was used to depict everyday scenes of working life, as opposed to genre painting or depictions of heads of state and aristocracy. Adjacent to this practice but is portrayed as having a more sentimental emotional approach is Rural-Naturalism. Immediate recognisability was important for the sympathy of the viewer and held an appreciation of the peasant or other labourers not often depicted in genre paintings. Mimicry and the depiction of the body in these approaches are used to infer familiarity, community, or sympathy for the population and show inherent value in being human.

Fig. 10. Friant, E. 1898. *La douleur* [oil on canvas]. At: Nancy: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nancy.

'La douleur' (or pain/sorrow/grief) is a quite literal depiction of a demonstration of grief and its denial at the grave by Emile Friant. The generational divide between mourner and the bereaved intervening with the woman in pain might suggest that she has lost someone very dear to her, but it could be that the older woman is from a generation that was free to mourn openly as was allowed in previous European tradition and the younger generation is attempting to save her from social embarrassment, which is suggested by the other mourners looking back to watch her struggle.

Fig. 11. Pelez, F. 1887. *La victim ou L'asphyxiée*. [oil on canvas]. At: Senlis: Musée de Senlis.

Fig. 12. Manet, E. 1864–65. *L'homme mort*. [oil on canvas] At: Washington DC: National Gallery of Art

Both depictions of corpses from the second half of the 1800s are different to the quotidian death but are presented as examples of the absence of the believed to be unclean qualities of the dying process and dead body. Realities that could be present are excrement,

evidence of physical struggle, wounds, and/or a deadly amount of blood loss are not depicted. This could be for reasons presented above, to soften or censor the process of dying for the audience, or the reality that such paintings might be seen as too morbid to display; either way it highlights that Realist paintings were subject to such moral curation be it from the taste of the painter or the audience. Regardless of reasoning, this approach to the corpse was not the same as some thirty years prior to Manet and fifty years before Pelez, was Theodore Géricault, a French Romanticist painter known for his depictions of the dead and dying in a more honest manner:

Fig. 13. Géricault, T. 1810s. *Têtes coupées*. [oil on canvas] At: Stockholm: National Museum of Fine Arts.

While a painting like this was likely not displayed in the Salon, Géricault's *The raft of the medusa* was, and its political commentary of the incident via the depiction of the dying did garner a great amount of attention.[6]

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[6] In 1816 French Royal Navy frigate the *Medusa* ran aground on the coast of Senegal and survivors of the shipwreck were abandoned by leadership assigned to the ship by the government that succeeded Napoleon. The

Fig. 14. Géricault, T. *Le Radeau de la Méduse (Scène de naufrage).* [oil on canvas]. At: Paris: Louvre Museum.

Symbolism used optic mimicry for the sake of communicating emotions or absolute truths via metaphorical or mythological scenes. While using similar techniques as Realism and Naturalism, Symbolism was uninterested in the desire to depict the world as it was and instead used the recognisability of different objects and the body, usually adhering to the laws of nature (i.e. lighting, typical proportion, etc) in order to represent personal or more commonplace mythos. Like previous examples, the recognisability of the subjects and the believability of form is used to create a sense of relation or connection between the viewer and painting.

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150 survivors resorted to cannibalism to attempt to survive, but the majority did not. The painting was awarded a gold medal at the Salon, but the realism of violence depicted was not appreciated by some critics.

Fig. 15. C, Schwabe. 1895. *Death of the grave digger.* [oil on canvas]

      This painting combines the decrepit man of the Middle Ages with the softened death of the late 1800s. It also points to the idea of a sudden, unpredictable (i.e. surprising) intervention of death, therefore the implication that it was not meant to happen, that was starting to become more common thought. While previously it was expected, it begins to surprise even the grave digger. The green light Death would appear to be using to end the grave digger, as it would appear to be communicated, has a somewhat sinister quality one might have found in depictions of witches or pagan gods at the time, like Waterhouse's *Circe invidiosa*:

Fig. 16. Waterhouse, J. W. (1892) ′Detail of *Cirse invidiosa*′. [oil on canvas].

The possibility of Ireland as a partial exemption

The difficulty of finding thematic works in Ireland at the time could be a result of the struggle Ireland suffered from colonisation, independence, and following civil war, but would seem to also stem from the lack of visual culture. Painting in Ireland at the time was mostly done by the Anglo-Irish, who studied abroad in England, like the Yeats family. Additionally, The Great Hunger, World War I, the Irish War of Independence, and following Irish Civil War are all to a greater extent within the dates discussed during this shift of morbidity. Depictions of death in war, genocide, or the funerals of revolutionary leaders like Michael Collins exist, however would be categorised as wrongful or political deaths, not the quotidian one as is the focus of this body of work.

Fig. 17. Lavery, J. 1922. *Michael Collins (love of Ireland)*. [oil on canvas]. At: Dublin: Hugh Lane Gallery.

This could be the consequence of the country having, arguably, more pertinent issues to resolve and the Ireland was a smaller visual arts contributor than mainland Europe due to British oppression. Ireland has lost unique funerary traditions, such as keening (a form of vocal lament of the dead), as a result of cultural hegemony like much of the present-day European Union. A scene of what might be a typical funeral was painted by Jack B Yeats: *Early Morning, Glasnevin* in 1923.

Fig. 18. Yeats, J. 1923. *Early Morning, Glasnevin*. [oil on canvas] At: New York: Private Collection.

To an Irish audience, Glasnevin is a well-known cemetery, so the image would immediately harken a funeral, particularly with the presence of a priest. The framing of the image does not look in the same direction of the mourners, and without the title a viewer who is not familiar with Ireland might not be aware of the scene as one of mourning, as the cemetery is painted in a loose and low contrast method behind the cluster of men. It is solemn but stoic in a way that would be expected of the era, especially with the cultural influence of Victorian England on the Irish. Without the mourning fashion women would have worn (particularly the veil), it might be difficult to initially understand that the painting depicts a funeral as neither the corpse, the casket, nor the ground at the mourner's feet is shown, as opposed to Friant's *La Douler* (Figure 10). This is not to accuse Yeats of denying death — it could be presented in such a way for different reasons — but it is a notable piece in its

possible depiction of the average funeral at the time, since Yeats makes no further specificities of who has died, and that he avoids showing the dead or physical evidence of it. The painting would seem to prioritise solemn masculine demeanours that range between stoic and forlorn without overt grieving, which would be expected of the time considering previous observations. Yeats does not — in his painting method — use the indirect painting method of the 1880s as the painting was created well into the Modern art movement.

Chapter Three: The Cadaver's Effect on Psychic Imagery & Middle Knowledge

'"What vanity is painting which wins admiration for its resemblance to things we do not admire in the original!"' (Pascal in Blanchot, 1955, p. 260)

In the work *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, Maurice Blanchot contemplates a paradox of perception that the dead body might instil upon the bereaved and its resemblance to the artist who works (with images) in a representational manner:

> The deceased… is no longer of this world; he has left it behind. But behind there is… this cadaver, which is not of the world either, even though it is here. Rather, it is behind the world. It is that which the living person (and not the deceased) left behind him and which now affirms, from here, the possibility of a world behind the world. (1955, p. 256)

He posits the difficulty in processing the cadaver is a similar phenomenon that the image possesses, wherein he describes the image as 'form without matter' and in the realm of the artist whose goal it is to 'elevate beings to their disembodied resemblance.' (1955, p. 255) This interpretation can particularly resonate with painting that aims to replicate the world with optical mimicry – impossibilities for the natural world can become optically convincing in seemingly inconsequential ways. The lobster in Kalf's *Still life with Drinking Horn* (Figure 19) is at once living and dead: the shell is rendered with convincing texture and form in the colour red, indicating the animal has been killed and cooked – at the same time, the animal's eyes are black and reflecting light, indicating it is alive (the eyes of a boiled lobster are mattified, to clarify).

Fig. 19. Kalf, W. 1653. *Still life with drinking horn*. [Oil on canvas] At: London: National Gallery.

It is not unfair to excuse this dismissal of reality as a decision made for the sake of visual appeal – this interpretation being an example of Blanchot's task of the artist by elevating the lobster to a disembodied resemblance of itself (1955, p. 255) – or by making impossibility, according to what would be considered possible, appear to the eye as unquestionably real. Kalf has adjusted nature to create a visual reality to suit an aesthetic, or perhaps refer to a feat of overcoming death as informed by his social environment, by using paint to create a paradoxical image so subtle that it might not even cause the viewer to pause and acknowledge the lobster is at once living and dead.

Painting that uses optic mimicry in this way presents to the eye as physically present by optical illusion situated in rules of nature – it is optically real but cannot exist:

The image does not, at first glance, resemble the corpse, but the cadaver's strangeness is perhaps also that of the image. What we call mortal remains escapes common categories. Something is there before us which is not really the living person, nor is it any reality at all. It is neither the same as the person who was alive, nor is it another person, nor is it anything else. (Blanchot, 1955, p. 255)

This analysis, as presented by Blanchot, introduced the application of the paradox of the perception of the cadaver and the relationship between object and image to address the research question, with the goal of impressing the importance of recognising conflicting psychic imagery – like that which is found in the cadaver. Paint possesses a tactility and retinal capability that has made it a long-used medium with a variety of methods of use. The retinal, almost deceitful, nature of paint might be ideal for exploring the tangible but unknowable nature of death – to intentionally engage with Blanchot's 'possibility of a world behind the world' (1955, p. 256) or the void in painting. However, this is not a void due to its lack of things – a painted void is of course made of paint or canvas – but rather a void since it is imperceptible to the living consciousness. What *is* perceptible is form. This is another way painting can imitate the dual or impossible cadaver, as it can allow both void and form to occupy the same space existing but not existing at once.

Blanchot's essay, which was published in *The Space of Literature* as an appendix in 1955 (its original publication was in 1951), coinciding with the decade in which Ariès claims to be on the precipice of France's modern realisation of death denial in the hospital (1981, p. 570) and funeral industry, and the introduction of abstract expressionism to Europe. The difficulty in rationalizing the dead body is not inherently problematic to the psyche, nor a source of death denial, as Lifton discusses in his writing, as a sense of continuity and ritual is generally agreed to be a way to acknowledge and process a death (1979, p. 17). When compared with Chapter Two, wherein the dead body as an object of terror is discussed, Blanchot's discussion of the psychological complexity of the cadaver differs from the dead body when it is denied appearing dead or when it is framed as a threat to public health. Contemporary funeral practices, however, can present the corpse in this manner which would qualify as a denial of death.[7] The method and materiality of paint, and the project's intent to examine and emulate aspects of Blanchot's impossible cadaver (1955, p. 255), would not be

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[7] Doughty presents her own experience working in the American funeral industry where professionals present falsehoods regarding the safety of the presence of the corpse, inferring that the dead body will make the living sick if kept in the home or that it is illegal for the body to be kept in the home for more than an allowed period. In this way, funeral homes compete to claim the corpse to secure financial stability in the free market. (Doughty, 2014)

complete without understanding how funerary practice can inflate the fundamental difficulty the psyche has processing the dead body – specifically the practice of embalming as introduced in Chapter Four:

> ... cosmetic embalming can confuse the matter considerably, as a number of writers have pointed out. They 'play down the death of the person and... create the illusion of a living being... [who] will receive his friends on last time, in a flower-laden room and to the sound of sweet or serious –never gloomy–music… The psychological confusion here is the reliance on the dead body for the symbolisation of continuity and immortality. It is the confusion of the literal and the symbolic. (Lifton, 1979, p. 109)

As a core purpose, cosmetic embalming denies the dead body the appearance of being dead. It instead aims to reposition the dead body as a resting or sleeping person, with the aforementioned historical intent of avoiding emotional distress for the parties involved in the funerary proceedings as described in Chapter Two. The physical preservation of the body in this state of sleep is where Lifton recognises the shift of the immortality of the soul to be projected onto the corpse. The preservation of the body becomes a part of assuaging the bereaved – it is not uncommon for the appearance of looking well to be commented on if the corpse is presented to the bereaved (Kübler-Ross, p. 175) – as neutralising decay would seem to be seen as just treatment of the deceased. Corpses are not often presented to the public without some type of cosmetic intervention. There are well known corpses that not only exemplify this 'confusion of the literal and the symbolic' (Lifton, 1979, p. 109) but are foundational to modern embalming practice in the West.

One such example was created by Alfredo Salafia, who developed embalming fluids that achieved 'unexpected satisfactory results' (Piombino, 2008, p. 1) in the early 1900s. He established a company that provided embalming services and fluid manufacturing, embalming several notable people during his career. However, his most recognized work would be Rosalia Lombardo (1920) of Palermo, Italy, who died during the 1918 influenza pandemic. The corpse continues to be an example of remarkable preservation, made more sensational by the supposed loss of Salafia's embalming techniques after his death (Piombino, 2008, p. 1). The body of Rosalia is so well preserved that she (including her interior organs) has only minorly deteriorated and can be seen by the public in the Capuchin Catacombs of Palermo.

Fig. 20. (2019) 'Preserved remains of Rosalia Lombardo'. [online image]. At: Palermo: Capuchin Catacombs.

Numerous attempts to recreate Salafia's technique have been attempted, as the results are highly desired, but none have resulted in preservation as complete as Lombardo.[8] It should not surprise, given the psychological confusion of such complete preservation, that rumours of the Lombardo body being able to blink persist. One could see how the preservation of the body in such a way that maintains the effect of moisture in the face and organs — as opposed to emaciated bog bodies or other mummified remains — continues the removal of the macabre from the corpse and returns the psychic interpretation of a corpse to that of death as sleep, which is recognised as a part of children's psychology that under typical circumstances should resolve with maturation (Lifton, 1979, pp. 64–70). This is to say, judgement on the part of the Lombardo family is not to be interpreted as negative. Regardless of Salafia's contribution to death denying practice, Rosalia's death resulted in incredible grief, and her family requested a service that they believed would bring comfort to their suffering, which is not to be questioned morally. This research project can simultaneously appreciate the beauty in her preservation and the profound heartbreak that was her death.

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[8] The mummification techniques used on Rosalia Lombardo were believed to have been discovered in 2007 (Piombino, 2008, p. 1) in a memoir written by Salafia.

In contrast of the death-denying techniques of Alfredo Salafia, literature on a second recognizable corpse, but representing preservation without the presence of death denial, was consulted. The body of Vladimir Lenin is on public display in Moscow, Russia, and is unique not only in the flexibility of the word preservation regarding his corpse but the rationalisation of his preservation.

Fig. 21. (2016) 'Living statue of Vladimir Lenin'. [online photograph] At: Moscow: Mausoleum of Vladimir Lenin.

Like Salafia's embalming method, an analysis of the technical aspects of Lenin's preservation would be incomplete, however it is notable that Lenin's body is not preserved in what is known to the West as an embalming method. The method of preservation is unique to the Soviet Union and is intended to preserve the aesthetic of his body at his time of death, as opposed to mummifying the original tissue. When parts of the body can no longer maintain such an appearance, the tissue is discarded. It is important to appreciate that the value of the preservation is not the original body, it is the memory of the body. The body is referred to as a living sculpture (*zhivaia skul'ptura*) by Yuri Lopukhin a veteran scientist of the lab that continues to care for the display (Yurchak, 2015, p. 128). While Lenin's corpse has also been denied decay, in a way, the psychology and intent of the method of his preservation differs than those of Salafia and the Lombardo family.

More relevantly to the presence of death denial: Lenin's body would seem no longer representative of himself, but instead has been elevated above individuality to represent a political revolution and past state. In this way the dead body has become a symbol of a continuation (or memorialisation) of political ideology, rather than echoing Lifton's concern over conflating the symbolic immortality of an individual and the dead body. Again, it is not appropriate to judge the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation on the morality of the preservation of a beloved political theorist; it is to divine understanding of manifestations of death denial in preservation, the treatment of the cadaver, and the hypothesised psychic imagery that might be involved. There might, indeed, be instances where death denial is beneficial – it is not possible to wholly dismiss the phenomena as harmful. The corpses discussed are both of unique and historic circumstances, not necessarily the quotidian death in Blanchot's *Two Versions of the Imaginary.* Lombardo's corpse would seem to have greater effect on funeral practice in effect today, while Lenin's preservation has only been shared with other Communist states and is reserved for those deemed worthy by the state, but both have distinct aesthetic qualities in their presentation.

The investigation of Lombardo, Lenin, and Blanchot's cadavers posed challenges and refined the method in which death denial needed to be rejected – focus on the pervasiveness in social norms, the funeral, and the dead body, by the values of this enquiry, are not places where the dead body should be denied its appearance, outside of exceptional circumstance. If Lifton, Kübler-Ross, and other experts are to be believed, the cost of psychic confusion and psychic numbing has too great an effect on the psyche outside the funeral. When Blanchot mentions the corpse is 'everywhere in the room... at every instant it can be elsewhere than where it is' (1955, p. 258) he illustrates that death cannot be denied in totality, which is further exemplified by the late 1800s attempt to do so in the previous chapter. The attempt to deny death from this era brings about repression (psychic numbing) of emotional distress, not relief. Contemporary terror management theory studies the Dual Defence Method: thoughts of death are stored as 'declarative knowledge', allowing the brain to pull thoughts of death in and out of focal attention from the fringes of consciousness (Pyszczynski, 2015). Blanchot's declaration that 'after the object comes the image' (1955, p. 254) directly heralded painting to engage the duality of the cadaver so it might be 'everywhere in the room' as Blanchot describes:

> We dress the corpse, and we bring it as close as possible to a normal appearance by effacing the hurtful marks of sickness, but we know that in its ever so peaceful and secure immobility

it does not rest... it is also everywhere in the room, all over the house. At every instant it can be elsewhere than where it is. It is where we are apart from it, where there is nothing; it is an invading presence. (1955, p. 258)

To call for the rejection of something without either the presentation of or the possibility of solution is not a result that this contribution aims to present. While the amelioration of fear of death is not believed to be feasible after consulting experts in psychological philosophy, it is not to say there is no way to challenge death denial as it currently manifests. Middle knowledge, according to Lifton, is thought of as 'a state hovering between complete acceptance and repudiation of the imminence of death' (1979, p. 109). The phrase was coined by Avery D. Weisman MD and Thomas P Hackett MD who performed interviews and observed the behaviour of patients who were convinced that they would soon die. They found that the soon to be dead (or at least those convinced of impending death) regardless of seeming indifference or denial, were in fact aware of their death, even if their doctor had kept the terminal diagnosis from them. They called this mindset middle knowledge and considered it 'the responsiveness of the mind to both internal perceptions and external information.' (Weisman & Hackett, 1960) which does not sound altogether different from Ariès's tame death of the Middle Ages.[9] Though first used with patients who were actively dying, Lifton posits it should apply to anyone, as the only difference between the actively dying and the living is the timing of death. Below, in a paragraph that does not differ greatly from Blanchot's observation of the cadaver's 'invading presence' (1955, p. 258), Lifton elaborates:

> To be sure our knowledge that we die pervades all such larger perceptions of life's endings and beginnings. And our resistance to that knowledge, our denial of death, is indeed formidable... But that denial can never be total; we are never fully ignorant of the fact that we die. Rather we go about life with a kind of "middle knowledge" of death, a partial awareness of it side by side with the expressions and actions that belie that awareness. Our resistance to the fact that we die–the numbed side of our middle knowledge–interferes considerably without symbolizing process. We, in fact, require symbolization of continuity–imaginative forms of transcending death–in order to confront genuinely the fact that we die. (1979, p. 17)

If middle knowledge became an exercise of sorts – a conscious action instead of a state as Lifton describes it – middle knowledge might conduce a method of developing resistance to psychic numbing by consciously practicing the engagement of fear, as opposed to

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[9] Weisman and Hackett go on to say that the isolation experienced by the dying is almost entirely the responsibility of the living entourage who refuse to engage with death and would rather physically or emotionally abandon the dying (1960 pg 251), which remains in line with this project's observation and critique of late 1800s behaviour.

dismissing uncomfortable thoughts. There are already metaphors along the lines of 'training for death' as it were a marathon that one might have to run at any moment (Toolis, 2017, p. 39). Here is the intention behind method: the way the research enquiry might be investigated. If painting (as an action and an object) were to mimic or embody the duality of the image, if that would bring the 'feeling of death in the room', and if it somehow became an exercise in the back-and-forth negotiation between acceptance and repudiation, might it become an *act* of middle knowledge, and the resulting finished painting become the image of middle knowledge to the object of middle knowledge as posited by Blanchot?

While this practice seeks to visually de-layer the psychic numbing, it at once acknowledges that any individual should not be expected to accept their death nor should acceptance be equated with feelings of happiness or peace. The psyche is unable forget that we will die, but it cannot perform daily tasks necessary to live while contending with death terror (Becker, 1973). Instead, middle knowledge would allow for negotiation and change in the individual's psyche. An act of middle knowledge might look like being confronted with the reminder of a loved one's future death, and in reaction one might engage with or challenge the uncomfortable thought. Any emotional response to said thought would challenge psychic numbing and would hypothetically allow for the psyche to develop tools to engage death thought as opposed to denying it. Acts of middle knowledge would be challenging due to its embrace of discomfort and the possibility of emotional vulnerability in the company of others, but such challenge might present an opportunity for critical reflection.

Publications that identified and began to challenge death denial culture in the West briefly grew in numbers in a twenty-year window between the 1960s and 1980s. This is the era of Becker, Kübler-Ross, and Lifton, amongst others. In their time, authors acknowledged a lack of examination of death awareness but did not, outside of Kübler-Ross's interviews, provide comprehensive studies to support their philosophical observations:

> ...there is little if any examination–conscious imagery–of actual death awareness, a retreat which lends an inchoate quality to the important struggles around ultimate commitments characterizing this stage. In brief, the paradox lies in attempting to live the examined life without examining death. This particular sequence of diminished death awareness, from adolescence to young adulthood, probably extends to other culture–we need much more study of such matters everywhere–but there is good reason to believe that the American suppression of death imagery in young adulthood is uniquely intense and constitutes a cultural suppression of life's possibilities. (Lifton, 1979, p.87)

Today, *Thirty Years of Terror Management Theory* has overseen a project that authors Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon claim as a continuation of Ernest Becker's ideas in *The denial of death.* They have since published *The Worm at the Core: on the Role of Death in Life* in 2015 as a way for the layman to approach their findings. To very briefly summarise, their programmatic research aimed to observe the behaviour of individuals from more than twenty-five countries when reminded of their mortality to discover if fear of death is at the root of human behaviour, as Becker hypothesised (1979). The study resulted in Terror Management Theory (TMT) a social and evolutionary psychology theory that breaks down with specificity psychological phenomena that takes place when people feel threatened by mortality and has hypothesised behavioural tactics to cope with death thought found in social norms.

