

Research in Practice - Dissertation Proposal

Organic, Decay & Render

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Research in Practice – Organic, Decay & Render

This proposal will serve as a means of refining areas of research with a dissertation question as the outcome. I will be using three key words as points of departure around which I will base my explorations. My research will include relevant art history and analysis in relation to my own body of work. Each word will reflect areas I deem significant to my personal fine art practice and will be examined within this context. These key words are *organic*, *decay* and *render*.

The *organic*, to me, is a branch of nature with a biological emphasis. The word 'nature' lacks this specificity. This is something I examine closely through the means of drawing with graphite pencil. Being absent in colour, these drawings are reliant solely on form which leads me to pursue subjects with complexity such as *organic* structures. The *organic* encapsulates areas like flora and fauna which carry rich symbology and universally understood beauty that has inspired art movements and provides the context that stimulates my own practice.

Botanical illustration is the systematic study of plants originally for the purpose of scientific documentation and is one such artistic exploration of the *organic*. This procedure initially served to record the form, colour and any medicinal properties of the plant to aid identification and taxonomy (Rix, 1981). Paradoxically, the tradition is artistic yet academic posing the dilemma: 'is the botanical artist a servant of science or art?' (Wilfrid Blunt, 1994). For practical reasons, the tradition rejected interpretation and demanded the artist conform to radical realism. As the predecessor of photography, this was the only method of visually recording the natural world: paving the way for scientific advancement and understanding. However, the act of isolating and capturing an *organic* specimen in this way inadvertently connects with an intrinsic human habit, or perhaps need to find beauty in the everyday. The plant is plucked from the monotony of its surroundings and presented in a new context, undergoing a sort of transfiguration. Art: even as a medium of documentation, has the ability to 'ennoble and elevate' (Bryson, 1990) its subject by communicating with a certain primeval aesthetic consciousness we possess. As a result, the *organic* leaves the realm of necessity and becomes an indulgence: an elicitor of visual pleasure.

