‘Subversive Pleasures’

Drawing on Myth, Mischief and Mayhem

by

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Abstract

This paper is written in four sections. Julie Rrap ‘The use of the self is almost like a ruse.’; Paula Rego ‘under the polished surface’; Angela Carter ‘No limits to useful stories for women.’; and Studio Practice ‘The Wild Domestic Scenes.’ In an attempt to clarify my own experience in this creative and theoretical research I will investigate the work of Rrap, Rego and Carter as they consider notions of a feminine identity. I intend to explore these artist’s examination of social and cultural boundaries and how they expose both their arbitrariness and their reversibility, through visual and written representation.

My research followed how these artists questioned the subjectivity of a feminine identity from different perspectives. Although they work in diverse practices such as Julie Rrap (b.1950 Australia) visual artist - multimedia; Paula Rego (b.1935 Portugal, Lives and works in London) visual artist - painting, drawing, etching; and Angela Carter (b.1940-92 Britain) writer – fictional tales; further study revealed connections between their objectives, strategies and theoretical concerns. Rrap consistently examines the relationship between artist, artwork and viewer, frequently using her own body as a subject and a stratagem. Her works exhibit an ironic humour and identity as an unstable performance. In Disclosures: A Photographic Construct 1982 Fig. 3 the photographic process and repeated images of the body alert the viewer to the gap between representation and reality.¹ In A-R-MOUR 2000 Fig. 5-8 the artist

¹ Lynn, V. Julie Rrap: Body Double, Annandale, Australia, 2007, 54
takes on various guises transforming and metamorphosing that results in destabilizing the feminine stereotype.

Rego works in the domain of the family and the domestic exploring complex human situations and conditions. In *The Soldiers Daughter* 1987 Fig. 9 the figures are fixed in the experience of domestic life, however, in Rego’s composition the central female protagonist emerges to challenge the interpretation of the situation represented. This visual narrative references the ordinary and the domestic creating conflict with the extraordinary situation presented. The series of works *Untitled* 1998-99 Fig. 10-15 openly deals with abortion an uncommon subject in painting. The female figures in the abortion series are represented in strong physical poses with determined facial expressions that do not suggest either hopelessness or despair. This series in fact makes reference to the political through the domestic. Rego’s artworks combine the real and the imaginary into pictures that confuse the boundaries of a fixed reality.

Angela Carter writes creative stories for adults through appropriation and adaptation of fairy tales. In culture fairy tales often function to enlighten and defend prescriptions placed on women in particular. In Carter’s stories cultural restrictions are wholeheartedly rejected as she focuses on female perspectives and features female protagonists in innovative and subversive retellings. *The Courtship of Mr. Lyon* one of Carter’s revisions of Beauty and
the Beast, Beauty is unable to escape patriarchy completely however Beauty refuses traditional characterization and limitations by making her own choices.

Rrap, Rego and Carter explore the terrain of gender, sexuality, domesticity and the everyday. The social and cultural relevance of their artworks engage audiences and most importantly stimulate discussion.

Investigation into these artists’ concepts, strategies and artworks has clarified my work in experience and practice. The series of paintings for my exhibition work has been named *The Wild Domestic Scenes* Fig. 18-21 & 25-27 and are representations of the female figure that combine a performative element and narrative. In each painting I developed a central female character within a domestic space. Experimentation with composition, line, colour and form enabled distortion and selective exaggeration to take shape in the pictures. The images are rendered in a realistic manner together with some aspects that are illogical and humorous. The descriptive compositional process blended with the real and the fictitious activates an ambiguous visual narrative. The research into the selected artists and my painting practice has allowed for a clearer understanding of my own work and a deeper appreciation of a broader contemporary context.
Introduction

A feeling of solidarity: the ideological self-realization that a number of women - without being part of a group, working in different media and in different countries, addressing disparate concerns – are nevertheless able to speak surprisingly clearly of our collective agenda. Even if we have never met, we have become confident of the shared aims of our collective, and we have come to realize how one woman’s work or words leads into or enables the next woman to work or speak.

