

AS ADAM, EARLY IN THE MORNING:
EXPLORING THE TRANSIENCE OF THE HUMAN BODY THROUGH PAINTING

by
BERKE DOĐANOĐLU

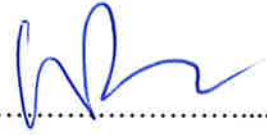
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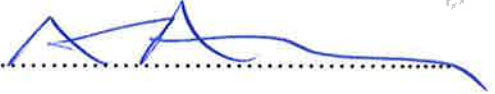
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ABSTRACT

AS ADAM, EARLY IN THE MORNING: EXPLORING THE TRANSIENCE OF THE HUMAN BODY THROUGH PAINTING

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M.A. THESIS, July 2018

Thesis Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Wieslaw Zaremba

Keywords: Body, Anonymity, Painting, Surface, Materiality

This text intends to provide an analysis for the series of paintings I have produced within the last three years that culminated in the exhibition *As Adam, Early in the Morning*. The series consists of paintings that emphasize vulnerability of the human body without exposing the figure's identity. The paintings subvert the relationship between the figure and the spectator; either the head is removed, the eyes are indiscernible or the figure is seen from behind. The anonymity of the figure allows the spectator to project their own narrative onto the works. Throughout this paper I will be discussing my criteria for the paintings; focusing on how the paint handling matches the disorderly power of the flesh and how the anti-narrative tendency of the paintings obliges the viewer to project on the paintings.

ÖZET

AS ADAM, EARLY IN THE MORNING: İNSAN BEDENİNİN GEÇİCİLİĞİNİ RESİM YOLUYLA İNCELEMEK

BERKE DOĞANOĞLU

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Anahtar kelimeler: Beden, Anonimlik, Resim, Yüzey, Maddesellik

Bu metin, son üç yıl içerisinde ürettiğim ve As Adam, Early in the Morning sergisi ile sonuçlanan resim serisinin bir analizini sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu serideki resimler, figürün kimliğini belli etmeden, bedenin savunmasızlığını vurguluyor. Alışlagelmişin dışında bir izleyici ve figür ilişkisinin hakim olduğu bu resimlerde, figürün başı resimden çıkarılmış, gözleri belirsiz veya figür izleyiciye sırtını dönmekte. İşlerde öne çıkan bu anonimlik, izleyicinin resimlere kendi hikayelerini yanıtmasına izin vermektedir. Resimleri üretme aşamasındaki ölçütlerimi değerlendirdiğim bu metinde, resimlerdeki anlatı karşıtı eğilimin izleyiciyi kendi anlatısını yaratmaya yöneltmesine ve boya kullanımının etin düzensiz yapısıyla olan yakın ilişkisine odaklanıyorum.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	2
2. PAINTING AS A MEDIUM FOR SELF-RECOGNITION: THE OTHER THAT IS LIKE ME	
2.1. Painting as an Empathic Presence	5
2.2. The Surface as Metaphor.....	8
2.3. An Exploration of Body's Physicality Through Painting.....	10
3. DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE HUMAN BODY THROUGH PAINTING.....	16
4. ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A FIXED NARRATIVE IN PAINTING	
4.1. Painting Beyond a Specific Narrative.....	25
4.2. Narrative Dissolves into a Bodily Presence.....	27
CONCLUSION.....	31
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	32

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1 <i>Actress</i> Oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm.....	3
Fig. 2 Body Oil on canvas, 75 x 100 cm.....	4
Fig. 3 Matthias Grünewald, <i>Isenheim Altarpiece</i> , 1512-15.....	8
Fig. 4 <i>Neck (Diptych)</i> Oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm.....	12
Fig. 5 Paul Cézanne, <i>The Bather</i> , 1885 Oil on canvas, 97 x 127 cm Museum of Modern Art, New York.....	14
Fig. 6 Pierre Bonnard, <i>Self Portrait in a Shaving Mirror</i> , 1935 Oil on canvas Georges Pompidou Center, Paris, France.....	15
Fig. 7 <i>Beach</i> Oil on canvas, 75 x 75 cm.....	15
Fig. 8 Lucian Freud, <i>Naked Portrait</i> , 1972-3 Oil on canvas, 61 x 61 cm.....	17

Fig. 9	
Lucian Freud, <i>Benefits Supervisor Sleeping</i> , 1995	
Oil on canvas, 151.3 x 219 cm.....	18
Fig. 10	
Edgar Degas, <i>After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself</i> , 1892	
Pastel on wove paper laid on millboard, 98.5 x 103.5 cm.....	19
Fig. 11	
Maria Lassnig, <i>Krankenhaus</i> , 2005	
Oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm.....	22
Fig. 12	
Francis Bacon, <i>Man and Child</i> , 1963	
Oil on canvas, 147.5 x 198 cm.....	27
Fig. 13	
<i>Nightgown</i>	
Oil on canvas, 75 x 100 cm.....	29
Fig. 14	
<i>Mouth</i>	
Oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm.....	30

As Adam Early in the Morning

by Walt Whitman

As Adam early in the morning,
Walking forth from the bower refresh'd with sleep,
Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach,
Touch me touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass,
Be not afraid of my body

1. INTRODUCTION

I had a breakthrough in my painting practice, when I started acknowledging it as a medium that provides content. This also reshaped my relationship to painting at large, both in terms of how I perceive it and how I approach making. While in my earlier paintings I was paying a lot of attention to formal qualities, over time I became more and more interested in how painting can become a vehicle for conveying subject matter. I realized that an artwork is the accumulation of a lot of things, the formal reading being only one of them. I also realized that my intention no longer is to make self-referential paintings, but paintings about human beings. My work deals with the body: The body as a metaphor, a site for psychological exploration and as a physical thing substantial in itself. The series of paintings in this exhibition are inspired by the poetry of Walt Whitman, specifically the closing poem of the collection *Children of Adam, As Adam, Early in the Morning*, which the exhibition takes its title from. Partly an attempt to distill the feeling created by this poem into a series of paintings, the exhibition defies a fixed narrative, and rather focuses on instances depicting the vulnerability of the human body.

The paintings in *As Adam, Early in the Morning* belong to a private world, one that is intimate, yet slightly removed. The figures in the paintings commonly appear as isolated, engaged in contemplative moments. In all of the compositions there is a certain estrangement from the viewer; either the figure turns its back on us, the head is removed or the eyes are obscured in a way that does not allow the viewer to easily recognize the subject. In most of the paintings, fragments of the figure occupy a substantial area of the canvas and the background is not specified. The close up views of the body provide an

opportunity for the viewer to intimately engage with the figure, but also present a layer of clinical detachment through the de-construction of forms and distancing of the subject: the anonymous figure is seen only in fragments or from behind. The intimacy created by these paintings can be discomfiting at times because of the abject quality of the naked flesh as a metaphor for the internal vulnerability. While the paintings only show fragments of a whole, they work as a synecdoche for the body as a larger, strange entity. In the rare instances when a face is depicted, the expression is ambiguous and difficult to decipher. At the center of the painting *Actress* (Fig. 1), the figure is in a pensive mood, looking down, away from the viewer. Her eyes are indiscernible. The facial expression seems weary, yet hard to interpret. She could be shying away or drowning in sorrow. She could be blind or simply disengaged. But the specific atmosphere the painting provides makes it clear that she is experiencing some sort of inner conflict. She is detached and introspective in this specific moment. It is as if she is not present in the world with us, but rather prefers to be an inhabitant of the universe inside her.



