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Uncanny urges: the familiar made strange.

**An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
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Abstract

My research is centred on examinations of the uncanny. I am interested in strategies of the uncanny and the fetish, both Surrealist strategies and how these strategies create psychologically compelling images and objects. I perceive the uncanny in my work as the familiar made strange through eccentric juxtapositions of every day materials, objects and images. Through a diverse range of artists such as Pat Brassington, Sarah Lucas, Louise Bourgeois and Hans Bellmer I have explored key strategies of the uncanny to locate my own practice. I also draw theoretically from the works of Sigmund Freud, Nicholas Royle, Julia Kristeva and W.D. Winnicott. Methods of play are utilised to examine the possibility of an uncanny aesthetic through a process of bricolage whereby photographs and sculptural forms are constructed from various everyday materials available or on hand. Through this method I investigate how photographs and sculpture can operate as uncanny or fetishistic stand-ins for the body, which is always absent although a primary referent for my work.

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Fig. 1, Adi Brown's Workspace, 2012

1. Early beginnings

This exegesis examines the possibility of an uncanny aesthetic through a process of bricolage whereby works are constructed from various everyday materials available or on hand. Through this method I investigate how photographs and sculpture can operate as uncanny or fetishistic stand-ins for the body, which is always absent although a primary referent for my work. Through this investigation I playfully probe codes in western art, sculpture and photography by situating the representation and social construction of women's bodies in Surrealist art under critical analysis.

In Surrealist art, ideas of the uncanny are experienced when objects of varying scale are placed in careful juxtapositions with or next to each other in a single work or space. It is this intrusion on continuity that gives Surrealism its shock value and sense of the *Heimlich* (homely and familiar) with the *unheimlich* (hidden and secret). I am interested in strategies of the uncanny and the fetish, both Surrealist strategies and how these strategies create psychologically compelling images and objects. I perceive the uncanny in my work as the familiar made strange through eccentric juxtapositions of every day materials, objects and images. The main theoretical and experimental referent is the uncanny.

In the first part of this thesis I will examine Freudian notions of the uncanny through readings of Nicholas Royle, Helen Cixious and Elizabeth Wright and the relevance of this concept to contemporary art today. Psychologically compelling images and objects imbued with an uncanny aesthetic are discussed and contextualised within the historical precedents of Dada and Surrealism. I then discuss contemporary artists Louise Bourgeois, Pat Brassington and Sarah Lucas who borrow and appropriate these ideas and reference these precedents in their work.

In the second part I investigate bricolage and the urge to collect found objects through artist Mike Kelly's curated exhibition *The Uncanny*, and Christopher Grunenburg's essay *Life in a Dead Circus*. Kelly posits that the urge to collect is uncanny in itself and all the discarded objects that are collected are really worthless. This chapter also considers Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer's manifesto (Femifesto) of the 'Femmage' an enquiry into what women saved and assembled historically.

The third and final part I position my own art practice within interdisciplinary 2D and 3D practices of photography and sculpture through discussions of materials, methodology, and psychologist W. D

Winnicott's theory of transitional objects. The different materials that I collect and reconstruct are integral to my fine arts practice.



Fig. 2. Adi Brown, *Transitional Object Feathers*, 2012, feathers, tape, glue, MDF, plinth.

2. This is not proper.

'The uncanny is not what Freudthinks. It has to do with a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves'. Nicholas Royle¹.

The uncanny is an uncomfortable sensation that erupts when a subject, object or experience is encountered that is familiar to us, yet also foreign or unknown. The uncertainty we feel, when presented with something strangely familiar causes disorientation and confusion, due to being equally drawn to, yet repulsed, by the subject or object at the same time. This sensation of dread or horror at the visual is what has become known as the uncanny. The uncanny was initially theorised in 1906 by Ernst Jentsch who was concerned with the everyday occurrence of it. He conveyed the idea that on first encounter if an inanimate object is thought of or confused with the animate it can be a frightening experience. He considered that the human experience of waxwork figures, artificial dolls and automatons leave us with an uncertain feeling as to whether they are really alive or not, which results in sensations of the uncanny².

Freud discusses the uncanny within the discourse of Psychoanalysis. He acknowledged, then advanced Jentsch argument and in his essay *The Uncanny* written in 1919 he rejected the idea of an aesthetic comprising a theory of beauty and the sublime, so he could explore the aesthetics of anxiety and unpleasantness. This particular world of aesthetics was not usually explored by a psychologist and Freud traversed the uncanny by understanding and writing about its strange impressions, situations, feelings and associations. He explored the concept of the uncanny via descriptions that resemble it, such as fright, fear and anguish. To Freud, as an idea and a realm, the uncanny showed signs of the indefinite; that peculiar uncertainty that is at once familiar as it is strange.³

Hal Foster discusses Freud's uncanny in a very succinct way. He notes that it is the return of familiar phenomena (image, object, person or event) that is made strange by repression. This repression ensures that the subject is anxious and the phenomenon is ambiguous. The primary effects of the

¹ Royle, N. (2003), *The Uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

² Welchman, J, C, (2004) 'On the Uncanny in Visual Culture' in Kelly, M *The Uncanny*. London: Walther Konig.

³ Cixous, H, 'Fictions and it's Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny)' in *New Literary History*, Vol.7, No. 3, Thinking in the Arts, Sciences and Literature (Spring, 1976). John Hopkins University Press.

uncanny are caused by this anxious ambiguity which make it impossible to differentiate between the real and the imagined, bewilderment as to what is animate and what is inanimate and the appropriation of physical reality by psychic reality. All of these ideas were adopted by the Surrealists in some way as either aims, an opportunity to make images or as an enthrallment of a subject or sign. The effect of which is anxiety, otherwise experienced as the uncanny⁴.

I have found the uncanny to be a very slippery concept and I think that is because it must be 'felt'. It is associated with the feeling realm and sensation. For me it is the moment that results in an alarming awareness when you first experience something that then erupts into a feeling of mistrust when you realise what the object is, or is made of. I create objects and photographs that are familiar yet unhinging. I look for a liminal moment; a space in-between recognition and disturbance where the uncanny association of ideas make you shiver with doubt and foreboding.

The uncanny has been talked about in terms of the *homely* (Heimlich), which refers to something homely and familiar but it also indicates something secret or hidden and the *unhomely* (unheimlich), something strange and familiar that emerges from the domestic or the homely. The unheimlich is also indicative of repressed material and threatens us in some way by not being what we thought it was; it is about something that shifts out of context and is no longer familiar. Kelly⁵ cites an incident wherein Freud explains his personal experience of this; his first encounter with da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and her uncanny character. Freud traces the *unheimlich* back to the most familiar and homely through his first viewing of the *Mona Lisa* which he associates with his earliest memories of his mother. He also considered it to be a theory of psychological experience that suggests familiar (objects) appear as 'frightening so as to provoke dread or horror in the viewer'.

Wright⁶ discusses the heimlich and the unheimlich in regards to Surrealist art and the strategy that made it so provocative. She states that it was the careful positioning of the art object next to another object in a particular space that enabled surrealism's shock value, because it roused feelings of the familiar when objects were viewed in juxtaposition with the unfamiliar. An example of this can be seen in the photographic images of Pat Brassington who I will discuss in more detail further on.

⁴ Foster, H. (1995). *Compulsive Beauty*. Cambridge: London, p. 7.

⁵ Kelly, M, et al (2004). *The Uncanny*. London: Walther Konig.

⁶ Wright, E, (1990). 'The Uncanny and Surrealism' in Collier, P and Davies, J (Eds) *Modernism and the European Unconscious*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Her images of disengaged body parts, legs in silk stockings and, distorted shoes with human toes tantalise us like fetishes. Objects once imbued with emotion are now estranged and become dead substitutes for what is left over from the past. We observe these images with our child self and our adult self; the images are *unheimlich* because we are reminded of old childhood uncanny fantasies we have long since repressed⁷.

In his book *The Uncanny* Nicholas Royle (2003) locates the uncanny in the 21st Century by applying the notion to relevant subjects of today. In the first chapter he compares 19th and 20th Century philosophers', theorists, political theorists and writers whose work has grappled with the uncanny in some way, claiming that western political, philosophical and literary past is simply haunted with the uncanny. Royle states that the uncanny is as much critical to Marx as it is to Derrida, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Marx's uncanny is experienced through the 'spectre that haunts Europe,' defined by notions of alienation, revolution and repetition. Nietzsche claims that European nihilism is uncanny. Heidegger more than any other 20th Century philosopher was pre-occupied with the ordinary being extra-ordinary. This position was central to his thesis and his explorations regarding the unhomely existence of humans in the world. In his discussions on peace, Wittgenstein establishes peace as strange with a touch of the mystical. For both Wittgenstein and Heidegger the uncanny is 'a surrealism of the habitual'. Russian formalism, especially literature emphasised the notion of de-familiarisation or making strange (*ostranaenie*) by making familiar perceptions unfamiliar.⁸

By directing us into readings of the uncanny that equate more with the 21st Century, Royle progresses Freud's text which he considers is concerned with the enlightenment and 19th century culture in Europe and America, and thus situated within dominant western culture. He endeavours to bring the uncanny into a more general cultural and historical context. He does so by positing that the uncanny is as relevant today as it was in the 19th century. He states that today the uncanny could offer new ways of thinking about new technology and the quotidian. The uncanny is so embedded in enquiry and transformation of everyday life that it applies to issues of class, race, sexuality, age, imperialism and colonialism. All are issues of potential 'otherness' that are as significant in the 19th century as the contemporary world. The uncanny provides explanation and relevant ways of thinking

⁷ Wright, E, (1990), p. 268.