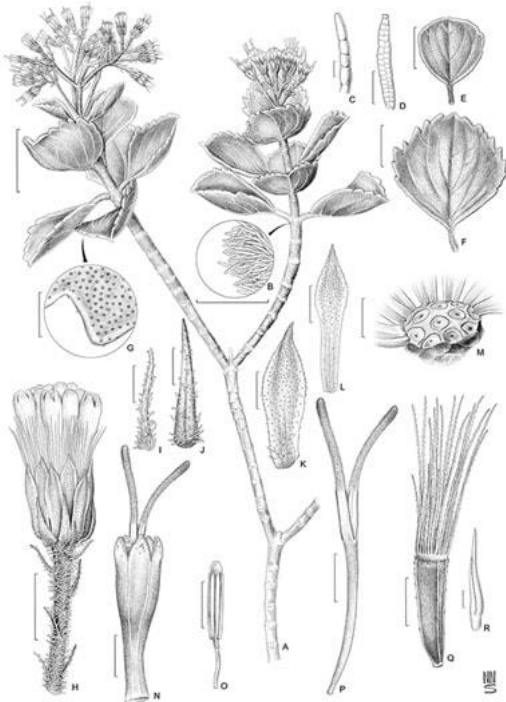


Figure 1



Figure 2

The Dutch flower painting tradition of the 17th century demonstrates the evolution of botanical illustration into a practice synonymous with luxury. The depiction of the flora became less an appreciation of natural beauty and more a reflection of contemporary material culture. Such works were characterised by a vast array of tangled blooms that couldn't naturally occur together: a psychedelic 'botanical impossibility' (Alastair Sooke, 2016). These compositions were achieved through using botanical studies as reference. The result is a beautiful defiance of the *organic* and the borders that contain it. Floral specimens from successful expeditions are culminated into a trophy of human achievement. Each flower is a vehicle of both symbolic and literal meaning. Tulips were imported from foreign lands and carried the status of an exotic and priceless rarity, of affluence and colonial power. Varieties were aptly named *Viceroy*s, *Admiral*s and *General*s as if they embodied the masculine figures that so boldly resisted geographical boundaries (The National Gallery, n.d.). 'Nothing is accepted as a gift of nature' (Bryson, 1990), rather the fruit of human intervention and labour, of horticulture, curation and the skill and time involved in the artist's rendering. This reading suggests the flower is admired in relation to man; its beauty admired through a cultural lens. The trace of man is evident in the vase that tames the flora into a domestic setting as seen throughout Ambrosius Bosschaert's body of work. The vase is perhaps an inadvertent symbol of domination, and in retrospect is telling of a troubling colonial past that hides beneath the manufactured perfection.

The Dutch Golden Age marked a certain commodification of the *organic* as it pandered to an appetite for rarities (Berger, 2011). Each piece seemingly immortalises and fetishizes the material goods that wealth afforded. The spectacle of materialism still thrives today in the form of an Instagram post perhaps. Trends justify and dictate our purchases which we conclude with a photo: a contemporary Still Life of sorts.



Figure 3

While beautiful, there is a certain perversion of nature in the Dutch pieces. A man-made yet natural contradiction. These pieces epitomise hyperreality as represented in Jean Baudrillard's *Simulation and Simulacra* which describes society as having substituted reality with representation (Davis, n.d.) The painting is the simulacrum of flowers made through a cycle of reproduction. The composition is constructed originally from botanical illustrations which, themselves, are simulations of reality. The result is an idealised utopian vision that can be dissected into a collection of re-representations.

The pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood favoured 'Truth to nature': a concept coined by John Ruskin in response to such movements. This dictum taught that through 'rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing', the artist could follow nature and find 'truth' within it (Mancoff, 2003). This notion recalls Michael Landy's series *Nourishment*. This body of work is made up of meticulous studies of various individual weeds. The subject matter is an homage to early Botanical illustration in its isolated and scholarly rendering yet conceptually is perhaps a symbol of social marginalisation. Julian Stallabrass suggests 'the depicted weeds act metaphorically, standing in for the urban underclass – similarly mobile, mongrel and diasporic' (The Evening Standard, 2002). Ultimately, the status of 'weed' is given based on judgement, on human dictation rather than formal classification and parallels can be drawn when referring to social issues. We decide which plants are an inconvenience and swiftly eliminate them. Their resilience is what sets them apart from our curated garden roses, how they so easily invade our beautifully clinical gardens as if to spite our efforts. The inability to conquer this plant threatens our human-centred view of nature which is quantified by cosmetic and agricultural function. Landy's elevation of the humble weed through botanical illustration demonstrates its ability to alter perceptions. Perhaps the weed is a 'healer of a vandalised earth' (Tate, 2011).



Figure 4

Landy's *Nourishment* does not revise the *organic*. He disregards any hierarchy of flora and depicts this 'exiled lowly vegetation' (Tate, 2011) exactly as it is. This 'truth to nature' resonates with my own practice, especially the traces of *decay* evident in the studies which illustrate the passage of

time. Through my own practice and focus on *organic*, I typically seek out unidealized subjects, most of which are *decayed* plant life. I combine the artifice and idealisation of the bouquet and the *organic* nature of the *decay* process, drawing inspiration from both Botanical Illustration and Dutch Flower Painting. I remain faithful to biology in not fabricating the progression of the *decay* process in my composition. There is a certain tragic romance in the ephemerality of cut flowers. Especially given that much of the plant life I use for reference is retrieved from bins. The *decayed* flower is very much an existential symbol as seen in *Memento Mori*.