A sense of loss: The realization that women’s history is faintly written and must be continually written and must be continually re-inscribed before it is forgotten again. And then of course, as Gertude Stein knew, one always needs to repeat because, ‘Every time it is so, it is so, it is so.’

Jo Anna Isaak wrote these words in her ‘Laughter Ten Years After’ exhibition catalogue of 1995 and communicates a point of view relevant to today. The key findings of modern linguistics and psychoanalysis in academic discourse have dramatically influenced the understanding of how all signifying systems function. The impact for women has been an increased recognition of the importance in these recent developments in how meaning is generated and structured in culture. As Jo Anna Isaak emphasizes ‘the death of the author levelled the playing field for women.’

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3 ibid, 271
'Subversive Pleasures’ Drawing on Myth, Mischief and Mayhem will investigate the work of a number artists who challenge notions of a feminine identity and who utilize strategies to disrupt and question the status quo. These artists develop subjects and themes fearlessly and determinedly as they attack or reject cherished beliefs, values and customs.

This paper will examine the diverse practices of Julie Rrap, Paula Rego and Angela Carter as their work intersects and overlaps in representations of femininity and identity. The intention is to highlight relevant contemporary material which interconnects with the development of my own concerns and imagery.

These artists authenticate the feminist creed that the ‘personal is the political’ as they entangle the public and the private, the historical and the individual in their artworks. Paula Rego’s imagery combines the ordinary and the dramatic into pictures that distort the boundaries that identify a fixed reality. Julie Rrap’s images engender an identity that can only be interpreted as an ‘unstable sequence of performative acts.’ Angela Carter’s (writer) fairy tale ‘revisions open up ironic space that draws the reader’s attention to the self-conscious articulation of femininity.’ These artists could be described as daring, cheeky or mocking employing wit, humour and narrative as subversive elements in their practices.

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4 Lynn, V. Julie Rrap: Body Double, Annandale, Australia, 2007, 63
Julie Rrap (b.1950) is an Australian artist working in multimedia. Since the early 1980s Rrap has consistently explored the relationship between artist, artwork and viewer. Rrap frequently uses her own body as a subject in artworks or as in *Disclosures: A Photographic Construct* 1982 Fig. 3,4 a found object. The performing body is what interests her as she creates postures and poses focused more on private and disguised actions. In the work *Disclosure: A Photographic Construct* the viewer is surrounded by numerous images of the artist performing the part of photographer, viewer and model all simultaneously. The work results in fracturing and collapsing together observer and the observed. Rrap uses wit and an enticing sense of humour in an investigation of serious conceptual concerns.

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Fig. 1 Julie Rrap, *Thief’s Journal: Philosophies of the Boudoir (Dangerous Relationships)* 1985-86. (Detail) panels 1,2,3 of a six-panelled wooden screen, photographic emulsion on canvas, acrylic and oil paint, each panel 200 x 100cm.

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6 Lynn, V. Julie Rrap: Body Double, Annandale, Australia, 2007, 51
7 ibid, p 6
In the work *Thief’s Journal: Philosophies of the Boudoir (Dangerous Relationships)* 1985-1986, **Fig. 1.** Rrap narrates the story of a crime in a series of six wooden screens. Each panel combines elements from pictures by either Magritte or Delvaux. The pictures are set in a domestic space which is then drawn in white paint on a black background. Next she performs in front of this backdrop where real objects are included, such as a wig, cloth and furniture, creating a combination of the real and a deception. These performances formulate a tableau vivant that is subsequently photographed.\(^8\) Rrap explains that *Thief’s Journal* is not only appropriation rather the emphasis is on a ‘more political-feminist relationship to history… The take on history is a kind of humorous thing I do, a piece of mischief.’\(^9\) Also from a feminist perspective is her use of photography a media notorious in the objectification of women. For Rrap the camera is a tool with which to deconstruct the subject and undermine the hand-made practices of painting.