⁸ Royle, N. (2003), *The Uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

about both modernity and postmodernity. Michael Arnzen⁹ considers that while the anxieties of both epochs are similar yet different, there is an interrelationship of both that can be analysed within the uncanny. The spectral forms of automatons and the double,¹⁰ troubled the moderns while today we are spooked by clones and techno-human cyborgs. The concept of the double is important to my work because of the reference to the body that it invokes. Royle concludes that in the future the uncanny can provide a critical framework for exploring our memories, beliefs, experiences and feelings by laying bare what is hidden and showing us ways to be at ease with uncertainty, to question and experience in new ways within contemporary globalised culture.

These writers and philosophers present us with the argument for considering 'real life' or the everyday as strange or disrupted which is important for my work. I am attracted to working with everyday¹¹ materials because of the way the familiar can alienate, repulse and repeat. Everyday materials and objects carry associations of today's world, people and experiences, not all of them necessarily pleasant or wholesome. Materials that I use such as discarded bandages, a pile of glass, mounds of hair, feathers and taxidermy carry the notion of the uncanny because of their unknown past. The surrealist artists were also obsessed with the everyday. They believed that materials of the everyday shaped desire and informed thought.¹²

I am attracted to the possibility of an object or materials strangeness because of the questions it raises in me; who wore this? Why is this familiar yet repulsive, where have I seen this before? What makes this strange? What are these stains or traces of life? Old dirty bandages are suggestive of a body, a diseased body, a lame body, festering skin that has been wrapped and encouraged to heal

⁹ Arnzen, M, (1997) 'The Return of the Uncanny' in *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres*, Vol 3, no 3-4, pp316 cited in Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 37.

¹⁰ Freud comments in his essay *The Uncanny*, that the theme of the double was well theorized by Otto Rank who connected it with reflections in mirrors, shadows, guardian spirits and a belief in the soul and with the fear of death. Freud considered that ideas of the double originated in the mind of the child and primitive man as an insurance against death – the immortal soul was the first 'double' of the body. Freud's considers the double was also a doppelgänger or a stand-in for the self. See Freud, S, (2003). *The Uncanny*. London: Penguin Group.

¹¹ I use the term everyday to describe objects and activities that are familiar and ordinary. The everyday is a concept that has been theorized by Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and McKenzie Wark. Wark discusses the concept of the everyday in an internet review regarding the *Everyday: 11th Biennale of Sydney 1998*. <http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/3/3298/1.html> He notes that an increasing number of artists have brought the notion of the everyday into their art practice by utilising familiar objects that clutter our daily lives.

¹² See Wach, K. (1994). 'The Souvenirs of Sensation: Surrealism and Objects' in Palmer, M (Ed), *The Aberrant Object: Women, Dada and Surrealism*. Exh. Cat., Heidi Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, Victoria, P. 26.

under the swell of cloth. Or bandages that wrapped the limb that didn't heal, its owner permanently deformed and disfigured.

Working with materials that I can borrow or find is an essential part of the methodology of my practice. My intention is to make work that is strange, uncomfortable, sexualised, deviant and 'other.' Mixing up materials, natural and human made, juxtaposing odd combinations of objects and disrupting their his/herstory is quietly entertaining to me because it can be humorous and strange. Making the homely or everyday object *unhomely* holds a psychologically compelling attraction for me. Materials that represent something that is familiar and homely, yet the reconfiguration of them embodies something unfamiliar and foreign are concepts that intrigue me.

03.04.2012

There's been an uncanny event. I am with my friend and she brings out a plastic shopping bag with something stuffed in it. She is five years cancer free today, which is considerable. She opens the shopping bag and shows me the contents. Inside is the hair she collected from her first and only hair cut since being diagnosed. This is significant hair. It is matted and roiled into a strange pointy sausage shape. She is disgusted by it, but I am intrigued. It provokes a weird *unrecallable* memory in me, a memory that feels slightly out of reach and not at all rational. Coming into contact with this hair, this dead object that has a life of its own, is highly charged. We both know that somehow this moment is slightly tinged with horror; the ordeal she has been through, her survival, her life now. The hair itself is not morbid; it's just texture and form. I take this idea from the everyday, this uncanny notion and use it. From one chance uncanny event, I begin to make art with hair.



Fig. 3. Adi Brown, *Transitional Object Hair and budgie*, felted hair, taxidermy budgie, wood.
80 x 40mm and taxidermy budgie, 80 x 40 x 40mm.

3. Disrupting borders.

When discussing the uncanny in female arts practice we can refer to two eras of creative production. The first is the historical period of Dada and Surrealism¹³ and the practitioners of that time such as Meret Oppenheim, Claude Cahan, Leonora Carrington and Louise Bourgeois. The second is the era of contemporary female artists who reference, appropriate and borrow ideas from Dada and Surrealism today such as photographer Pat Brassington, and sculptor Sarah Lucas. I have chosen to research these artists, not only because of the uncanny in their art, but also to the human female body. Through this investigation and a discussion of Hans Bellmer's doll works, I propose to explore and analysis the representation of women's bodies in Surrealist art.

Dada investigated and then unravelled art world contexts and radically changed the notion of what art was by destabilising the art object. Altered or reassembled found objects took precedent over original handcrafted sculptures to link art and everyday life. This notion also challenged ideas of high art and low art by questioning distinctions between the two, connecting art and everyday life. Surrealism was more concerned with themes of eroticism, sex and death, and attempted to recreate a new liberal world order by liberating repressed desires through the erotic. Early Surrealism did so by focusing on reflections of Freudian psychological theories, angst and the poetic imagination.¹⁴

The Surrealists rebelled against normalcy and the strictures of society of the time and they sought to do so through ecstatic tales and violent passions. Freud's description of female *hysteria*¹⁵ which included symptoms of hallucinations, amnesia and partial paralysis provided a perfect platform for the Surrealists to make 'unconscious' art. Through the adoption of these ideas, coupled with the unconscious the Surrealists considered that the art they made could be seen as a protest against the dominant constructs of materiality and capitalism, from which they sought liberation. In this way male Surrealists sought to cause subversion to the limits of convention through the erotic.

¹³ David Bate defines a discursive surrealism that recognizes its interdisciplinary effort across literature, culture, visual arts and politics rather than just another art movement defined by its paintings. This is the surrealism I am referring to when discussed in this thesis. See Bate, D. (2004). *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social dissent*. London and NY: I.B Tauris and Co.,

¹⁴ Ann Marsh, (1994). 'Of Bodies and Mythologies' in *The Aberrant Object: Women, Dada and Surrealism*. Melbourne; Museum of Modern Art at Heide.

¹⁵ Hysteria in woman was thought to be caused by a 'wandering womb' where the womb would supposedly wander around the body causing madness, fits and fevers. If women indulged in 'unwomanly pursuits' such as mathematics, science or engineering it was thought to bring on the affliction. See Plant, S. (1997). *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the new Technoculture*. London:Fourth Estate, p. 32.

Hans Bellmer a Surrealist artist, made two sets of doll mannequins influenced by a play he saw where an automaton plays a major role. The mannequin had entered the Surrealist's repertoire of iconography as a stand-in for the female body reasonably early. The first doll Bellmer made was a dismembered wooden and plaster doll that resembled a heavily abused child's toy and the second is made up of numerous ball joints (Fig 4 and 5). Bellmer replicated this technique many times and is often referred to by many other artists. The multiple parts, breasts or legs locked together stem from the classical Freudian notion of the fetish that derives from a particular moment in the Oedipus complex whereby the (male) child is reminded of castration evoked by the sight of female genitals. Bellmer's whole oeuvre of work is based around distorted representations of woman's bodies made out of dismembered doll parts. His work provides a good example of the Surrealist's interest in uninhibited and subversive sexuality. Thematically linking eroticism and death, Bellmer's work is exemplary of what many of his male peers believed; that subversion of family values, church and state could be enacted through the erotic.¹⁶

The liberation of male desire only acted to effect the representation of women undesirably. Andre Breton, self appointed leader of the Surrealists, undertook enquiries into sexuality with his male peers only, negating the voice of women to define their own point of view from personal experience on the topic. He did so by neglecting to invite them to the meetings he held on the subject of sexuality and thus in most cases, representations of female desire were garnered from a male perspective only. Many feminist art critics such as Dawn Ades, Mary Ann Caws, and Whitney Chadwick agree that the presence of 'dismembered bodies, headless and faceless females and the violence done to the female form in Surrealist art simply re-inscribes patriarchal myths of women and female sexuality' and that the work of female Surrealist artists often did the same.¹⁷

Criticism of Freudian perspectives on female sexuality began as early as the 1920's starting with psychoanalyst Karen Horney's opinion that Freud's theories about penis envy and castration anxiety were distorted and condescending, counter-suggesting that it was in fact men who suffered from

¹⁶ Marsh, 1994, p. 35.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.35.



Fig. 4. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1936/1938, photo-vintage print.