Fig. 1

Actress, oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm

This sense of uncertainty regarding the figure's state is even more noticeable in the paintings in which the figure is seen from behind, standing or lying down. For instance in the painting titled *Body* (Fig. 2), a figure whose gender is not specified is depicted reclining in front of a grey, non-descriptive background. What comes to the fore is the physicality of the body; the fact that it has mass, carries feelings and holds a certain

cumbersome quality. No longer a vehicle for representing a specific person, the body starts to become something that feels substantial in its own right: body as a potato or a rock, body resembling a whale washed up on a beach, body as a material thing. The paintings in *As Adam, Early in the Morning* evoke inertia, weariness and decay through these bodies. They are recognized in their physicality, which becomes a metaphor for their psychology. The viewer is entitled to project on the paintings since the narrative is removed from a specific person: “It is an older woman. It is a Russian woman. It is my grandmother. I do not think about the woman, I think about the weight.” There is no way to verify any of these statements, and they could all be equally true. So we end up relating to these paintings by the means of the psychological importance we project onto them.



Fig. 2
Body, oil on canvas, 75 x 100 cm

In this case; with many possible interpretations, an attempt to arrive at an ultimate conclusion about the narrative and the identity of the figure in these paintings is irrelevant. Covered by a veil of ambiguity, these paintings are marked by a prevalent mood of melancholy and a sense of solitude. Yet, this ambiguity does not lead us to vague generalizations regarding these bodies. Even though the figures are anonymous, they are not generic; the bodies they inhabit are specific and convey a sense of personality through their awkwardness and humanity.

2. PAINTING AS A MEDIUM FOR SELF-RECOGNITION: THE OTHER THAT IS LIKE ME

2.1. Painting as an Empathetic Presence

It is often said that the act of creation is one's declaration of his/her existence and an effort to leave a trace. Within these attempts, the human body as a subject matter has been the most re-visited one, reconsidered and appropriated in a variety of mediums many times over the past centuries. Painted, sculpted, photographed, deified and deglamorized; body has been the primary point of departure for many artists in their quest to explore what it means to be human. The 20th century poet W H Auden declares in his poem "Letter to Lord Byron": "To me, Art's subject is the human clay/And landscape but a background to a torso" (qtd. in Lubbock). His sentiment is relevant for all times and especially today, in times of emotional strain and unrest. Christine Macel, Director of the Biennale Arte 2017, defines art as the ultimate ground for reflection and argues in the introduction text for the Venice Biennale 2017 that in a world of stress and uncertainties, subjective feelings of melancholy and alienation reemerge, forcing the artists to reconsider the human being; examining the relationship between the individual and his own existence (Macel). According to the painter R.B Kitaj who describes painted images of the single human form as "the most basic art-idea, from which so much great art has been made", this is a subject that will never grow old: "It's not as if an instinct which lies in the race of men from way before Sassetta and Giotto has run its course. It won't. Put in a simple way: many of us like to make pictures of people because people and their lives interest us more than anything else" (qtd. in Godfrey 48). Apart from Kitaj's proposal of this as an impulse, I would add that another reason to create and look at images

of the body throughout centuries is our search for recognition in the image of the other; an effort to understand ourselves. After all, being stuck in this fallible, material body and being subject to its limitations and eventual decline is our shared experience.

A painting that evokes the human is always an empathetic presence that we respond to. Jennifer Blessing argues that when “confronted with a representation of a person, we respond according to how and why we are attracted to it, or repelled; how it expresses something about our own bodily awareness; in other words how we are like it or unlike” (7). Therefore we, in our distinct bodies, are a constant in relation to which we can assess a variation. And in the process of identification, it is always easier to make a correlation between our own bodies and the bodies that imply a fleeting mortality, because we can also recognize it in our own physicality. Regardless of how different each of us experience it, having a body stays as the sole common bond between us and an image of it in a work of art becomes a mirror for the viewer who is faced with an other that shares a common bodily experience with him/her. In a painting seeing a body lying down; recognizing the flesh, bones, muscles and the physical presence causes the miracle of empathy to take place and the spectator rises out of their indifference to recognize themselves in another body. Jennifer Blessing also reminds the reader that emotional contagion studies which research the neuro scientific bases of empathy, often focus on the fact that we rather feel the pain of others than the joy (10).

Art historian Linda Nochlin argues in her seminal work “Body in Pieces” that, art historians focused on nineteenth century art and gender theory (herself being among them) are often forgetful of the body as a site for suffering and pain because they are used to evaluating it as an object of desire. However, the scholars of art prior to that are inevitably aware of the body as the former, with its many representations of suffering as martyrs and victims, either on hell or on earth (18). According to Chris Townsend, “We should not forget that the Western tradition of art since the Dark Ages rests upon continual reinterpretations of the death of a man executed by slow asphyxiation, with nails driven into his hands and feet, and a spear thrust into his side to test if he was dead. Few works of art made since have been such convincing analogues of suffering as Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece, or so possessed the stench of the morgue as Hans Holbein's Dead Christ (1521), in its stress on Christ's humanity and mortality” (9).

The Isenheim altarpiece (1512-15) (Fig. 3) created by Matthias Grünewald, a German

Renaissance painter of religious works, is an interesting art historical example for the relationship between the artwork and the viewer. The Isenheim altarpiece was painted for the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim, which had a hospital that treated the disfiguring skin disease known as St. Anthony's fire (Blessing 10). The center of the altarpiece shows Christ's peeling, discolored skin covered in gruesome pox and sores. Grünewald's initial audience was the hospital's patients for whom Christ's suffering body served as a site for self-recognition. The main point of identification for the patients was Jesus's skin. Covered in livid bruises and marked by the symptoms of their disease, the body of Jesus became relatable to the patients. In stark contrast to the deified crucified body of the Italian Renaissance, Grünewald's depiction is especially morbid. In addition to the thick blood and the diseased skin that is depicted, parts of Jesus's body are grotesquely distorted; mirroring the ailing, frail bodies of the sick. However this macabre bodily presence of Jesus is empathetic and therefore serves a function of catharsis. The spectators see Jesus as a holy figure who could relate to their bodily pain directly and they in turn could perceive their agony as Christ-like. We don't even need to consider the piece as site-specific and limit its audience to the patients of the hospital. When taken out of context, the skin of Jesus becomes a metaphor for corporeal complexity and the work conveys a universal idea of suffering that anybody can relate to. In his 1960 magnum opus *Truth and Method (Wahrheit and Methode)*, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer draws a relationship between empathy and catharsis that could be applied to this case. According to Gadamer, "What is experienced in such an excess of tragic suffering is something truly common. The spectator recognizes himself [or herself] and his [or her] finiteness in the face of the power of fate. What happens to the great ones of the earth has exemplary significance. . . .To see that "this is how it is" is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he [or she], like everyone else, lives" (132).