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\(^8\) Lynn, V. Julie Rrap: Body Double, Annandale, Australia, 2007, 24
\(^9\) ibid, 24
Paula Rego works in traditional mediums of painting and drawing in an exploration into human relationships that contain a psychological edge. The picture titled *The Policeman’s Daughter* 1987 Fig. 2 places it directly in the domain of the family and the domestic. A young woman sits with her arm rammed in her father’s boot as she gives it a polish. Rego dresses her in symbolic white, however the representation of innocence is unconvincing, especially with the inclusion of a black cat. In fairy tales black cats are associated with witches and devils or in superstition an omen of bad luck. In this scene of a dutiful daughter, domestic order and black cat Rego’s story promptly disintegrates into criminal behaviour. Rego’s inspiration for her pictures often comes from fairy tales, religious stories, the theatre, wherever there is a story to tell. However these narratives only serve as potential for her

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own fiction as the artist rewrites the story visually. In her stories the female protagonist inevitably surfaces in order to challenge the reading of the situation in which they are depicted. Rego’s artworks combine imagination and theatricality into narrative pictures whose themes are grounded in the ordinary and the everyday.

Angela Carter discusses imagination, ‘I do think that the body comes first, not consciousness….I often shatter pure and evocative imagery with the crude. But remember there are a materiality to symbols and a materiality to imaginative life which should be taken quite seriously.’11 The fairy tale for Carter presents the opportunity for reiteration and variation. They provide a diversity of subject matter in which she examines female characteristics, situations and conditions. In Carter’s ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ one of her revisions of Beauty and the Beast she distorts and reverses the characterisation of the central figures through satire, modification and enhancement in retelling the story. In her stories she represents female subjectivity as active rather than predetermined and submissive. Indeed Beauty successfully tames, domesticates and seduces Mr. Lyon. Carter’s imagery is thus formed through her symbols and metaphors combined with exaggerated descriptions and embellished language.

Rrap, Rego and Carter rather than overlooking the prescriptions placed on women, bring them into play in a subversive manner rendering them null and void and therefore making up their own rules in the process.

In creating figurative pictures in oil paint on a two-dimensional surface I attempt to represent women in invented narratives in a playful and humorous manner. In these paintings I undertake an exploration in the territory of gender, domesticity and everyday life. The drawing and painting processes make it possible for me to experiment with the female form, composition and narrative. The narrative aspect of the pictures is formed by the combination of the female figure, the background as domestic space and the objects within it.

Representation of the figure begins with the model as I direct poses and facial expressions that are subsequently recorded with the use of a camera. These images of the model become a base for sketches and drawings in developing the body’s position in space together with consideration of foreshortening and distortions. Describing the figure through the medium of paint allows me to create an impression of realism. Concentration on the design and appearance of clothing, hair and shoes contribute to an image of proper, ladylike attire and domesticity. The background adds to the narrative element of the painting particularly the development of the floors into patterns and colours that add further to distortion and warping of space. In addition to the background various objects are included and interact with the female protagonist in her performance. The paintings describe realism in pictorial expression and the everyday, however, this is at variance with the questionable activities of the characters. The domestic space is the domain of women, a place where stories emerge communicating observations of conformity but also infinite possibilities to manoeuvre and influence.
The Chapters

Research into Aesthetic and Conceptual Influences

Chapters one, two and three speculatively examine the art practices of Julie Rrap, Paula Rego and Angela Carter. These contemporary artists have informed and encouraged the studio practice.

Chapter One

Julie Rrap ‘The use of the self is almost like a ruse.’

Chapter Two

Paula Rego ‘under the polished surface’

Chapter Three

Angela Carter ‘No limits to useful stories for women.’
Chapter One

Julie Rrap ‘The use of the self is almost like a ruse’

Julie Rrap (b.1950, Lismore, NSW, Australia)

Artist - Multimedia.

Born in the middle of the twentieth century Julie Rrap grew up in a time when artists and writers were interested in not just creating artwork but also with the work making reference to the surrounding social and cultural milieu. During the 1960s and 1970s there was an awakening to activism, women began to challenge oppressive institutions in an effort to create societies more inclusive of the lives of women. Women were no longer regarded as simply biological entities, but rather as bodies marked with an unspoken past of objectification.