Fig. 5. Hans Bellmer, *The Doll*, Original 1935 and *The Doll*, recast 1965

'womb envy' because of their inability to bear children.¹⁸ Not surprisingly female commentators have continued to argue that women's bodies have been demeaned by the objectification and fetishization of the female body at the hands of Surrealist male 'liberation.' Contemporary feminist critics, from Sarah Kofman to Kaja Silverman comment that there is a difficulty in a theory that 'privileges a male response to the 'uncanny trauma' of a woman's lack.'¹⁹

Art historian Rosalind Krauss provides a counter argument that the Surrealists view on sexuality was actually politically enabling for women. She posits that Bellmer's conglomerate body parts can be seen as liberating because they refuse to represent an idealised woman. Opposing arguments to Krauss's are that it would be counter-productive of women to adhere to male structures of representation. In the past 30 years feminist critics and artists have reclaimed their own image and redefined the body in very many ways to provide more positive representations for women.²⁰

Despite the likely viciousness of Bellmer's dismembering of dolls and the mis-representation of women's bodies as a mere toy; I am intrigued in Bellmer's doll work because it is disturbing, extraordinary work. The artist evokes with inanimate objects a sense of tragedy and brutality that carry a dark sexual overtone. I find the photo of Bellmer lurking behind a tree (Fig. 6), the silhouetted image of a quintessential dirty old man, face obscured, 'perving' desirously at the mutilated doll parts clad only in little girl shoes and socks irresistible. This image conjures up metaphors of decay, abuse and longing. It is a grotesque image, the distorted vision of female sexuality posed for the gaze of men. However the reason why I am drawn to this image is that there is a sense of melodrama. Bellmer wants to explore the object, the erotic, in all his sadistic and fetishistic voyeurism, but in a theatrical way, as if to remind us that the dismembered doll is after all only a representation and not really an act of sadism. Krauss describes Bellmer's use of the doll imagery as a tactic: 'To produce the image of what one fears, in order to protect oneself

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 35.

¹⁹ Cited in Vidler, p. 10.

²⁰ Feminists have long disdained the theorizing of the body through patriarchal means whereby the female body is theorised through female corporeality as castrated. Strongly influenced by psychoanalytical thought feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Jane Gallop provide alternative understandings. Irigaray sees the female body (as well as the male body) as a site for social signifiers. Gallop proposes the body as a site of resistance to patriarchal occupation. Subsequent theorists have insisted that there are more than two distinct realities in terms of anatomy, corporeal experiences, and modes of sexuality. See Wright, E. *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*. USA: Wiley-Blackwell. 1992.

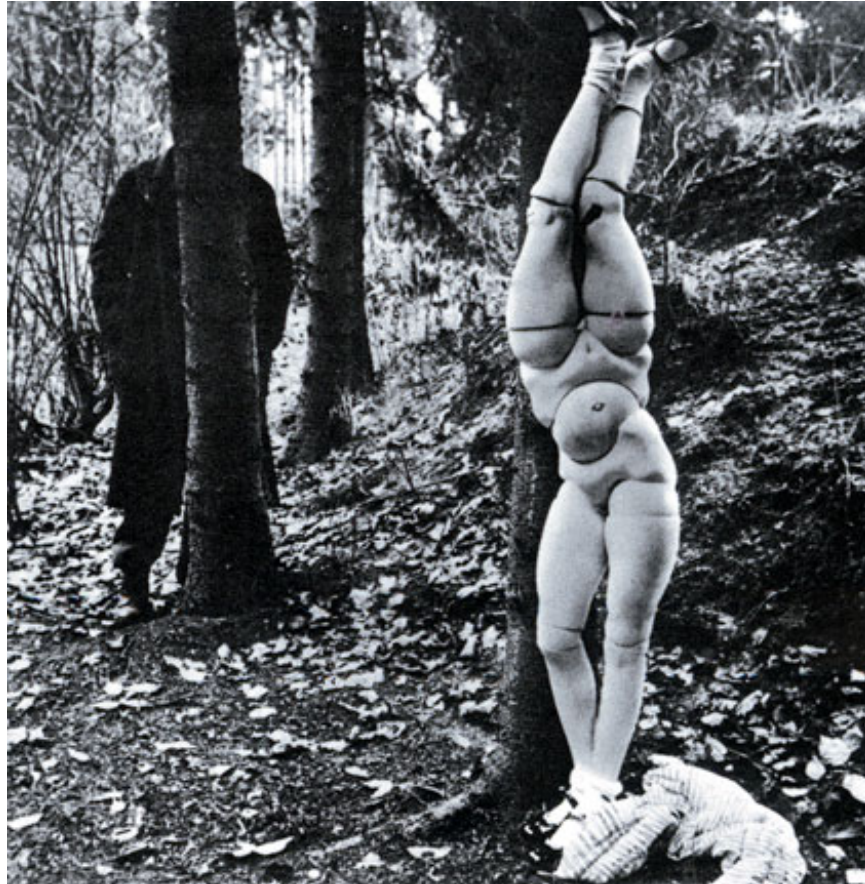


Fig.6. Hans Bellmer, Photograph, 1935.

from what one fears – this is the strategic achievement of anxiety, which arms the subject in advance, against the onslaught of trauma, the blow that takes you by surprise.²¹

In my own practice I re-constructed a miniature doll by firstly dismembering it and re-joining the parts with white tac in a different configuration. I realised that my own experiments with dismembered doll parts could be a play on some of Dada's and Surrealism's historical tropes and perhaps even be considered a bit of fetish theft²². As a female artist questions arose for me when working with the doll parts along the lines of did I really want to 'quote' an artist such as Bellmer by working with a dismembered doll? He can be thought of as merely a pervert and was that reference necessary in the underpinnings of my work? What could I hope to gain from this? Enberg²³ states that quotation can be used as a device for feminist re-invention to offer new and often funny meanings. Humour operates in my work on a level where although sometimes quite unpleasant, the objects, can also be strangely humorous. I also considered my action of dismembering the doll an attempt to articulate a feminine presence as a female artist, rather than being simply a subject and bring a fresh reading to it that was unfamiliar and funny.

I decided I would photograph the dismembered doll. This was mainly to distort and fetishize the object further and to create a psychologically compelling image rather than a three dimensional object. As an object in itself it just isn't uncanny enough. It is too familiar. When you look at the object – a dismembered doll, it is simply that. I also wanted to avoid literal representations of the body and present the body more by implication; as something that existed previously and is now reconstructed as a fetish.

²¹ Krauss, 1997, p. 196.

²² Originally fetishism was defined by Freud as a particular masculine perversion whereby sexual gratification was obtained from a female sexual object, generally inanimate such as fur, velvet, hair, a shoe etc. A definition for a fetish for females is problematic, however, one feminist perspective on fetishism has been that of appropriation whereby the fetish from a female perspective can be identified as a sort of 'perversion theft' when pilfered from traditional forms of the male fetish. This is what I am referring to when I use the term 'fetish theft' in reference to working with doll parts, hair etc, and other materials traditionally associated with male fetishism. I consider that I am borrowing the fetish for my own ends. See Naomi Schor, 'Female Fetishism: The Case of George Sand', in Susan R Saleman (ed) *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass and London, 1986, pp 363-72 cited in Robyn Mckenzie, 'The Aberrant Object or Frigging the Fetish', in *The Aberrant Object: Women, Dada and Surrealism*, Palmer, M (Ed), Exh. Cat., Heidi Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, Victoria. 1994, p. 19 and . Wright, E. *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*. USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992, p. 115.

²³ Juliana Engberg. 'A Cabinet of Curiosities,' in *The Aberrant Object: Women, Dada and Surrealism*, Palmer, M (Ed), Exh. Cat., Heidi Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, Victoria. 1994, p. 10.

When photographed I could explore it further as a scary little object that could be scaled up to proportions alien to the original subject. Photography is an exceptionally good vehicle to develop ideas of the uncanny.²⁴ Surrealist artists in the early decades of the twentieth century adopted photography and aspects of the developing field of psychoanalysis to explore the experience of Freud's 'uncanny.' Through this pursuit Surrealist photographers distorted and abstracted the medium away from what was originally associated with an empirical model of knowledge into among other things, processes of doubling whereby the photograph acts as an inanimate double of its animate (human) subject. Krauss notes that the Surrealist manipulations of the medium and its relation to reality results in a paradox. 'The paradox of reality becomes translated into a sign or signifier'.²⁵

When the doll is photographed questions arise in terms of what exactly is the image that we are viewing - is it a doll or is it human? It's obviously a figure of some sort but the body parts are exceedingly distorted by the depth of field of the camera lens. The reading of it is also psychosexual and presents as a fetish because of the black boots pressed to the edge of the print. As already noted disorientation takes place when we are not sure if something is animate or inanimate. Confusion over whether the figure is alive or not can be experienced when viewing this photo. The image is large – larger than life size; although the boots and legs appear doll like, the figure still threatens to come to life in some way because of its proportions. The original model which I photographed is miniature. I tested the scale to distort, to question reality, and make the image more surreal. (Fig. 7 and 8).

²⁴ Bates, D. *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social dissent*. London and NY: I.B Tauris and Co, 2004.

²⁵ Krauss, R. (1985). 'Photography in the service of Surrealism' in *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*. New York: Abbevill Press. p. 31.



Fig. 7. Adi Brown, *Out of body experience 1*, Digital print, 1200 x 900 cm.



Fig. 8. Adi Brown, *Out of body experience 2*, Digital print, 1200 x 900 cm.

4. Feminine interference

Operating in parallel to the development of Surrealism the French sculptor Louise Bourgeois was forming an extensive oeuvre of work that dealt with distinctly psychological themes pertaining to her personal childhood experiences, sexuality and the unconscious. Although Bourgeois states in a 2005 interview²⁶ that she was not even slightly interested in being labelled a Surrealist, nor was she attracted to their themes, her work is often cited as having direct links to Surrealism through its psychological inclinations.²⁷ Bourgeois utilized Surrealist practices not to make Surrealist art, but to make art that disturbs and destabilizes. She also did so within a growing social and political framework of feminism, which permitted mining of her personal life to explore psychological aspects of her childhood in her work. If an artist is interested in the unconscious, psychoanalysis, the role of chance or the uncanny, then he or she is revisiting Surrealist ideas, but is not necessarily making Surrealist art.