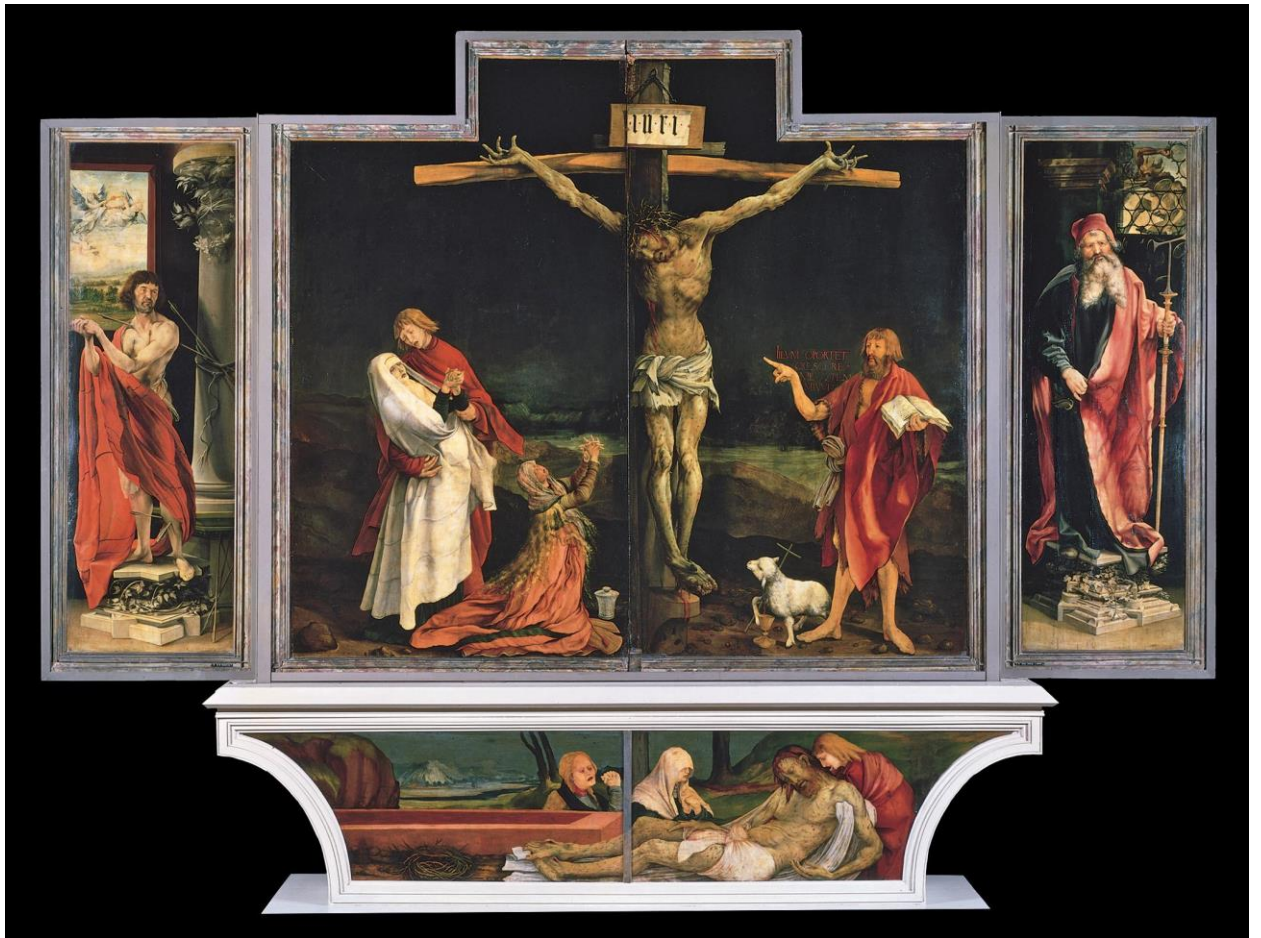


Fig. 3

Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512-15

Painting can be a space for reflection not just because of its content as exemplified above, but also through its material condition, surface and the way it is executed.

2.2. The Surface as Metaphor

Human flesh is vulnerable. The skin of a painting is also fragile; open to rupture and damage. Willem de Kooning famously pointed out this similarity in 1951: “Flesh is the stuff people are made of...the reason why oil painting was invented” (qtd. in Brennan 72). Looking at de Kooning's paintings it is safe to say that he was not only thinking of the flawless flesh of Venus but also the wounded flesh of the dead Christ. Central to the Western tradition of painting is the representation of life and death through the depiction of body. According to Tony Godfrey, “The art of the Renaissance revolved around not only the living, red-cheeked flesh of the Madonna but also the grey, bruised flesh of the

dead Christ'' (270). A painting is always infused with a sense of flesh and what we are confronted with is always a surface. So how does the surface of a painting become a metaphor for the corporeal life cycle with its constant transitions from order to disorder, growth to decay? The surface of the paintings in *As Adam, Early in the Morning* are not healthy skins, they are not meant to be sterile. Similar to the experience of having a body, there are parts of the surface in which the paint cracks or turns into liquid; dripping or clotting in chunks. This trait of slight abjectness is present within these surfaces. Mark Hutchinson describes ugliness as "...the failure of surface'' (152). The words he carefully chooses when he is describing the relationship between the ugly and surface can be read closely in relationship to the body: "...the failure of surface is the failure of the illusion of the containing wall of stuff: the failure of an object to remain a discrete object. The failed surface lets formless stuff out into the world: a kind of ontological meltdown'' (Hutchinson 153). Describing the surface as a wall of stuff containing raw matter, Hutchinson suggests a relationship between surface and our skin: although one is an illusion, they are both protective but fragile barriers between the inside and the outside. And they triumph only when they keep the ugly (the organic and the impulsive aspects of the body) at bay. The cultural theorist Mark Cousins says, "The obsessional thinks in terms of the formula that ugliness is a function of proximity, but also thinks that the way to stop an object getting closer, to bring it under control, is to clean it. This involves a phantasy about gleaming surfaces; whatever gleams is sufficiently distant from myself. What I polish recedes; what is dirty approaches''(149).

If we think about the ugly as the bodily, and apply this thought to the surface of a painting, then we can conceptualize the stain and the impurity on a surface as a bruise; categorize it as something which should not be there, which should be hidden under a glimmering surface, out of our sight. According to Mark Hutchinson, the ugly "...also threatens to make the subject ugly too: to turn you back into your component parts. The breakdown of other things into matter is an unwelcome reminder that you, too, are just a heap of nasty stuff barely contained by a fragile and fallible surface. When the 'undead' monster drips on you, the uncontained bodily ooze is a picture on the skin of what is under the surface; it is tangible evidence of how similar the ugly object is to the living subject'' (154). At the end of the day, we are all impaired bodies that will inevitably be further damaged with time and thus confrontation with the ugly serves as a reminder of our shared material condition and mortality.

2.3. An Exploration of Body's Physicality Through Painting

'I would say that form is the shape of my discontent, and that what interests me is how form can match that feeling or condition – of funny, homely, lonely, ill-fitting, strange, clumsy things that feel right. In other words, a form that tries to find itself outside of what is already okay. Awkwardness is the name I would give this quality, this thing that is both familiar and unfamiliar.'

Amy Sillman

'What's he going to do, draw a bull? Who wants a bull? What we're looking at is his experience in seeing this particular animal.'

Philip Guston

In a conversation with the curator James Putnam, the sculptor Antony Gormley comments on how our attitude to time in objects have changed significantly and argues that "...we can now appreciate things in terms of fragility and temporality and their relationship to an event as much as to their sense of permanence and monumentality" (30). In the group of paintings that are included in this exhibition, there exists a certain rawness in the way they are made that matches the condition of the figure in the paintings, emphasizing vulnerability. Characteristics of the object itself correspond with our bodies' inevitably incomplete materiality, while the impure and rawly handled surface of the paintings become a metaphor for the decaying flesh.