Rrap’s art practice since the early 1980s has continually explored the relationship between artist, artwork, and audience. Wit and humour is used by her in an effort to conceal serious arguments that challenge accepted views of history. She invites the audience to participate in a journey that travels a territory between art history and feminism.
Rrap frequently uses her own body as a subject in her installations, photography, videos and sculptures. The significance of this approach is clarified by Rrap, ‘For me, the body is a common reference point through which it is possible to engage the viewer more directly’. In the installation *Disclosures: A Photographic Construct* 1982, **Fig. 3** Rrap uses her own body in a combination of performance and critique. For instance the images are hung around the gallery wall and also installed in several rows in the centre of the room. The spectator must walk up and down the corridors in order to view the artwork. The photographs are confronting in their nudity, the way they are hung and their sheer number. On one side of the corridor are photographs of

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1 Alexander, G. Moore, C. Julie Rrap, Piper Press, Australia, 1998, 122
the artist in the studio with her camera or photographic stand-in (her life-size cut-out). On the other side are mirror images taken by the same camera together with the random shots including bits and pieces from the studio. The images are in pairs and were taken simultaneously with the aide of a self-timer. The deliberate positioning of the viewer, in theory, locates them in the model’s space. The artist challenges the viewer to look ‘There was a sort of empathy forced on them, because they were metaphorically between the cameras, so they had to experience what it is to be trapped in the gaze of a voyeur’.  

Fig. 4 Julie Rrap *Disclosures: A Photographic Construct, 1982* (Detail)  
cibachrome and black-and-white prints, Installation

There are images of photographs within photographs. A number of images are repeated or rearrange along the corridors including the artist’s face, mirrors, plastic sheeting, panty-hose and knickers, ending with the artist’s naked body.

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Rrap represents herself as a photographer, the creator of the image, but she is also the model, in various stages of undress, inventing poses and postures, performing for her own camera. Rrap’s line of attack for posing was basically one of ironic give and take, ‘returning the look of the observer through feminine parody, so that the observer becomes the observed’. These seemingly objectified representations have a tendency to intensify the sense of pleasure and anxiety that pervades the installation.

As a commercial photographer Rrap photographs artworks for books, catalogues and magazines. In Disclosures she uses the same neutral flat lighting and standardized formula as her commercial work, in addition to using her own body in the sense of ‘found object’. John McDonald (art critic, Australian) observes, ‘Although this exhibition is awash with nudity and sexual suggestion – from the photo-series, Disclosures 1982 to Soft Targets 2004 – it has a clinical ambience. Sexual identity is positioned as a matter of investigation, not titillation’. However, it is the junction between the naked model and the spectator-experience that draws the viewers ‘roving eye’ unwittingly. The viewer is caught between established modes of looking, from the socially acceptable perusal in the art gallery to the distinct gaze of a soft pornographic magazine.

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4 McDonald, J. “Naked truth behind the buzz”, The Sydney Morning Herald – Arts and Entertainment, October 27-28, 2007, 17
5 Alexander, G. Moore, C. Julie Rrap, Piper Press, Australia, 1998, 10
The artist has embraced the medium of photography from the feminist perspective of exploring a media used in the objectification of women. For Rrap photography is a tool with which to deconstruct the subject and undermine the hand-made practices of painting and sculpture. Performance is also important to her art making process. Rrap performs for the camera but not in the sense of expressing the self. The performing body is used as a device for investigative purposes, an approach that is employed by other artists such as Cindy Sherman.

In contrast to many performance artists, Rrap is concerned with manipulating more private and veiled actions. These actions surface during the photographic process of making the work and are not regarded as independent artworks. Therefore she performs with her body as a means rather than from an individual and prejudiced position. The objective in placing herself in the position of both performer and director assists in subterfuge arguing that, ‘I see myself as talking from the third person, not as a self-portrait … I use my self-image in a more disembodied way. I am having a conversation with the female body: I am in two positions at once as model and author. The use of the self is almost like a ruse’.7

Also of relevance in Rrap’s practice of performance is her point of view and awareness of the feminist concept that gender is performative. Judith Butler put forward that gender is representative of a performance, through a sequence

6 Lynn, V. Julie Rrap: Body Double, Annandale, Australia, 2007, 51
7 ibid, 52
of repetitive acts over time, maintaining that, ‘If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style’. Butler argues women play a role from birth, which is strengthened over time through frequent repetition and by society’s validation of it.