The work I was firstly drawn to is Bourgeois's small fabric dolls stitched together with crude sutures (Fig. 9 and 10). There is something strangely macabre about these small dolls deliberately removed from the context of play, they give the impression of bandaged victims or beings formed by ghastly surgery. Constructed with humble tactile fabrics they possess both tenderness and an eerie quality.²⁸ Provoking an emotional response, despite their playful rendering, these dolls signify a darker side to childhood and reference to the past. Bourgeois was surrounded by fabric in her early years of her parent's tapestry workshop and helped with repairs in the business from a young age. She constantly hoarded fabric, clothes and domestic items such as tables, clothes and bed linen that she cut up and re-stitched to make art in her later years. In an attempt to mend psychological rifts caused by the fear of being abandoned as a child, the sewing or joining together represents a need to make things whole. In 1982 Bourgeois published a photo essay in *Artforum* revealing that her

²⁶ Garden-Castro, J. *Vital Signs. A Conversation with Louise Bourgeois*, *Sculpture* 24, no 6 (July/August 2005) pp. 29-33.

²⁷ Chadwick, W. (1991). *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*. London: Thames and Hudson; Brown, Caws, M, et al (eds). (1991), *Surrealism and Women*. Cambridge: MIT Press and Hopkins, D. (2011), *Exh Cat. Childish Things*. Edinburgh: The Fruit Market Gallery.

²⁸ Nochlin, L. (2007). 'Old Age Style: Late Louise Bourgeois' in Morris, F, (ed). *Louise Bourgeois*. London: Tate Publishing, pp. 189-196.

father's mistress (her governess) lived with the family for ten years undermining Bourgeois and her mother. Autobiographical notions of betrayal, anxiety and loneliness are inherent in her work.²⁹

Bourgeois has been cited as using Surrealist devices in her work such as 'chairs that hang from the ceiling, spiders, remains of bones and flayed animals that lie in a mess among quite common everyday objects such as beds, tables and mirrors³⁰.' Un-interested in the traditional Surrealist tendency for randomness that juxtaposes incompatible objects, Bourgeois is more inclined to achieve a unification of physical experience and emotion that borders on the *unheimlich* or uncanny through her references to the home. Vinding³¹ states this is particularly cogent in her works the *Cells*, because in the distorted passages Bourgeois creates, we can recognise the passages of a house. The installation *Passage Dangereux* (Fig. 11) although not relating directly to the home introduces us to a dangerous passage where death is ever present, a dead fly in a glass horse, bones, an electric chair. It is within these symbols we experience the *unheimlich* because the materials permeate with emotional reference and are substitutes for something that was once living.

²⁹ Hopkins, D. (2011).

³⁰ Vinding, P. (2003). 'The Space and the Body' in *Louise Bourgeois: Life is Art*. Louisiana: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 13.

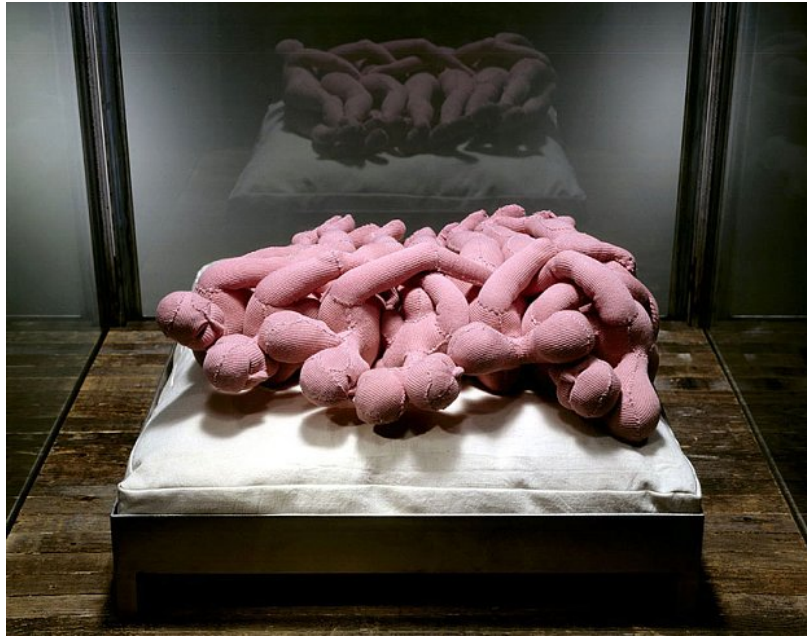


Fig. 9. Louise Bourgeois, *Seven in a Bed*, 2001



Fig 10. Louise Bourgeois, *Temper Tantrum*, 2000, Pink fabric 22.9 x 33 x 50.8 cm.

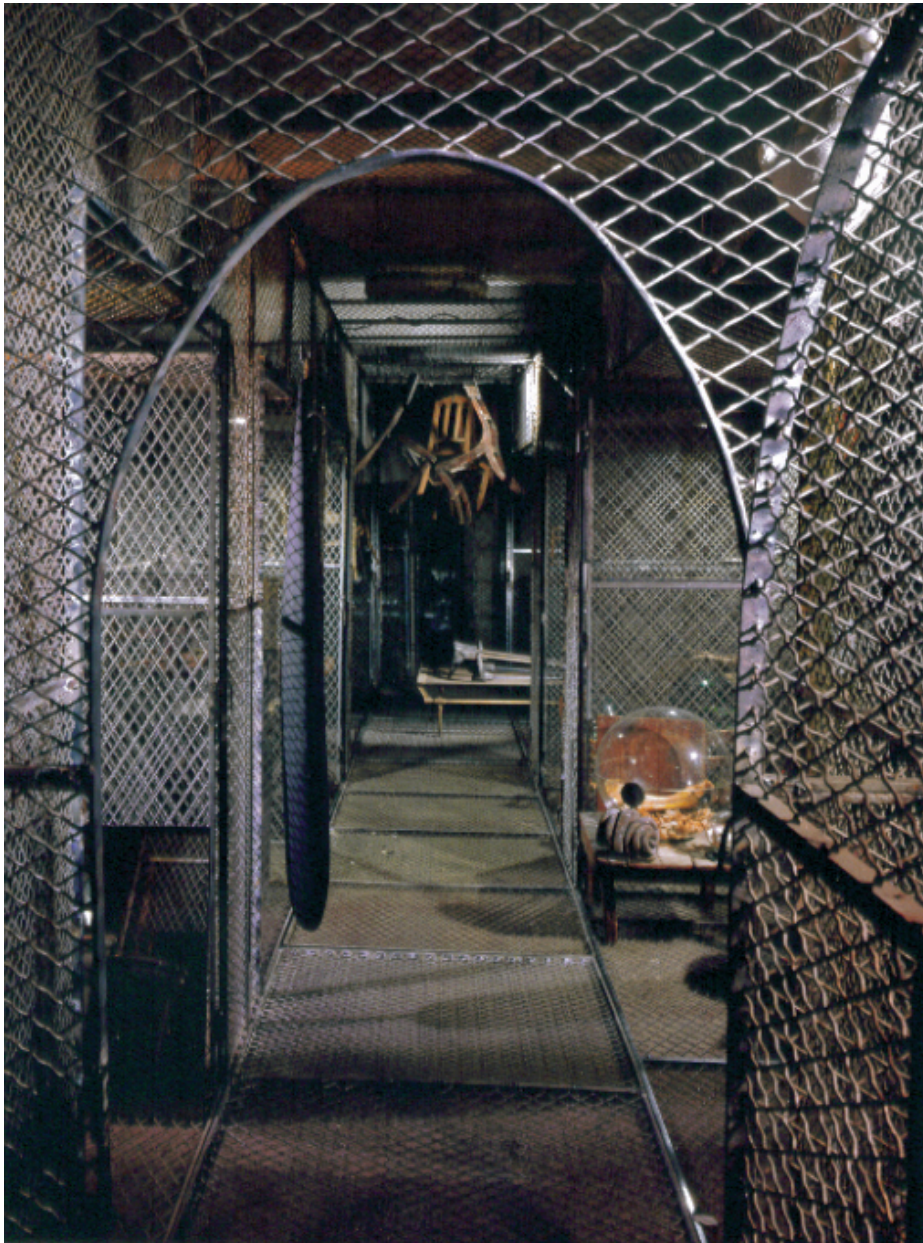


Fig. 11. Louise Bourgeois, *Passage Dangereux*, 1997.

11.07.2012:

The tail broke off my taxidermy budgie. At first I was troubled by this but then realised that I could use this to my benefit. I began wrapping some painted sticks I had in my studio with dirty old bandages to create a body onto which I affixed the tail. This object is part human part bird wrapped together with a bandage in an act of repair, much like I imagine artist Louise Bourgeois repairing psychological rifts through acts of sewing and joining. Does repairing the budgie somehow represent a need in me to make things whole? What rifts am I repairing if any in this work? However I have no intention of repairing the budgie to make it whole with my act of wrapping. In fact I am more concerned with making something sinister and spooky out of the budgie tail and the grotty bandages. I also enjoy dismembering doll parts to reconfigure them to create something that is familiar, yet strange. The object I have made is a body, but not a body in a direct way. By way of association, through the bandages, the finished object makes me think of a sick-bird like human body in need of repair wrapped in bandages for comfort and restoration. Now I have a tail-less taxidermy budgie and a new budgie body made with the tail and bandages. What will I do with the now tail-less taxidermy budgie? Perhaps cover its head up with something. I don't want it to have to witness its own disavowal or castration by losing its tail (Fig . 12).



Fig. 12. Adi Brown, *Wandering Womb*, bandages, glue, sticks, paint, feathers, 10 x40 x 20 cm.