The paintings in *As Adam, Early in the Morning* do not aim for an accurate, natural representation, paint is rather handled so as to allow the viewer to understand the physical condition of the subject. In a formal sense, this subject came to the fore when a perfectly painted skin with an academically trained technique ceased to be sufficient for what I wanted the paintings to convey. At the end of the day, the paintings found themselves rejecting clean conclusions with a perfect finish. In a certain sense, the paintings started to work when I started looking for forms that emphasized the voluminous physical presence of a body and surfaces that revealed a sense of the material aspect of their subject. This conceptual turn meant that I had to sometimes accept what was right for the

paintings, which was not to make them more beautiful. This meant, in some cases giving less importance to the articulation of an anatomy and settling for an awkwardness which maybe did not work as a perfectly painted figure but said something more profound about the body we inhabit. The painter Amy Sillman describes awkwardness as an urge that pushes one towards clumsiness, strangeness and brutality. She defines it as a state of being which is emotional and philosophical; a thing that is funny, uncontrollable, and opposite of the great, the noble and the cynical. Sillman continues to observe that awkwardness “...is both positive and negative, with its own dialect and dialectic” (Sillman).

Regarding the use of color and blatancy of brushstrokes, an impure surface became crucial for the content of the paintings since the paintings were about the flesh as a metaphor for the inner world of the subject. Flesh is at the center of the diptych of paintings *Neck* (Fig. 4), which are in a sense anti-portraits. There is no way to say if these two views belong to the same body because their physiognomy is cut off from our point of view, we see a fraction of these figures from behind. Imbued with a quiet intensity, the psychological weight of the paintings are increased by the fact that we seem to be at a very close distance to these bodies yet they reveal so little of themselves in terms of who they might be. Anything that we derive from these paintings, we have to derive from the condition of the flesh. Concerned with depicting the actuality of flesh rather than aiming at a natural representation of it, the blatant brushstrokes get more dense and the paint gets uglier in the certain parts that are the areas of focus of these paintings. These brush marks embody the fleshy quality, but also hint at a body where the densities are rearrangeable according to the change in interior bodily sensations. Bridging inside and outside, the diptych shows skin as the outer limit of the body, a fragile surface that makes the internal workings of the body visible. These are paintings of a felt body, rather than what is available to the gaze of strangers or what is seen at a distance.



Fig.4

Neck (Diptych), oil on canvas, 60x90 (each)

At this point I have to mention that for me trying to paint the body and making a figure painting are completely different. The body in my paintings is not the body that is at a safe distance, that we see in fashion ads or the body we hope to carry when we have to ideally present ourselves to the world. It is rather the body as the fallible, transient physical shell we inhabit. The former is the figure, the latter is the body. Tony Godfrey, in his book *Painting Today*, distinguishes between the figure and the body as the former being an idealized version we usually see in classical painting that is outside ourselves, one that does not really reflect our physical condition and the latter relating more to our bodily experience. He adds; “Figures do not sweat or fart; bodies do” (Godfrey 180). And what pushed me to depict the body in this manner and shaped my approach to these series of paintings, which would become *As Adam, Early in the Morning* is my encounters with the reality of the body, experienced through a painting, in a conversation or in an unexpected moment. Those became the most important sources for the paintings.

1- The young, anxious bather of Cézanne (Fig. 5) and his clumsy body carrying all the strange feelings triggered by adolescence, uncomfortable in his anatomy: Does this awkward body belong to me? This figure standing there looking down; pensive, confused but so alive. A body with no heroic promises. Standing in front of it, I realize I recognize the feeling. It feels somehow reassuring to see it captured in a painting. Maybe I am projecting, but then, isn't that what a good painting should provide? I feel like I am witnessing his experience being in this particular body.

2- Bonnard's last self-portrait (Fig. 6). An aging, frail body in front of a mirror, presumably in an introspective moment. When I first encountered this painting, I felt that it was anything but a perceptual representation. Telling the biggest story of all through a single painted image, the story of being alive without the need for too much description. A bitter painting that says without sugarcoating: there is nothing beyond the death of the body.

3- I come across a video recording of an old talk show dated 1995. One of the guests is the popular Turkish diva Sezen Aksu. At one point with the intention of surprising her she is shown her first music videos, shot when she was presumably in her early twenties. To other guests and the audience it probably feels like a sweet nostalgia: "Look how young and lovely she was...". While watching the videos at one point her expression becomes wistful and she takes a deep breath. For a brief second, time stops and suddenly it feels very intimate. Those five seconds feel like a requiem for something not entirely alive anymore. I am touched in a way I don't expect to be watching a mid 90's talk show which is supposed to be mildly entertaining at its best. Later that week I visit my grandmother. My grandmother who can barely walk now, tells me inside she is still running. I do not see it as a tragedy, nor do I pity her. She is ninety four years old and has lived a long life, and a physical decline will happen to each of us if we are lucky to live as long. It just occurs to me that the body is a nonrenewable shell and she is the same person inside from forty years ago.

4- I'm on a holiday by the seaside. I see an older woman sitting on the beach, facing the sea. She sits there alone for a long time, watching people swimming, playing with the sand time to time. I never see her face but I imagine her inner monologues, trying to guess what kind of life she had. All I see is the vastness of her back like a landscape, the sheer

volume of her body and the imprints of age on her skin. It feels to me like a moment of intense experience of another person's psychological presence through her physicality: a large mass of aging flesh on the sand. An event in itself, even though nothing happens. It is nothing and everything; melancholic, joyful and miserable at the same time. One of those miraculous moments of “I want to paint this so I never forget” occurs. And after that, a never ending search for a form and surface that will crystallize all these emotions about being alive. The painting *Beach* marks the start of the series *As Adam, Early in the Morning*.

In my experience, coming across these kind of paintings, these situations that were really non-events but carried a lot of pathos, shaped my approach to narrative. I wanted to make paintings that leave enough space for reflection, engage the viewer enough to create their own narrative and extend themselves into the paintings. Otherwise, the things are just things, banal and pointless.