The importance in the use of the camera for Rrap is a position of observer and not the function of subject. The images are frequently of her own body, however they become deconstructed through her process and thus a reading of a cohesive subject is not successful. Photographic images give the impression of an exact representation, the copy at times so believable it may stand in for the real, appearing as a ‘body double’. Rrap is interested in exploring the complex relationship between the image and what it represents, and in revealing photography’s trickery. She is very much aware of the photographic image and its part in the social construction of femininity and as a result, enthusiastically sets about to undermine its power. Firstly she does this by taking control of the representation of her own body, and, secondly, by revealing the creative process of her art making. By highlighting the process together with multiple images of the self, creating repetition, the audience becomes more aware of the gap between representation and reality. The installation Disclosures: A Photographic Construct, 1982, is one example of

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8 Lynn, V Julie Rrap: Body Double, Annandale, Australia, 2007, 52
9 ibid, 54
multiplying or doubling the body, another is in the more recent series *A-R-Mour*, 2000.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Fig. 5 Julie Rrap Marilyn (A-R-Mour), 2000 digital print 195 x 122cm**

In the work *A-R-MOUR 2000*, Rrap explores repetition or body double in a series of photographs where she impersonates actresses from leading roles in films. The title *A-R-MOUR 2000* discloses the intention of the artist to play with doubling, *amour* is love in French and *armour* in English describes leather or metal gear worn by soldiers in battle.\(^\text{10}\) George Alexander (Critic, Australian) remarks “the title itself suggests love may be a declaration of war.”\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^\text{10}\) Lynn, V. Julie Rrap: Body Double, Annandale, Australia, 2007, 63

\(^\text{11}\) ibid, 63
Here Rrap chooses for her models the classic feminine character, the temptress, a creature that is both alluring and threatening. Furthermore, the costume or clothing of the actresses defines the character in a dynamic, spirited or exaggerated way.

Fig. 6 Julie Rrap Sharon (A-R-Mour) 2000 Digital print 195 x 122cm

In this series the images could be considered a type of masquerade except she has no intention of taking on the persona of the character as an actor may. Rrap is always clearly, the artist and creator, with the intent to destabilize the stereotype of the female archetype. For example, in *Marilyn*, Fig.5 Marilyn Monroe’s *The 7 Year Itch* flowing white dress is transformed into a solid but easily broken glass adaptation. In *Sharon*, Fig. 6 Sharon Stone’s iconic pose in *Basic Instinct* is described through the dress in a liquefied metallic creation
that reflects the two male actors, Michael Douglas and Denis Arndt in its glossy sheen. The metallic costume refers to armoury and could also be seen as a declaration of war. In *Camouflage #5 (Catherine)*, Fig. 7 Catherine Deneuve from *Repulsion*, parts of the body are overcome by the floor. The colours of the floor and flesh are similar, making it difficult to separate the two as the solid timber warps and softens integrating legs and arms into its surface. The black and white checkerboard floor in *Camouflage #8 (Jeanne)*, Fig. 8 is represented as part of her costume accessories, gloves and stockings. In these images Rrap dislocates the self through a series of deceptions or camouflages referring to undercover military operations, rather than a masquerade.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{12}\) Lynn, V. Julie Rrap: Body Double, Annandale, Australia, 2007, 63
In the concept for *A-R-MOUR, 2000*, the medium of photography is a crucial element. The importance to the artwork is expressed by Rrap for it’s ‘relationship to the real, to mechanical reproduction, to technological space, to cinema, to narrative, to voyeurism, to death, and finally to a history of art’\(^{13}\) In *Disclosures: A Photographic Construct* there are pictures within pictures, nothing is as it appears. In *A-R-MOUR* Rrap takes on a number of guises, transforming into part model, part performer, and at times part of the décor, her female characters transgress, change and morph. As Victoria Lynn points out “her identity can only be viewed as an unstable sequence of performative acts”.\(^{14}\)

![Image of Julie Rrap Jeanne (A-R-Mour) 2000 Digital print 122 x 122cm](image)

*Fig. 8 Julie Rrap Jeanne (A-R-Mour) 2000 Digital print 122 x 122cm*

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\(^{13}\) Lynn, V. *Julie Rrap: Body Double*, Annandale, Australia, 2007, 63  
\(^{14}\) ibid, 63
Chapter Two

Paula Rego ‘beneath the polished surface’

Paula Rego (b 1935, Lisbon, Portugal).