5. Disquieting humour

Bourgeois has been cited as the 'mother' of young British artist (yBa) Tracey Emin. Yet it is the work of yBa Sarah Lucas that is relevant to my discussion through her Surrealist referencing. Sarah Lucas is a contemporary artist who emerged in the early 1990's in association with the yBa's. Her photographic and sculptural work play on sexual puns, confrontational humour and a general prodding at British-ness. Though at times she resists the urge to directly and deliberately reference surrealism, her work can be considered to demonstrate ironic use of Surrealist concerns. David Hopkins³² identifies an example of this in her early photographic work *Get off your Horse and Drink Your Milk* of 1994 (Fig. 13). When this image is situated alongside Rene Magritte's Surrealist icon *The Rape*, 1934, (Fig. 14) we see where Lucas re-presents a humour filled take on a questionable image. Applying childish symbols of milk and biscuits to replace signs of masculinity Lucas draws attention to Surrealist tropes and the everyday realm of low art where issues of male and female identity can be questioned.

Her latest series of sculptures, NUDS (2009-2012) which is a pun on nudes, nodes or nods and the resulting installations, show surrealism as a launching point for her work. The soft sculptures are constructed of stuffed nylon and are highly sexualised in nature as are the photographs (Fig. 15). They reference her earlier gender-orientated work of the 1990's where effortless but potent assemblages of found objects became stand-ins for the female body. For example *Bitch* 1995, (Fig.16), consists of two melons slung inside a t-shirt that is stretched around a table with an old piece of boned trout in a plastic bag hanging off the back.

For Lucas sexuality holds an attraction comparable to the Surrealists but from her perspective the broader framework of identity politics is of far greater importance.³³ What is interesting about Lucas's work is her engagement with puns, the obvious humour, and the references to sexuality and identity that are assisted by simple assemblages and configurations of materials to get her ideas across. The use of materials is fundamental to the ever present discomfort in her work. Bodily references are entwined and trapped within the combinations of nylon stretched taut over soft materials. Suggestive of corporal extrusions and bulges the soft sculptures provide an unsettling encounter of entangled limbs or internal organs.

³² Hopkins, D. (2004), *Dada and Surrealism: A very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³³ Ibid, p. 150.

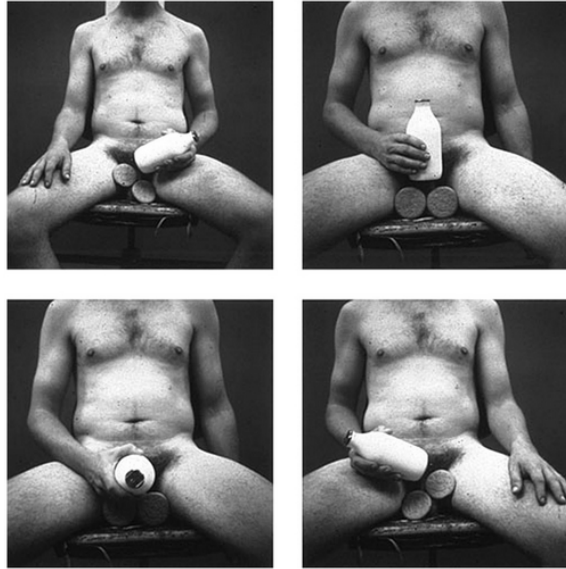


Fig. 13. Sarah Lucas, *Get Off Your Horse and Drink Your Milk*, 1994



Fig. 14. Rene Magritte, *The Rape*, 1934.



Fig.15. Sarah Lucas, *Nuds*, installation view, 1995.



Fig. 16. Sarah Lucas, *Nud 26* and *Bitch*, 1995.

6. Further disturbances

Elisabeth Wright states “The uncanny has become an important concept in post-modern aesthetics because it acts as a challenge to representation. It makes us see the world not as ready-made for description, depiction or portrayal....., but as a constant process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction.”³⁴

Australian photographer Pat Brassington’s work is populated with distorted bodies and strange shapes. These shapes, which are usually attributed to the human body, can act as fetishistic stand-ins. Like Lucas, her interests lie in provoking a private psychological reaction and investigations into broader political or social frameworks are also apparent in her work. Her digitally constructed images are decidedly alarming in content, and although borrowing Surrealist concerns around the uncanny, focus more on nuances of individual female desire and fear by giving presence to it.³⁵ Brassington intensifies a sense of anxiety within the work through her use of colour, distortion, fragmentation, shadowy shapes and camera angles. She effectively undermines and challenges the traditional subject positions of surrealism by drawing attention to it and allowing aspects of female desire and fear to predominate.

An example of this can be seen in her work *Rising Damp*, 1995 (Fig. 17). In this work, she uses multiple black and white images of stained and dirtied women’s underwear to create a formal grid with around thirty individual photographs. Brassington plays with the tensions between desire and repulsion, the strange and the familiar in these works that negate any potential for the romantic allure of lingerie. Instead we are confronted with bloodstained underwear and tattered slips, their disembodied presence provoke unspoken feelings and thoughts of the darker underside of feminine lived experience, that spills over into the abject.³⁶ Furthermore we are confronted with the sense of the body, its marks and stains left as impressions on the underwear, suggestive of fear and tension, or the threat of violation on delicate folds of skin. This is what gives these images their specific uneasy quality.

³⁴ Wright, Elizabeth, (1990), *The Uncanny and Surrealism* in (Eds), Collier, P and Davies, Judy, ‘Modernism and the European Unconscious,’ Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 266-282.

³⁵ French, Blair, (2009). *Twelve Australian photo artists*. Annandale, N.S.W: Piper Press.

³⁶ Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press. P. 4.

Brassington's work overall is frightening and repulsive in a number of ways. The combination of form, repetition and neglect of colour has the effect of leaving you with a sense of horror and an uneasy mood after viewing her work. In many of her images colour is drained and de-saturated, used as a device to suggest deadly absence. Yellow, dirty white and pink are amongst her favourite colour choices. In particular it is this bizarrely bleached pink that pricks at our subconscious and makes us question the images of swollen tongues and protruding phallus like suspensions. Are they alive or dead?

Brassington's work is deliberately ambiguous in terms of sexual identities. The boundaries of the body are fluid; forms appear where they shouldn't, shapes penetrate at strange angles and body parts are unidentifiable. *Boucher* (2001) is an example of a strangely configured body or bodies. Two pinkish legs are pressed suggestively together, or possibly an arm and a leg, to create a channel. There is a hint of pubic or under arm hair in the bottom centre of the image and a protruding object, probably a finger penetrates one of the legs. It is this unexpected probe that is abject and uncanny providing the image with a dark humour and an unsettling construct.³⁷

The themes explored by Louise Bourgeois, Sarah Lucas and Pat Brassington and the art they make, appropriates, borrows and is influenced, by theories of the uncanny but is usually not made in direct reference to it. They are making art that re-presents and reclaims the female image in some way through a careful dissection of Surrealism by resurrecting notions of the uncanny rather than reiterating its tenets in a complete or historical context. These artists utilize Surrealist practices not to make Surrealist art, but to make art that unsettles the unconsciousness of the viewer, and is deliberately subversive.³⁸ It's not the objects or images themselves that provoke fear, it is what they represent. From our repressed psyche the desire-fantasy breaks through, and this is what results in the uncanny.

³⁷ Marsh, A, 'A Surrealist Impulse in Australian Contemporary Photography' in *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 6, Autumn, 2007.

³⁸ Solomon-Godeau, A, 'Feminisms Long March', *Art in America* 95, 6 (June, 2007), pp. 63-67.

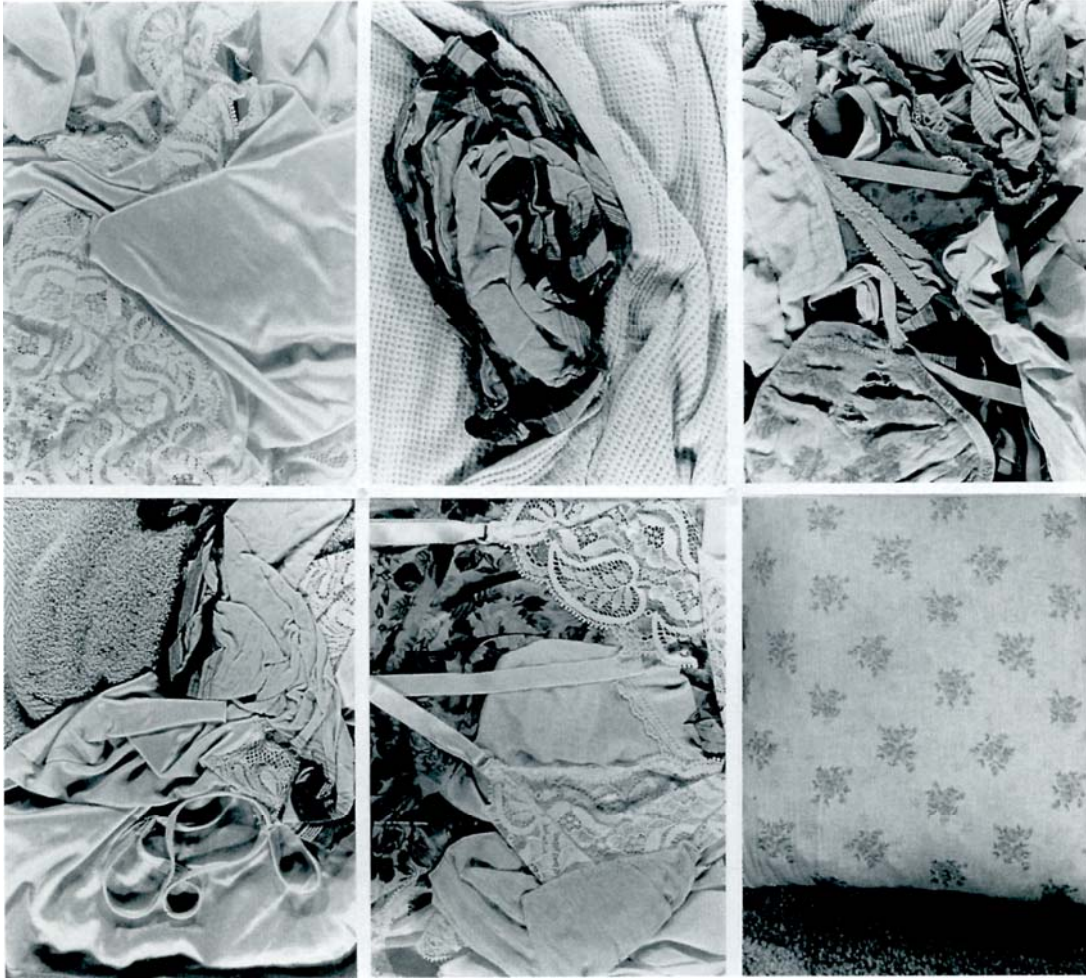


Fig. 17. Pat Brassington, *Rising Damp*, (detail), Pigment prints, 85 x 63cm
<http://www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/assets/files/Exhs2002/patbrassingtoncatalogue.pdf>



Fig. 18. Pat Brassington. *Boucher*, 2001, from *Gentle*, Pigment print, 60 x 43cm.