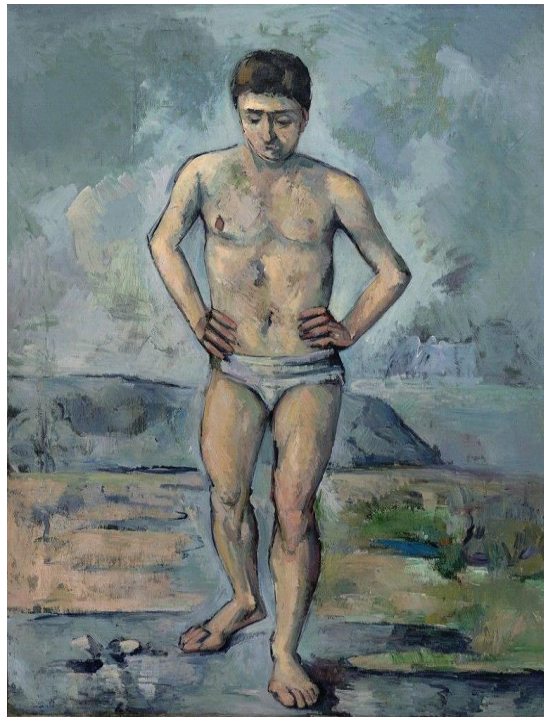


Fig. 5

Paul Cézanne, *The Bather*, 1885

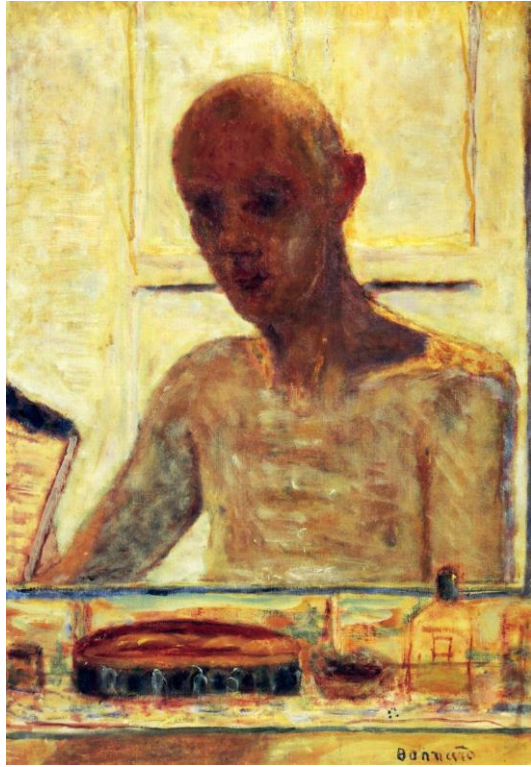


Fig. 6

Pierre Bonnard, *Self Portrait in a Shaving Mirror*, 1935

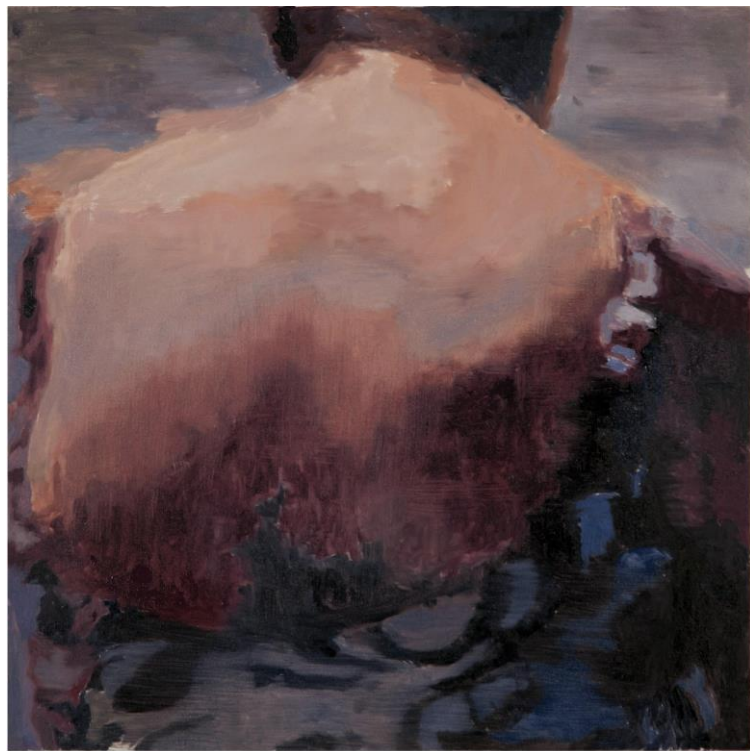


Fig. 7

Beach, oil on canvas, 75 x 75 cm

3. DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE HUMAN BODY IN THE HISTORY OF PAINTING

In this chapter, I will be discussing different approaches to the subject of body in painting by focusing on the artists Lucian Freud and Maria Lassnig with quotes by Francis Bacon whose approach to narrative will be explored in the next chapter. All of the painters deal with the body in their own unique ways, but they share the common motivation of pursuing a reality that goes beyond naturalism. While Lucian Freud's paintings rely on a careful observation of the body, understanding it exclusively from outside, the paintings of Maria Lassnig and Francis Bacon focus on the way we experience our bodies internally and attempt to render these abstract feelings in a tangible manner. Furthermore, all of these artists refute the presentation of an ideal body deprived of humanity. Through their works, these artists seek for a certain physical presence with discomfiting implications of mortality. Partly, it is this clash of carnality against the presentable body that gives their paintings the power to mirror our most private conditions, providing a disquieting experience for the viewer.

Lucian Freud is among the most celebrated painters of the twentieth century and the human body is a subject he has committed himself to throughout his entire career. He has been quoted saying that he wanted the paint to work for him as flesh does (qtd. in Godfrey 170). He does indeed succeed in forming a close relationship between paint and flesh by moving the thick impasto paint around in various ways to create rough and smooth textures, capturing a sense of the irregular quality of flesh while emphasizing its tactility. What stands out in his paintings is the clay-like quality of flesh; mouldable by time and gravity, thus vulnerable. In his work, the meticulous observation of the other plays an

important role. Whether he is depicting the pliancy of stretched skin or rendering the downward pull of gravity through a sagging flesh hanging loose, Freud's paintings offer a psychological penetration of his model through an intense examination of his/her body. In some of his paintings this psychological weight is particularly strong; for example in *Naked Portrait* the sentiment of the subject feels animal-like on a dissecting table, and is even strengthened by the jarring, unnatural lighting (Tate)



Fig.8
Lucian Freud, *Naked Portrait*, 1972-3

With his painting *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*, Freud challenges the Western tradition of the reclining female nude. In contrast to the common examples of this tradition, Freud's portrayal of the real body is intimate and revealing, showing no interest in idealised conventions. He was rather interested in the fleshiness and heaviness of the sitter's body and the possibilities this could present for experimentations in form and paint application. Freud was, “very aware of all kinds of spectacular things to do with her size, like amazing craters and things one's never seen before, my eye was naturally drawn to the sores and chafes made by weight and heat. [...] It's flesh without muscle and it has developed a different kind of texture through being such a weight-bearing thing” (qtd. in Haag 218). There is a dichotomy between the intimidating, voluminous physical presence of the figure in the painting and her vulnerable state in sleeping. Immediately, you feel the fleshiness and the mass of this bulky, bulging body. Contradicting this, the figure is in a

defenseless and tender moment, asleep and unaware of the artist's and the viewer's gaze. The manner in which Freud renders the flesh gives it a damaged quality, there are subtle but frequent changes in his limited palette depicting the endless hues of flesh and the variety of brushstrokes corresponding with the tactile quality of the flesh making us understand its disorganized structure with sags, blemishes, and moments of peculiar beauty. The strength of this painting lies in Freud's attention to detail. There exists an almost heightened awareness of the body. One starts noticing every little detail like the greyish blue discoloured veins in her right breast that is so amplified in depiction that almost seems like a wound. All of these details emphasize the humanity of the body in the painting, going against the grain of Western tradition.



Fig. 9

Lucian Freud, *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*, 1995

Freud's other reclining bodies also harken back to the traditional nude, but he still employs a different approach in his treatment of the body than the other examples of the genre. He abandons the ideal body and its pretensions to fleeting mortality of a real body in a radical fashion. It can be argued that this is why his paintings sometimes offer an unsettling encounter for the viewer. Art critic Robert Hughes argues that while Freud's paintings can be related to the great tradition of European painting, they are also in conversation with a crisis in that tradition which is the crisis of the ideal nude. Hughes discusses that whatever can be said about the graphic quality of Freud's paintings were previously said by the art critics for the late pastel drawings of Degas around 1890 (19). These pastels,

submitted to the last Impressionist exhibition, were criticized at the time for the clumsy poses of the figure and an almost bestial depiction of the human body. Degas himself commented: “I show them deprived of their airs and their graces, reduced to the level of animals cleaning themselves”(qtd. in Hughes 19). These late pastels of Degas was also a source of inspiration for the painter Francis Bacon. In his famous interviews with David Sylvester, Bacon talks about his affection for the painting *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself*: “...you will find at the very top of the spine that the spine almost comes out of the skin altogether. And it gives such a grip and twist that you’re more conscious of the vulnerability of the rest of the body than if he had drawn the spine naturally up to the neck. He breaks it so that this thing seems to protrude from the flesh. Now, whether Degas did this purposely or not, it makes it a much greater picture, because you’re suddenly conscious of the spine as well as the flesh, which he usually just painted covering the bones” (Sylvester 53). Looking at these artists and their inspirations from the past it becomes clearer what they pursue and want to put emphasis on in their painting, which is to go beyond depicting the body, and create a certain feeling regarding being in the physical body, one that is shared by humans at large.