Artist – painter, draughts-person and etcher.

Living and working in Britain, since the age of seventeen, Paula Rego still identifies with her cultural heritage. The subject matter and pictorial feel of her work is instinctively Portuguese. What’s more contemporary issues and history of Portugal influence her artwork. Rego declares ‘I am Portuguese. I live in London, I like living in London, but I am Portuguese’. However her pictures communicate with audiences beyond the Portuguese world since she uses universal themes that relate to mankind. The dominant themes in Paula Rego’s work are human relationships in all their complexity.

For Paula Rego “The greatest problem all my life has been the inability to speak my mind – to speak the truth. Adults were always right, never answer back. To answer back felt like death, like being in a sudden huge void. I’ll never get over this fear; so I’ve hidden in childish guises – or female guises. Little girl, pretty girl, attractive woman. Therefore the flight into storytelling. You paint to fight injustice.”

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Rego’s imagery combines the ordinary and the dramatic into pictures that distort the boundaries that identify a fixed reality. Her inspiration comes from the ordinary and mundane wherever there is a story: fairy tales, nursery rhymes, novels, films, plays, the theatre, poems, religious stories and folklore. The stories are not illustration rather they function as a point of departure for her artwork. Not only do ready made narratives act as a source but also her memories and vivid imagination.

An example of Rego’s narrative painting is *The Soldier’s Daughter* 1987, Fig. 9 whose title instantly places it within the domain of the family and the domestic. The scene depicts a central figure of a girl, the daughter of the soldier, about to
pluck a dead goose. There are two small figures in the foreground that on first glance may appear insignificant. One figure is a soldier with his duffel bag while the other is an expressionless woman kneeling as in prayer or in an expression of grief.

These two characters call to mind the typical ‘men must work and women must weep’ plot,\(^3\) which becomes more complicated when you consider the rest of the elements in the composition. The girl is sitting in a yard under an arch in the sunlight. The background describes buildings and a ramp leading to heavy, closed gates in a wall which effectively blocks any view to the outside world. The girl is represented as being engaged in women’s work, preparing the goose for the family meal. However in view of the fact that this story refers to a departing soldier, presumably bound for war, you suspect there is more than one dead goose in this story.

The miniature soldier is walking out of the scene but not as you might expect up the ramp and out the double gates. Instead he has the sun at his back and moves towards making his exit out of the picture into the darkness and unknown. He leaves behind the kneeling, weeping, praying woman; the soldier in fact has turned his back towards the family.

Back on the home front the dutiful daughter appears to get on with the job at hand which conforms with the customary division of labour ‘men fight, women

nurture; men kill, women breed’. However the boundaries between these divisions appear to blur. She wears a merry red flower and foliage in her hair and is completely comfortable in her attire of socks and slippers; she exudes an air of guileless, innocence which contrasts with her merciless hold on the goose. Most likely she is responsible for the wringing of its neck and looks intent on plucking it.

In allegory and myth the goose is commonly associated with love and fidelity. The goose is also similar to the swan in some folklore and is further associated with beauty, helplessness, submissiveness and sacrifice, all of which are traditional features of femininity. However in Rego’s story these very qualities appear to be put to death at the hands of a young girl who symbolically strangles ‘the angel in the house’.

In Rego’s image the not so angelic daughter clutches the hapless goose at the same time as the departing father moves in the direction of impending disappearance and possibly death. In truth in Rego’s pictorial drama sanctified domesticity slides effortlessly into a scene of carnage.

*The Soldiers Daughter* is an illustration of Rego’s technique in constructing her narratives compositionally. The picture generally contains a central character, and at times several figures depending on the story. The detail is important in

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5 ibid, 82
6 ibid, 82
her work with attention paid to the figures, their surrounding space, posture, attitude and clothing in creating each pictorial drama. Objects from the everyday fill her drawings and paintings contributing to the story and possible interpretations. These references to the ordinary and the domestic however conflict with the extraordinary situations presented in her artwork. Joao Fernandes asserts that Rego’s artwork continually sets up an ongoing ‘tension between the real and the imaginary’. 