7. Dead things

In an exhibition the artist Mike Kelly curated for Tate Liverpool in 2004, *The Uncanny* grouped together contemporary and historical objects that for him shared an uncanny quality. Kelly describes the uncanny as conceptually challenging to isolate, but states that it is concerned with a physical sensation that can be attributed to viewing art, especially objects or films. He related it to unrecalled disturbing memories from childhood, that surfaced when he became confused when viewing an art object, that caused him to be unable to differentiate between himself and it (the object). For Kelly the uncanny is charged with confusion and a horror that produce goose bumps and déjà vu, of an experience that is unable to be summoned up except as an experience of weirdness. 'All of these feelings are provoked by an object, a dead object that has a life of its own, a life that is somehow dependent on you, and is intimately connected in some secret manner to your life.'³⁹

In the selection of objects for the show Kelly favoured large life size mannequin-related art works from the 1960's onwards, with objects from disparate cultural contexts that engendered a sense of unease in the viewer: medical dolls, anatomical waxworks, religious statues, pagan figurines, ventriloquists' dummies, sex dolls and taxidermy. He was inclined to exclude small figurative objects even though they contained an uncanny quality. This was because he believed that viewers were more inclined to get lost in fantasy in smaller objects, as proved by his own experiences with projecting on to them and he concluded that viewers could lose a sense of themselves physically. In this category of small uncanny objects he included things like stuffed animals, transitional objects, fetishes and magical objects. A stuffed animal is not simply a play thing to a child, it is an object that could represent the mother. In regard to Winnicott's transitional objects,⁴⁰ a stuffed animal can be associated with great pleasure and security. I am curious to investigate whether you can lose yourself in fantasy when confronted with a small object and how this would relate to the small objects I make.

Kelly also included physical documentary of objects that were not able to be borrowed or no longer existed in the show in the form of photographs. In an uncanny twist he treats photography as

³⁹ Kelly, M, 'Playing with dead Things' in *The Uncanny*. London: Walther Konig Publishing, 2004, p 27.

⁴⁰ I discuss the transitional object in greater detail further on in this exegesis. See Winnicott, W. D, (1971, 2005). *Playing and Reality*. USA: Tavistock Publications LTD 1971 and New York: Routledge 2005.

documentation of figurative sculpture even though he included some art photography such as Cindy Sherman's photographs of medical demonstration models. It has been an on-going concern of mine to include my photography in the installations I construct. My own tests of placing photographs alongside their existing object did not work as a double as I had originally thought, but are more inclined to reiterate what has already been said in a pointless way, rendering both object and image redundant. However my intention with including photographs of other uncanny objects or phenomena has been to extend my explorations into the uncanny aspects of photography.

Kelly included his own collections, called the Harems, in *The Uncanny* exhibition (Fig. 19). The Harems consist of 16 groups of objects ranging from marbles, bubble gum cards, shot glasses, toys, album covers and erotic magazines and postcards. Kelly is an obsessive collector. His collection is what Walter Benjamin identified as characteristic of 19th Century collecting as the 'dreamy time of bad taste.'⁴¹ The contents of the Harems indicate 'low' forms of collecting and are a spectre of tackiness that provide haunting memories of the sins of youth. Kelly's collection reflects a personal history; we can visualise a young man growing up in America fixated in the pursuit of his private collection. 'Collecting has been described as a form of "doubling". The collector attempts to cheat death by amassing identical or similar objects through the pursuit of rarity or completion. Kelley states that the uncontrollable impulse to collect and order is itself uncanny. Most of the stuff is mundane, it could all be tossed out tomorrow and it wouldn't affect him at all.

⁴¹ Grunenberg, C, (2004), p 63.



Fig. 19. Mike Kelley, 'Harems' from *The Uncanny*, Installation view, Tate Liverpool, 1994.

8 Unsettling materials

Objects, which suddenly release their phantom presence, which one sees and reads in a different manner, that becomes animate in the heart of a familiar and yet never perceived thing – they give evidence of a secret life, which we regret to not feel beating in the cup of our hand.

Georges Hugnet (1938)

My practice is led by explorations of materials. Things that occupy and haunt my studio; a bandage, stray feathers, cat fur, a glove, glass, paper, hair, objects of desire and objects of abjection.

Collecting⁴² and working with human hair in my art practice has consistently held a fascination for me. However I have learnt to gather hair somewhat clandestinely. This is because the attraction for collecting hair is not held by everyone and can be considered ghastly by many.

The collecting and gifting of hair was an ancient practice. In Europe, hair work in jewellery became popular in the 16th century and grew to become a strong industry presence in the 18th century, where the sentiment then slowly waned over time. During this time the making and gifting of hair and hair jewellery was steeped in customary rituals for bereavement or sentimental purposes but it was mostly given as a personal gesture of affection between two people.⁴³ Today particular rules exist around human hair largely due to images from mass media that frequently show bodies devoid of all hair except for the hair on the head. For men and woman hair must be waxed, shaved, dyed and generally kept under control so as to be attractive and not objectionable.⁴⁴ Hair is also

⁴² When I refer to collecting in this work I am thinking of a methodology and not a reference based on serious taxonomical collecting as discussed above. Therefore I am referring to the methodological process of gathering materials for the work. The art of collecting has a long history based in the Western tradition of museums and display, and is a vehicle for preserving material culture. The 18th century precursor to the museum collection was the curiosity cabinet or Wunderkammer. Defined as a place for discovery and reflection, the Wunderkammer housed a discursive array of natural history specimens and cultural artifacts. As opposed to a hoard, a serious collection is defined as a series of objects grouped together within a classification system. A serious collection is also defined by its collection policy. This research acknowledges the history of exploitation and postcolonial discourse in museum practice that puts the western world in a position of power by making 'other' cultures exotic and the object of the gaze. See Pearce, S, M, 'The urge to collect' in Pearce, S (ed), *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp 156-159 and Putnam, J, *Art and Artifact*, 2001, pp 66-75 for further discussions regarding collections.

⁴³ Julin, R and Millquist, E. (2004) 'Notes on Hair' in; *Mona Hatoum*, exh. Cat., Hamburger Kunsthalle, Germany: Hatje Cantz publishers, pp 75-78.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.76.

associated with different cultural practices and observances in Aotearoa/New Zealand and it can be considered inappropriate to work with it.⁴⁵

Much of my hair collection comes these days from personal trips to the hair dressers or from friends who are willing to donate their hair to me. *Transitional object* (Fig. 20) came about after a chance storage event. A forgotten plastic bag was found in the corner of my studio containing a collection of human hair donated to me from a friend after a hair cut about eight years ago. The hair object had matted itself together in a process resembling felting that provoked an empathetic reaction in me. Can an object that is alarming also exist as a comfort object? Did I find this object made of hair comforting because it reminded me of friendship which in itself is a security? Yet the object can also be considered uncanny because of the nature of the material of which it is made and the associations that hair evokes. Making work from hair can be considered subversive bearing in mind the norms and practices that are associated with it. Yet the horror of the hair as a severed part, separated from the body, is enthralling. It may take on a life of its own.

Hair can also be considered a fetish object. As previously stated fetishism from Freud's point of view was generally associated with a wholly male perversion which involved deriving sexual pleasure from associations of female sexual objects such as fur, parts of the body, a foot, a plait of hair or other objects like clothing or shoes. These objects are not adapted for sexual purposes, but are related to the sexual person in some way.⁴⁶ Emily Apter⁴⁷ notes that sentimental collecting represents a form of female fetishism and that the 19th Century practices of collecting keepsakes' from lovers such as hair and nail clippings is both characterised by melancholy and a 'lack of disgust' for the objects of sentiment. Because I indulge in collecting of this type do I therefore have a pleasurable acceptance and perhaps even a perverse delight of the object?

⁴⁵ In Maori custom the head is considered the most sacred or tapu part of the body. Traditionally in many cases hair-cutting was a religious rite and ceremonial practices around hair cutting were observed throughout Polynesia. Today customary practices around hair and the handling of it are still observed by Maori due to the tapu nature of it. See <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-Bes01Reli-t1-body-d7-d4.html>, Elsdon Best, 1976, *Maori religion and mythology*, Wellington: A.R. Shearer Publishers, and Hooker, M (2008). *Makawe: gaining an understanding of the tikanga for hair*. Auckland: Print Design Limited.

⁴⁶ The fetish is substitute for the mothers missing penis and is associated with the first time the male child sees the (castrated) (sic) female genitals and suffers from castration anxiety. Wright, E. (1992), p 16 and Nochlin, L, (2007), p 145.