TYoTMT offers a more contemporary and clinical (as opposed to philosophical) perspective on what researchers call 'Mortality Salience' (MS) – the hypothesised awareness of inevitable death – by analysing and assigning terms to observable behaviour. The interest for this project and its conversation with *Two Versions of the Imaginary* and the duality of the image lies in 'Death Thought Accessibility' (DTA) and 'Dual Defence Method' (DDM). DTA refers to how available cognitions related to death are in one's mind, while DDM is a hypothesis proposing death is stored as 'declarative knowledge' which allows the brain to pull thoughts of death in and out of focal attention — this is referred to as distal and proximal defences (Pyszczynski, Solomon and Greenberg, 2015). This would imply that these thoughts are kept on the fringes of consciousness, like Blanchot, Lifton, Becker, and others have inferred in their more philosophical writing referenced above.

The understanding provided by TYoTMT instilled confidence that appropriate application of psychic symbolism and philosophical paradox might allow the paintings to bring about mortality salience in some capacity. To understand with greater specificity the mechanics of thought, even to that of a layman as compared to a practicing psychologist, would assist the interrogation of the research question. The DDM specifically would seem to support the possibility that paintings might prompt death thought accessibility, but it also echoes the de-layering of 1800s Western painting methods that the practice would use to investigate Blanchot's duality of the image. The visual back and forth of void and form imitates both the mimetic representation of the object and the way the brain fetches death related thought. The confusion of the form's relationship to the void mimics thoughts of death, moving between the distal and proximal defences in the DDM in addition to its intended similitude to the cadaver in Maurice Blanchot's *Two Versions of the Imaginary*.

Chapter Four: Neoliberalism's Myopia & Individualism – Society no longer stops for death

In tandem with and beyond the aforementioned stylistic movements, the era saw the Modern art movement and the splintering of methodologies of art making into groupings of people with similar creative or political goals eventually leading to well-known art making styles such as Cubism or Surrealism. The dissolution of some monarchies in Europe and Imperial Russia saw new liberal and socialist government along with various art movements throughout the West. The Modern art movement, which is generally considered to have continued until the 1970s, showcases the re-evaluation of Academic tools to create work that focuses more on individual belief systems, as opposed to the previous art making systems like the École that were dictated by the public opinion of the bourgeois (not the July Monarchy). In this way modernism reflects liberalism's additional role as a moral philosophy that values the liberty of the individual, typically the European male, and showcased varying political ideologies (sometimes conflicting fascist and communist ideologies) which continued in tandem with the application of Keynesian economics post Great Depression until it was gradually replaced with neoliberalism in the late 1970s, which coincided with the Postmodernist art movement.[10] Both Postmodernism and neoliberalism share a common ideology in the conception of freedom as an overarching social value. *The Handbook of Neoliberalism* describes the term neoliberal as:

> ... referring to the new political, economic and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility. Most scholars tend to agree that neoliberalism is broadly defined as the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics and society. (Springer, Birch, & MacLeavy, 2016, p. 2)

As the Modern art movement came into the 1950s and 60s certain uses of optic mimicry in painting, amongst more abstracted styles of painting like Abstract Expressionism, remained in American Social Realism, Surrealism, and Soviet Realism. The transitioning economic model to neoliberalism in the West, along with the Cold War with the USSR, saw

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[10] Keynesian, to summarize in brief, is an economics theory that uses state intervention to regulate economic highs and lows and was applied to Europe and the United States in the 1930s and was in place until the 1970s (Geopolitical Economy Report, 2023).

the reframing of American action painting as a part of a culture war (Saunders, 1999; Cockcroft, 1985) against the Social Realism of the USSR. The qualities of American action painting were made popular in the 60s by a five-year campaign in Europe indirectly funded by the CIA (Saunders, 1999), and recontextualized painting to conform to the emerging Neoliberal belief of the individual's responsibility, or in this case the individual's potential. Hence the commonly heard comment: I could do that. Action painting became the popular American style of painting, as Social Realism and other painting styles using optic mimicry fell out of fashion in the United States and Europe by the 1970s (Saunders, 1999) when Postmodern art and neoliberalism were established.

Fig. 22. De Kooning, W. (1955) *Police gazette*. [oil on canvas]. At: Greenwich: Private Collection.

Fig. 23. Polyakov, V. (1969) *After storming the Winter Palace*. [oil on canvas].

One of the only painting movements in the United States that held onto a relationship with optic mimicry in the 1970s was Photorealism. The intent behind this method of optic mimicry was replication of the camera/photograph, which is a singular lens, as opposed to the human visual system that uses two lenses, that captures images within seconds or less. The method deviates from the mimetic representation previously discussed in Chapter Two, and used historical in Modernism and before, because it emphasized detail over form, often replicating more information than is typically absorbable by the human eye. For example: a photorealistic portrait might render eyelashes or pores individually while portraits of the Realist era would ignore pores and individual eyelashes because they are unable to be seen by the naked eye. A photorealistic method results in flatter, higher contrast images, that might appear optically align with how nature presents itself, but it fundamentally interested in the lens and flatness of the image not the illusion of space and three dimensionality.

'As an ideology, it [neoliberalism] denotes a conception of freedom as an overarching social value associated with reducing state functions to those of a minimal state.' (Kostko, 2018)

Individual responsibility and the reduction of the state could connect such events that might appear somewhat disparate in theme in the mind of this researcher. The examination of Lifton (1979), Becker (1973), and Ariès (1981) made the connection at the time of neoliberalism's establishment between death terror and resulting death denial to the feeling of disconnection from psychic imagery of species continuation, social support, and ritual. Western neoliberal economics, government, and ideology values the perceived freedom of the individual so highly, consequentially (or purposefully) devaluing community and its continuation (Fisher, 2009). The funeral industry, hospitals, and hospices serve to isolate the dying and the corpse from the bereaved. This is partially due to the nature of the free market, appearing in their most intensive forms in the United States and the United Kingdom, which brought two of the three generally accepted founders of neoliberalism in Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Responsibilities of the state that have been given to the individual, such as the removal of Keynesian economic policies that regulated stability of the liberal marketplace, would seem to have resulted in a more volatile market that is more myopic in its preparedness for future instability. This myopia could also be seen in the managing of the COVID-19 emergency and effective inaction regarding the consequences of climate change. Outside of state involvement, stressing the responsibility of the individual would also not seen a social environment that might develop effective cooperation. Even in contemporary popular art, collective moments, influential and organized, like those seen in Modern art movements, would seem to be diminished. They are instead individuals tasked with the responsibility to continuously invent new practices and styles out of individual interest. In *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Mark Fisher posits that neoliberalism's emphasis on individual responsibility rules out the consideration of social systemic causation, which has been already identified in earlier in this chapter when addressing expert writing in the field.

> ...by privatizing these problems [mental health] - treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual's neurology and/or by their family background - any question of social systemic causation is ruled out' (1999, pg 21)

Death is too great a stress to bear on one's own. The stress and short-sightedness (myopia) of this hyper-individually, with no social support, would seem to work in favour of

death denial and other psychic numbing habits that have been discussed in Chapter 2. The individual works too many hours to care for their dying or to mourn, the risk of impoverishment if work is paused is possible for many who must sell their labour to capitalists in order to survive. This would nearly appear as a self-fulfilling prophecy regarding death denial and psychic inertia: if the labourer that lives in a neoliberal environment lacks time away from work, a connection to imagery of continuation, and the communal support to meaningfully encounter death, psychic inertia would seem the easiest option. Historian Phillipe Ariès in his work *The Hour of Our Death* points to the advances of both technology and the increased amount of time needed to sell labour in the 20th century as a motivator to move the dying out of the home and into the hospital (and/or hospice). It not only allowed for someone else to contend with the day-to-day difficulties of providing care for the dying, but, also, allowed the entourage of the dying to carry on with normal life despite the dying family member:

> The burden of care and unpleasantness (of the dying) had once been shared by a whole society of neighbours and friends, which was more extended among the lower classes and in the country but continued to exist in middle-class circles as well. But this... participation steadily contracted until it was limited to the closest relatives... to the exclusion of the children. Finally in the twentieth-century cities, the presence of a terminal patient in a small apartment made it very difficult to provide home care and carry on a job at the same time. (Ariès, 1981, p. 570)

While hospice is noble to provide the necessary and difficult service it does, it would seem to this researcher symptomatic of a culture that does not allow appropriate time for life outside of labour to exist. It separates and isolates the dying from the entourage and effectively replaces the historical support of the community. It being a paid service would also highlight a further manifestation of the responsibility of the individual in the current neoliberal climate. In its abstraction it is reasonable to conclude that isolation and separation of such a service continues to inflate the original modesty problem of the later 1800s — but when thought of practically, there is little else is for the average household in the West to do. Like Ariès highlights, the average working person, who must work forty hours a week (or more) to afford typical living conditions, would find it difficult to provide for a dying person. There is little time, or space in some conditions, available for the care and ritual that would provide adequate psychic imagery needed like Lifton suggests in *The Broken Connection* (1979 p. 17).

Ariès is critical of the French National Funeral Directors Association which was founded in 1884. He accuses them of capitalising on the advice of psychologists and appointed themselves as 'doctors of grief' (1981, p. 598) making themselves responsible for assuaging the pain of the bereaved, but in fact reduced appropriate spaces to engage thoughts of death and grief: 'They removed mourning from daily life, from which it had been excluded anyway, and concentrated it in the brief period of the funeral… where it was still accepted.' (1981, p. 598) Limiting mourning to the funeral does preserve certain social aspects of mourning since friends and family gather to support the bereaved, but in the belief that the funeral is the appropriate place to mourn, this in turn isolates the mourner as their behaviour is considered taboo outside of such a context. Mourning and dying in contemporary environments become further individualised (private) and inconvenient:

> It was this kind of mourning that in the nineteenth century imperceptibly took on another function. It retained its social role for a while, but it appeared increasingly as a means of expressing great pain, an opportunity for the entourage to share this pain and to help the bereaved. This transformation was so profound that its novelty was quickly forgotten. It soon became a part of human nature, and it is as such that is served as a reference for the psychologists of the twentieth century… It is the first romantic generation that was the first to deny death. It exhaled death, it defied death, and at the same time it transformed not just anyone, but the loved one, into an inseparable immortal… At the same time, for other reasons, society no longer tolerates the sight of things having to do with death, including the sight of the dead body or weeping relatives. The bereaved is crushed between the weight of his grief and the weight of the social prohibition. (Ariès, 1981, pp. 582 – 583)

Throughout reading not only Ariès, but other experts in other fields that explore the same or related issues, there is a consistent criticism of society or common behaviour that denies death but there is little meaningful examination of the politics of a society where the behaviours being criticised are able to flourish. To abstract the discussion to such a degree that the psychology seems a constant through behaviour would seem myopic. The loss of community and connection is pointed out but how it might have been lost — the social systemic causation — is not interrogated. Ariès and Kübler-Ross take on the faults of the hospital, and to a certain extent the economic involvement of the funeral industry, but not necessarily the economic policies that would provide opportunity for death and dying to continue to be treated the way it is in these industries. 'Economics are the method: the object is to change the heart and soul.' (Thatcher in Butt, 1981)[11] Even without a critical lens

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[11] Thatcher's explanation of neoliberalism's intent to 'change the heart and soul' (Thatcher in Butt, 1981) is a significant reason as to why the United States and Europe are heavily scrutinised in this project regarding death denial. The effect of cultural hegemony imposed on other countries via colonisation or economic compliance

focused on the economic changes of his time, Ariès does suggest that capitalists who have taken over death as their businesses, like the hospital and the funeral industry, do so without appreciating the gravity of what it is or might mean: 'Death is regulated and organised by bureaucrats whose competence and humanity cannot prevent them from treating death as their "thing," a thing that must bother them as little as possible in the general interest.' (Ariès, 1981, p. 588) Communal ritual and communal support would seem to have been transformed into services that are a member of the free market. Procedures that this project has established as death denying, such as embalming, the competitive collection of the body in the funeral industry, or hospital culture that frames death as failure are directly related to performance as a business more than it is a communal (or personal) wrestling with loss (Doughty, 2014). 'Capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator...' (Fisher, 2009)

While the stress on the responsibility of the individual in liberal and neoliberal environments might lead the average citizen of the West to engage in psychic inertia when encountering financial and emotional difficulties around dying and death, the tendency of short sightedness in the neoliberal economy could also play a role in such behaviour. This project has not engaged the subject of extinction, due to its focus on the quotidian death (which could be criticized for its own individual myopia, however, it was felt that limitations must be drawn to create appropriate visual language for specific goals regarding the research question), but climate change could illuminate one of the myopic policies of neoliberal governments. Like the COVID-19 emergency in 2020, stress is put upon the individual to contribute to the combating of climate crisis (Blakely, 2021) with minimal intervention by the state as per the values of neoliberalism, when a very small number of the population that contributes disproportionately to carbon emissions:

> Around half the consumption emissions of the global top 10 per cent and 1 per cent are associated with citizens of high-income countries, and most of the other half with citizens in middle-income countries (Chancel and Piketty 2015; Oxfam and SEI 2020). One study estimates that the 'super-rich' top 0.1 per cent of earners have per capita emissions of around 217t CO_2 – several hundred times greater than the average of the poorest half of the global population (Oxfam and SEI 2020).' (UNEP & UNEP-CCC, 2020).

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should not be underestimated in its ability to change other countries' cultures, including dying and funerary practices. This is even applicable to allied countries, like those in the European Union, who adopt policies from the United States.

The subject of climate change is of course massive, but as a reduction of the issue one can look at consumer per capita figures of two of the largest contributors to carbon emissions. According to the Emissions Gap Report The United States estimated consumption emissions are approximately 17.6 tons CO2e per capita while The People's Republic of China are 7.61 (UNEP, UNEP-CCC, 2020). The United States, like other Western neoliberal countries also accounts for a significant portion of the 'super-rich'. The ability of the individual to consume and grow immense wealth without regulation, such as state intervention, would seem short sighted for the sustainability of a hospitable climate for the general population.

> The relationship between capitalism and eco-disaster is neither coincidental nor accidental: capital's "need of a constantly expanding market"… mean that capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability. (Fischer, 2009)

To push the responsibility for climate change onto the individual, with the implied goal of avoiding extinction, would seem as overwhelming and paralytic a thought as one's own death. This project can connect that myopia would not seem to be only economic in nature by neoliberalism, but also one of psychic inertia of the individual unable to see a future without climate emergency or a meaningful method of avoiding it without radical change to the Western state. This is why this project interprets the Western state as ideal for death denial to persist.

This chapter is not an in-depth interrogation on the flaws of neoliberal economics, however it does intend to present how certain values neoliberalism extols are a decent, if not good, environment to encourage death denial and other psychic inertia behaviour to inflate. Again, to the researcher, there would seem to be a self-perpetuating cycle, not unlike the embalmed body in Chapter Three. Psychic numbing could serve as a type of myopia creating death denying behaviour which would effectively create more myopia which would create more death denying behaviours. Sustainability, which could be compared to continuation for the sake of language that applies to the previous psychological terms, would not seem to be in the neoliberal philosophy as these states are also volatile in economics. To continue the removal of Keysnian theory in the 1970s allowed for market bubbles and bursts that were seen previously in the 1930s to happen again in the 1990s, the early 2000s, and potentially again in 2023 when this project is concluding, post COVID-19 emergency regulations. Wages for those who must sell their labour to capitalists do not appear to grow with a country's

wealth or with economic inflation. If dying and mourning were performed in the way Ariès described in the medieval era how might that affect such a system?

> … death was never the complete surprise it became in the nineteenth century, before the spectacular advances in longevity. It was one of the risks of daily life. From childhood, one more or less expected it… The individual was not overwhelmed, and yet mourning existed, in a ritualised form. Medieval and early modern mourning was more social than individual… Mourning expressed the anguish of the community that had been visited by death, contaminated by its presence, weakened by the loss of one of its members. The community protested loudly so that death would go away and not come back… Life came to a halt here, slowed down there. People took their time over things that were apparently useless and unproductive. Condolence visits repairs the unity of the group… the ceremonies surrounding burial also became a holiday from which joy was not absent, in which laughter was often quick top take the place of tears. (Ariès, 1981, p. 582)

In this researcher's estimation, it would not appear conducive to a neoliberal country, economically and morally, with its value of individual responsibility at the expense of the state's effectiveness, to encourage its labourers to mourn communally like Ariès refers to above. Neoliberalism might find it difficult to simultaneously value individual financial responsibility, capital, life, and death. If one is to interrogate the model of the hospital and funerary services as a part of the free market, the unavailability of time outside of work for the labourer, and the unwillingness (or inability) to sustain a hospitable climate environment for future citizens, one might conclude that it cannot.

Additional qualities of the myopia in a neoliberal environment that fosters death denial could be exemplified in the lack of state intervention during the AIDs crisis by the United States (Lopez, 2016) and its inability to resolve gun violence (Gumas, Gunja, & Williams II, 2023), but more topically, and with the more relevant inclusion of Europe, it could be exemplified in the West's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the public's response to COVID-19 is not dissimilar to recorded behaviour of the public during the Black Death in Europe since some preferred protective measures to contain the disease and preserve life, while others resisted adjustments to their livelihood to accommodate the exceptional circumstance (Kelly, 2006). The response of Western governments varied in approach regarding the health of their population. While Europe initially showed caution with state recommended lockdowns to curb infection and death rates, the priority of the economy did overcome restrictions put in place to reduce risk to the population. The United States effected minimal legislation or regulation to minimize risk for its citizens, particularly low-wage labourers, outside of acquiring vaccinations, which it did not legally, on a federal level,

require, but instead put the responsibility on the individual (as in the decision was left to private businesses and institutions as well as a personal decision). The lack of state intervention in the United States resulted in over a million deaths as of 2023, a higher percentage of infected people when compared to other countries with large populations (World Health Organization, no date) and an unknown number of disabled citizens, resulting in work shortages (Rowe, 2023). As early as 2022, the United States declared the pandemic over while variants of COVID-19 and COVID-19 related deaths continued to cycle through the population with as many as 400 deaths a day in the United States (Hunnicutt, 2022) and much of Europe reopened hospitality and tourism in 2021. While these deaths might not qualify as the quotidian — depending on one's interpretation they could be interpreted as political deaths, extinction related, or death by climate change — it is of note that the COVID-19 emergency took place during the making of this body of work. While the pandemic is a historic event, it is not necessarily an unprecedented one, as commonly claimed, as it increased exposure to disease was forewarned by climate change scientists (Cho, 2014). From the perspective of this project, there is little evidence to support that the COVID-19 pandemic has alleviated death denial in the West. One could compare media coverage of the deaths of approximately 3,000 in the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 to the media coverage of approximately 3,000 deaths of US citizens related to COVID-19 per day in the month of January of 2021 to gauge which deaths are encouraged for the public to mourn.

Part Two

The Critical Review of the Research Process

Introduction to Part Two

Practice-based PhD research in this project approached the research question through cycles of image creation and critical reflection on those images upon the completion of a series of works. The methodology applied to the practice attempted to strike a balance between intuitive art making and calculated application of theory to engage the research question to the best of its ability. Death has a large scope of related themes in visual art and writing, so it was critical to apply relevant, focused artwork and expert literature on death denial, instead of more generalised writing on existentialism if the work was to engage the research question. Refining literature and narrowing the field of influential artwork aimed to assist in developing a way painting might be used as a means of understanding the presence of death denial in social norms by providing space for critical reflection on the relationship with death, dying, and the dead body.

When examining the field of critically engaged artwork that was death themed in some way, there was a notable lack of painting practices. Work that either intentionally or unintentionally had death themes typically comprised of sculpture, installation, photography, videography, and trans-disciplinary practices within certain scientific disciplines. Painting had not always been the preferred method of art making by the researcher, but the material and retinal qualities of painting seemed appropriate to engage the subject of death denial, not only due to painting's use of visual context to build curated realities, but also due to the historical link to the *memento mori* in Europe. Additionally, painting has a longstanding, but under-examined, relationship to the visual void — the void having its own relationship to death terror. While painting was less present in the current field of enquiry, this does not mean that other methods of making cannot inform a painting practice.

The research process, due to historical presence in painting practice, began with historical approaches that investigated the *memento mori* in Cycle One. Because of the influence of a historical painting aesthetic on the researcher's painting style, the project began by interrogating the historical *memento mori* and the skull in Cycle One. Through this investigation the role of the object was experimented through visual interpretations of Francis Ponge's *The Nature of Things* (1942) in the attempt to expand the meaning of objects outside

of their expected role resulting in major works *Glioblastoma*, *A Body in Ashes (1952–2008)*, and *Birdwing and Coffee*. While many specifics were not yet established, the work was not interested in the abject, or triggering a trauma response; instead, it aimed to allow the viewer emotional space to engage thoughts of their own death and death denial at their own pace, even if engagement was at a later time.[12] The abject, or other more confrontational or traumatic approaches to the subject risked pushing those who needed to engage death denial most to avoid the work. While it was not in the active research process, in Cycle One, the paintings began to explore the psychic encountering of the corpse.

As the project progressed into the second cycle, a method of material experimentation to create objects that might be painted was developed alongside the creation of paintings in order to expand studio research and further inform and help recontextualise the paintings and painting process. Through this experimentation the preservation of animal bodies with salt and wax lead to an expanded understanding of the role of the void in painting method used in the École des Beaux-Arts, particularly in Charles Bargue's lithographs in *Drawing Course* (Ackerman, 1866) published in the 1860s. Cycle Two saw the pinpointing of the late 1800s Europe as relevant to the research question and focused the painting method and material experimentation, which appeared to align with the outside areas of expertise consulted, particularly Robert J Lifton, Phillipe Aries, and Ernest Becker. Through this exploration, the void, material experimentation alongside the painting process, and critical reflection of the formal method and qualities of mimetic painting began to take on the role of giver and receiver of consciousness/existence. Death denial as psychic numbing gave additional focus to the direction the work was taking, resulting in major works: *A Veil So You Cannot See*, *Silicone Pig Heart*, and *A Waiting Shroud: Series I*. Intentional delayering of painting method to reveal more voids as in the *campitura* or ground also began to take place in this work and *en grisaille* became the chosen method in order to engage Maurice Blanchot's cadaver in *Two Versions of the Imaginary*.

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[12] The abject could have similar effect on the mind to fear of death since its goal is to challenge the viewer with something commonly perceived as repulsive, especially pertaining to bodily functions. However, this project views abject art as somewhat ineffective in its belief that the people who need to hear said message and are challenged by the work will grow from the encounter. Psychic numbing is pervasive, as discussed in Part One, and it is far more likely the purpose of the work will be overlooked by the audience that needs it most, in this researcher's estimation. This project aims for the viewer to be compelled to reflect in the space of the painting and not confront on such a visceral level that it might repel.