Rego’s pictures challenge the viewer’s understanding and possible readings of what is represented. The compositional elements encourage connections to the viewer’s own values and beliefs. The artist’s strategy in staging a visual drama creates the space to develop her own message and meaning. These methods and techniques invite the audience to reconsider traditional cultural and social moral codes. Joao Fernandes (Director of The Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art) asserts ‘This strategy of subversion through transformation and through the unexpected enables Paula Rego to face taboos and mythologies head-on, to deconstruct narratives and develop subjects and themes through an intrepid and irreverent iconoclasm.’

In 1998-9, Paula Rego created a body of work in drawings, pastel paintings and prints on the subject of abortion. The works were developed in response to the outcome of a referendum on abortion in Portugal in 1998, where pregnancy termination remained unlawful. Rego was incensed, as she believed people

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7 Fernandes, Joao. Paula Rego, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Portugal, 2004-5, 14
8 ibid, 12
deliberately refused to acknowledged the reality of this issue. In Portugal illegal operations are arranged and performed by women in secret. These women abortionists and the abortions are both ignored and quietly overlooked within society and the law.\textsuperscript{9} Rego explains her position in an interview with Maggie McGee, ‘I did these new paintings for Portugal. In my village I saw the secrecy, the pain, the shame. Women came to me all the time asking for money for abortions. They died, sometimes, of septicaemia. Or they washed up on the beach with all their guts hanging out, like an old blown-up cow.’\textsuperscript{10}

This series of work portrays women and girls preparing for and the aftermath of back-street abortions.\textsuperscript{11} These pictures represent the desperate measures women and girls undergo to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, a consequence that relates to their own and their partner’s actions. Rego decided not to name this series but to identify each work by numbers and labelled the series as \textit{Untitled}, suggestive of an event that is considered unspeakable.

Within the \textit{Untitled} artworks there is a series of ten coloured pastel paintings and a \textit{Triptych}. Each picture represents a single figure of a woman preparing for or coping with the aftermath of an abortion. There is no actual act portrayed. The clothing depicted in the paintings identifies a number of young girls and women from a range of societal backgrounds. The women are also

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{9} Rosengarten, Ruth. Paula Rego, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Portugal, 2004-5, 41
\item \textsuperscript{10} McEwen, J. Paula Rego Behind the Scenes, Phaidon, London, 2008, 56
\item \textsuperscript{11} McEwen, J. Paula Rego Behind the Scenes, Phaidon, London, 2008, 58. Another referendum in 2007 found in favour of legalization of abortions.
\end{itemize}
represented in difference postures and poses associated with this particular operation.

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 10 Paula Rego *Untitled No5*, 1998, Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 110 x 100cm**

For example in *Untitled No5*, **Fig. 10** the models body is arranged into a practical position with feet on folding chairs reminiscent of gynaecological stirrups. This woman looks prepared no matter how awkward. In other pictures the models contort themselves into positions on beds, furniture or the floor all waiting or recovering in a matter-of-fact way. Rego’s method in drawing directly from the model, enables her to capture a sensitive and emotive impression. Ruth Rosengarten describes Rego’s pictures as portraying ‘a
palpable sensuality and sense of presence, poignantly underlined by the closely observed sartorial details.\(^\text{12}\)

![Fig. 11 Paula Rego Untitled No.1, 1998, Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 110 x 100cm](image)

In *Untitled No.1* Fig. 11 the woman takes up an ungainly, open posture on a bed, being the very centre of the composition. There are buckets and basins nearby, coloured in pink and red shades as is the mat beneath her body. The blue dress is casual and ill-fitting with a no nonsense red scarf that holds back her hair. This woman looks directly out to the audience, with a mutinous expression. Rego describes this woman as having 'a defiant look on her face as if she has been slapped and she is staring back at you; she is not a school