Figure 5

Existentialism is exclusive to the human condition and places significance on physical existence and our absolute freedom within it. While liberating in this sense, there is pressure and contemplation that accompanies absolute control. Man is but the 'ensemble of his acts', he is 'without excuse' (Sartre, 2007) and ultimately death defines his accomplishments. The existential condition is explored in the 17th century Still life sub-genre of *Memento Mori*: a Latin phrase that translates to 'remember you must die'. This ideology informed popular thinking throughout the late middle ages

and early renaissance periods, shifting focus from spirituality and religion to the physical body. Existence indeed proceeded essence (Sartre, 2007). *Memento Mori* paintings heavily employed the use of visual symbolism in the form of skulls, fruit, wilting flowers and extinguished candles to name a few. These connote images of death, gluttony, vanity and brevity of life and convey the futility of earthly pleasures as evident in Philippe De Champaigne's *Vanitas*. This is contrary to the Still Life tradition that celebrated cultural artifacts and commodities. We examine these symbols 'in conjoint relation to the thing denoted and to the mind' (Pierce, 1880). The sign communicates with our existing knowledge and conveys meaning by association. *Decay*, as a part of the death process, is its signifier and has much conceptual potential in this same regard.

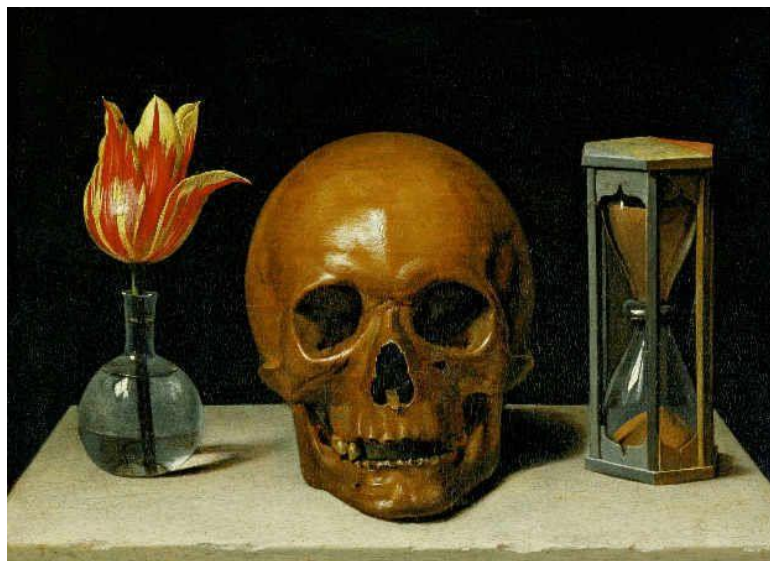


Figure 6

The legacy of *Memento Mori* is apparent in the contemporary visual language of Lauren Marx. This artist challenges our perceptions of beauty and repulsion by depicting morbid yet vibrant and alluring scenes of flora and fauna. She uses animal symbolism, mythology and biology to create hyperbolised scenes of nature: rich with images of *decay*, corruption, gluttony and conflict that resemble those in *Vanitas* pieces. The imagery in the work is allegoric of the human experience and based partly on 'representations of emotions, personal mental health, family, and self' (Laura Staugaitis, 2019). The somewhat anthropomorphised animal figures are often depicted in disturbing scenes of conflict and consumption where flesh is torn or *decaying*. Contrastingly, this gore is accompanied by a vibrant colour palette, symmetry and the inherent beauty of *organic* form. Conceptually, the pieces draw inspiration from belief systems like Christianity and Pantheism as well as the cyclical nature of life, death, *decay* and creation. She speaks of the physical body's relation to the cosmos, of death as a transference of 'messy, raw molecules of life from one form to another in

an endless cycle' (Hayley Evans, 2017). This recalls the work of Joseph Beuys, especially the performance: *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. He spoke of the dead animal's 'special power to produce' and 'actualising a union of matter and spirit' (Delapaix, 2013). There is certainly a metaphysical quality to this notion. Marx, as an agnostic is 'obsessively anxious about [her] mortality' (wowxwow.com, 2018). She lacks the security granted by the promise of an afterlife and instead pursues this sense of purpose in creating her own pseudo-religion through her body of work. This world is inhabited by the divine animal figures she creates, each regally donned with moth halos.