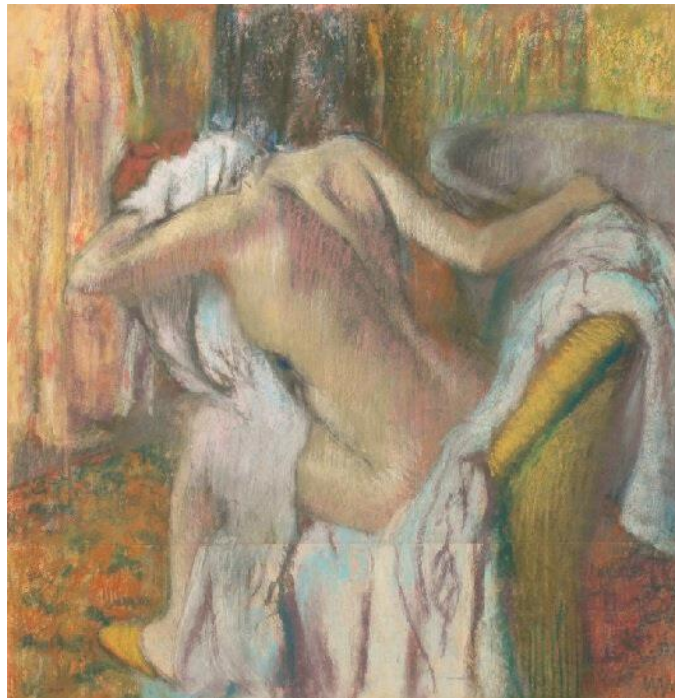


Fig. 10

Edgar Degas, *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself*, 1892

Apart from the relationship Freud forms between paint and the materiality of flesh, another important feature of his work is the absence of narrative. In a certain sense, this absence allows the paintings to become plains in which the facts that manage human existence become the only things in focus. Hughes argues that; “one is made poignantly aware of Freud’s desire to show how the strictest formal expressiveness of the body comes from the body’s own forms and not from the narratives it can be made to enact” (24). In the way he portrays the body, he intends to emphasize its humanity, “...with the utmost plastic force, the advantages of scrutiny over theatre, without for a moment falling into the formalist trap of regarding the body as a mere inventory of potentially abstract forms, or the idealist one of mistaking it for a cultural construct without pores or orifices, without the sag and sheen of flesh- without in sum, the humanity that Freud’s art so alertly hunts from the body’s cover” (Hughes 24).

Another artist who works primarily with the subject of the body but in a completely different manner is Maria Lassnig, whose paintings are less about the flesh and more about how she experiences her body through its sensations. By the end of 1950s, her practice turned towards a more expressive way of painting which was very much linked to her own body. She developed her idiosyncratic language of painting which combines common figuration with a sensual introspection where she perceives the body from its inside, creating an ambivalence between figuration and abstraction. Self-portraiture was a deep rooted fixation for her. She alluded to her early drawings as ‘introspective experiences’, and afterwards, coined the term ‘body awareness’ to describe her works in which she reveals her bodily sensations through painting (Who Is Maria Lassnig?). She explains that her aim is to paint everything as directly as possible, declaring that she needs “... the real body, real air” (Hughes). In a journal entry from 1980 she wrote: “I feel the points where my backside presses into the divan, my stomach because it is filled like a sack, my head is sunken into the cardboard box of the shoulder blades, the skull is open at the back, in my face I feel the nasal opening, as big as a pig’s, and around it I feel the skin burning. I’ll paint it red” (Inside Out). Perhaps this explains why her paintings are so raw and closer to the experience of having a body compared to her much celebrated male counterparts; Bacon and Freud. In comparison to them, it can be argued that Lassnig goes further in painting the reality of the body, refuting the tendency to comprehend the body exclusively from outside. While Lucian Freud attentively observed and perfectly depicted how the body looked with all its blobs, sags, imperfections right down to the

pore, Lassnig captures the intensity of how it feels to be inside the shell of the body. For her a true representation is not a naturalistic one that can be observed perceptually, but rather is the reality of feelings and sensations. So, how the body really looks is not her main concern and that is visible in the way she paints. *Krankenhaus*, a painting she did later in her career, is a powerful example showing her intention to depict the perception of bodily feelings from within. The painting is an image of weakness and shows mortality as the principal limit of the body as frail, aging bodies are seen aching with pain in a hospital-like environment. Lassnig presents through these exposed bodies the physical decline and sickness that comes with older age and in a very abstract way amplifies how age bends the bodies out of shape. Her body shapes are unnaturally mutilated and tinted, however oddly lively and recognizable: maybe we perceive their humanity by the recognition of their obvious humiliation (“How embarrassing!” Tate). The importance of these unnatural forms lies in the fact that they amplify a condition in a way that is only possible through painting. In looking at this painting, one knows that these bodies are not that deformed or skeletal, that they do not exactly carry those tones of sickly bright pink and greenish yellow. Her manner points out to an exaggeration through form and color to convey this sense of frustration with how the body turns against itself as it ages. In a certain sense, this formal exaggeration and deformation is a trick to get one to see the reality these bodies occupy and it helps to make the emotional experience of them more relatable for the viewer. Describing her paintings in an interview Lassnig says: “they really knock the truth on the head with a hammer. That’s what makes them drastic.”(Inside Out)



Fig. 11

Maria Lassnig, *Krankenhaus*, 2005

Krankenhaus is an unnatural, violent description of a fact that governs the entire human existence: these are bodies slowly dissolving through time. This is both an abstract sentiment and a statement that can be taken literally and it corresponds with the painting's position between abstraction and figuration. This simply is not the case with Lucian Freud, he "knocks the truth on the head with a hammer" in a different way. His paintings are an intensification of reality, the flesh is fleshier and the bodies are heavier to get the viewers to see and understand a certain physicality. Again, this particular sentiment goes back to the following remarks made by Degas in his time: "One gives the idea of truth by means of the false" and "Art" is the same word as "artifice", that is to say, something deceitful. It must succeed in giving the impression of nature by false means" (Francis Bacon: Back to Degas). All of the artists examined in this chapter, amplified this sentiment to different degrees in their paintings in their own unique ways, capturing a sense of visceral reality.

The setting of Maria Lassnig's paintings is hardly defined, it can almost be defined as a non-space. In the painting exemplified above, we are led by the title to think that this is a

hospital. This is the case for the majority of her paintings. The painter Celia Hempton comments on Lassnig's uncompromising flat backgrounds, discussing that the reason for the lack of definition in the background lies in the fact that it is not necessary for Lassnig to create a world for her figures to exist in when her focus is on the internal processes of the body (Artists' Artists: Celia Hempton). Lassnig employs a certain type of economy in the way she uses paint, and does not make any marks for decoration or stylistical purposes, for the painting to look better, to fulfill someone else's particular taste or for the sake of accepted conventions in the history of painting. She has a focus, a certain feeling and sense she wants to convey and does it in a very raw and direct way. According to her the purpose of a background is to create a mood and atmosphere in a painting and she declares she does not need any of those (Inside Out). Francis Bacon has a similar approach in isolating the figure from its surroundings; combining a *malerisch* handling of the body with a brightly colored flat background.