The final and third cycle of the research project developed the *Waiting Shroud* series through further material experimentation that was applied to both the painting subject, the vertical, life-size shroud, and the painting itself. The bedsheet was chosen to visually embody the giving/receiving character of the void (one is often born and later dies in bed) while its ability to perform the role of shroud aimed to act as both the personal and the universal. The role of the void and the cadaver in *Two Versions of the Imaginary* was further interrogated in the application of the *en grisaille* technique and experimentation with historical painting material, questioning the construction of death denial as a social norm and applying TYoMT to visually imitate the Dual Defence Method. To realise the idea of a painting as a space of reflection, the paintings were made to be life-size in the sight-size method and presented on the floor so the viewer would be able to stand directly in front of the waiting shroud. In this way the removal of objects from their expected place, which would be the wall in the case of painting, and intended purpose was applied to the painting (noun) to help encourage critical reflection on the part of the viewer. This approach resulted in major works *A Waiting Shroud: Series II Standing* and *Reclining*. In *Waiting Shroud: Series III*, the painting (noun) as a space continued its use of mimicry and bodily empathy to elicit reflection with the addition of a seated shroud and physical chair placed across from the painting, effectively closing off the area in front of the painting. However, there should be little expectation for the audience to interact with the chair due to the pervasive nature of death denial behaviour — and the common perception of death as an outside malignant force, i.e. the shroud being perceived as an 'outside, malignant force' (Kübler-Ross, 1969, p. 7), which suits the research question in its goal to understand the presence of death denial in social norms.

The confusion of the form's relationship to the void mimics the confusion of the cadaver and therefore the thoughts of death, metaphorically moving between the distal and proximal defences of the Dual Defence Method in addition to its intended similitude to the cadaver in Maurice Blanchot's *Two Versions of the Imaginary*. This method of painting developed through Series II and III was informed more completely by theory than in previous cycles, and attempted to create a neutral double of the existing object. It uses void, layering, and illusory form to question whether the illusion is forming or disintegrating and the nature of the concept of the void, which can be considered the primary fear of death and is not related to death denial (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pzszczynski, 2015). In this way the *Waiting Shroud* series might ask: What is my relationship to the void?

Chapter Five: The First Cycle

Throughout various iterations of the research question during this project, the intent to make the viewer think of their own death was consistent. As mentioned previously, there were originally sentiments of instigating some kind of ameliorating of fear of death or illuminating/confronting death denial, but critical clarity on either of these subjects was absent. Instead, there was a general desire to evoke thoughts of death. Some experts who studied dying, like Kübler-Ross, were consulted to develop a further understanding of death denial. If a better understanding of the phenomena was eventually gained, then perhaps that could be applied to the work and a more intentional engagement with death denial or generalized thoughts of death might result. As the researcher's painting education is mostly based in the style of the Caravaggisti — combined with certain aspects of what was believed to be a French academic painting method, as taught by an Art Renewal Centre certified school — a natural inclination towards the historical still life appeared appropriate.[13, 14] By engaging in still life, which historically had been used to elicit thoughts of death, the first paintings of the research project aimed to interrogate the skull, the visual use of void in painting, and the Dutch *memento mori.* Additionally, there was an investigation into why paintings of death reminders seemed no longer be in the circulation of critically engaged artwork. This exploration resulted in the first major works of the project: *Glioblastoma* and *A Body in Ashes (1952 - 2008)* in the fall semester of 2018.

Glioblastoma attempted to use certain objects to mimic the *memento mori* usage of the human skull as a reminder of death, but aimed to avoid the front of the skull, as the ocular and nasal region, along with the exposed teeth, would seem to have transformed into something of a cliché or pop culture symbol (Figure 24; Figure 25) to the contemporary

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[13] The Caravaggisti were painters in the 17th century who imitated Caravaggio's used of a singular light source to the extent of a fuller range of value (chiaroscuro) with a dark background, his use of real-life imagery – such as dirt under the fingernails – and the presence of red, which was typically glazed. As Caravaggio never established a school to continue his methods, his followers imitated his style without his guidance (Marandel, 2012).

[14] The Art Renewal Centre, or ARC, is a non-profit, educational organisation founded by Fred Ross that can provide a vetting service for private schools that teach methods of drawing and painting that conform to the aesthetics of nineteenth century Salon painting style (Art Renewal Centre, 2024).

viewer, as opposed to the previously more macabre usage in the 16th century by the Dutch Calvinists and other painters in history (Figure 26).

Left: Fig. 24. McQueen, A., (2003) 'Skull scarf'. [online image].

Middle: Fig. 25. Rackham, C. (2017) *Reaper*. [oil on canvas].

Right: Fig. 26. Kintzer, A. (2009) 'Photo of *Allegory of the transience of life*'. [digital photo of tomb].

At the same time, the skull and crossbones are still used to warn of toxicity if certain products are consumed and a few notable, nearly contemporary, sculptures featuring the skull were in the mainstream art scene in the 1990s and early 2000s. The more well-known of these is a cast of a human skull commissioned by Damien Hirst in 2007 for his work *For the Love of God*, which is intended as a *memento mori*. In his published memoir of the construction of the work, Hirst includes an essay by art historian Rudi Fuchs to show the success of the piece: 'The skull is out of this world, celestial almost. I tend to see it as a glorious, intense victory over death.' (2007, p. 17)
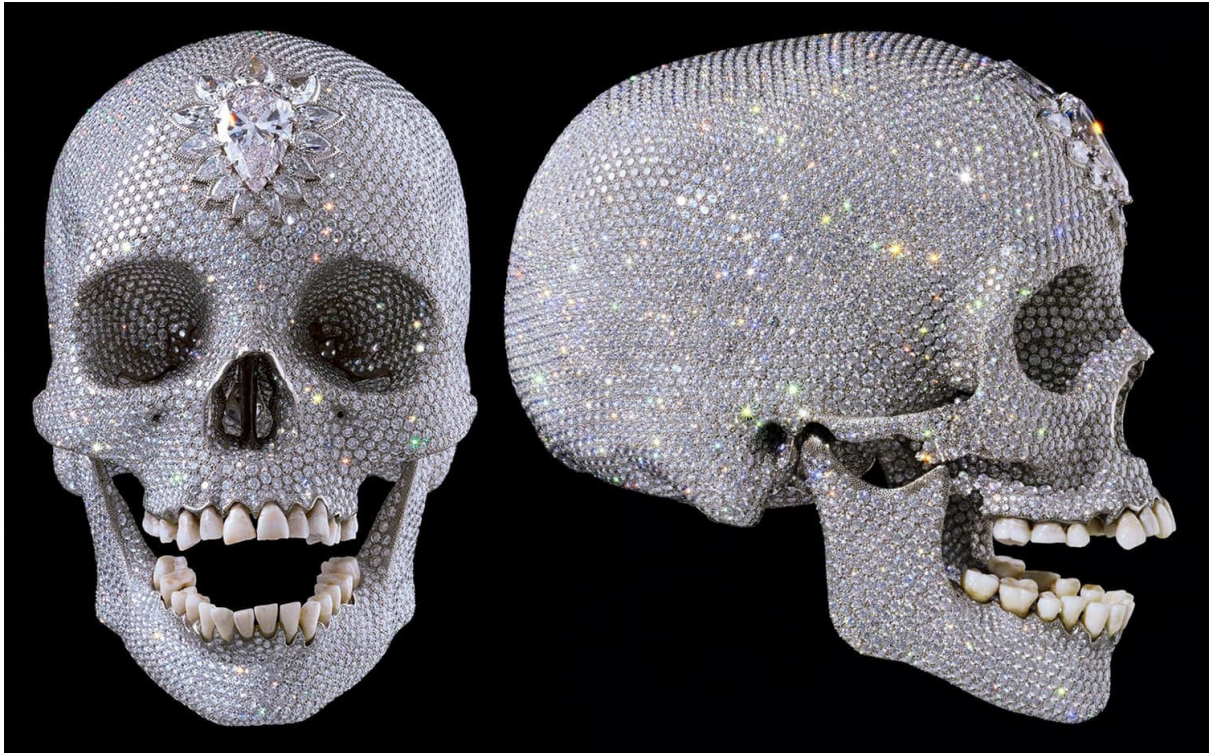
Fig. 27. Hirst, D. (2007) *For the love of god*. [platinum cast, diamonds, human teeth].

While the work had detractors regarding elements of the creation and the sale of the piece had some controversy attached — primarily the claimed monetary value and record sale of the piece — the work being regarded as a victory over death would seem to exclude it from the intent of the *memento mori*.

Ten years prior, Gabriel Orozco drew on the human skull to create *Black Kites*. Orozco seemed to have used the method of drawing as a means of spending a long period of time with something he considered 'not very big, but is very powerful.' (Orozco in Temkin, 2009)

Left: Fig. 28. Orozco, G. 1997. *Black kites*. [graphite on skull]. At: Philadelphia: Museum of Modern Art

Right: Fig. 29. Cross, D. 2014. *Telescope*. [telescope, gilded skull fragment, meteorite, iron table].

These pieces use the skull as an object, not reproduced in a painting and those that used the entire skull would seem to have embraced the more current interpretation of the skull as cliché via Hirst's use of diamonds and Orozco's chequered and sometimes harlequin pattern that would make the skull appear like a traditional Venetian mask. Dorothy Cross's use of the skull is somewhat abstracted in both presentation and purpose: the skull is incomplete, turned so the cranium is down and the absent face is upward, and used as a vessel. In the case of *Glioblastoma,* an attempt to both remove the human skull from this more modern interpretation, as demonstrated by Cross, and illustrate a specific death (a tumour behind the right eye), the skull was turned around so the viewer could see inside the skull, into the ocular region. This was to test if the skull would be recognized in its unfamiliar presentation or if its nature as a corpse would be overlooked due to either death denial, the unfamiliar presentation, or some combination of both.[15]

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[15] Anecdotally, the skull was not always recognized due to the composition and was referred to as a bowl instead of a skull by some viewers.

Fig. 30. Lawrence, R. (2018) *Glioblastoma*. [oil on canvas]. At: Ballyvaughan: Private Collection.

Critical failings in the attempt to prompt thoughts of death present in the painting, however. Interacting with guests of the studio led to the confirmation that the human skull as an object disturbs some upon interaction, which Orozco and Hirst used in their work. The featured skull is in fact a part of a corpse, but paintings of skulls in still life would seem to no longer trigger such mortality salience reactions, regardless of the way they are faced. Peter Power from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago said plainly during a studio visit that the painting did not make him think about his death upon viewing *Glioblastoma*. While presenting these first works to Gediminas Gasparavicius, an art historian, a significant difference between the intent of project's paintings and the Dutch *memento mori* was illuminated: while *Glioblastoma* was allegorical, dealing with a specific death, the 17th century *memento mori* was created formulaically for a middle class growing in wealth as a reminder from the Calvinists that wealth did not grant entry into heaven.

Fig. 31. Heda, W. C. (1628) *Vanitas*. [oil on wood]. At:

It became clear that the research project had a fundamentally different goal from the Dutch still life. Thematically both included death signifiers and had some similar formal qualities regarding painting style, but the intent and ultimately subject matter differed.

While this painting ultimately did little to evoke reflection on one's future death, it did occasionally start conversations with studio visitors who also had deceased friends or family, particularly when the death was similar since it was a parental figure and was deemed premature by what is expected, which is the case with the death that inspired *Glioblastoma*.

This iteration of the work brought into question the relevance of historical aesthetics on a contemporary audience and therefore if the work could be considered relevant. There was some amount of concern on the part of advisors and faculty that the work might be mistaken for actual historical painting by its use of chiaroscuro as opposed to more contemporary uses of higher key palettes or obvious influence of photography. However, defining a clear aesthetic of contemporary painting is difficult due to a lack of organised art movements – outside of some kind of token application of abstraction – and historical artwork is well known for its ease of consumption and for moving contemporary viewers emotionally. Painting movements from over a hundred years ago, such as Impressionism or the Italian Renaissance, continue to draw millions to museums in Europe. Painting and paintings continue to have an intangible timelessness to them, and because of this the modernity of aesthetic did not seem to be as imperative at this stage to the researcher

(although it was experimented with) — instead, a need to interrogate the role of the object took priority.

While the objects represented would change throughout the project, later reflection on the practice recognized the presence of the corpse so immediately in the painting. The theme of the corpse continued in *A Body in Ashes (1952-2008)* with the corpse as ashes in a plastic bag alongside metaphorical objects of transformation, and *Birdwing with Coffee* which was painted alla prima — the Italian term meaning to paint something in one sitting — from the corpse of a bird found near the studio, placing the corpse physically beside an everyday habit. In this iteration of the work, painting the object was thought of as a method of recorded material and emotional understanding which became the representational vehicle of exploring the concept of acceptance of death, when — in actuality — it was already exploring the mind's ability to psychically encounter the corpse.

Fig. 32. Lawrence, R. (2019) *A body in ashes (1952–2008)*. [oil on damaged panel].

Fig. 33. Lawrence, R. (2019) *Birdwing and coffee*. [oil on linen and lace panel].

This subconscious or artistic instinctive exploration of the corpse could be further seen by the difficulty finding other objects that satisfied the researcher thematically. The aesthetic of the more old-fashioned appearance continued to be an obstacle concerning the relevance of the paintings to the audience. There was the possibility that while using a historically adjacent method or aesthetic that the objects painted might signify the painting as contemporary, but to find modern objects that would be immediately associated with death was a challenge. It would appear that death denial is so complete that a Western universal, symbolic language of objects that communicated mortality in a serious tone, like the Dutch *memento mori*, no longer exist as no immediate ideas came to mind in consultations with advisors or peers who are all experienced visual artists. There was a hesitation to include objects such as cell phones due to the addition of said technology potentially dating the painting to a specific year. The timelessness of both death and painting seemed too significant a shared quality. There was also hesitation to include obviously plastic objects — such as disposable cups — as plastic often brought climate change and extinction into the theme of the work instead of the everyday death.

There was discussion with advisors regarding objects used or found in hospitals while dying, such as radiation equipment or medication for cancer treatments, but these objects could instead signify related trauma for cancer survivors or surviving entourage (or trigger

fear of the dying body) rather than bring about critical reflection. The notion of painting a radiation mask for a brain tumour, for example, was intriguing at first. The mask is skull-like, and it does have a macabre aura that the skull has arguably lost over time. When it was imagined, however, that the surviving family of the person who wore the radiation mask might see the painting, it would not be a reflective moment. From personal experience of accidentally finding such a mask in storage: this mask operated as a reminder of chemotherapy and related trauma surrounding the treatment of cancer. It would become a painting about cancer or pain, not a painting that caused one to ponder their own relationship with death. Such symbolism, along with other notions of the abject, was rejected. Was it rejected out of personal trauma or rejection (fear) of the dying body? Of course, this is possible, as the researcher is as subject to denying death like anyone raised in the West. However, triggering a trauma response would distract from the intent of a somewhat inviting — or at least non-confrontational — appearance of the work to allow the viewer some emotional space to engage thoughts of their own death at their own pace, even if that engagement was at a later time. A more aggressive or confrontational method brought concern that the viewers who needed to confront death denial most would avoid work that was visceral or frightening. Not all might agree with such an approach, however:

> Painters think around it [death] by showering it with symbols. What are hourglasses, young women looking into mirrors, skulls, candles, decaying fruit, withered flowers, and old books, if not ways of making death visible without discomfort? In art history, we say an hourglass is a *memento mori*, a reminder of death—but it isn't; it's a way of *not* thinking about death, not looking at it and not thinking about it. (Elkins, 1996, p. 108)

As a painter seeking to paint something that makes another contemplate death, I cannot disagree with Elkins that painting death itself in some imagination of its true form is impossible. To depict death symbolically without any discomfort would not be representative of the presence of fear and the still life subjects he refers to would seem to have not been effective as this theme would seem to have diminished even before the 19th century. Elkins would be correct apart for the usage of the skull, as it might have actually served as a reminder of death at the time of the vanitas or *memento mori* still life. While initially this project's rejection of the radiation mask might appear contradictory due to the immediate usage of the skull, the skull in historical work would seem to have held a somewhat unique representation of fear and approachability, as though it was an invitation to contemplate or

converse with fear, not only to experience it. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is well known for its usage of the skull to show such a relationship and is of the era:

> Let me see. *(takes the skull)* Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. (5.1.168–171)

Yorrick's skull provides Hamlet at once both a fear of decay and reminder that the decayed skull was once a friend that he could confide in and contemplate the death of others through Yorrick's remains. That balance of fear and contemplation might allow for meaningful reflection, and while it may not be a visceral representation or even a direct look at death (if such a thing is possible), it is the mark this research project set out to investigate. The exploration of the skull somewhat solidified the desire to elicit critical reflection, as opposed to critical confrontation, as a priority via the use of optical mimicry, which might use the allure of technique and the familiarity of eyesight to encourage the viewer to spend time with the subject matter. In this way the paintings, through interrogation of the role of certain objects, also began to frame the painting (as a noun) as a space for reflection, but this idea had not matured in the first cycle of making and reflecting on the work.

> ...I wonder what it could possibly mean to *see* death... Aspects of death are terrifying, and so I do not see them, in the sense that I avoid thinking about them. It is frightening how death becomes more and more obvious as we get older, until people who are dying are unbearable to see, because they are deeply immersed in death—death hovers over them and waits, as they used to say. The worst encounters with the idea of death are those moments when we talk to someone we haven't seen for a while and he looks much worse than he used to—even if he is young and healthy, we can clearly see that death is beginning to write on his face. (Elkins, 1996, pg. 107)

Throughout this cycle of research allegorical paintings curated from personal experience via symbolism of relevant objects were created. Paint as a mimicking material, painting as a verb, and painting as an object began to separate into differing themes. Additionally, themes of the concept of void, the life-size as a psychologically reflective device, and the need to specify the type of death addressed as opposed to solely a general theme of death denial, began to become more clear. *A Body in Ashes (1952 – 2008)* and *Birdwing and coffee,* in particular, began to apply a facet of Francis Ponge's approach to the object: to reposition something out of its original context to give it new meaning. The copper ladle in the context of the moss-covered goat skull and a bag of human ashes, becomes oxidation as opposed to an antique kitchen tool. The bird wing in the place of a biscuit takes

the cup of coffee from the breakfast table to an unknown place where such a pairing seems normal. The coffee takes the severed wing from its nature as a corpse in decay to a treat at the breakfast table. *Birdwing with Coffee* also experiments with the void as a not a black space but as an object physically outside the painting, pairing painted objects with physical objects and the painting as an object with other objects. A dialogue between paintings (i.e. the painted object and the painting as an object) and the object in situ as a method of further interrogating the role of paint, object, and painting began to be established. While in this installation of the work, the void was experimented with both within and outside the painted surface, only in later cycles of the research did a more critical application of the void take place. Future iterations of the work are somewhat heralded by this experiment with the use of the drapery – not only by way of the size, but also in its challenge of where the void is in relation to the painted image. However, generating specific thoughts and conversation about death denial or the viewer's future death remained elusive through using symbolic objects and more unusual still life setups, even with the addition of dialogue between object and painting.

Fig. 34 Lawrence, R. (2019) *Experimental installation spring 2019*. [various oil studies and objects].

Fig. 35. Lawrence, R. (2019) *Experimental installation spring.* [various oil studies and objects].

Fig. 36. Lawrence, R. (2019) *Experimental installation spring 2019*. [various oil studies and objects].

Something of a comfort habit began in the first year of practice-based research that allowed for extended breaks from critical thinking of death, which can be emotionally strenuous, and from experimental work and quick studies to allow for time for ideas to rest. Portrait painting and drawing in *en grisaille* (in grey) was an escape from research for

technical practice to maintain or improve skill and focus on formal qualities of painting that appeal to the researcher in an aesthetic way. This research project indeed set out to interrogate the research question, but also aimed to make paintings that still satisfied the maker on a purely aesthetic level, which this exercise intended to focus on apart from conscious critical inquiry.

The *en grisaille* method is believed to be used to resolve value and form before colour is considered, as colour might create moments of simultaneous contrast that hide the physical nature of the subject being painted. After the value and form of the subject was resolved, colour was then glazed over the grey (or monochrome) painting, giving the final work the illusion of glowing that is typical of this indirect painting method. To paint *in en grisaille* is to — from an observational painting perspective — strip away distraction and understand the subject's surface in a physical space. *En grisaille* allows the painter to focus on the way light interacts with a surface and where those surfaces turn to and from the light and to and from the painter. The more contemporary usage of the method has historical roots but is closely related to the conceptual rendering method typically credited to Jacob Collins, who founded the Grand Central Atelier in New York City in 2006 (Figure 37).[16] This technique would seem to make a painting that both accurately represented the object as it exists in nature while at the same time looking nothing like the real-life subject matter due to the use of neutral grey:

Fig. 37. Albo, J. (2023) *'En grisaille* study at Grand Central Atelier NYC'. [oil on panel].

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[16] *En grisaille* and similar techniques like *verdaccio* (a grey-green underpainting) is believed to have been in use since the 15th century norther European renaissance, through the Baroque into the turn of the 20th century in William A. Bouguereau's work. Typically it can be seen as the glazes begin to fade, allowing for grey or green tints around hairlines or other areas on fair skin on older paintings.

Left: Fig. 38. Lawrence, R. (2016 –19) *Florentine woman*. [oil on canvas].
Right: Fig. 39. Dore, G. (1869) *The poor in London.* [ink on paper].