⁴⁷ Cited in Meckenzie, R. (1994). 'The Aberrant Object or Frigging the Fetish' in *The Aberrant Object: Women, Dada and Surrealism*, Palmer, M (Ed), Exh. Cat, Heidi Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, p 22.

28.09.2012:

I have a bag of hair in my car. It's haunting me. I collected it as I usually do when I went to the hairdresser last, but now I'm too scared to touch it because I think having it in my presence has unleashed some terrible Makutu.⁴⁸ An incident happened when I was driving home with the hair in the car to make me think this. I stopped in at Savemart in Porirua to shop – shopping, it's my leisure activity. I like to shop, collect cheap second hand clothing, you know, the act of possessing is more important than the possession itself. I'm in the changing room getting dressed after trying on numerous things. I go to leave, push open the door and it is blocked by the presence of an enormous gang member on the other side. I don't know he's a gang member at this stage, I haven't seen the mongrel mob tattoo on his forehead yet. All I see are large brown eyes staring in at me. Have I been perverted at while I was dressing? I'm not sure, I can't be sure, but I get a sensation, that eerie sensation when you're very sure but can't really prove anything that borders on the rational and irrational. I push open the doors of the changing room strongly, past him and in my bossiest voice ask him who he is looking for, has he lost someone, where is his wife? His eyes are wide and blood shot, his replies are slurred. He's stoned or something.

⁴⁸ Makutu is a Maori word meaning witchcraft, sorcery, spells and incantations. Cited in Williams, Herbert W, 1975. *A Dictionary of the Māori Language*. 7th edition. Wellington: Government Printer.



Fig 20. Adi Brown, *Transitional object*, felted hair, 15 x 6 x 6 cm, 2012.

I then decided to start working hair and feathers together. My intrigue in positioning these two bodily coatings together was at first an experiment in working with two materials that are both familiar and serve a similar process – to cover a body. I found that when woven or used together, hair and feathers, being removed from their original context, create a hybrid body that is somehow comforting, yet confronting in the same instance. In Surrealist art, objects of varying scale are placed in careful juxtapositions with or next to each other in a single work or in a space. It is this intrusion on continuity that gives Surrealism its shock value and sense of the *Heimlich* (homely and familiar) with the *unheimlich* (hidden and secret).

In his catalogue essay for the exhibition *Transformed Objects*, Felix⁴⁹ states that Surreal and post-Surreal objects that link diverse components can create logic defying journeys into new understandings and readings when united. This was significant to my understanding of my reaction to *Transitional object* (Fig. 21) as it provides an explanation as to why a somewhat peculiar hairy feathery object can in fact evoke empathy as well as disgust. Hair and feathers are also partly alive and partly dead, which can be disturbing in itself.

Further hair experiments moulded in plastic shopping bags have revealed interesting results. The hair needs a long time to mat and felt itself satisfactorily to maintain a form. This process can take a long time. If the hair is bound in the plastic for only a few months it emerges still somewhat fragmented with loose clippings falling from it. The form is not firm enough to hold itself together. How the hair is wrapped in the plastic bag is important as it affects the final form and I have been experimenting with different wrappings to produce different shapes. But mostly it is a chance event as originally spoken about and I don't have much control over it.

Many of the materials I use border on the abject. Psychologist Julia Kristeva examines abjection in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.⁵⁰ Abjection is primarily associated with societal taboos regarding the materiality of the body and the horror that arises when we experience bodily excretions such as blood, pus or feces. These are things that emanate from the body and question the distinction between what is I (inside) and what is I (outside) which becomes dead or not I. She also comments that the corpse is a symbol of the most absolute extreme form of abjection as it is

⁴⁹ Felix, Z. (2012) 'The Metamorphosis of things' in; *Transformed objects*, exh. Cat., Kai10 Athena Foundation. Germany: Kerber Publishing.

⁵⁰ Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, p 4.

something that takes over life when it becomes not I . “The corpse is death infecting life...it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.”⁵¹

For Freud the corpse was also a chief source of the uncanny as death was something that was unfamiliar and hidden from us, yet familiar as well in its unavailability. For Kristeva death is the final expulsion and final rejection of that which is expelled from us (the body) and that it is far worse than the uncanny. “Essentially different from “uncanniness” more violent too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin: nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory.”⁵² Elements of the abject are undeniable within my work and the materials such as hair I work with. My key aim is to disturb and unsettle through the use of dead materials that alarm and disgust, dead substitutes for what no longer exists.

⁵¹ Kristeva, J. (1982), p 4.

⁵² Ibid, p 5.

11.10.2012:

I began thinking about my dead mother today. Mostly about going to the funeral parlour to dress her body. The body she had just expelled, although it wasn't a violent thing, she had managed it all quite restfully and independently. Anyway there was her body, waiting for me. I was the only one in my family who went to see her in this state. The first thing I noticed was that the undertaker, a female, had plucked the hairs from her upper lip as part of the embalming or laying out process. I thought this was quite good because when she was alive and very bad-tempered she would never allow me near them to do it. The other thing I noticed was how very dead a body is when it is dead. Clichés such as 'a dead weight' come to mind. She was really very heavy. It took the two of us, me and the undertaker to lift her body to dress her. I was glad I did it though. It was all very final. She wasn't really herself, just her outer covering was present and because I had never experienced her like this before I had to rely on instinct and had no memory of how to relate to her like this at all.



Fig.20. Adi Brown, *Untitled Fetish*. Hair, cloth, rubber, organic material, paint. 22 x 4 x 4 cm.

8. Uncanny urges and collections

Susan Stewart⁵³ describes the “insane collection” as an accumulation of things for its own sake and movement. My workspace is filled with things I might need one day, things I don’t want to waste, things of emotional significance and things that others are revolted by. Dead things, decaying things and things you wouldn’t want your mother to see. Things that are out of sight out of mind, and have been swept away, like bags of hair which are normally tossed out by hair dressers. “Things that affect our emotions and impact upon our thoughts.”⁵⁴

My accumulations of stuff can be contextualised within Stewart’s concept of the insane collection. I am gathering things for their own sake, there is no ordering system and what I collect to make art with is simply kitsch or organic objects and bric-a-brac. The gathering or purchase is soon forgotten. A serious collector would never lose track of the individual components or the meaning of what they were collecting. The significant element for me is the actual gathering and then the putting together, reflecting what Dilworth⁵⁵ alludes to when she says “what one has is less important than what one is about to get – the fact of possession is less interesting than the action of possessing”. The idea of an ‘insane collection’ correlates well when it is populated with my gatherings of hair, rubber bands, glass, budgie tails, sticks and bandages. I have titled two of the works I have made with these materials *Wandering Womb* and *Rose*⁵⁶ *Bush* as a nod to Surrealism, Freud and ideas of hysteria. I can think about the objects I put together, with playful delight and uncanny urges, as an act of hysteria.

Schapiro and Meyer⁵⁷ discuss the activities of women as collectors in history, although some would deem them hoarders. Materials that were gathered, saved and combined signify necessity, memory

⁵³ Cited in Dilworth, Leah. (ed). *Acts of Possession: collecting in America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 287.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p 19.

⁵⁵ Dilworth, *Acts of Possession*, p 287.

⁵⁶ The pseudonym Rose Salvey was taken on by the artist Marcel Duchamp when he dressed as a woman. He also used it to sign various art works and written material. I have appropriated it as a title for a work.

⁵⁷ Schapiro, M and Meyer, M (1978) *Waste not Want not: An enquiry into what women saved and assembled – FEMMAGE* in (Eds) Stiles, K and Selz, P, (1996) *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art.* California: University of California Press.

and nostalgia. Schapiro considers that each letter, photograph, bead, scrap of wool, material or lace was a reminder of its place in a woman's life and resembled an act of journaling or a diary entry. Out of necessity woman saved scraps and left overs to use again in decorative functional objects such as a quilts or rugs. These scraps were also used in collage, decoupage and assemblages for decorative purposes in acts of adding and repair. These objects represent the layered meanings in life, the labour, and the relationships between people and even as objects that are vital for physical survival.

Much of woman's work or art in this manner has been described somewhat disparagingly as decorative or low art. The decorative is still considered uncomplimentary in the contemporary art world, which has a long history in prejudice from the dominant canon of Western fine art hierarchies. 'High art' has been valued over and above 'low art' for centuries where practices traditionally associated with women such as collage, assemblage, decoupage are not held in high esteem. My choice of materials situates my work in what could be considered a 'low art' framework. These ideas are relevant to my practice as they draw parallels between my passions for collecting and working with low materials. I enjoy making something from nothing and I find the prospect that I am making work that acknowledges the crafty side of women's art throughout history is encouraging.

Grunenberg⁵⁸ explains another way of describing a disordered collection by way of a *Wunderkammer*. He begins by drawing attention to the blurring of boundaries between art and entertainment in the 19th century where ambiguous objects or sculpture was staged in wax museums, natural history museums and art galleries for public spectacle. For him the contemporary uncanny is contained within these sites from the past that was manifest in an ambitious and theatrical way to shock and entertain willing audiences. Grunenberg⁵⁹ goes on to describes the museum as place where an array of objects such as stuffed animals to mummies and relics are housed alongside various art and cultural artefacts that have been removed from their original context of origin to create a fresh uncanny gathering.

An uncanny gathering evokes ghostly surprise and suggests to me notions of the inanimate becoming animate. I am interested in how objects and images can become an uncanny gathering

⁵⁸ Grunenberg, C, (2004). 'Life in a dead circus,' in *The Uncanny*, London: Walther Konig Publishing.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p 25.

under the umbrella of a 'museum' or '*Wunderkammer*' whereby strange and rare objects are placed together in seemingly random juxtapositions of art, taxidermy and found objects.