Figure 7

'A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of the king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm' (Shakespeare, 1992)

My own interpretation of Marx's work entails a deep examination of humanity with nature as mediator; borrowing from Derrida's concept of 'animot' (Delapaix, 2013). The artist *renders* the predator-prey dynamic in a hectic and romanticised manner. In doing so she succeeds in creating a

strong sense of motion, accentuating the image's frantic quality. Personally, I interpret this as a reflection of the power of the base survival instincts that govern the lives of animals as each party fights for survival without empathy. Ultimately, I think humanity is more bestial than we'd like to admit, hiding behind notions of elevation like religion that separate us from animals. Expectation eclipses instinct. Humanity has perverted nature's course, be that for the better or worse. Personally, I think the pieces reflect a distorted nature that mirrors humanity's perversions. Arguably, the auto cannibalistic behaviour of the figures is evocative of this corruption and imbalance. The chaos perhaps comparative to the existential state of the non-believer who can only depend on himself. As stated by Dostoevsky: 'if god did not exist everything would be permitted' (Lukes, 2006). This freedom can be repressive. The romantic and beautiful rendering however could be suggestive of the elevated morals that supposedly differentiate us from beast. This 'sacred *decay*' (Marx, 2020) is a beautiful façade.



Figure 8

Decay holds both conceptual and visual significance in my own practice. My drawings aim to isolate, reappropriate and capture the transience of *decay*. It marks a sombre ceasing of existence that we, as humans, cannot help but contemplate. Visually, *decay* is a spectacle. It accentuates existing biological structures of the leaves, petals and stems; spontaneously curling and contorting their form. The veining of the leaf is drawn out, the body shrunken and wrinkled; all disordered and overlapping. Every aspect of the plant's anatomy is more pronounced. This, in comparison with the uniformity of living plants makes for a more exciting subject to *render*. The increased texture creates opportunity for the stark tonal contrast that I thrive in replicating. Yet why am I so compelled to

replicate these qualities? There is something romantic in repurposing the discarded. The bouquet is granted a second moment of triumph. The drawing serves to memorialise in a sense. Arguably, this intimacy cannot be replicated by the photograph.

To *render* is to bring art into actuality, a method of thinking and feeling through the means of depicting. 'Render' could be read in relation to meat, perhaps parallels can be drawn in reference to our carnality. In order to explore the human tendency to *render*, we look to the most primitive of examples. Prehistoric cave painting gives the rawest glimpse into art yet untainted by monetisation and narcissism rather driven by authentic human impulse. Much cave art was assumed to be driven by shamanistic rituals and 'hunting magic'. It was thought to have served purely to increase the yield of the hunt rather than express creativity (Clottes, 2016). A common perception of primitive man was as ruthless and without the capacity for empathy. This notion is contradicted by markings that seemingly depict 'prey' from a position of awe, respect, admiration and comprehension. This conveys dimension, realism, texture and an appreciation that is perhaps beyond the realms of gore. Some examples are highly gestural and stylised, they transcend fact and convey personality and imagination. There seems to be a joy found in the replication and *rendering* of beauty and a significance in the notion of trace and imprint. 'In the scale of human life, geology is a constant' (Antony Gormley: How Art Began, 2019) and these rocky canvases will live on. Antony Gormley proposes there is an understanding of life's ephemerality that drives creation. We attempt to represent ourselves in a time we know, we soon will not inhabit. We crave legacy. Our awareness of self in relation to the world compels us to *render* as a means of comprehension.