 Florentine Woman was completed in 2019 as a part of this comfort exercise completely separated from the work being made for the research project. Surface level observation might register the portrait as being ghostly – due to the grey – and therefore topical to the project, but its relevance to the project lay more in the method of painting's relationship with the natural world, rather than a ghostly appearance. Rendering the woman's form in grey allowed for convincing likeness, expression, and three-dimensional presence, but was removed from natural reality through the lack of colour – if she looked this way in real life, she would surely be difficult to encounter. The use of grey allowed for the painting to look like the woman painted while at once not appearing like her at all due to the removal of colour. The use of grey alongside raw umber in the shadow shapes also allowed for the painting to remove itself from black and white photography. This phenomenon seemed to be something to investigate more critically regarding the optic mimicry of the painting technique, if not for any other reason than experimentation. There was some synchronicity between the *en grisaille* studies and certain paintings that were potentially a part of the field

this project was aiming to contribute to however in Ken Currie's paintings of visceral, ghostly faces in the black void (Figure 40) and Nicola Samorì's *Hans Holbein Ecorché* [sic]. Both paintings marry morbidity and historical technical approach while Samorì's painting includes commentary on historical artwork in his reference to Hans Holbein the Younger and the academic use of *écorché* (the flayed figure [Figure 41]) for anatomical study, which the practice was also attempting in its engagement with the *memento mori.*
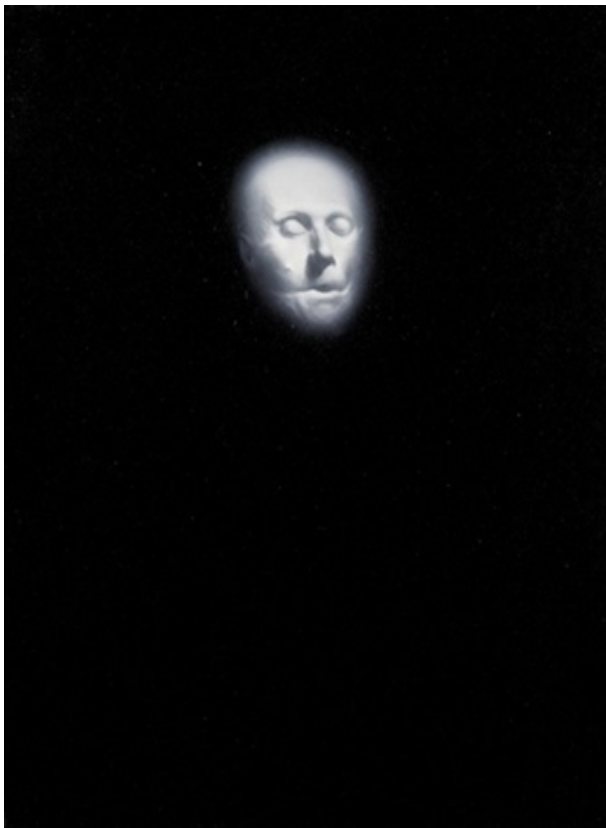
Left: Fig. 40. Currie, K. (1996) *Earthly remnants (after the death mask of Sheridan).* [oil on canvas].
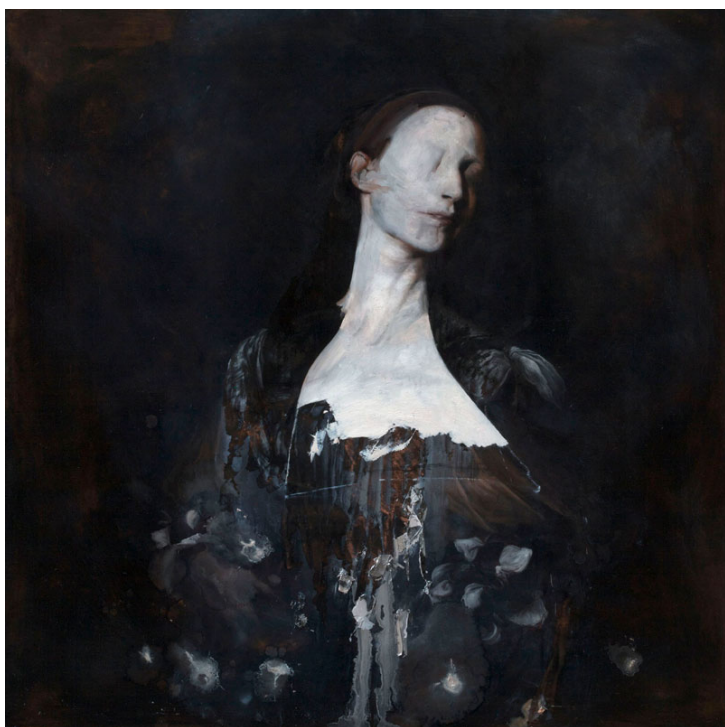Right: Fig. 41. Lanteri, E. (~1900-05) *Torso écorché of man.* [plaster].

Fig. 42. Samorì, N. (2010) *Hans Holbein ecorché* [sic]. [oil on canvas]. At: Vicenza: AmC Collezione Coppola
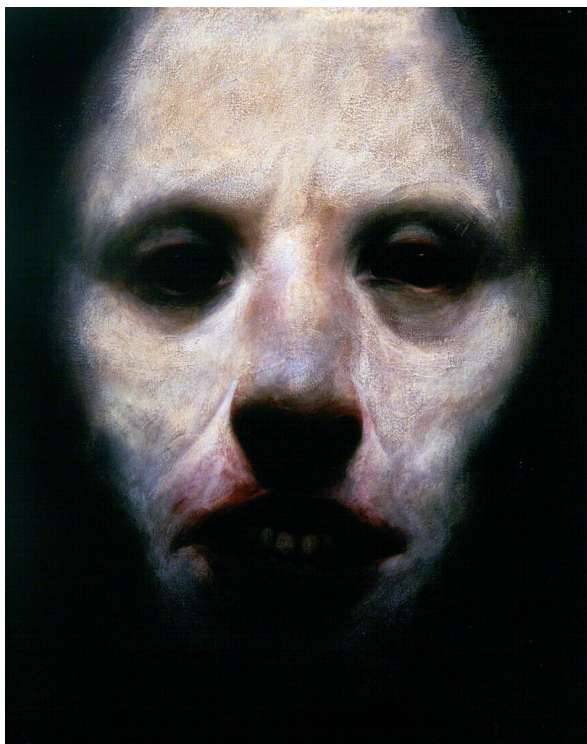

Fig. 43 Currie, K. 1995–96. *Gallowgate lard*. [oil and beeswax on canvas].

While tangential from the purposeful practice-based research, the act of painting alongside the research project would have seemed to have contributed potential technique for future bodies of work. *En grisaille* would later be applied in a more purposeful manner towards the research process in the second cycle.

Similarly, but more intentional than the portrait painting, explorative exercises that engaged in the material quality of the object outside of its replication with paint began in order to contribute unique objects to the experimental installation of objects and paintings as shown previously. Due to the focus on surface texture in *Glioblastoma* and *A Body in Ashes* working with different material to create objects — like plaster dipped flowers and snail shell balls — to also paint was used as further exploration into the material and the object. Literature by James Elkins and Francis Ponge on the object (and of paint) continued to inform objects painted and developed experimentation of creating objects to paint that might steer the viewer towards thoughts of death but an exploration into material was eventually added to the process resulting in some unique objects or sculpture-like things were made to be painted.

> Objects... around give me a great deal of pleasure on the other hand. The convince me. By the very face they don't need to. Their presence, their obvious solidity, their thickness, their three dimensions, their palpability, indubitability, their existence of which I am far more certain than of my own, their: "that's not something you invent (but discover)" (Ponge, 1947-48)

Ponge's interpretation of objects and his desire to define them as objects and not as words, is not unlike the painter who is attempting to accurately recreate an object optically according to the rules of nature in which it exists. The material nature of the thing — its weight, its three dimensions, how it might feel to the touch, its age (if applicable), or even its ability to move — might possess aspects that the painter is aiming to reproduce with paint. Perhaps the relationship would be different if the object is made by the painter, the knowledge somehow more complete, or it might be understood in more than one way. Making objects might provide one method of understanding, and then extended observation of mimicry (i.e. painting) might provide a different perspective that making did not provide. While at this point of the research, making objects seemed a small part of the first cycle of research, it would become a bridge into the next cycle of work. This method was especially possible due to working in a small community of other visual researchers (in this case sculptors) who were willing to provide consultation and guidance.

Fig. 44. Lawrence, R. (2019) *Experimental installation: skull, lace, and snail shell ball.* [human skull, doily, snail shells, and butterfly].

Cycle One already saw the research question begin to narrow from broad thoughts of death and a general rejection of death denial into the beginnings of what would be later thought of as the quotidian death, while the purpose of the paintings began to focus in intent. At this juncture it was clear the paintings would need to appeal in both a personal and a universal way since the quotidian death was both personal because it will happen to every individual, and universal since all will experience it and likely all have feared it (if experts like Becker are to be believed). While there was some notion of history having a role in the project, it was unclear at this stage to what extent, as was the researcher's understanding of psychology in the theme of death denial and fear of death.

Chapter Six: The Second Cycle

The Second Cycle of reflective practice-based research spans over the course of approximately two years, including the first year and half of the COVID-19 emergency, beginning with *A Veil so You Cannot See* alongside studio experimentation with material and concluding with *A Waiting Shroud: Series I*. This arc of research employed both the act of making and reflection alongside consultation of expert literature in philosophical psychology, notably Robert J. Lifton, Ernest Becker, and TYoTMT when regarding death denial and death terror, including other reading into phenomenology by Gaston Bachelard, poetry by Francis Ponge, essays on death and the cadaver by Maurice Blanchot, and historians Albert Boime, James Elkins, and Phillipe Ariès, among others — as a wide proverbial net was cast so the next step in the studio could be taken and relevant theory applied. These years saw the development of methodology in a multipronged approach in the studio which began to reflect the improved understanding of relevant theory and the historical context of the project. The research question developed into a more specific enquiry that recognised the quotidian death as the death of focus, but still struggled with a clear approach as to how painting was to meaningfully engage death denial, outside of recognising that it was embedded in social norms and that the act of critical reflection seemed a desired result. *A Waiting Shroud: Series I* began to solidify the approach to reflection and death denial, but it would not be until Cycle Three where clarity into this question of the project was more achievable.

Developing a greater understanding of psychological philosophy on death, death denial, and clinical psychological disorders seemed necessary to inform and develop a practice that aims to interrogate death denial through painting. Via this process, the importance of the quotidian death began to solidify into the practice, and establishes a purposeful delineation from other kinds of death or other approaches to confront death denial that might be seen in contemporary art. While potentially relevant literature was consulted, artwork within this field of enquiry was again investigated upon the beginning of a new cycle of making and reflecting to further explore contemporary critical artwork that was purposefully, or incidentally, death themed or — more ideally — addressed death denial in some way. In the case of a doctoral research that is practice-based, it appeared important to

not entirely pause the act of making for the sake of study via literature, as understanding in creative practice often comes from the act of making:

> Art practice cannot be reduced to standardized dichotomies of cause and effect, input and outcome, or process and product. Making art and responding to art remains an iterative and strategic encounter that comprises a creative coalition of individuals, ideas and actions. (Sullivan, 2001, pg. 10)

Repetition in making and thinking in a medium, even if one is not anticipating results that would benefit the research question, is crucial to progression since discovery in either theoretical or artistic technique can be made. The connection of beneficial ideas for the project or synchronicity in theory and image making might be revealed when the work is in progress and the maker is in a state of creative flow. In *The Object Stares Back,* Elkins recalls the childhood hobby of collecting insects, particularly moths, and notes that some twenty years later he is still able to spot moths without effort: 'Something in my subconscious must still be scanning for that particular shape, and it breaks into my conscious thoughts to warn me when it thinks I have discovered a moth.' (1996, pg. 55) This is not unlike the underlying contemplation of the research question while making work. The mind continues to seek out connections even while focus might be on formal qualities of image making.[17] This example might recall the proximal and distal thought retrieval process as discussed by TYoTMT. As an art practice researcher and not a researcher in psychology, therefore it cannot be asserted with certainty that this is the same phenomenon, but it does share similarities with what TYoTMT describes. To have a similar thought process occurring through art making either reflects a basic function of the brain or could show a kind of link between instinctive creative thinking/making (a kind of flow state) and death thought retrieval (DTA). Practice-based research can use a kind of thinking/making as in Elkin's example of 'thinking in a medium' in his book *What Painting Is* (1999). Wherein problem solving, emotional expression, and physical movement become a singular act when drawing or painting.

Reflection on the previous cycle had already revealed the shortcomings of the skull and the traditional still life, however the experimental object and painting installation led to a symbolically and visually engaging set up to the researcher, so it was pursued alongside the

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[17] While not related to practice-based research, this is a similar phenomenon that happens to those who have experienced a dying family member or friend. One studio visitor would conflate lines painted on grass that would mark a football pitch or construction site and be reminded of the lines that demarcate dig sites for the grave of the deceased after attending the funeral of a loved one for example.

absorption of literature. *En grisaille* had been yet to be formally introduced to the project and some reading of Lifton (1979) discussed the psychic imagery of stillness interpreted as death and motion as life. Stillness as death appealed to the research question at this time, especially as the project was continuing to investigate still life, which as a name has some amount of relevancy in its roots of painting either that which is dead or something that is alive and does not move, or — in the case of plant life — moves too slowly for the human eye to perceive when casually looking.[18] Stillness to signify death was used in Damien Hirsts's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (Figure 45) in 1991, which featured the corpse of a tiger shark submerged in formaldehyde. A shark would potentially not only bring thoughts of death to the viewer due to the very nature of the animal's ability to kill, but Hirst also seemed to use the commonly held belief that a shark would suffocate if it stops swimming; therefore causing the viewer to think of death via stillness. Hirst also uses text to attempt to elicit thoughts of death in the title: *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*.

Fig. 45. Hirst, D. (1991) *The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living.* [Tiger shark in formaldehyde].

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[18] When regarding subject matter in which typical rules of life and death apply, as opposed to a man-made object.

Initial attempts to re-contextualise the painting as an object with new meaning, after Ponge, began with the investigation of stillness, comparing death as cessation as discussed by Lifton (pg 58, 1979) and the painting as an object that has no intention of ability to move, but is not frozen in time:

> 'I can imagine a figure in a photograph coming alive, like a still scene being released into motion, but I cannot imagine a painted figure moving and talking... If the Venus in Botticelli's painting walked out of her canvas... she would be a silly mannekin [sic].' (Elkins, 1996, pg. 221)

While Elkins may conjure Botticelli's stylistic approach to the figure for his example, it can also be applied to paintings seemingly more accurate to nature. Elevating an object or figure like Blanchot describes as a disembodied resemblance (1955, pg. 255) would make many paintings somewhat bizarre if they were to suddenly move or brought into real life, even for paintings that aim to replicate the rules of nature somewhat accurately. This is due to the contextual method that painting (and drawing) formally functions within and the effect of designing an appealing image, in whatever way it might be deemed appealing.

Fig. 46. Lawrence, R. (2018) *Alloro, aglio, e pomodori*. [oil on canvas]. At: Fort Worth: Private Collection

For example: the tomatoes in *Alloro, Aglio, e Pomodori* (Figure 47) would appear as red as tomatoes can be seen in nature, but these tomatoes are primarily rendered with cadmium orange and are surrounded by a ring of cadmium red to complete the optical illusion of the entire fruit being red in colour. The goat skull does not represent the amount of detail or colouration of the original goat skull that is being referred in order to effect a feeling of space that the human eye perceives. If these were outside the context of this painting it would look wrong to the eye, despite how naturalistic they might appear within the image. For the researcher, beginning to think of the painting as a noun, a physical object, while in creation began to allow for the development of different roles the painting could perform as an object itself. In this cycle of the research the painting as an object was thought of as one of stillness and silence, but this role would evolve as the research cycles progressed.

Fig. 47. Lawrence, R. (2020) *A veil so you cannot see*. [oil on canvas].

In addition to the use of the *en grisaille* technique, at least in the case of the skull and lace, and the attempted theoretical application of psychic imagery of cessation to the painting (as a noun) *A Veil So You Cannot See* used and interrogated other concepts and techniques.

The still life setup continued to challenge the use of the forward-facing skull in another attempt to recapture the uneasiness and contemplation found in historical paintings. It was turned in profile for a more unusual, perhaps more contemporary, framing and the lace doily covered the face to further obfuscate both the look of the skull and represent psychic inertia and death denial by covering the face, so the recognisable features of the skull might be indirectly seen through the woven pattern. The composition was done at a direct, front-facing perspective as opposed to the oft-seen perspective from above like in the previous cycle's paintings. This is more of a reference to the Italian Baroque era's use of the level perspective to encourage psychological engagement from the audience (Figure 48), as opposed to the turn of the 20th century and the Dutch Baroque's *memento mori* genre, but it is somewhat contemporary because it is minimalistic in presentation.

Fig. 48. Caravaggio, M. M. (1599) *Basket of fruit*. [oil on canvas]. At: Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana.

The red, plastic vessel below the skull in *A Veil So You Cannot See* unintentionally acted as a container that was yet to bear something but was intentionally an experiment that paired an *en grisaille* object made of organic material painted indirectly (i.e., in layers that are allowed to dry between painting sessions) against an object in full colour made of plastic that was painted directly (i.e., painted wet into wet). Upon reviewing the cycle of work after completing the first *Waiting Shroud* series (Figure 75), it was somewhat revealing to see the concept of an open vessel waiting for death as though the plastic container was an urn without ashes just as the future shrouds are without literal corpses in the final work. Moments of clarity such as this are a throughline of thinking/making, not all decisions are made with complete clarity, sometimes things are added because they — for whatever reason — *feel right* since the instinct or reaction is not a thought that manifests itself in words. The red vessel with a lid was not the first item painted beneath the skull, other items like butterfly corpses and small vases had been painted and did not *feel right* in the image. In hindsight, the red container would seem related to the plastic bag of ashes in the previous work: *A Body in Ashes (1952-2008)* (Figure 32) just as the future standing shroud (Figure 75) would relate to the empty and waiting container.

A Veil So You Cannot See (Figure 47) also approached the black void and the sight-size technique again, after previously being used in *Glioblastoma* (Figure 30) and experimentation with the void in *Birdwing and Coffee* (Figure 33). The sight-size method derives its name from the painting being made to the original size of the subject matter. Typical execution of this method is to place the canvas next to the subject being painted, as opposed to the canvas being situated somewhere in front of the subject. This allows for quick and intuitive comparison between the painting and subject to assist with drawing accuracy. Deviating methods typically allow for the painting to be bigger or smaller than the source material. Sight-size often requires the painter to move physically, not rest in a chair, because the painter should observe the canvas and still life set-up side by side at a distance – typically two metres – to check for accuracy and then return to the canvas to make a mark, resulting in the subject painted being life-size:

Fig. 49. Lawrence, R. (2018) 'Example of sight-size still life set up'. [digital photo].

In this project the objects painted being presented as life-size hoped to elicit some kind of physical familiarity between the painting and viewer, beyond the optic mimicry being used, and could potentially assist in the re-contextualization of the painting (the noun) as an object. The skull being life-size would hypothetically seem to have more reflective impact as opposed to a very small or very large skull, which would not be able to belong to the viewer's body by way of its size.

Exploration of the Concept of Void

A method of exploring death denial and fear of death was to examine the researcher's own relationship with death, dying, and the dead body, which was the method attempted in

Cycle One. However, in Cycle Two it felt that the researcher's loss of a parent was not the intellectual path to discover language that moved between personal and universal experience or reflection on death denial. While death denial was present in the death of William G. Lawrence Jr, through reading literature it seemed more relevant to ruminate on fear of death as the project was not focused on grief post death. The researcher's fear of death has been, since the age of nine, the concept of not existing, which equates sleep with death as is common with child psychology (Lifton, 1981).[19] Throughout the researcher's life, comprehending what it would be like to not exist has caused great distress and no solace was found within the possibility of a lack of awareness upon death as some might claim.[20]

> The truth in the claim is apparent enough: we are unable to imagine—that is, experience through imagery—our own nonexistence. But the fallacy lies in letting the matter end there. For while I cannot imagine my nonexistence, I can very well imagine a world in which "I" do not exist. (Lifton, pg. 8)

Herein lies this cycle's exploration of the void which takes place through experimentation with material — which took place simultaneously in the studio but will be discussed shortly — and in the manner of the painting style. In the manner of the painting style used in this project, void is being thought of as both or either the negative shape around the subject and the object in shadow, which is delineated by the termination line used in Bargue's method. One can see clear examples of the termination line as it divides the object in light from the object in shadow, without rendering any form, as illustrated by Charles Bargue's instructional lithographs in *Drawing Course* (1866):

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[19] In *Death* (2017) Julian Barnes writes of his experiences with family and friends dying and the death denial he experiences in the United Kingdom. In his discussion of the fear of the void, as in not existing, he recalls how common it is to be afraid of the void after death, but it is more rare to be afraid of the void before one was born. Barnes refers to Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography in which the author describes a chronophobiac (a sufferer of a clinical anxiety disorder that features a fear of time and time moving forward) who cannot bear to watch videos of family before his birth as he cannot process the idea that he did not exist yet (2017, pg. 20).

[20] Becker rejects the somewhat casual way some dismiss being without consciousness, typically along the lines of: I will not exist and therefore will not care, and frames it as an act of repression (i.e. death denial) 'A man will say, of course, that he knows he will die some day, but he does not really care. He is having a good time living, and he does not think about death and does not care to bother about it -- but this is a purely intellectual, verbal admission. The affect of fear is repressed. (1973, pg. 17)' In *Death* (2017) Barnes anecdotal stories about his own and his friends and family experience with death and dying would seem to share the sentiment.
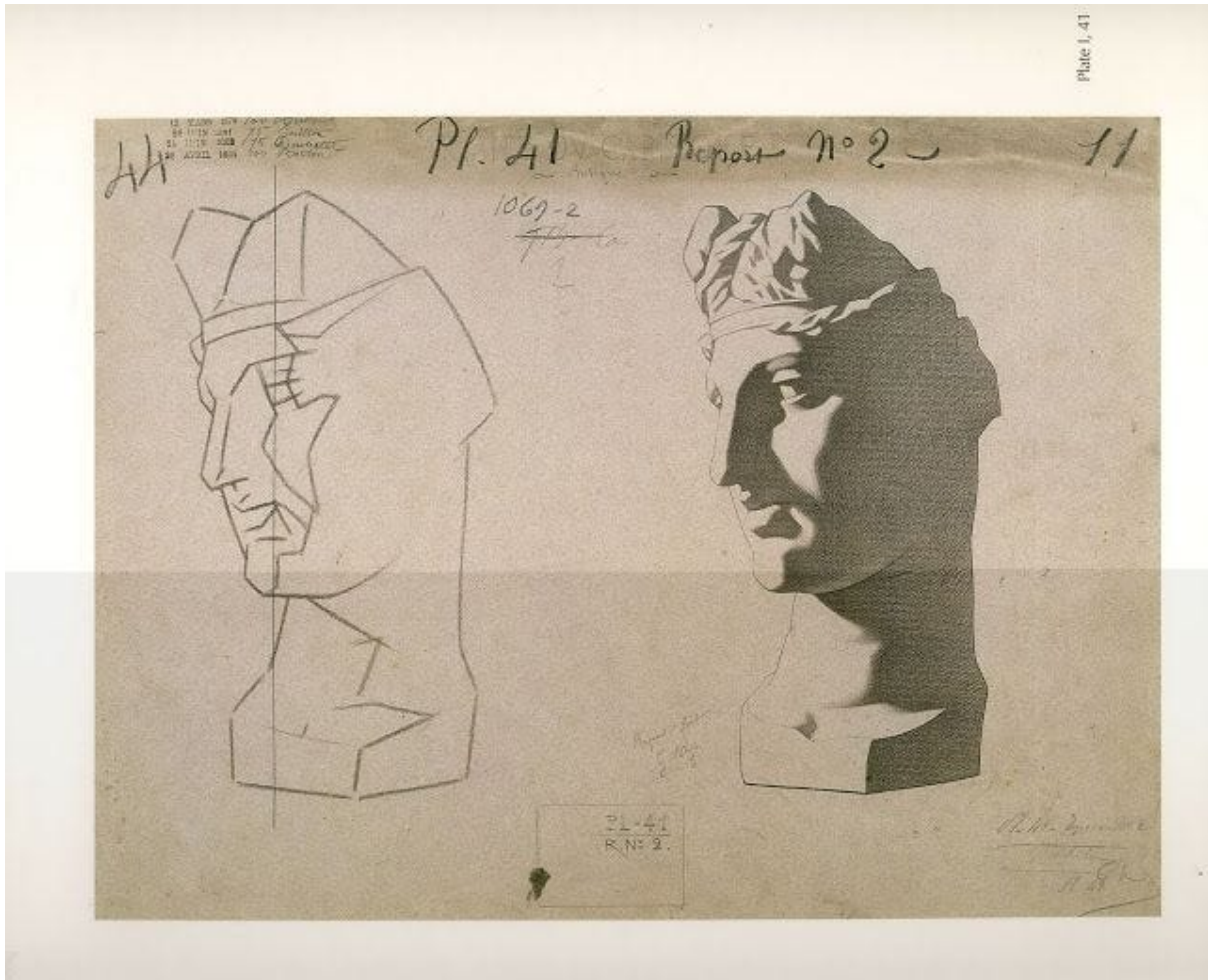
Fig 50. Bargue C. (1866) *Plate 1, 41: The capitoline Ariade*. [reprint of lithograph].