There is 'no narrative structure, no taxonomy and no ordering impulse of a museum in a *Wunderkammer*'; it is merely a collection of uncanny urges that culminates in an uncanny gathering. The uncanny disorder of a *Wunderkammer* destroys any ordering principal or taxonomic impulse of the Museum. Gruenberg's observes that objects and images are familiar but have become strange when placed together in a context that defies any tradition. The grouping is 'uncanny' because imagination is initiated and reality is questioned through processes of the invented, presented as genuine.⁶⁰ This is a significant concept to my practice, the orderings or groupings of my work can be considered non-traditional in materials and situation. However at this stage the grouping of my works as a wunderkammer requires deeper exploration to fully resolve this idea.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 25.



Fig. 22. Adi Brown, *Transitional object 2 (Mummy)*, plaster, bandages, feathers, organic material. 40 x 50 x 40 mm.

9. This is not rational: methods and experiments

My work is driven by a series of uncanny objects that provoke curiosity and speculation. This has motivated me to consider further how the objects and images can be grouped together. When I started to make so many different objects and images I began by thinking about them individually and not how they might function as a whole or when placed together. This has led me to experiment with how the objects and images work together, and how a site could become a habitat or environment for my objects and photographs.

I searched Massey University for an appropriate site; one that was uncanny in itself and one that could be activated in some way with my objects as sculptural forms and images. One such site was found in B Block. It is a room reached by a narrow staircase and along a single lane walkway. Lighting is dim and the access is littered with ghostly squeaking floor boards. The room itself is internal with a tiny external light source in one of the doors that filters an extraordinary blue light from the corridor outside. There is a small stair case up to this door and the room has an uncanny quality reinforced by the actual architecture of the space and from a persistent sound. There is a distant hum of the air conditioning.

This was the perfect site for testing my collection of uncanny objects and images (Fig. 23). Vidler states in his essay on the architectural uncanny that architecture has historical links to the uncanny since the end of the eighteenth century. Houses provide sites for haunting, doubling and dismembering while the spaces of modern cities provide a basis for modern anxiety in the revelation of epidemics, phobias and alienation. 'The uncanny is a sensation that is best experienced in the privacy of the interior.'⁶¹ I have titled this testing of weird objects and uncanny photographs *The Gathering* (Fig. 23).

I have also been considering the emotional responses to my work. One in particular was very interesting. This was from an adult spectator who expressed the absolute compulsion to take one of my hairy objects home to nurture it, coupled with the desire to reject it because of its repulsiveness. This has initiated examinations of ideas associated with Winnicott's transitional objects. W.D. Winnicott⁶² discusses the transitional object as the first 'not-me' item such as a cuddly toy or blanket

⁶¹ Vidler, A, (1994). *The Architectural Uncanny*. USA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, p 4.

⁶² W.D Winnicott was an influential pediatrician and psychoanalyst active in the post war period and developed theory pertaining to the transitional object as well as being particularly effective in the field of object relations theory. He was a

that is utilised by an infant as a stand-in for the mother that provides great comfort and security. In an effort to accept the 'otherness' of the world and recognise him or herself as a being separate from the mother the transitional object is important for a child at the time of going to sleep and as a defence against anxiety. Cuddly toys have also been used as comfort objects for adults in rest homes and in ambulances for trauma victims. Winnicott states that all his theories relating to transitional objects, phenomena, play and understanding reality apply to children and adults.⁶³

Could my hair objects, as disturbing as they are, also be considered as transitional objects? Is it that a transitional object can become a fetish object? Artist Mike Kelly comments that the transitional object and the fetish are actually one and the same thing depending on who is experiencing it – adult or child.⁶⁴ That is, they are both objects that act as stand-in and are not what they actually symbolically stand for, yet they both hold the same attraction or greater. This could explain why the adult spectator I mentioned previously felt a total desire to take one of my hairy objects home. The object potentially held for her a compelling familiar charge that acted as a fetish and a comfort object simultaneously; culminating in her response to seek comfort from the object as well as be attracted to its sexualised form.⁶⁵

Winnicott also provides a further perspective for contextualising my working methodology. Through his theories on play and reality we can come to understand how aspects of play affect all of life. 'Playing makes it possible to address the otherness of reality.'⁶⁶ Winnicott⁶⁷ states that an important feature of play is that the child or adult is free to be creative. Playing is an experience; one that is

proponent for child play as a developmental tool and he also saw that play was essential for psychological well-being for all people including adults. By play in adults he meant making art, sports, hobbies and other creative activities. He observed that play was essential to develop an authentic sense of self because when people play they feel real, spontaneous and alive.

⁶³ See Winnicott, W. D, (1971, 2005). *Playing and Reality*. USA: Tavistock Publications LTD 1971 and New York: Routledge 2005.

⁶⁴ Kelly, p 27.

⁶⁵ Emily Apter considers that the strategy of disavowal, makes fetishists of us all. By allowing desire and anxiety to coalesce in the same object because the fetish simultaneously conceals a lack (castration) and stands in for the absent object, it draws attention to the very loss it tries to hide. See Emily Apter and William Pietz, eds., *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993 cited in Groom, S, et al. 2007. *Neil Gall: Shelf Life*. London: Black Dog Publishing.

⁶⁶ Winnicott, 2005.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p 71.

always creative and that is experienced in space and time thus becomes a basic skill essential for the development of an authentic self. His ideas around play incorporate a need for a near withdrawal state that can be associated with concentration or focus in older children and adults. This realm of withdrawal cannot be easily left or allow intrusion but it is not an inner psychic reality. It is a state that is external to the individual but it is not the outside world, where the child gathers objects and phenomena from, for use in play. Processes of play are activated in the making of my work. When making work I am playing with the materials I work with and I am completely absorbed in that activity. Some of the decisions I make are unconscious in terms of construction and others are very conscious. Intrusions to my play or making processes are treated as irritations and are to be ignored.

23/11/2012.

There has been another uncanny incident. I went to un-install my work from the site I had been working in to and found the objects had been tampered with. A group of builders are using the site as a tool storage area. I walked in to find drills and saws leaning on my digital prints. But stranger than that, is that every object has been actively knocked from its placement, twisted in half, unravelled, split or destroyed in some way. The remnants of my art objects are lying broken amidst builder's debris and detritus. At first I am horrified at this affront to my work. Then I began to understand this destructive response as deeply imbedded in the human psyche. I can appreciate we are all human and the temptation to play with my strange bandaged and hairy art objects must be irresistible. I don't know if upon encountering phallic forms and bandaged budgie tails the perpetrators experienced odd memories that arose relating to superstition or fear. Perhaps it was similar to Freud's experience when he first encountered the Mona Lisa? Whatever it was it was peculiar, and immense enough to motivate them to react in the way they did. Now that I have had time to reflect on this I can see that there is potential to salvage most of the art work that was damaged, and treat the whole episode as yet another aspect of process.



Fig. 23. Adi Brown, *The Gathering*, Installation view.

12. *The Gathering*

The final work is a selection of small sculptural forms constructed from glass, felted hair, organic material, cloth, paint, feathers and glue, as well as a series of selected photographs. My intent has been to examine the uncanny, the fetish and in particular the concept of the 'familiar made strange' within the two and three dimensional mediums of photography and sculpture. I have done this so that I can explore my ideas in a number of contexts and position my own work within contemporary frameworks. My key aim is to disturb and unsettle through the use of dead materials that alarm and disgust.

Of particular relevance are the writings on the uncanny by Freud, Hal Foster, Nicolas Royle, Helen Cixous and Julia Kristeva's concepts of the abject. Kristeva notes that the abject is more fowl than the uncanny, yet is not dissimilar. In addition W.D. Winnicott's theories of the transitional object, also discussed by Mike Kelly regarding his response to small uncanny objects, are important to my work. The emotional responses from others to my work has ranged from the compelling desire to take one of the hairy objects home to nurture it, to the complete destruction of the objects. I find these diverse reactions intriguing. Yet when considered within the context of the uncanny and Foster's idea of 'anxious ambiguity' which produces primary effects of the uncanny we can understand and disentangle the responses. We are all human, fear and desire can erupt as one and the same response. Felted hair can equally be a compelling and repelling substance.

Exploring artists' Hans Bellmer, Louise Bourgeois, Pat Brassington, Sarah Lucas and Mike Kelly has been particularly relevant for the development of this current body of work because of how they have employed surrealist strategies and techniques of the uncanny, the fetish and collecting. It is through exploring these artist's dark and sometimes humorous tropes, the tension they accomplish between desire and repulsion, the strange and the familiar within their work has provided a contextual platform for my own practical work.

The photographs are smallish in scale and consist of a varied range of abstracted and figurative images in a de-saturated colour palette. I have applied distortion, shadowy shapes, exaggerated depth of field and close up camera angles to examine ideas of the uncanny. Because of the uncertainty or lack of distinction between the real and the imagined that can be created by

photography, it was the perfect medium to explore the uncanny. My intention is to raise questions as to what is real and create a sense of anxiety or disquiet in the images. I have also sought to explore the surrealist urge for shock, wit and pun in my photographs and objects, but also the darker tropes of the fear of death.

The materials and use of materials such as felted hair, broken glass and feathers, are integral to my working process, and the thrall and discomfort in the work. I perceive the uncanny in my work as the familiar made strange through eccentric juxtapositions of these every day materials, and how they have come together in objects and images. The main theoretical and experimental referent is the uncanny, resulting in this current gathering of objects and images, titled *The Gathering*.



Fig. 24. Adi Brown, *My very own private little Rose Bush*, glass, fibres, organic material, white tac. 20 x 20 x 20mm.

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