Maria Lassnig's paintings divert from the ideal body and present a different reality of the body by rendering emotions which are abstract, private, ephemeral and not easily observable due to their intangibility. What Maria Lassnig does is to emphasize that her reality is one that is rooted in emotions, and she makes them tangible through paint. For this reason, her paintings are both very powerful and confrontational, and also vulnerable for the embarrassing presence of the body that plays a big role in her paintings. For most of us, shame is an undesirable introduction of one's self to the world, we hope for a more decent representation. However, the artist Michael Craig-Martin asserts that an artist should make himself/herself vulnerable '...in exactly the ways most people spend their lives trying to avoid' ('How embarrassing!' Tate).

Lassnig was generally underrepresented for most of her career as a painter. Her unsettling self-portraits made galleries and curators anxious. Her portfolios were returned to with harsh comments about the "strange", "morbid" and "sick" nature of her work. Granted; they are not exactly "pretty" pictures to look at, in a conventional sense they can be regarded as unappealing. However, this way her paintings point to an immediacy which serves the content that is actually about all those states of strange, morbid, sick, powerful, strong and vulnerable situations of living as a physical being. In a way, by not making the painting prettier, she accesses something very raw and evokes a more substantial thing about human nature. Writing on Maria Lassnig's work, the painter Celia Hempton

discusses this and points out how this way of painting corresponds with the content of the work: ‘In many of Maria Lassnig’s paintings, there is a desire, I think, to express human inadequacy, both intellectual and physical. States of being are schizophrenically polarized – from self-loathing to comical, irreverent and tender acceptance, and the confrontational demand on the viewer to “accept this”, “accept me” (Artists' Artists: Celia Hempton). The reality is often-times embarrassing and so is the body; these paintings show a very tight relationship between their refusal of grandiose ideas about how a painting should be painted and this very mundane feeling of inadequacy and vulnerability. Strange bodies should be painted in a strange way. Sick bodies should be painted in a sickly way, being consistent with their content. A painter’s craft should never override the content and Maria Lassnig’ brave approach makes her one of the most important painters who dealt with the physical presence of the human body.

4. ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A FIXED NARRATIVE IN PAINTING

4.1. Painting Beyond a Specific Narrative

What I want the paintings to do is to suggest certain emotions without ever locking them into a narrative that assigns them a fixed meaning. We can never know for sure if the laid out body in some of the paintings is sleeping or if it is dead. But the paintings epitomize an existential condition that conveys an experience of these bodies' physical and psychological presence. Even though the paintings seem to depict unremarkable moments, they have the distinct quality of evoking a sense of pathos. They are solemn windows into ordinary situations. Bathers sit by the sea, sleepers lie down in beds, nothing seems to happen. The bodies seem to be waiting for something. I want the bodies to look as if they cannot be somewhere else and that they are fixed forever in that condition. The event in the paintings seems to be internal. The still body is subjected to invisible forces that act on it. It is this refusal of a specific narrative that gives the viewers space to respond to the works with a degree of reflection.

Discussing the work of Marlene Dumas, Ilaria Bonacossa argues that, “the ambiguity of her paintings is ultimately an ethical act that obliges viewers to acknowledge their role in assigning meaning to faces, bodies, groups and figures” (164). In her interview with Barbara Bloom, painter Marlene Dumas complains about the fact that since she is a figurative painter, people always ask for more information about the figures than what is provided in the painting as a whole: “I mentioned earlier this one work in which you see a child from the back; you can't see what he's doing, you can't see anything. And so when someone asked me what the sex of the child was, I said I didn't know. This was of course

not only a wrong but an inappropriate question, because it's a painting where you do not have that information. If I were interested in that type of information I would have included it" (28). Ultimately painting is not a time-based medium in which you can experience the work unfold over time. However; painting creates a space for the viewer to decipher a situation rather than a story and in the case of Marlene Dumas, she creates a psychological space that focuses on the imminent realities that affect human condition. Marlene Dumas describes her work as suggestive rather than narrative, in the way that her paintings suggest a variety of narratives without really telling the viewer what is actually going on: "Someone said that it feels as if something has happened, in the sense of an after- event, or alternatively that something's going to happen but you don't know yet what it is." Gilles Deleuze, in his book titled "Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation" has similar things to say about the paintings of Francis Bacon: "Within the round area, the Figure is sitting on the chair, lying on the bed, and sometimes it even seems to be waiting for what is about to happen. But what is happening, or is about to happen, or has already happened, is not a spectacle or a representation" (12). It could be argued that painting is not an ideal medium for storytelling, because ultimately it defies a fixed narrative. Rather than imposing a closed narrative, this kind of work offers a dialogue, inviting the viewer to spend time and have a psychological conversation with it.

Deleuze points out that, Francis Bacon's admiration for Cézanne's painting *The Bathers* comes from the fact that even though there are several Figures on the canvas, they are not there to illustrate or narrate a story (70). Deleuze comments on Bacon's painting from 1963, *Man and Child* (Fig. 8), referring to art critic John Russell's analysis of it. He mentions that Russell presents several hypotheses for possible narrations of this painting: "Is the girl standing in disgrace before her unforgiving father? Is she the man's jailor, outfacing him with folded arms as he writhes in his chair and looks the other way? Is she an abnormality, a physical freak returned to haunt him, or is he a man set on high, a judge who shall shortly pass sentence?". According to Deleuze since painting itself is beyond all narration, one could certainly argue that the painting is the possibility of all these narrations simultaneously (70).