The visual void in art is an oft used and rarely written about subject. Perhaps it is appropriate since the idea of the void is nothingness, is there anything to discuss if something is truly without anything? Unless one approaches it from a scientific approach as exemplified in Matilde Marcolli's lecture in 2014, comparing art in the modern and postmodern era to mathematics representation of the void as it exists in outer space. This form of void has various shapes and actions that would seem to follow mathematical laws, but this is not the void the researcher fears when contemplating a lack of existence. The closest experience the researcher has had to a similar void is the instantaneous loss of time while unconscious from vasovagal syncope and anaesthesia from major surgeries. In those moments on the cusp of returning to consciousness again, there is only the experience of a void of black, with perhaps some visual agitation as the brain begins to once again process the information the eyes are receiving while closed. In this way the researcher understands void as total absence of

sensation that one can only partially perceive (or likely not being perceived at all) upon returning to consciousness. With this interpretation, void in the context of consciousness does seem related to the visually flat as it opposes or contextualises the visually three-dimensional. Marcolli qualifies the Classical vacuum, which is how she quantifies the void, as 'passive and undifferentiated, the modern vacuum is active, differentiated and dynamical' as in 'the vacuum has structure.' (2014, slide 1)[21] If Marcolli is indeed using the Classical in a more casual way to refer to the era neoclassicism or other art that refers to the Classical era in its use of figuration or theme, it could be argued the Classical void is not passive or in any way inert: the Classical void is receding from the eye unable to be entirely perceived.[22] The void in optic realism that prioritises form, is dark and recessed due to the limitation of what the eye can see, depending on how much ambient light is reflecting into the shadow shape. In this way the void that represents a lack of consciousness imitates the eye since the void is unable to be perceived due to the limitations of the body. Without the void in painting techniques, the illusion of form would be incomplete and could not exist in a visually similar way to how humans perceive form in nature. At this point in the research process this interpretation of void as contextual completion for painting form mimicked Lifton's reminder of the natural unity of death and life. Death does not appear out of nowhere, it is not an 'outside, malignant force' (Kübler-Ross, 1969, pg. 7) but is a part of the body, present in some way at all times. To die is to negate being alive, true, but it is at once a part of life:

> To die well one must feel a measure of self-completion--imagery of a life with connection, integrity, and movement, and of dying as part of some immortalizing current in the vast human flow... In brief, the paradox lies in attempting to live the examined life without examining death. (Lifton, 1979, pp 53–87)

Using the visual void to emphasize its role in framing, or even being the substance from which the form came, was something to explore in *A Veil So You Cannot See* with more critical intent as it was briefly experimented with in *Birdwing with Coffee.* While not highly experimental in presentation like *Birdwing and Coffee* (Figure 52; Figure 33), *A Veil So You*

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[21] By which it is assumed she is referring to any point in art history before modernism, since the specific era is not defined in the published document. Classical would typically refer to the Hellenistic art of Greece through the fall of Rome. This usage of the term Classical is somewhat academically inattentive and unspecific given the immediate reference to Dürer in 1500 (2014, slide 2), who would be considered a part of the Northern Renaissance or Gothic period, not Classical.

[22] Painting in the style of optic mimicry, unless one is working with photo or hyper-realism, is believed to use a method that aims to recreate how the human eye works, particularly that humans typically have two eyes that combine data in the brain, which is why there is emphasis on form over intense detail. Most photo and hyper-realism aim to recreate what a single lens can capture in moments, which is why in these styles there is an emphasis on detail over the illusion of three-dimensionality.

Cannot See attempted to replicate agitation in the void as experienced by personal experience and as used in turn of the 20th century painting, which experimented with shadow shapes and negative space, a kind of void in painting, as not only dark in value, but painted physically thinner or even scraped away.

Left: Fig. 51. Lawrence, R. (2019) *Birdwing and coffee*. [oil on canvas, black panel]
Right: Fig. 33. Lawrence, R. (2019) *Birdwing and coffee*. [oil on canvas, lace].

This usage of void not only used colour and value to have the void retreat from the viewer, but also reveal another void found in painting, elements of the underpainting (primarily the *imprimatur* or *campitura* [ground of field colour]) and canvas.

Left: Fig. 52. Stachiewicz, P. (1883–85) *Ukojenie (Solace)*. [oil on paperboard].
Right: Fig. 53. Fantin-Latour, H. (1877) 'detail of *Reading'*. [oil on canvas].

Again, it should be emphasized that *A veil so you cannot see* was done with the intent of learning by making, additionally informed by material experimentation that will be addressed shortly, and is likely the most overtly inward facing painting of the research project as the path to progress was not obvious at the time. That is to say that these references and interactions with the void in the piece were intended almost exclusively for the painter to appreciate and contemplate. It would likely be impossible for another to see the churning void in *A Veil So You Cannot See* as inspired by Death's ghostly cloak in Piotr Stachiewicz's *Ukojenie (Solace)* or Fantin-Latour's translucent void shapes (areas of shadow) that revealed the *imprimatur* below the opaque finishing layer, nor would one think of returning to consciousness by the look of the void in the painting. This work is a personal exercise in the researcher's fear and death denial, attempting to see the void as what it can only be understood as: nothing, while simultaneously allowing for the possibility of reframing the void as something that is not able to be understood and could therefore be something else or something traversable (not unlike coming in and out of consciousness). The void, through this exploration, material experimentation alongside the painting process, and critical reflection of the formal method and qualities of mimetic painting, began to take on the role of giver and receiver of consciousness/existence. Delayering the painting to reveal more voids in painting method (the campitura or ground), also began to take place in this work.

Experimentation with the material and its effect on painting method

While making *A Veil So You Cannot See* it became clear that more experimentation was necessary to push the practice towards a visual language that had the potential to communicate better with the viewer, but more importantly at the time, interrogated and refined the research question. To further interrogate the human corpse as an object of terror, a multipronged approach to the work began to develop with experimental sculptural projects to search for an object that might act as a new subject to paint. With the exploration of the researcher's personal fear in the previous work, exploring other fears like of the corpse and its relationship to the death denial in the funeral industry was brought to mind by *The Faraway Nearby* by Rebecca Solnit, who explores themes tangential to death via food decay and

preservation in the chapter 'Apricots'. She likens the overripe stone fruit to the human corpse in its secretion of liquid:

> Every time I looked at the mound of apricots there were a few more going bad that needed to be culled before the decay spread. The pile began to look like an organism, a human-size entity with a life of its own, the occupying army in my bedroom. Juices began to ooze out, as though I had a corpse decomposing on my floor, while the rest remained sweet, ripening in a rush as I waited for a window of time to do something with them. (2013, pg. 13)

The preservation of animal corpses that humans use as food struck a chord with the project because food and game is a historical theme of still life painting and working with these types of corpses aligned more ethically with the project. This, again, is a studio art practice-based research project that creates images, the researcher is not a practitioner of medicine or science and has no authority or medical expertise that should allow them to perform any kind of medical procedure. While this project searches for understanding through writing and interviews by experts in other fields, it does not find it necessary to cross over explicitly other lines of work, especially in the case of something as sensitive as the dead human body. Working with material that might imitate these specialised practices conceptually more than performing actual procedures like embalming allows the practice to explore these concepts via making/thinking. [23] One of the first and, at the time of this chapter being written, still ongoing experiments into preservation was with salt. As the researcher's studio is in the Burren in Clare, Ireland, decaying corpses of wild goats and some livestock can be found while walking on the limestone hills. Early in 2020, a goat leg was found near the college and placed in salt with the hope of mummifying the limb.

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[23] There was discussion of the researcher possibly visiting medical research performed at the University of Galway so that human corpses might be observed, however this was interrupted by the COVID-19 emergency and not pursued. Observing embalming could have been beneficial to the project, however the possibility of a vasovagal syncope on the part of the researcher, unfortunately, would have complicated the observation. It should be noted that due to deaths in the family, the researcher has been in the presence of human corpses.

Fig 54. Lawrence, R. (2020) 'Goat leg before preservation attempt'. [goat leg].

Fig 55. Lawrence, R. (2020) 'Goat leg covered in salt in plastic container'. [goat leg and salt].

Salt curing offers no alternatives to waiting, which is not wholly unfamiliar to the practice due to the method of oil painting employed that commonly takes months to complete. While waiting and meticulous observation and repetition are not necessarily synonymous there is a respect for slowness and long passages of time to pass before results are yielded. If death denial might be the result of a lack of time due to the busy nature of the West (Ariès, 1981) then this practice felt that intentionally taking time to observe death through the work was necessary to both combat death denial and create work that might do the same. This is not to say the practice is one of deliberate meditation, but it can be slow moving. Observation transformed into an optically convincing painting takes time to complete for the researcher and since this work is not being made to sustain a financial living,

the pressure of time is resisted outside of academic deadlines. The goat leg is occasionally uncovered, typically once a year, to check on the amount of decay and if the salt is preventing bacterial and insect activity, so far it has been in the salt for just over three years. It does not appear that the salt has been able to draw moisture from within the bones, hoof, or deep in the joints of the leg so far, and the most challenging aspect of the experiment is the smell.

Fig. 56. Lawrence, R. (2021) 'Goat leg after one year of salt treatment'. [Goat leg and salt].

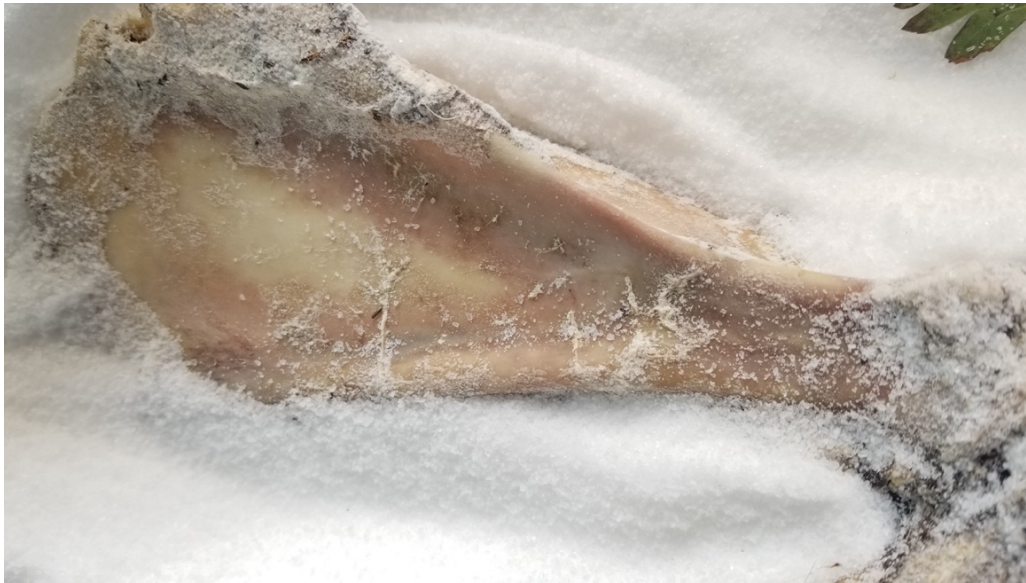Fig. 57. Lawrence, R. (2021) 'Hoof after one year of salt treatment'. [goat leg and salt].

Fig. 58. Lawrence, R. (2021) 'Pelvis after one year of salt treatment'. [goat leg and salt].

Beeswax also became a material that was explored due to its yellow colour (similar to the discoloration of the corpse and the preserved corpse [Figure 20]), its role in food preservation, and its use in painting.[24] Wax is particularly visually striking in the preservation of poultry:

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[24] Cold wax is used in oil painting to give body and translucency to paint and is typically, but not exclusively, used in rendering shadow shapes (the void) and in some glazing techniques that want to physically raise the paint on the canvas, but white (the *impasto* [pasty mixture]) is not desirable for hues used in glazing techniques. It is also used in the encaustic method, which this practice does not employ.

Fig. 59. Guzmán, R. (2017) 'Salt cured duck in beeswax'. [digital photo].

Salt cured meat sealed with wax was so visually alluring and seemed to share historic still life subject matter with more contemporary aesthetic in its strangeness, that similar methods were applied to the hearts of pigs. The pig heart was chosen because it is very similar to the human heart in size and might have been a more challenging part of the corpse since it was an organ as opposed to a bone, like the now-dismissed human skull. The symbiotic relationship between life and void echoed sentiments of the previous work. Salt-curing the heart made it somewhat difficult to recognize due to moisture loss; instead moulds of the heart were attempted with plaster and filled with wax, with mixed results as the raw heart cooked slightly in the plaster as it set. Another attempt was made with silicone. This mould was not filled with wax as the mould itself was too visually compelling in its texture and strangeness to risk destroying. Additionally, the anterior structure of the heart was destroyed during its removal from the body, thereby likely not releasing the wax cleanly.
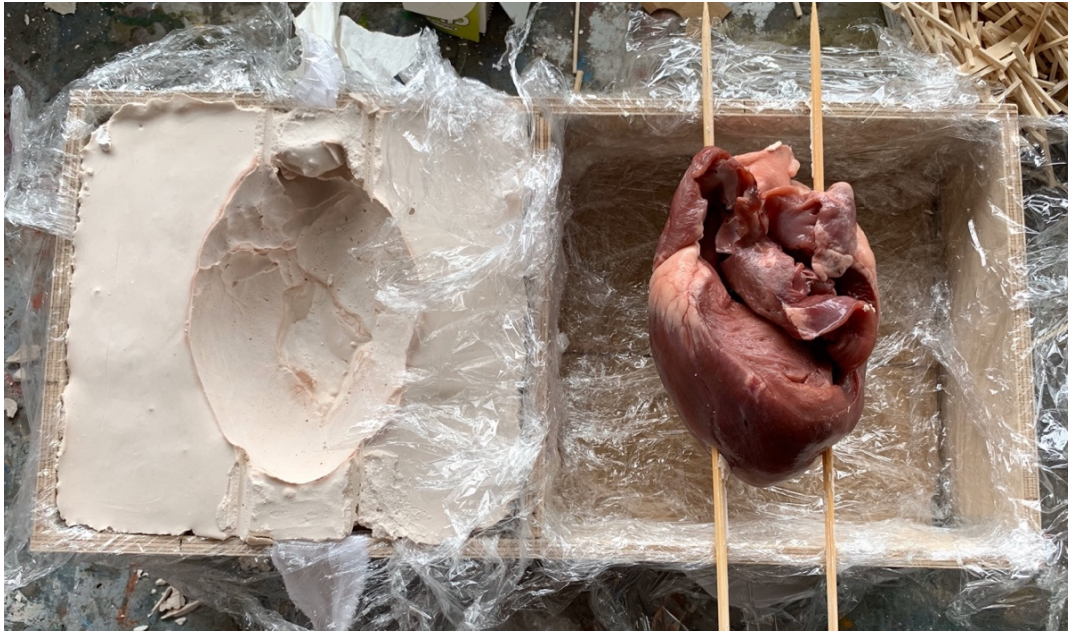
Fig. 60. Lawrence, R. (2020) 'Documentation of plaster casting of heart'. [pig heart and plaster].

Fig. 61. Lawrence, R. (2020) 'Documentation of plaster casting of heart'. [beeswax and plaster].

Fig. 62. Lawrence, R. (2020) 'Documentation of silicone casting of heart'. [pig heart and silicone].

Fig. 63. Lawrence, R. 2020. 'Documentation of silicone casting of heart'. [silicone].

While working with the heart alongside the making of *A veil so you cannot see* (Figure 47), it was realised that the heart functions as a kind of living void. This idea of heart as void became critically important to the practice — even if it was not painted as a part of the final series — because it enhanced the critical exploration of the void (death) as a necessary part of something so that it might function. The heart cannot operate if it does not have a chamber in a state of void. In this way the heart illuminated to the researcher the symbiotic relationship of form and void a relationship in painting method might be applied more purposefully to the paintings to better address the research question. This was when the interplay of void to form began to further connect conceptually in the mental exercise regarding the imagination of the void in *A Veil So You Cannot See*. The use of Bargue's method and the nature of the optical illusion between objects in shadow and objects in light was understood in a more complete way due to the heart and was further realised upon the later addition of *Two Versions of the Imaginary* (1953). The silicone mould of the heart in particular led to sketches and small studies that pointed to the painting that would conclude the second cycle of making and reflection:
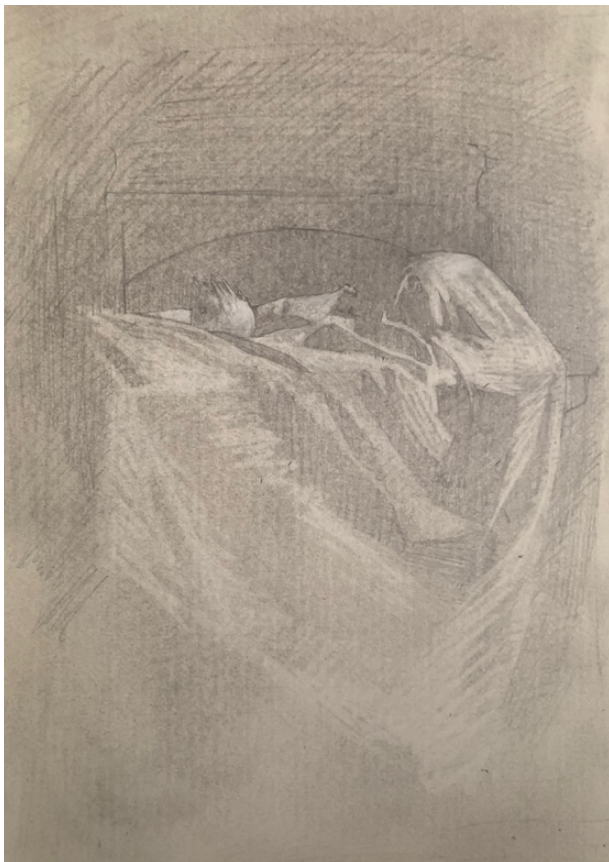

Fig. 64. Lawrence, R. (2020) *Study of silicone heart and bedsheet.* [graphite on paper].

In other contemporary art practices that experiment with or depict parts of the corpse (or the body), preservation, and decay, one can find ecologically focused artists that challenge the funeral industry's negative effect on the environment with the ultimate goal of encouraging death acceptance (Lee in MacDonald, 2016). By critiquing typical, Western burial practices and creating products to provide burial alternatives, Jae Rhim Lee aims to combat what she sees as death denial practices and ecologically damaging practices in the funeral industry. Lee is a transdisciplinary artist whose practice aims to reimagine how individuals might live and die in a more environmentally sustainable manner. In 2011, Lee debuted her *Infinity Burial Suit* (Figure 4), in which she claims to have trained a unique strain of mushroom to decompose and remediate toxins in human tissue by feeding them her hair and skin.

In his paintings, Ken Currie can pair viscera and flesh with the black void (Figure 65), recalling Francis Bacon, Goya, and the Realist painters of the 19th century before him. At the same time, Currie has used imagery of the death mask in a ghostly fashion (Figure 40). This work is devoid of violence and gore, but Currie continues to employ a more existential black void. Like Lee's work with skin, hair, and urine, Currie sometimes pushes what is comfortable to confront. Neither of these works veer into the abject however — like this project — but the use of flesh, hair, and bodily functions could trigger the difficulty the mind might have to accept its nature as an animal body making it differ slightly from the intent of this work, even with the use of the pig heart.
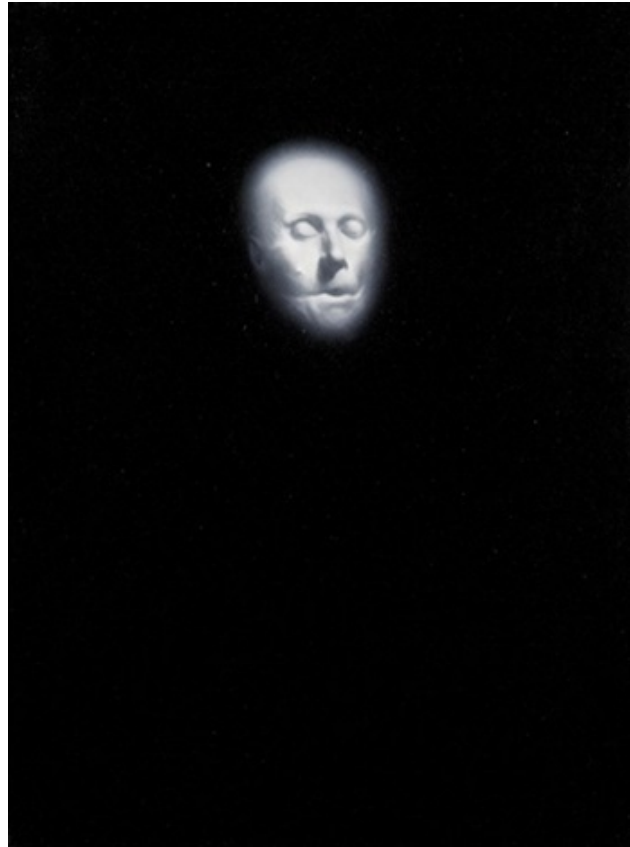
Left: Fig. 65. Currie, K. (2014) *Cetus*. [oil on canvas].