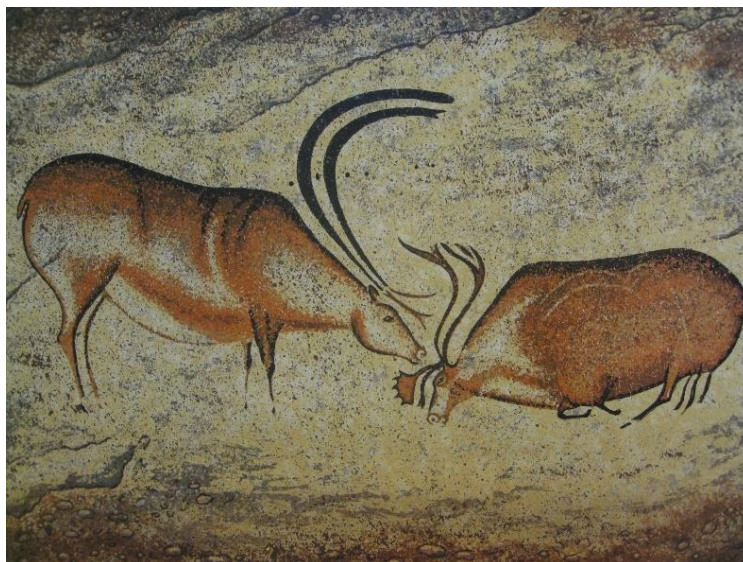


Figure 9

This notion of immortalising a moment in time is as relevant today and something I use my work to consider. John Berger states 'A drawing is an autobiographical record of one's discovery of an event' (Berger, 1953). This notion of discovery recalls a nearly universal childhood interest in drawing. During this period of our lives alone, we are unclouded by expectation. We are most drawn to *render* at our life's most primitive stage. This suggests: to *render* is to be impulsive, to act and create without regulation. This activity inadvertently equips us with further understanding of the subject. Those who do not substitute this youthful impulse for another can master this understanding. Drawing can capture 'change, transience and brevity of each moment' (John Berger, 2007). This is notably relevant in my own work, especially given the ephemeral nature of some of my subject matter. To *render*, rather than photograph is to examine the subject with more intimacy and purity of action. The artist comes into direct contact with the image in a delicate and tactile manner with little mediation that distances us from the act. This concept of 'delicacy' suggests that drawing inhabits a position between 'absence and presence', 'being and not being' (Casey, 2016). This sense is evoked by the inherent fragility and lightness of the materials but also the blurring of reality and artifice. Between these borders is intangible thought. The rendering is a representation rather than replication. It serves as a tender preservation of a moment and provokes consideration of beauty in thought and form.

To conclude my dissertation proposal, I have explored and deconstructed the keywords that contextualise my practice in order to refine areas of study for the following year. In doing so, I have discovered the strong relationship between the three and expanded my knowledge on the various literary and philosophical theories that feed into and support my practice. My dissertation question will be 'Materiality and Mortality in Dutch Still Life'. In exploring Still Life traditions, I have discovered the profound depth of meaning they contain and the broad conceptual value that encapsulates many of my interests. In the process of formulating this proposal, a number of sub-questions were prompted for consideration including 'Depictions of Death and Decay in Contemporary Art' and 'The Intimacy of Drawing'.

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Figure List

Figure 1

Available at:

<https://www.botanicalartandartists.com/margaret-flockton-award.html>

Figure 2

Available at:

<https://pixels.com/featured/tulips-pierre-joseph-redoute.html>

Figure 3

Available at:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/Bouquet_of_Flowers_in_a_Vase_1618_Ambrosius_Bosschaert.jpg

Figure 4

Available at:

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/landy-nourishment-76690>

Figure 5

Available at:

Author's own Image

Figure 6

Available at:

<https://www.kunst-fuer-alle.de/english/fine-art/artist/image/philippe-de-champagne/7151/1/122951/vanitas,-allegory-of-the-transience-of-life-with-skull-and-hourglass/index.htm>

Figure 7

Available at:

<https://www.laurenmarx.com/2018>

Figure 8

Available at:

<https://www.laurenmarx.com/2018>

Figure 9

Available at:

<https://medium.com/@nikhilkanthi/cave-art-is-important-2de1055052f4>