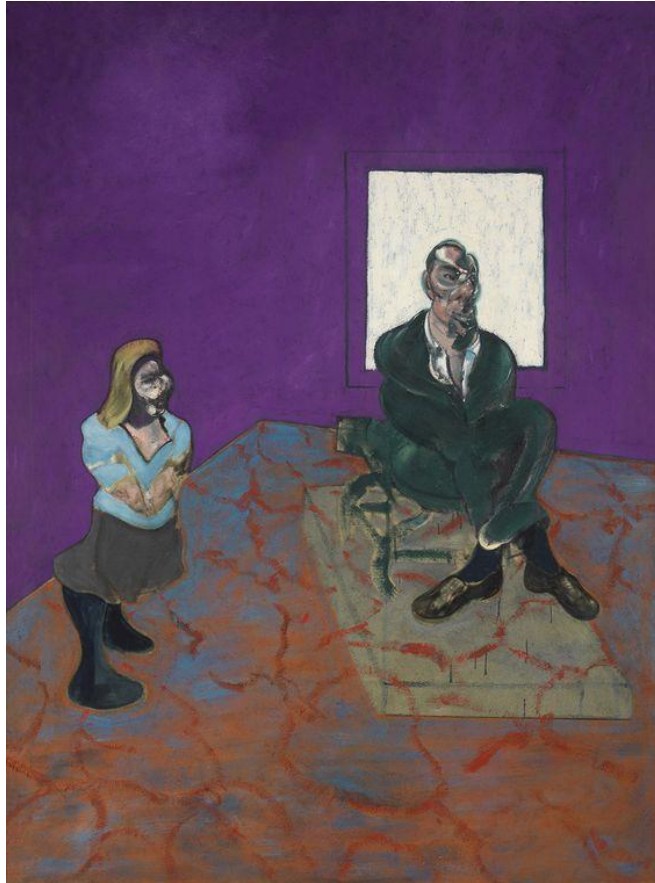


Fig.12

Francis Bacon, *Man and Child*, 1963

4.2. Narrative Dissolves into a Bodily Presence

The exhibition *As Adam, Early in the Morning* is titled after Walt Whitman's poem of the same name. The poem is a celebration of the physical body with all its awkwardness through the narrative of a pure Figure. Just having awakened after a refreshing sleep, the poet feels as if he is Adam from the Garden of Eden. The name Adam is used in the Book of Genesis in reference to the first man that God has created and is also used commonly to talk about "a human" (in the prototypical sense). Content with his own body and existence, the subject is somebody who shares the common experience of bodily existence with the readers of the poem. Adam's body, which the reader cannot see but is encouraged to touch is in this case representative of all bodies. However even though this seems to be a common body, the poet assumes it might ignite aversion in the reader. He requests for an acceptance as he is and invites the reader to touch him without fear:

“Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass / Be not afraid of my body.” Since the confrontation with Adam is like a confrontation with ourselves, the poem is also about coming to terms with our own bodies as spaces of existence and destruction.

What, then, takes the place of narrative in this group of paintings? The dissolution of a fixed story brings to fore a pure, anonymous figure: a fragile self. What the paintings emphasize is the physicality and the vulnerability of this figure without telling the viewer who the subject is. In viewing, it becomes an elder, an adolescent, a mother, us. In most cases the gender of the figure is ambiguous, the paintings are primarily about the body as a common denominator in the experience of everyone. According to Freud, one of the main reasons for our suffering is the unembellished fact that our frail bodies are transient structures, “doomed to decay and dissolution”. Freud goes on to say that suffering also threatens us from another side: the external world that can “unleash overwhelming, implacable, destructive forces against us” (17). This proposition is about the body as a material thing and is applicable for anybody and everybody. Our bodies have mass, they are unarmed to the effects of gravity and will be vandalized by time. The paintings in *As Adam, Early in the Morning* enact this situation through these anonymous figures. The narrative in these paintings is replaced by an Adamic figure portraying this situation, starting a conversation.

According to Deleuze, Proust shares a similar approach with Francis Bacon in his writings. Both of them refuse the figurative that tends to merely illustrate and the abstract that is too voluntary in their own realms. Deleuze argues that Proust “...was striving for, what he wanted to bring to light, was a kind of figure, torn away from figuration and stripped of every figurative function.: a figure-in-itself...”(67). This figure serves as a means to write about the facts of the human condition. For instance, the painting *Nightgown* (Fig. 9) is really a painting about the invisible force of gravity. The focus is on the mass of the body, a body that is defenseless to this natural force that pulls it down. The painting is beyond narration; it rather presents a situation, embodies a matter-of-fact.

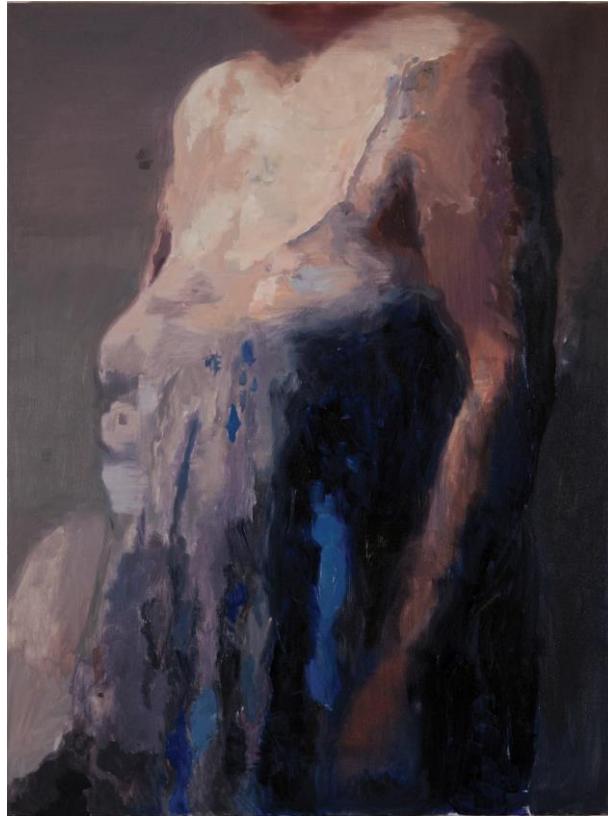


Fig. 13

Nightgown, oil on canvas, 75 x 100 cm

In many ways, this sense of narrative ambiguity is most evident in the painting "Mouth". At the center of this work is the close-up of an open mouth . An area I was interested in visually were medical archive photographs that document symptoms of certain illnesses. I was drawn to these fragments of images as anti-portraits in the sense that the physiognomy of the figure was no longer perceptible and the body itself came to the fore as a separate entity. This painting is an example of a group of works that employ a fetishistic gaze, showing only a fragment of the whole while exaggerating the importance of that part. The fragmented, magnified gaze is there but with an anti-aesthetic quality. What we see is an open mouth that is isolated from the face and it looks like a big bruise; subverting the ideal notions of beauty, blotchy in paint application. In the surrealist journal "Documents", Bataille accompanies a photograph of a mouth with the following text: "On important occasions human life is still bestially concentrated in the mouth: fury makes men grind their teeth, terror and atrocious suffering transform the mouth into the organ of tearing screams... As if explosive impulses were to spurt directly out of the body through the mouth in the form of screams (qtd. in Hammer and Arnaud 54)". We do not

see the rest of the face and we cannot hear the sounds the mouth makes so what we have in front of us is an ambiguous fraction. One viewer might interpret this as a cry or scream, the other one might see an outburst of laughter. It might be the result of a spasm, it might be the result of pleasure.



Fig. 14

Mouth, oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm

5. CONCLUSION

The paintings in *As Adam, Early in the Morning* are the culmination of my curiosity about the body as an organism and also of my keen interest in people; the signs of youth and aging, life and death on their body. My main investigation was how I could use the paint synonymous to the entropic quality of flesh. To convey this, paintings defer a straightforward narrative but rather emphasize the condition of the flesh and the physical presence of the portrayed bodies. Since the focus in the paintings is the vulnerability of the body and its transient structure, formal decisions were made accordingly. The paintings refute purity with their dirty pinks and grays that underline the materiality of the body and the unknowing condition of flesh. An anatomical articulation is not prioritized because the awkward quality of the forms brings the paintings closer to the content. I focus on conveying an experience of another person's physical presence.

The paintings carry a psychological weight because these elusive, uneasy bodies are still, fragile and they never meet our gaze which underline their otherness. However, instead of reading them as hermetic paintings one should consider them as mirrors to our material condition and respond to the work with a degree of reflection. Even though these paintings belong to a private world of their own, they do not shut the viewer out. The feelings revealed by them are both personal and universal. What comes to the fore in the paintings is the physicality and the vulnerability of the depicted person without telling the viewer who that person is. It becomes every person. It becomes an elder, an adolescent, a mother, us. What I hope to accomplish in these paintings is to tell another kind of story and to portray a fragment of humanity by using the body as a point of departure. Hopefully, the viewers identify with these paintings that aim to represent all of us.

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