Right: Fig. 40. Currie, K. (1996) *Earthly remnants (after the death mask of Sheridan)*. [oil on canvas].

Notably none of the objects made through this point in the research were featured as subjects painted in the next series of work; some have been displayed as small sculptures alongside paintings, but outside of studies, the traditional still life set up, even objects that had more relevancy to the goals of the project were not painted in the concluding series. The attempts to take previous objects from Cycle One from their known environments to give them new symbolic meaning did not seem to cause critical reflection on death or death denial on the part of the viewer nor did paintings and drawings of more compelling objects — like the silicone heart — were nearly unrecognizable and therefore their meaning lost. However, the contributions to the understanding of the void were measurable in future work and the experiment with materials would also translate into the concluding painting of the cycle. Ultimately, this painting practice remains one that uses still life which continues to inform painting by the inclusion of objects either directly in a more traditional method or indirectly as was employed through the multi-pronged approach.

Up until this point, the paintings made were personal allegories of a specific death, which is not entirely outside the experience of death as each death is a personal experience. It seemed more relevant to the research question if the work became both personal and universal so it might appeal to many, individually. The connections made during the making/thinking of both *A Veil So You Cannot See* and the wax and silicone hearts began to also shift thinking towards the painting as a physical object beyond the painting as an object of stillness (cessation). If the work could achieve a kind of universality in connection and evoke thoughts of death it might become a space for reflection.

Development of the Painting as an Object, Development of the Vertical Shroud in a Waiting Shroud: Series I

Fig. 52. Stachiewicz, P. (~1883–85). *Solace.* [oil on paperboard].

Solace was created approximately between 1883 and 1885 by Polish painter Piotr Stachiewicz. His interpretation of personified Death drapes a bedsheet over presumably a recently deceased body, seemingly acting more as a collector rather than the malignant external force that personifications of death tend to have. This interpretation can be seen in *Nāve (Death)* made by Latvian painter Janis Rozentāls in 1897. The painting depicts a similarly peaceful scene, shows Death taking the life of an infant with a kiss (Figure 66) unlike Death in Stachiewicz's *Solace* who would seem to be performing an act of finality after death, not unlike how death is depicted in the hospital through entertainment media: the final act after death being the bed sheet laid upon the just deceased. The act of laying the bedsheet over the body transforms the sheet into a shroud. In this painting, a connection of the bedsheet to the void was made since — in modern times at least — many are typically born in a bed and dies in a bed, making the bedsheet the receiver of life and deliverer of death, and thus the mediator between the void and form for the purposes of this practice.

Fig. 66. Rozentāls, J. (1897) *Nāve*. [oil on canvas].

The shroud's relationship to the body made it potentially symbolic of both individuality and universality, which the project was seeking, but there was the question of how it might be presented. The horizontal shroud is one that already bears a dead body and paintings in the past use that horizontal alignment to convey the corpse like it is depicted in Manet's (1864–65) *L'homme Mort* (Figure 12) and Pelez's (1887) *La Victim ou L'asphyxiée* (Figure 11) but a vertical shroud —like Jae Rhim Lee modelling her *Infinity Suit* (Figure 4) — could be interpreted as a shroud that has some sort associations between the verticality of standing and sitting and the living. The artistic interpretations of indentations in a bed could be, and has been, used to signify absence — like in Dorothy Cross' monumental marble sculpture titled *Bed* (Figure 67) — but again the horizontal nature of the bed could be detrimental to the goal of critical reflection because the bed would be observed by the viewer, as opposed to the vertical nature of standing, which could be used to communicate active conversation and engagement, especially in a two-dimensional medium like painting. However, Cross' use of mimicry and recontextualising of the bed with marble to recreate the illusion of cloth and cushioned surfaces could be argued to be an inviting space for reflection on death, sleep, birth, sex, and/or anything else associated with the bed, but the viewer should be deterred from physically interacting with the work due to its monolithic figure and monument-like presence, status as sculpture, and reality of marble's hardness. It might cause one to wonder who the bed was for, however, which is a similar effect this project aimed to achieve but might imply absence or loss by the relief.

Left: Fig. 4. Lee, J. R. (2014) *Infinity suit*. [cotton and mushroom spores].

Right top: Fig. 67. Cross, D. (2018) *Bed*. [Carrara marble].

Right bottom: Fig. 68. Cross, D. (2018) *Bed.* [Carrara marble].

A vertical shroud would still remain ghostlike, so it seemed more ideal to drape the bedsheet in such a way that it was more shroud–like and not a reaper or ghost. The drape should avoid the even distribution of fabric beginning from the top of the head around the body or any opening that might be interpreted as a deep hood. If focused instead on wrapping the body or draping predominately over the posterior or anterior side of the body it might avoid unwanted comparisons, or at least consciously deviate from them. If upon viewing the vertical shroud a viewer should question if they were seeing a reaper or ghost it would not be entirely desirable, but it would still be positive for the project since the viewer is thinking about death, dying, and the dead body. Furthermore, questioning what is being seen is beneficial because it causes the viewer to pause to contemplate what they are seeing, taking more time with the image to think and other steps could be taken to attempt to communicate the act of reflection. The colour of the shroud would be important as it could confuse or clarify the work symbolically. To test the concept, small sections of cloth were dipped in wax and draped over small anatomical figures, so that, when cool, the shrouds could stand while

retaining emptiness. The resulting pieces resituate the hollow, free-standing, paradoxically vertical shroud which intended to the remove the body and the bedsheet from its expected use so that the mortality of the viewer might be projected onto the painting. If these were made on the scale of the life-size and painted in the sight-size method, there might be an even greater chance that bodily familiarity might elicit a reaction from the viewer:

> Vischer wrote about paintings because he was interested in the way that they can communicate feelings without language to do so. Pictures of the body elicit thoughts about the body, and they can provoke physical reactions in *my* body... Normally there is nothing obvious about empathy or proprioception, and most viewers seldom even notice them; but they are universal. (Elkins 1996, pg. 138)

Fig. 69. Lawrence, R. (2021) 'Graphite study of shroud miniature with image of silicone heart in cloth'. [digital photo].
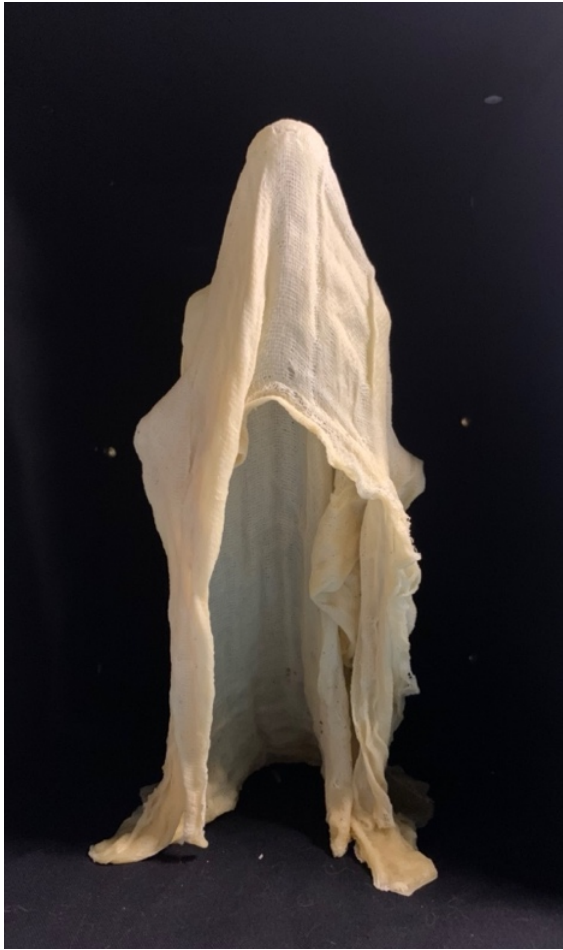
Left: Fig 70. Lawrence, R. (2020) 'Shroud miniature tests'. [cheesecloth and wax].
Right: Fig 71. Lawrence, R. (2020) 'Shroud miniature tests'. [cotton and wax].

Various monochromatic colour arrangements were tested to see the interaction with Blanchot's *Two Versions of the Imaginary* (1953), which had been introduced to the practice by visiting faculty John Strutton from the Royal College of Art in London, who likened the essay to the use of monochrome, form, and void in *A Veil So You Cannot See* and in a painting study of *La Danse* by Carpeaux that was unrelated to the research project. Strutton pointed out that the form in grey was convincing to a point of logical confusion as the raw umber background and shadow shapes were flat and different in value/colour. Consulting the work of Blanchot led to thinking beyond featuring an object that is a part of a cadaver, but instead treating the painting method and painted object as the cadaver via the duality of the image. This duality of the image — its ability to exist and not exist simultaneously — seemed emphasized by the combination of the monochromatic nature of the work in and the interaction of shapes in light (form) and shapes in shadow (void).

Fig. 73. Lawrence, R. (2018) *En grisaille study of 'la danse' by Carpeaux*. [oil on canvas].

      While exploring variations of monochrome via oil studies: red was removed as a possible colour as it is often associated with living things, romantic love, violence, and is associated with viscera/horror in the West. White could be a counterintuitive colour to use to convey mourning today as it is typically associated with more celebrated occasions such as weddings, springtime, or (more negatively) European and North American white supremacist ideals of perceived purity or social value that are used to colonise, which is highly at risk due to the use of the white bedsheet and its association with white supremist American groups. In Derek Jarman's *Chroma* the negative complexity of white is captured in a straightforward way by the chapter title: *White Lies* (1994, pg. 9). Western whiteness becomes complex to such a negative degree when critically accessed that it did not appear that it would allow the focus of the work to be the quotidian death. Black however was not wholly dismissed from future application due to its relationship with mourning clothes in the West. Black became the colour of mourning in Europe and the United States when synthetic dyes were developed during the industrial age (Forester & Christie, 2013) and the influence of Queen Victoria on

appropriate fashion standardised the practice for a growing middle class, becoming some of the first civilian ready-made outer garments once the colour become more affordable. Through this relationship the Victorian era was researched more thoroughly, and Ariès' critique of late 1800s European death denial behaviour solidified the use of the usage of *en grisaille* and the technique of rendering form for this historical relevancy. Technical painting methods influenced by this era (Krüger, 2013) could be used to analyse and critique thinking in the late 1800s and the use of layers to cover, refine, and construct a more palatable reality, which led the project back to grey due to the use of *en grisaille* in the 1800s and early 1900s. Grey is a flexible hue since it can be as straight forward (a mix of black and white) or as complex (a mix of various complementary colours) to make as the painter desires. It also has a wide range in value from nearly black to nearly white but technically remains grey and has few cultural comparisons that come to mind, aside from ambiguity.

Left) Fig. 74. Marquis, F. 2020. 'Robbie Lawrence being cast in plaster to create structural support for the wax covered bedsheet'. [digital video].

Right: Fig. 75. Lawrence, R. 2021. 'Final shroud in the studio next to Robbie Lawrence to illustrate its similar size' [digital photo].

For the concluding work in the second cycle, *A Waiting Shroud: Series I*, Blanchot's cadaver as the duality of the image was applied to the practice alongside the understanding of void and form brought about by the making of the silicone heart. This attempted to synthesize theoretical reading into the method of painting, resulting in the use of the sight-size and *en grisaille* technique to explore the paradoxical relationship of the neutral double and physical object. Additionally, the painting method's interplay between form and the void began to investigate late 1800s modesty's relationship with death denial. Due to *en grisaille's* historical relationship to technique of the era, its incomplete nature — somewhere in-between the empty canvas and *fini* — seemed to suit the desire to realise a visual representation of a shroud waiting to receive the viewer's future cadaver and the exploration of the duality of the image. How much could the grey paint and raw umber ground both exist in a convincing form and not exist in a physically three-dimensional way? This method also began the path that would later see the painting method as Blanchot's symbolically confusing cadaver, as discussed in Chapter Three.

While the bedsheet as an empty, vertical shroud aimed to symbolise both the personal and the universal, the act of reflection was thought to be assisted by the use of life-size painting as an object. To further push the realisation that the shrouds were life-size, the painting was placed on the floor instead of hung on the wall in order for the viewer to be able to stand directly in front of the waiting shroud. Hanging paintings higher than typical gallery height had been tried in previous installations, with little to no notable reaction, but the stately nature — or perhaps precious, untouchable symbolism — of being hung on the wall to be exclusively viewed had to be challenged so the viewer might encounter the painting in a different way than is typical in a gallery setting. In moving the painting to the floor, it becomes more akin to a space for the viewer, not a metaphorically untouchable item on the wall. Being able to stand toe-to-toe, so to speak, with the painting, especially if the viewer happens to be a similar hight to the waiting shroud, might elicit the thought that the shroud is for the viewer and trigger some aspect of mortality salience. In this way the experimental removal of objects from their expected place and intended purpose needed to happen to the painting (a noun) to encourage critical reflection on the part of the viewer.

Fig. 76. Lawrence, R. (2021) *A waiting shroud: series I.* [oil on canvas].

By the end of this research cycle, the work breaks through the expected presentation of still life through considered, repeated experimentation in the studio with a multi-pronged method of material/sculptural experimentation and painting — informed by psychoanalytic and philosophical theory — to further synthesise and interrogate the research question and develop the next step in applying more realised critical theory to the work. The painting (as a noun) was expanded upon by the practice, by removing it from the expected hanging place on the wall to the floor, resituating the painting as a experiential pace for personal reflection.

Chapter Seven: The Third Cycle

> Heinrich Böll's observation that "the artist carries death within him like a good priest his breviary" has never been more important than in our death-haunted time. And not only for the artist. For the attempt to exclude from the psychological imagination death and its symbolisations tends to freeze one in death terror, in a stance of numbing that can itself be a form of psychological death. (Lifton, 1979, pg. 8)

To realise the *Waiting Shroud* series, the optic mimicry method of painting used through the second cycle takes on a distillation of critical theories, resulting in the solidifying of the research question and the way it was being interrogated. The previous concept of death as a general theme had now divided into death (as the void), dying (as fear of nature's rule over the body), and the dead body (as the duality of the image). The practice was focused on the quotidian death and the way it aimed to address death denial by the painting as an object in the role of a reflective space and the painting as a method in the role of Blanchot's cadaver. The practice also solidified its application of middle knowledge to the painting and material experimentation — the work acknowledged the need for constant fluctuation that is an individual's relationship with fear of death. Through these methods the paintings aimed to appeal to the viewer in such a way that it might create the opportunity for critical reflection regarding fear of death, dying, and the dead body. In this way, the work could provide the impetus for interrogation of the self with regards to the ability to approach such fears or possibly provide the realisation that one might tend towards death denial as described by grief therapist Carter Ross:

> The "harm" one would be avoiding through death denial is of course the emotional distress, but the desire to deny is bolstered by the assumption of many individuals that they are not capable of effectively managing the emotional distress that accompanies profound loss, i.e. they will lose their grip on reality, "go crazy". (Apr 2023)

The paintings made as a result of this practiced-based research would hope to suggest via the Western universality of the bedsheet and the shroud (as in the universality of the shroud as at once an individual but is also many), that one is capable of managing said distress, as many have before and will after, but also that it is an ever-changing relationship. This was clarified through the method of painting an object for months at a time: the difficulty of understanding

something via optical mimicry is the painter's own perception of it, which might differ day-to-day. Certain day's decisions made might feel correct, as though the object is being understood and interpreted well, bringing feelings of joy through understanding. Other days might bring doubt or anguish as past decisions no longer appear true to the subject matter, or understanding and translating the subject might feel an arduous or impossible task. Painting in this manner is an emotional back and forth between the self and the object being observed, mediated by paint and the hand. Likewise, on certain days death may bring sleepless nights, tears, and despair, while on other days the idea death may bring feelings of relief or tranquillity.

However, it must be acknowledged the artmaking possesses somewhat unique properties since public interpretation of said artwork cannot be controlled, no matter how intensively the creator works to communicate a specific message visually and will undoubtedly be interpreted in a way that is unintended. In this way the academic rigor of creative, practice-based research can frustrate because it is not necessarily a result-based practice (Sullivan, 2001). While there cannot be complete confidence in effectiveness, this practice is not art-therapy, and it is not to be used in place of any sort of therapy. It is a body of work informed by repetitive image making, reflection, and historical and theoretical application in the attempt to develop expertise in a specific field of thematic art making. Art making, like many creative practices, is derivative, as the long history of painting would seem to support, and this project made a significant effort to source visual language from multiple fields of expertise in the attempt to satisfy the enquiry.

> Paint incites emotions, or the thoughts of motions, and through them it implies emotions and other wordless experiences. That is why painting is a fine art: not merely because it give us trees and faces and lovely things to see, but because paint is a finely tuned antenna, reacting to every unnoticed movement of the painter's hand, fixing the faintest shadow of a thought in color and texture (Elkins, 1999 , pg. 193)

After the creation of *A Waiting Shroud: Series I*, Series II was made with the intent to investigate the transitional, or perhaps traversable, relationship between form and the void, using historical painting method to pinpoint Europe in the late 1800s as a time relevant to modern death denial and de-layer its psychology. It also began to purposefully explore the duality of the cadaver as an impossible image that is optically convincing but does not protrude into space. The material experimentation that was used to explore potential painting subjects from the previous cycle was applied to the painting itself, taking certain elements of traditional painting material that seemed to simultaneously have a symbolic relationship with

the dead body or symbolic continuity — such as marble, hide glue-size (part of a corpse), gold, bed sheets, and paper — and uses them in a different method than intended.

Material experimentation was applied to the surface texture of the painting, specifically the priming agent which would typically be referred to as *gesso* in most cases. *Gesso* is Italian for chalk, which infers that chalk is added to glue size for opacity, absorption, and texture, but this can mean any white or opaque priming agent for raw canvas. This initially was guided through visiting artist Matthew Mitchell, who created what he has coined material through the combination of hide glue and various clays or powdered stone to make paintings.

Fig 77. Mitchell, M. 2018 *Map*. [Clay material from Doolin and enamel on board].

In the first year of research, Mitchell was generous in offering guidance as to how hide glue was uniquely used in his practice, especially when compared to traditional methods of thin applications of glue size to raw canvas in order to prime it for painting, and explained methods in which he applied such material to surfaces to create his work. While Mitchell's material did not suit the practice because his specific technique did not create a surface that supported oil paint and varnish, it was the impetus to experimentation some four years later

after the pig's heart. Marble dust was used in historic painting in order to make white paint more opaque, which in turn makes the paint intensely white. While modern technology has improved this opacity through the development of titanium, a pigment that, on a microscopic scale, knits together to create greater opacity/whiteness, marble of different grits is still used to create paint texture and *impastos* (Italian for mixture) which help create visible brush strokes on the canvas. The use of marble (a metamorphosed limestone) and chalk (a sedimentary limestone) in more traditional mixtures in painting (*gesso* and *impasto*) led to the exchange of chalk for marble to see if marble dust could make a surface for the paintings. Not only did marble and hide glue combine to create a primer that was not compromised by the oil in the paint and varnish like previous experimentation, but it took on similar properties to paper in its interaction with mineral spirits and oil paint. This was later compared by a viewer to surfaces created by Informalist Antoni Tàpies (Figure 78) who used mixed media painting techniques in the 1950s including thick pastes of glue, paint, and sand (or clay or marble dust) to make images that rejected the academic emphasis on optical form, which was at the time no longer considered a significant movement, and instead focused on the material. While both Tàpies and this enquiry claim to be reacting to official or historic academic technique, the intent behind both differ because this painter intends no contradiction to academic method.

Fig. 78. Lawrence R. (2022) 'Marble dust and hide glue mixture'. [digital photo].
Fig. 79. Lawrence R. (2022) 'Marble dust and hide glue mixture'. [digital photo].

Fig. 80. Tàpies, A. (1959) *Gray relief on black*. [digital image of painting].

This methodology of material experimentation is not unique to Modernist painters like Tàpies' work, it is one with a long relationship to historical painting. Elkins compares the tradition to alchemy in *What painting is:*

> Painters have always used outlandish methods, very much like the alchemical methods of their day. Rubens and his contemporaries boiled oil and lead into a stinking mixture called black oil... they pulverized ore samples... mixed them with melted wax, plant resins, and various oils... (Elkins 1999, pp 20–21)

Elkins goes on to say that while the chemical makeup of different supplies may not matter or necessarily contribute meaning to the work, artists instead care about how the substances are made (1999, pg. 22). In practice–based research at the doctoral level, however, enquiries into the makeup of materials used would likely contribute to the meaning of work, but as stated previously, not all acts with purpose in making/thinking yielded expected results. Many instances of work or materials unrelated to the project have yielded pathways that later benefited the research. In this case, it was thought marble might act a signifier of the divine, the eternal (or continuation), or the passage of time both aesthetically and materially through its derivative use in Hellenistic sculpture, sculpture during the Roman Empire, Italian Renaissance and Baroque sculptures, French Academic sculpture of the 18th and 19th century, and contemporary work like Dorothy Cross's marble *Bed* (Figure 68). Hide glue

could be argued as just as historic as marble in its long used application in the construction of paintings, but not as revered for its material nature as its role in the aesthetic of the work is not as visibly apparent. However, it being part of a corpse added to the material thematic signifiers that made the work in addition to its relationship to historical painting techniques used in the 1800s and early 1900s. While this research project might need material to contribute theoretical meaning, Elkins is correct in the case of painters needing to ultimately understand how material behaves so that it can be reacted to at the speed of thought (Elkins 1999, pg 21).

Fig. 81. Far left: Alexandros of Antioch (-150– -125 BC) *Venus de milo.* [digital image of sculpture].

Fig. 82. Left: Praxiteles. (125-150) *Diana of Versailles.* [digital image of sculpture]

Fig. 83. Middle: Buonarroti, M. (1513-1515) *The dying slave*. [digital image of sculpture].

Fig. 84. Right: Bernini, M. (1644) *Truth.* [digital image of sculpture].

Fig. 85. Far right: Carpeaux, J. B. (1873) *Les trois grâces*. [digital image of sculpture]

The marble material compelled because it behaved like paper in its porosity, like stone in its hardness, and like typical *gesso* in its ability to absorb oil and provide appropriate grip for oil paint. This confusion of what the surface of the painting might be made of: another duality of physical hardness and symbolically eternal in marble and visual softness due to the diffused appearance of the marble dust, creating paper-like absorption of paint and fragility suggested by paper, appeared to strike a similar duality in psychological imagery of cessation (paper-like fragility) and continuation (stone-like eternal). Incidentally, a solid application of oil-based house paint created a somewhat tar-like surface (tar having its own relationship to death, painting, and preservation due to its relationship to crude oil and fossilization) on the marble and glue size surface in Series III (Figure 89; Figure 97). The

marble surface appeared visually similar to the unpolished stone, even retaining the characteristic of occasional reflective properties that raw marble can have. It also added both strength and fragility to the work since the surface was hard, firmly attached to the canvas, but prevented any flexibility of the canvas which, risked cracking and crumbling, making the proverbial lifespan of the paintings likely short due to the large size and inability to roll the canvases for storage.

Fig. 86. Lawrence, R. (2022) 'Documentation of marble and glue size tests'. [digital photograph].

Fig. 87. Lawrence, R. (2022) 'Detail of marble and glue size surface with paint significantly thinned by mineral spirits'. [digital photograph].

Fig. 88. Lawrence, R. (2022) 'Work in progress on Series II at the Notan stage'. [Oil on marble surface and canvas].

Fig. 89. Lawrence, R. (2023) 'Detail of Series III: Application of oil-based housepaint on marble material'. [Digital photograph]

Another material that straddled both death symbolism and historical painting that interested the researcher was gold leaf. Outside of symbolic meaning, imitation gold leaf was applied to the surface to help highlight the unique marble texture of the painting's surface in case it went unnoticed. Symbolically and chemically, however, gold is nearly immutable which likely contributed to the historical belief in the metal having purifying and eternal qualities as exemplified in Greek and Egyptian myths of paying fees in gold so that souls

could cross over to the land of the dead.[25] In *What Painting Is* (1999)*,* James Elkins compares the emotional and intangible qualities of paint to the historical practice of alchemy:

> ...knowledge gained in the studio is every bit as engrossing and nuanced: it's just that instead of learning words, painters learn substances... is it a kind of knowledge, and it is the same knowledge that alchemists had. (1999, pg. 22–23)

Paired with gold's historic attachment to myth and death ritual, it seemed worthy of experimentation. Additionally, *A Waiting Shroud: Series II* aimed to use multiple elements of formal painting methods and traditional materials used in the 1800s and late 1900s that might suggest the void was traversable, which gold was a part of, particularly in its use in gilded frames.[26] In this application, the gold leaf was exclusively used in the shapes in shadow (the void) that were either on or cast by the shroud in order to signify its similar symbolic role to the bedsheet regarding traversal through the void and its adjacency to birth, dying, and the shroud. The use of grey for the objects in light and the background alongside the objects in shadow decorated with gold conflates the identity of the void belonging to the shapes in shadow like in Series I of the work. Where void belongs becomes more nebulous due to the grouping of one typically used void – the field colour of the painting – with the colour that signifies form – the shapes in light with the colour grey. This rearrangement of void continues via the separation of the object in shadow through the use of raw umber and imitation gold, which visually separates it from the void it would typically be grouped with – the field colour of the painting. This rearrangement of the void was initially explored through the drawing practice in graphite studies of the miniature shrouds (Figure 104; Figure 105).

While gold does not seem to have the same historic symbolic relationship with the death in most modern, Western funeral practices, it has remained in historic Catholic aesthetic and display of wealth – a religion widely practiced in the West. This enquiry is secular, it has not consulted much theistic symbolism to create the body of work or to critically analyse death denial, but it does acknowledge the effects of Christian hegemony on the West, which should be expected to be projected onto the work on the part of some viewers — even if a practice is secular in execution. Gold's symbolic usage is far wider than Christianity, even within the West, and does not feel exclusive to the religion.

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[25] Elkins (1999) points out however that lead was believed to be a corrupted or sick version of gold since both are heavy and soft, which was later applied to the practice in the casts of L'Inconnue de la Seine.

[26] It was not uncommon in academic painting practices to create the painting on a canvas that was already framed. This method considered the frame as a part of the image making process and would have some influence on the composition of the final work.

Fig. 90. Lawrence, R. (2023) 'detail of *Series II: Standing* in progress in the studio'. [Oil and imitation gold leaf on marble and glue size on canvas].

L'Inconnue de la Seine: Late 1800s Sensation of Death Denied, Modern CPR Training Manikin & Atelier Training Staple

Fig. 91. (~1900) 'Putative death mask' of L'inconnue de la Seine'. [online image].

The plaster cast of *L'Inconnue de la Seine* (The stranger of the Seine) and its accompanying myth is well known in circles of the contemporary revival of academic style of painting. The cast is supposedly a death mask of a young, drowned woman who was supposedly found in the 1880s in the Quai du Louvre with a smile on her face. Her corpse was said to be devoid of bloating or any other unsightly decay and was so enchanting that her face was cast in plaster by the Lorenzi studio in Paris and displayed in the window of the undertaker to be identified (Chrisafis, 2007). One could extrapolate that due to the previous death denial behaviour explored in Chapter 2, such a tale might imply that anyone in such a time (and today) might aim to die in such a dignified, palatable way, far removed from the secretions and other bodily failings while dying or decaying. Her perceived beauty, speculation regarding her possible suicide (or murder), and lack of identity made her a

sensation of the time, resulting in her supposed death mask becoming one of the most recognisable, outside of notable historical figures, in Europe (Chrisafis, 2007) and inspiration for creatives for years to come. In viewing the cast in person — as the researcher is in possession of one — practical knowledge might conclude that she was not a corpse but a perhaps a sculpture or a life mask enhanced by a sculptor's hand. When comparing L'Inconnue de la Seine to other death masks of the time, there is a lack of skin texture, muscle slack in the features, and the hair is more similar to sculpted hair that artfully clusters as opposed to hair seen in other death masks. A descendent of Lorenzi, Claire Forestier, elaborates in an interview by Angelique Chrisafis:

> Look at her full, rounded cheeks, her smooth skin... There is simply no way the cast could have been taken from a corpse. And this is certainly not a drowned woman, fished from the water. It would be impossible to take such a perfect face from a dead woman. Some casts taken from living faces are so clear, so detailed, that when you look at the eyelids you can just see the eyeballs' movement underneath. That's the case with the Inconnue... The Inconnue was not dead; more than that I can't say... My only guess is perhaps the girl who sat for the mask drowned herself years later? But I've got no idea and we'll never know. (2007)

Fig. 92. Bargue, C. (1866–71) *Jeune femme plate 53*. [reprint of lithograph].

Some semblance of truth could lie in the publication date of Charles Bargue's drawing course, which features the Inconnue, but refers to her instead as: *jeune femme* (young woman). Bargue's drawing course was commissioned in either 1864 or 1865 by Adolphe Goupil to help train artists who aimed to attend the Ecole (Ackerman, 1866–71) and it took years to create the 197 instructional lithographs. The course was published in three parts sometime between 1866 through 1871, likely 1870 according to Ackerman's foreword. This would imply that a drowned woman not found in the Seine in 1880 because Bargue had drawn the cast before 1866 (likely between 1864 and 1866), and Jean-Léon Gérôme is believed to have told Bargue which sculptures to draw. These dates would also be consistent with the hairstyle worn by the woman, as her hair is more in the manner of the 1860s rather than the 1880s — these fashions were noticeably different in appearance and would not have been ignored by the public. This could mean she might have been a life mask in a sculptor's studio from which Bargue was sourcing plaster casts for the project, which could include the Lorenzi studios, who claim to the be originator of the cast, but do not claim a relationship with Gérôme. However, few studios believe the original exists anymore.

Regardless of the truth of the matter, in a synchronistic overlap: L'Inconnue de la Seine did not just become a popular symbol of decay denied and elegance (as opposed to the feared agony) in dying, she also became a popular plaster cast to teach painting and drawing in Academic schools that is still used today. The myth of the death mask eventually led to its use as the face of CPR training manikins (Chrisafis, 2007): another medical practice that both serves to preserve life and is at once misunderstood in its effectiveness and applied without explicit permission at times (Dalton, 2023). L'Inconnue de la Seine endures alongside the death denying mindset of her era, existing in its historic and contemporary imagery at once, which makes her a natural inclusion to the project as she unites many of the themes interrogated. L'Inconnue is a part of the history that shaped death denial, modern death denial, historic painting style, and was owned by many Western writers and artists, including Maurice Blanchot.

Fig. 93. (n.d.) 'Maurice Blanchot and L'Inconnue de la Seine'. [online image].

She exists in overlapped time between the turn of the century and today. The preserved historical casting technique that reproduces the mask for today's modern ateliers and the modern, less accurate or fine, reproduction of her face for CPR training can be analogous to the process applied in the studio. L'Inconnue became so compelling due to her touching on nearly every aspect of the research project that the researcher felt it necessary to not only keep her presence in the studio, but to attempt casts made of material that was being experimented with for the *Waiting Shroud* series, even though the researcher does not consider her a death mask.

Due to the cast's closeness to the historical and modern Ateliers', painting the L'Inconnue de la Seine did not seem to be an exercise that would be taken seriously in the contemporary art scene. This practice can engage her with the material that it deems close to another making/thinking language of this project: lead, marble dust and hide glue, gold leaf, and silicone. This is a lifelong enquiry for the researcher, as this project began years before the doctoral research project began and it will continue past the allotted time for the doctoral work — likely until this researcher's death. At this time, L' Inconnue will be engaged with a similar approach to the pig's heart and perhaps a way to approach her with paint in the future will make itself clear.

Development of the paintings in the third cycle focused on achieving a feeling of space and reflection and continued to be informed by the sight-size painting method with some use of Baroque methods for engaging the viewer.[27] Experience with historical genre painting and sculpture and education through contemporary Ateliers inspired the use of the life-size painting and sculpture as first-hand experience with the emotional power of the life-size seemed a decent beginning to elicit feelings of reflection or bodily empathy. The sight-size method required the creation of the painting on the floor in order to give the vertical shroud appropriate perspective, as well as a human-sized setup that would need to be emotionally encountered as an additional act of middle knowledge on the part of the artist.

Fig. 94. Lawrence, R. (2023) 'Documentation of sight-size still life set up in the studio'. [digital photograph].

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[27] The use of the Baroque in this way is mostly to credit the era in which direct, viewer engagement was developed, which has been used since in other painting movements. This is used for practical effect and with less criticality like the methods used to pinpoint the painting method closer to the 1800s.

The physical positioning of the life-size paintings at the feet of the viewer is used to attempt to communicate the viewer's reflective role in relation to the painting, to remove the painting from hanging on the wall might remove a barrier of preciousness and encourage curiosity and interaction. By literally placing the vertical, standing shroud at the feet of the viewer, the painting hopes to situate itself as not only in the same room, but as directly available for personal engagement. Additionally, the shrouds developed vary by both average heights found in the West, including some specific heights of still living family members of the researcher, including herself in the 162-centimetre shroud. The variation of relatable heights would hope to encourage thoughts of loved ones or the viewer by using bodily reflection. In this way the painting as an object is expanded upon, by removing it from the expected hanging place on the wall to the floor, it is resituated as a space for personal reflection. This is further indicated by bodily reflection in both the similar the size of the viewer and the painted subject matter, and by way of the act of standing on the part of the painting.

Fig. 95. Newman, L. (2022) 'A visitor to the Burren College of Art's gallery walking towards series II'. [digital photograph].

This body of work also made the addition of the extended frame in another interpretation of Baroque methods of direct or symbolic interaction with the viewer as used in Lorenzo Bernini's design for the colonnade in St. Peter's square. The frames are constructed with typical frame moulding used in framing paintings — which features an overhang of approximately two centimetres over the canvas — and extend forward on planks of timber. The more direct, forward–facing composition of the paintings is a practical usage of a similar Baroque invention as seen in Caravaggio's still life paintings (Figure 48). Bernini's use of forward-facing interaction through the outreaching porticos that surround St. Peter's square in Vatican City:

Fig. 96. (n.d.) 'draft of Bernini's colonnade design, illustrating the church's metaphorical outstretched arms'. [online image].

Fig. 97. Lawrence, R. (2023) *A waiting shroud series III: seated I*. [Oil on marble material on canvas].

This effect of the picture frame reaching out towards the viewer — just short of creating a cubicle or booth shape — also hoped to emphasise the paintings' repositioning as a physical space for the viewer by delineating the area directly in front of the canvas. In *A Waiting Shroud Series III*, the painting (noun) as a space continued its use of mimicry and bodily empathy to elicit reflection with the addition of a seated shroud and physical chair placed approximately two metres from the paintings, effectively closing off the area in front of the painting in tandem with the extended frame. The chair also acts as an invitation to participate in whatever the painting might ask of the viewer by sitting across from the shroud.

Fig. 98. (2023) *A waiting shroud series III: seated I (in progress)*. [oil on marble and glue size on canvas, chair, digital prints].

On the debut of the painting in the PhD Interim show: *Re-cover* in late winter of 2023, there was an overall hesitance on the part of viewers to sit in the chair during the opening event, even when guests were invited to do so. The lack of participation — when compared to the following winter exhibition that included a chair covered in stones, made purposefully uncomfortable to sit in, yet was regularly engaged with at the opening — would seem to imply death denial or some other kind of mortality salience (or social discomfort in participation) from the viewer. Practising therapist and grief counsellor Carter Ross's expertise was consulted to attempt to contextualise the behaviour:

> It does not surprise me that people avoid the chair. Sitting in the chair places the individual in close proximity to the uncomfortable and therefore "threatening" stimuli. Also the solitary or isolated nature of the chair proximal to the painting is playing a key role. The suggestion is that the individual is going to experience their discomfort in isolation which is of course more intimidating. (Apr 2023)

'Experiencing their discomfort in isolation' might initially seem in conflict with the practice's goals, however if one is feeling isolation in a gallery space then it would seem the work is creating a particular place for the individual. One's fear of death or death denial is

ultimately personal and must be faced at times on an individual basis, but this is not to say it must be resolved in isolation. Of course, one can gather resources and receive emotional support from others, but thoughts are generally experienced in isolation because they are in the mind, which is provided by the demarcation of the extended frame and chair, and the solitary composition of the waiting shroud. In fact, there should be little expectation for the audience to interact with the chair due to the pervasive nature of death denial behaviour — and the common perception of death as an outside malignant force, i.e. the shroud as a 'threatening stimuli' — instead it would be ideal if some of the audience later wondered why they did not want to sit in the chair, especially if they do witness someone willing to sit. While the chair in *Waiting shroud: seated I* was not engaged with by many (only two sat in the chair), the paintings were praised for their physical presence and several audience members went out of their way to express the intense emotional effect the work had on them in casual conversation with the researcher at the opening of the exhibition — one saying it caused her physical shivers and several others described their interactions as 'felt in the gut'. The woman who experienced shivers sat in the chair, while the ones who 'felt it in the gut' declined to sit upon invitation but did spend a significant amount of time with the painting. A guest who had a recent brush with his own death commented that he did not see death at all in the shrouds and was enthusiastic to sit across from *Seated I* and a standing shroud that matched his height — which is not entirely a surprising reaction given his more honest experience with his own mortality. This might imply the paintings elicit a more fearful reaction to those who experience death denial, which would be positive for this project.

 In the case of future work's use of painting as reflective space, A *Waiting Shroud Series III: Seated II*, would push the void from the painting into the gallery, similar to what is depicted in *A Waiting Shroud Series III: Seated I* (Figure 98), enveloping the viewer for a more challenging experience in a more defined space — not unlike in Anya Gallachio's approach in her 2014 installation *Stroke*:

Fig. 99. Gallaccio, A. (2014) *Stroke*. [Chocolate walls and bench]

While it is somewhat dubious if Gallaccio's intent behind the chocolate covered walls had any intention of becoming death themed art, the chocolate rotted on the walls and created an intense smell that reminded Caitlin Doughty, mortician and founder of The Order of the Good Death, so acutely of a corpse that she praised the work publicly upon her visit. While this project does not plan to use the sense of smell in a manner that borders on the abject, it does find Gallaccio's use of physical space for contemplation — or perhaps reflection — is relevant to the practice, regardless of thematic intent. Like the visual appeal of the technique of historic optic mimicry in painting and the repositioning of objects in order to expand meaning, Gallaccio uses a typically liked material in the West, chocolate, in a way that is both enticing and somewhat off putting to the viewer.

As in Series I, instead of painting objects or a scene that might signify the act of dying or the dead, elements of anonymity and universality of the body were reinterpreted as still life in *A Waiting Shroud: Series II*. With the bedsheet having taken on the role of receiver and deliverer of life and death into the void as the quotidian death often takes place in the bed, a paradoxically upright shroud acted as the removal of the body and shroud from its expected use for the viewer to encounter and assess its purpose. The emptiness — which is sometimes emphasised with a forward-facing opening (Figure 104) — of the shrouds might illustrate the

absence of a corpse beneath as the shroud is waiting for the death of the viewer. The verticality of the shroud was still in question at the time of the creation of Series II, which required experimentation with the horizontal that might reflect the waiting nature of the bedsheet draped over the absent corpse. In *Reclining,* the painting is displayed on the floor — not standing against the wall as in previous versions of the work (Figure 103). In the third cycle of the studio practice, the bedsheet was not encased in wax as the bedsheet was considered a mediator of life and death between the void, while the paint and painting method, not the wax, was intended as the cadaver.

Although verticality could mislead one to believe the bedsheet/shroud is acting as a spectre or reaper, the verticality instead indicated that death of the viewer had yet to occur, and this shroud was instead waiting for the viewer to die and fill the space within it, was believed too important by the researcher to abandon on the off chance that the concept might not come across. A reaper or spectre would still be a kind of mortality salience, and with the pervasiveness of death denial in a Western audience and its belief that death is an 'outside, malignant force' (Kübler-Ross, 1973), threat is likely to be interpreted. 'The difficulty in clearly identifying the figure adds to the mystery of its arrival, and given a blank space to fill in, we tend to do so with a negative interpretation.' (Apr 2023) While the researcher can acknowledge the intent could, and might, be lost in translation, effort has been taken to show diversity in height that might allow for viewer to realize the vertical shrouds might match in size to different viewers and some wording through naming the shrouds as performing the act of waiting might assist in communicating intent. Series II of the *A Waiting Shroud* paintings aimed to test the vertical shroud in its application of life-size by adding varying heights and orientating the painting and shroud in a horizontal manner that differed from historic usage of the horizontal as showing in Fernand Pelez and Édouard Manet's work (Figure 11; Figure 12). Somewhat average heights were included, with some ranging taller, as an homage to the researcher's family since her still living brother (at the time of this writing) is 1.9 metres tall. Series I included the height of the researcher and the researcher's still living mother (1.6 metres, an average height), whose death the researcher is deeply fearful of. While Ross is sceptical that many people would consciously project themselves onto the life-size shrouds, he does see projection of other conditions onto them as likely:

> I think what or who is projected onto the body will be largely dependent upon the individual's current proximity to death in vivo. Recent loss of a loved one will most likely be projected, if they are experiencing health problems then maybe the disease itself is projected but I don't see people "willing" to consciously project self onto the figure. (Apr 2023)

Conversely, in the appendices, artist and researcher in the subject of the uncanny, Aisling Jelinski, likens the use of the vertical shroud and bodily empathy to the effect she had witnessing the plaster casts of the impressions of dead bodies left in the volcanic ashes of Pompeii:

> Although they represent the victims of a brutal death at the hands of nature... there is an identifiable link between the Pompeii casts and the... *Waiting Shroud* series. There is a potency to the interaction between a life-size figure and its viewer which a larger or smaller scale does not achieve... I was not looking at skeletal... but full-bodied, three-dimensional forms lying prostrate at their point of death. In their true-to-life scale, I could identify within them my *own* body and self... The thoughts and emotions raised by the life-size figures are not unbidden, but entirely deliberate on the part of Lawrence... To identify oneself in these forms, to understand that the waiting shroud could in fact be your own – the scale of the work is vital to its effectiveness. (Jul 2023)

Fig. 100. 'Documentation of still life set up of 6'4" shroud in the studio'. [Digital photograph].

The method of draping the bedsheet made the effort to avoid the appearance of clothing, in order to avoid symbolising any religious head covering, historical clothing, or even the feeling that the sheet was being worn. In *A Waiting Shroud: Series III* different coloured sheets were used to avoid potential comparisons to sheet ghosts. Sculptures by Grzegorz Gwiazda partially informed the use of drapery due to his work with the dynamically posed body abstracted by drapery. Gwiazda often works with recognizable historical figures, particularly Dante Alighieri, author of the *Divine Comedy,* and academic aesthetics, which makes his work more tangentially and aesthetically related as opposed to critically, but it is a significant one as might be seen in the shroud set-up for *A Waiting Shroud Series II: Standing*.

Left: Fig. 101. Gwiazda, G. (2021) *Tangled*. [bronze].
Right: Fig. 102. Gwiazda, G. (2020) *Dante's world*. [clay].

There was some hesitation on the part of the researcher in wrapping the head with a separate colour in Series III (Figure 97) as images of tortured prisoners were not the goal, but the differing cloth was seemingly only interpreted as a reaper or executioner by one guest, which is not outside the realm of death and this was the only viewer to voice such an opinion.

While Series II saw several setbacks due to experimentation with both drapery and material experimentation, it improved the practice in a conceptual way, allowing for the completion of *Waiting Shroud Series II: Standing* later in 2023 and led into *A Waiting Shroud: Series III* with the return of the black void and the use of the chair to continue to push the painting as a space of reflection. The setbacks in both pieces in *A Waiting Shroud: Series II* primarily revolved around difficulties with *Reclining*, which was to be presented laying on the ground. Not only was creating the image by the sight-size method physically impossible due to the researcher's inability to hover above a painting while creating it, but the marble material was too heavy for the canvas stretched over a large area to bear. The paintings are nearly two metres by one and a half metres in dimension and buckling at the centre of the piece created critical structural and longevity problems, resulting in the work being abandoned. While it was created upright and the setup was made to imitate how fabric might lay on the floor, the illusion was not convincing. Additionally, the resulting extended frame looked more like a sandbox with four sides enclosed around the canvas, as opposed to the three used on the standing paintings.

Fig. 103. Lawrence, R. (2022) *A waiting shroud series II: reclining (in progress).* [oil and imitation gold leaf on marble and hide glue on canvas].

The symbolism of the horizontal did give the impression one was looking down into a grave, as opposed to a shroud mimicking a standing, living person, and it is not entirely impossible to imagine a shroud waiting for the viewers' death already in the future grave. But the dimensions of the painting are too wide to truly elicit thoughts of a casket, and these dimensions were chosen to give the viewer more space for comfort, not to imitate the relatively small resting place of a dead body. If possible — before the exhibition that embodies the contribution to new knowledge occurs — another attempt at this piece might be made to see if the concept can be improved upon, but the seated shroud and accompanying chair seemed to have had a more meaningful effect on the audience and been registered as the painting (noun) as a space of reflection.

The Painting Method

Approaching the method of painting in the beginning of the third cycle began, like the previous cycle, with reflection on the previous work. In the creation of small studies of the vertical shrouds, a pair of graphite drawings on grey toned paper were made in addition to painted studies to learn how to approach the value and form of the sculptures quickly.[28] Out of all the previous painted studies, and the final work in the *A Waiting Shroud: Series I and II*, the drawings received the most positive feedback from peers. The drawings captured attributes of the shrouds — or perhaps a more notable presence of the artist's hand (a kind of tacit knowledge by making) in the graphite markings — that resonated with peers, audience, and artist. The monochromatic nature of the drawing, when applied to Blanchot's duality of the image, seemed relevant if the *campitura* or field colour of the painting and the shapes in light were the same grey, as opposed to different hues like in *A Waiting Shroud Series I: Standing* (Figure 99) wherein the shapes in light were grey and the *campitura* was raw umber.[29] Instead of using separate hues to delineate form and void, confusing the role of

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[28] Paper toned with a mid-tone value is ideal for graphite drawing as it saves the draftsperson time filling in middle values with the tool, allowing for the deeper and lighter values to be applied in order to create the illusion of form in an efficient manner.

[29] *Campitura* is Italian for the background colour of a painting since it is the first layer of paint spread over the primer, or *gesso*. The role of the *campitura* is to allow for values to neither appear too light or too dark in the context of the painting. A light or white background makes other values appear much darker than in reality and

different hues might begin to question where the void belongs in the image and by extension through the allergy of the roles of the image: where the void belongs in one's life. It could even begin to question how many voids existed in the painting if hue united the *campitura* and form but separated the object in shadow.

Left: Fig. 104. Lawrence, R. (2021) *Pencil study of red shroud*. [Graphite and chalk on toned paper].
Right: Fig. 105. Lawrence, R. (2021) *Pencil study of grey shroud*. [Graphite and chalk on toned paper].

Alongside the physicality of the painting mimicking the physicality of the body, this interaction between greys might address the research question, or at least explore Blanchot's cadaver and elicit a feeling that 'No matter how calmly the corpse has been laid out... it is also everywhere in the room, all over the house' (1955, p. 258), in a more pointed way. The use of grey in this way shifts the historical and contemporary use of *en grisaille* in optical mimicry

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a dark background makes colours appear much lighter. A mid-tone field colour allows for both light and dark mixtures of paint to appear as they are.

painting method. Typically, the shadow shapes of the object are grouped by colour and often value, with the field colour as the painter's goal is to typically push both background and shadow shapes back from the objects in light so a convincing illusion of three-dimensional space as it is seen in nature can be achieved. To group both the field colour and the object in light might disrupt the concept and hypothetically disrupt what is believed to be moving forward (form) and what is believed to be moving back (void). Series II: *Standing* and *Reclining* represented this, with *Reclining* being abandoned due to structural failure.

Fig. 106. Lawrence, R. (2023) *A waiting shroud series II: standing.* [oil and imitation gold leaf on marble and glue size on canvas with digital prints].

The greyscale prints that accompany *A Waiting Shroud Series II: Standing I* were the result of another setback that affected Series II since the set-up for the painting — the bedsheets wrapped around the plaster cast of the researcher's torso — fell during the creation of the piece, resulting in much creative strife. It was impossible to recreate the drapery in the same way and one of the core tenants of the practice was tested in an unplanned manner. Without the source material, without the object, how is the neutral object to be made? Without the exercise of the sight-size method, resulting in the researcher encountering the

nearly two-metre-tall shroud in her studio every day, mimicking the way in which she hoped the viewer might encounter the work, traversing back and forth from the canvas to the space where the shroud was observed, how valid is the work? There was a personal slight to the setback since the shroud was representative of the researcher's brother and the drawing that had resulted was successful in an aesthetic way. This process was working towards what was believed would be a good painting and significant contribution to the research. Even though a great length of time passed, the painting was not abandoned, instead the practice took a different approach in questioning the image through photo documentation of the shroud. Values of the photo were compressed, to better mimic the ability of the human eye and large prints were attached to the painting so that the painting might continue.[30] The prints struck advisors as almost uncanny in the value range, causing them to question if the photographs were documentation of the original shroud. In this way, the practice attempted to pivot, embracing the question of the truth in the image by subverting the assumed truth that the photograph might provide. The work was displayed with the painting to question what the original shroud might have looked like. While not a planned interrogation of the image and its relationship to reality, the piece did meaningfully contribute to the practice and still executes the method that the researcher considers to be the cadaver. The use of grey still became an exercise in the back-and-forth negotiation between form and the void, questioning what aspect of the painting is meant to move forward in space and backward in space. The rendering of the object in light competes with the gold void for the front of the illusion, while both the grey of the background and the gold that shifts into raw umber retreats into the space. The confusion of the form's relationship to the void mimics the confusion of the cadaver and therefore thoughts of death, metaphorically moving between the distal and proximal defences of the Dual Defence Method in addition to its intended similitude to the cadaver in Maurice Blanchot's *Two Versions of the Imaginary* (1955). This method of painting developed through Series II, was informed more completely by theory, and attempted to create a neutral double of the existing object. It uses void, layering, and illusory

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[30] Contemporary painting that seeks to imitate the way painting, was created pre-photography, as practised here, tends to concur that the photograph is an unreliable source of information. Painters often move to see around the form of the subject to better understand how it is to be rendered, which a photo cannot. Additionally, painting in this way typically attempts to replicate the way two eyes see an object, not through one lens as the camera does. Elkins likens the photo to a frozen moment that sees more than the human eye is capable of, while a painting is a recording of time and emotional experience (1996). Most who try to paint in the way before photography would agree with Elkins, while acknowledging that ignoring the photograph's effect on painting today would be ignorant.

form to question whether the illusion is forming or disintegrating. In this way the *Waiting shroud* series might ask: What is my (and your) relationship to the void?

The use of grey, or the *en grisaille* method, during the *A Waiting Shroud: Series II* and *Series III* is continued due to its relationship with painting history, outside of its other application as an exploration into the duality of the image. Instead of viewing the *en grisaille* method as unfinished, a deliberate attempt to de-layer the method is made through the repurposing of marble dust, the shifting roles between what is considered form and void, exposed untreated canvas, gold leaf applied in-between layers of paint, exposed drawing, and an absence of the *fini*. While it might be interpreted as a rejection of the efficacy of academic painting tools, it is instead an exercise in delayering the late 1800's mindset of layering to create a curated reality, therefore intending to de-layer the psychic inertia of the time that this research project believes contributed to death denial, using the methods to fixate on the era. There is a somewhat hypocritical approach to curating such deconstructed work to also satisfy an aesthetic and overall acceptable look to the painting, but in the end this project is aiming to create compelling images that should hold up to formal scrutiny so it might capture the attention of the viewer.

Elkins describes how layering might be approached by the painter in *What Painting Is* (1999) wherein he compares well-known Impressionist Claude Monet to the general painting approach of the Italian Renaissance. While the Renaissance approached painting and colour in a more segmented — almost a paint-by-numbers or colouring book method — approach, Monet's contemporaries and those who showed at the Salon often debated how much of the layered technique was too much. A desirable painting exhibited the skill of layering and energy of the sketch. If one outweighed the other the painting would appear stiff (too much *fini*) or without form (too much like a sketch). (Boime, 1971) A good painting, according to the time, had a nearly undetectable number of layers, coming together with aesthetic balance and life-like energy.

> ...the texture strokes are themselves built up in layers, and the layering went on continuously and without premeditated metho until the paintings reached the magical point where it became impossible to tell how they had been painted: then they were finished. That moment is well known to painters. (Elkins 1999, pg. 14)

The *Waiting Shroud* series aims to make certain layers obvious, not only to build upon Blanchot and reveal the 'possibility of a world behind the world' and the void, (1955, p. 256)

but to expose the layers that are required to make the image as opposed to intentionally creating a narrative of effortless image creation. The construction of death denial and related psychic numbing social environments of the late 1800s required considerable effort and social enforcement; the layers of the *Waiting Shroud* series might remind the audience that these habits can be undone just as they were once made.

Painting Method as Rejection of Neoliberalism

The method of painting simultaneously functions as a rejection of neoliberalism's responsibility of the individual and accompanying policy as a further criticism of hegemonic culture that has erased traditional communal support and cultural diversity for the bereaved of Europe and the United States. It pointedly does not use Postmodernist method, which came into fashion alongside neoliberalism and shares similar values regarding individuality as discussed in Chapter 4, in its development. It does not employ scepticism or suspicion of reason, nor does it reject universal certainties or truth as it is a project focused on death, which it views as a universal certainty and truth. The painting method employed consciously derives from pre-modern eras of art making more than any other method to discuss modesty in the late 1800s and reject Postmodernism/neoliberalism. The practice recognises the effect of social systemic causation and the difficulty combating it regarding Western death denial and other issues involving mental health without radical change to economic and political structure as called for by Fisher in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009). Western death denial seems to be a widespread, socially ingrained form of psychic numbing and like most forms of denial as a defence mechanism, would be considered dysfunctional by the standards of modern psychiatry. (Apr 2023) Fisher, who ended his life in 2017, enquired as to why mental health seems to be declining in such large numbers:

> Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress... we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people... are ill? The 'mental health plague' in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high. (Fisher 2009, pg. 19)

While this practice does not view it as incumbent on the individual to resolve their own psychological distress involving death, it is, at this time, one of the only options available to

those of us living in the West, and these paintings would aim to present assistance in any one person's journey towards middle knowledge, reminding the audience that while we are individual we will all face the same fate and, in this way, we are a community.

The resulting paintings aim to appeal to the viewer with aesthetics and a method of optic mimicry — in order to to reflect in scale and proportions the optics of reality — but are unconcerned with marketability or social popularity due to the very nature of exploring death and death denial in a non-sensational way. The paintings are monumental in size, difficult to move, and presumably fragile in construction. Ken Currie, whose work has been compared to the practice due to the similar approaches to painting techniques and a focus on morbidity, gave insight from his more experienced perspective to the researcher on where practices that focus on the morbid in a sobering, not sensational, way fit into mainstream art markets:

> I don't think art of any kind should fit in to any system. I think it should remain as alienated as possible form the neo-liberal economic model and everything else in fact. I think your work should continue to challenge and ask questions despite the death denying culture we live in... We in the "West" seem to have a visceral revulsion to everything associated with death. For our capitalist consumer culture, the idea of death is a complete anathema to selling products. There is a danger that people will see through the shallowness of our acquisitive "get rich or die trying" culture. There is a fear that contemplating death and being confronted by the reality of it might make people more reflective of the fleeting nature of human life and force them to think of more important ways of being human rather than acquiring "stuff". Capitalism feeds on a relentless positivity and idea of progress. Mortality is incompatible with capitalism [sic] so a kind of continuous suppression goes on. Except, of course, in the mass media, in films and TV, where death is a kind of vicarious spectacle. (Jul 2023)

In making these paintings, challenging death denial, and making to effort to live an examined life with examined death (Lifton, 1979), it became difficult to ignore how opposed to the Western culture of consumption such a practice is. Perhaps if one examines death closely it becomes too upsetting to realise the shallow nature of consumption and that feeling of continuation is lost, so the cycle of psychic numbing continues. This practice attempted to engage middle knowledge, and thus it cannot be in congruence with neoliberalism or Postmodernism.

These paintings seek to expand the term middle knowledge, as coined by Weisman and Hackett (1961), into an object of death denial illumination and/or rejection by correlating the physicality of the viewer's body and the physicality of the painting (noun) and employing a historical methodology of layering, mimicry with curated intent, and finish-driven result in order to explore the image in both a psychological and retinal way. This practice-based

research project situates itself amongst other critically engaged contemporary artworks that approach death as a subject in some way and address the absence of painting. In specific terms: this field addresses the quotidian death and the cadaver as it relates to death terror and is critically addressed in a secular way. If deemed successful, this project would contribute re-positioned still life painting that focuses specifically on the quotidian death and provides a space to think critically about the relationship with fear of death, dying, and the dead body.

Summary of the Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding

This doctoral practice-based research project is an enquiry into painting as a means of understanding the presence of existential death anxiety and death denial in social norms, by providing a secular space for critical reflection on the relationship with death, dying, and the dead body.

A gap was identified in the field of critically engaged artwork that revealed an absence of paintings that engaged with death denial and the quotidian death. Through practice-based research in the studio, a multi-pronged visual method was developed, adapting historical painting processes and bringing them into the contemporary through reimagining still life as a type of experiential painting. The research attempted this using the optic mimicry capabilities of paint and material experimentation with the material, decay, and preservation, as it informed the painting method to address the quotidian death, the visual void, and the presence of death denial in the psyche. These paintings contribute to discourse regarding pre-modern art history and a new approach to still life painting since it has adjusted the relationship between painting and the object by the multi-pronged approach in the studio, using a material link between theme and making. The paintings employ objects to continue to inform the work in an optic, theoretical, and material way and use the sight-size technique alongside repositioning the paintings on to the floor to reflect the viewer's body and therefore role in interacting with the painting. This creates a type of experiential painting that could serve as a critically reflective space, addressing death denial by way of triggering mortality salience.

The studio practice was further informed by expert literature in death denial and death terror, philosophical essays, and history of painting and Western death, primarily through Ernest Becker, Robert J Lifton, Maurice Blanchot, and Phillipe Ariès. It frames the painting

method as an exercise of Maurice Blanchot's impossible cadaver in *Two Versions of the Imaginary* and elements of Terror Management Theory (an evolution of Becker's *The Denial of Death*) in order to elicit mortality salience in the viewer, acting as a neutral double to the little discussed middle knowledge — a state between the complete acceptance and repudiation of death. The painting methodology uses the interplay of void and form with historical painting techniques as informed by the relevant historical era that the practice posits having contributed to modern death denial. If painting (as an action and an object) were to mimic or embody the duality of the image, if that would bring the a feeling of death in the room, to paraphrase Blanchot, and if it somehow became an exercise in the back-and-forth negotiation between acceptance and repudiation, might it become an *act* of Weisman and Hackett's middle knowledge?

These paintings seek to expand the term middle knowledge, as coined by Weisman and Hackett, into an object of death denial illumination and/or rejection by correlating the physicality of the viewer's body and the physicality of the painting and employing a historical methodology of layering, mimicry with curated intent, and finish-driven result in order to explore the image in both a psychological and optical way. In specific terms: this project addresses a gap in the field that focuses the quotidian death and the confusing psychic imagery brought on by the cadaver as it relates to death denial and is critically addressed in a secular way. This project would contribute an evolution still life painting that focuses specifically on the quotidian death and provides a space to think critically on the relationship with fear of death, dying, and the dead body.

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imitation gold leaf on marble material on canvas, 140cm x 210 cm, Ballyvaughan.

Figure 104. Lawrence, R. (2021) *Pencil study of red shroud*, graphite and chalk on toned
paper, 21cm x 27cm, Ballyvaughan.

Figure 105. Lawrence, R. (2021) *Pencil study of grey shroud*, graphite and chalk on toned
paper, 21cm x 27cm, Ballyvaughan.

Figure 106. Lawrence, R. (2023) *A waiting shroud series II: standing,* oil and imitation gold
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Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview with Ken Currie

Q) What do you think the relationship between painting and mortality (as in the average death) could be today?

A) To paint the dead and to refer to death imagery is seen as somehow deviant, a betrayal of art's true purpose, which is to present beautiful images to the viewer, so that they may be uplifted, inspired and somehow ennobled. A common curatorial response to my work is that it is "Gothic". This is a way of trying to neutralise its potential to discomfit the viewer and dismiss it as somehow juvenile because of its perceived ghoulish obsessions.

Actually, my work is not at all about death as such - which is a process and an event, but mortality - which is a condition shared by all living organisms.

I have witnessed death. I was present at my father's death and was there in the immediate aftermath of my mother's. I have seen the face of death and witnessing it is unforgettable - and not in a good way, I hasten to add. The person you have known your entire life is reduced to a lifeless inanimate object before your very eyes. Unless you have deep religious beliefs it is difficult to see this as anything other than horrifyingly banal. These experiences have definitely fed into my work but perhaps not in an overt way.

Q) What do you believe the role of images that act as reminders of mortality is in a political, commercial, and social environment that doesn't want them?

A) We in the "West" seem to have a visceral revulsion to everything associated with death. For our capitalist consumer culture, the idea of death is a complete anathema to selling products. There is a danger that people will see through the shallowness of our acquisitive "get rich or die trying" culture. There is a fear that contemplating death and being confronted by the reality of it might make people more reflective of [sic] the fleeting nature of human life and force them to think of more important ways of being human rather than acquiring "stuff". Capitalism feeds on a relentless positivity and idea of progress. Mortality is incompatible with capitalism, so a kind of continuous suppression goes on. Except, of course, in the mass media, in films and TV, where death is a kind of vicarious spectacle.

Paintings, images that that foreground death as central to human experience are regarded as morbid, macabre and the product of sick minds. Yet ironically the central image in "Western" painting is of a crucified man either dead or dying in front of us.

Q) Sobering work like your own is largely ignored by the mainstream art sphere — How can the market accommodate what is perceived as 'grim 'or 'morbid 'work?

A) But the market has accommodated grim or morbid work. Quite easily in fact as we see in the work of Damien Hirst or Francis Bacon who deal with that which is grim and morbid in a sensationalist way, in a way that sells in fact.

Q) My project argues that states in the West largely reinforce death denial habits and policy — as the Neo-liberal economic model either purposefully or incidentally embraces death denial to keep itself afloat — how can work that challenges this fit within such a system?

A) I don't think art of any kind should fit into any system. I think it should remain as alienated as possible form the neo-liberal economic model and everything else in fact. I think your work should continue to challenge and ask questions despite the death denying culture we live in.

Appendix 2

Interview with Carter Ross, P.C., MS, LPC

Q) How important do you believe challenging death denial habits is? If so, do you find the average person is more or less willing to do so when the issue is raised?

A) In psychology we are typically trained to view the defense mechanisms of denial as a bad thing. Associated defense mechanism of active avoidance of distressing emotions and/or situations is also largely viewed as a dysfunctional coping mechanism (with certain exceptions pertaining to identified, generally agreed upon, acts of self-preservation). The "harm" one would be avoiding through death denial is of course the emotional distress, but the desire to deny is bolstered by the assumption of many individuals that they are not capable of effectively managing the emotional distress that accompanies profound loss, i.e. they will lose their grip on reality, "go crazy". Those who have experienced death at "close range" usually have less of a tendency to deny the reality of death as seen by their willingness to discuss the topic more so than those who have not had the experience. The exposure to death while unpleasant is not abnormal and the emotional distress, while extremely unpleasant, is also not abnormal (grief is not depression). So I think that challenging death denial is important because the defense mechanism can and will often result in actual clinical disorders such as depression.

Q) Does it surprise you that most people were unwilling to sit in the chair pictured, even after they were informed they were allowed to do so? In this case, the audience didn't necessarily understand the intent of the painting.

A) It does not surprise me that people avoid the chair. Sitting in the chair places the individual in close proximity to the uncomfortable and therefore "threatening" stimuli. Also the solitary or isolated nature of the chair proximal to the painting is playing a key role. The suggestion is that the individual is going to experience their discomfort in isolation which is of course more intimidating.

Q) Do you think the average person would project themselves into a painting because of the visual mimicry of the body?

A) No, I don't think people will be more likely to project self because of the body. I found myself interpreting the body as threatening or menacing, akin to the reaper. The difficulty in clearly identifying the figure adds to the mystery of its' arrival, and given a blank space to fill in, we tend to do so with a negative interpretation.

Also I think what or who is projected onto the body will be largely dependent upon the individuals' current proximity to death in vivo. Recent loss of a loved one will most likely be projected, if they are experiencing health problems then maybe the disease itself is projected but I don't see people "willing" to consciously project self onto the figure.

Appendix 3

The Bodies of Pompeii / The *Waiting Shroud* Series

By Aisling Jelinski

While directing the excavation of the ancient city of Pompeii, archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli faced a unique conundrum. Throughout the city, one could find the victims of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and its resulting pyroclastic flow. Some of these bodies were skeletons, individuals killed in the initial wave of falling debris which caved in roofs and collapsed buildings. The fast-moving hot ash and gaseous wave that followed blanketed the city, instantly killing any other survivors and burying them under layers of ash. The remnants of this pyroclastic flow calcified over the centuries, preserving the shape of the bodies within. As excavation of the city began in earnest in the mid-nineteenth century, Fiorelli realised that the remains of these bodies were disappearing along with the layers of ash his team was removing. Thus, Fiorelli created a method of plaster casting to preserve the impressions these bodies left behind in the volcanic material.

When one visits the *Parco Archeologico di Pompei* today, they will come face to face with some of these plaster casts, depicting people in their final moments with a shocking level of detail – not just vaguely-humanoid forms, but distinct individuals. Although they represent the victims of a brutal death at the hands of nature, rather than the ubiquitous death most of us will experience, there is an identifiable link between the Pompeii casts and the figures in Robbie E. Lawrence's *Waiting Shroud* series.

There is a potency to the interaction between a life-size figure and its viewer which a larger or smaller scale does not achieve. All of the written and visual documentation from Pompeii did not prepare me for the physical and emotional reaction I had to encountering the casts in person. I was not looking at skeletal remains or scientific renderings, but full-bodied, three-dimensional forms lying prostrate at their point of death. In their true-to-life scale, I could identify within them my *own* body and self, evoking thoughts and feelings that I either had to reckon with, or try to ignore. Lawrence's shrouded figures present the viewer with the same two options: engage with your waiting shroud and everything that it implies, or choose to avoid it.

I have spent an extended amount of time in the studio with the artist, her paintings, and the draped forms she works from. There were days in which I (un)consciously avoided

eye contact with the work – though one can never *fully* forget their presence if in proximity – and others where I embraced that which bubbled up in me. However, my visit to Pompeii shed new light on my understanding of the *Waiting Shroud* series. The thoughts and emotions raised by the life-size figures are not unbidden, but entirely deliberate on the part of Lawrence, with their heights scaled to that of the artist and her loved ones. To identify oneself in these forms, to understand that the waiting shroud could in fact be your own – the scale of the work is vital to its effectiveness.

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