\(^{12}\) Rosengarten, Ruth. Paula Rego, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Portugal, 2004-5, 41
girl at all; she stands up for herself, not a creature of pity; none of them are, that’s the whole point."\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Fig. 12 Paula Rego \textit{Triptych}, 1998, (Detail third panel), pastel on paper mounted on aluminium 110 x 100cm}

In \textit{Triptych}, Fig.12 the third panel, a schoolgirl squats over a bucket and glares out at the audience with an expression of defiance and rebellion. Her surroundings place her in her own bedroom. A plump pillow is on the bed together with a beautifully patterned cover. Next to her sits a large and comfortable chair upholstered in soft fabric with a shape capable of encircling and soothing the body. The girl appears isolated in the composition but at ease in the familiar domestic setting and clearly in a situation of her own choosing. Rego discusses with Sanda Miller (fashion historian), her strategy of employing

\textsuperscript{13} Miller, Sanda. “Fashioning subversion: clothes and their meaning in Paula Rego’s paintings.” \textit{Apollo}, Jan 2006, 8
attractive accessories, ‘This is a good point that if you use beautiful trappings, it emphasises the sinister; the pretty prints emphasise the sinister, not the other way round.’

Rego dresses and accessorises young girls in a further two paintings in this series, *Untitled No.4 and Untitled No.6 Fig. 13 & 14*. These are highly emotive pictures, since these girls are simply ill-equipped and unprepared for motherhood. They are girls young enough to still need their own mothers. The girls are dressed in school uniform, one with socks and school shoes, the other in socks and joggers both with their hair tied back in childish styles. They are clearly in pain and in need of comfort. As Maria Manuel Lisboa (writer) points out, the issue of child pregnancy ‘is morally unspeakable and almost unutterable: something

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14 Miller, Sanda. “Fashioning subversion: clothes and their meaning in Paula Rego’s paintings.” *Apollo*, Jan 2006, 6
which words hardly can but these images do convey."\textsuperscript{15} Regardless of abortion being a contentious issue, Rego is fearless in her investigation of the subject of child pregnancy and termination.

The painting *Untitled No9*, \textbf{Fig. 15} is the only picture that relates to the abortionist. The figure is represented as a homely woman seated on a plastic chair. She is dressed in comfortable clothes, sensible shoes and practical apron. Her sleeves are rolled up as she performs the task of wiping a basin. This figure of a woman embodies the characteristics of a mother, wife, or any female relative as she carries out her domestic chores of mopping up and cleaning. The woman in Rego’s story highlights a contrast in the expectation of who might perform a backstreet abortion. Rego herself describes her as ‘a good woman, a figure of goodness, she does what she can to help women.

\textsuperscript{15} Lisboa, M. M. Paula Rego’s Map of Memory: National and Sexual Politics, England, 2003, 178
This one isn’t bad’. Nevertheless whether this abortionist is a mother or murderer, because she represents both, this painting results in confusing the boundary between the two roles.

Significantly this series of paintings does not focus on dead foetuses or blood. However blood is suggested in the reddish shades of clothes, accessories, and surrounding objects. Regardless of the serious subject matter the paintings do not represent either hopelessness or despair. Instead Rego’s pictures capture an essence of endurance, struggle and true grit. In the end Rego’s methods and techniques achieve the unexpected, because she directs the viewer’s empathy and understanding towards the ‘mother aborting the child’.

Ruth Rosengarten contends that, ‘while invoking the political through the domestic, Rego’s work also narrates the familial – what Freud called the family romance – as political: relations of authority, struggles for power, murderous plots hatching just beneath the polished surface, revenge... but also attachment, alliance, desire. In meshing together the public and the private, the historical and the individual, her images give body to the feminist creed that ‘the personal is the political’.

Paula Rego’s artwork is thus a visual dialogue. It is a method of expression in an ongoing exploration and communication of the human condition. The artist

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17 Livingstone, Marco. Paula Rego, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Portugal, 2004-5, 49
believes that art should function beyond being simply decorative or entertaining. As Rego emphasizes, ‘a painting is not just colours and form, but also history. … Paintings can be political’.20

Rego’s key strategy of subversion through adaptation and the unexpected makes it possible for her to dismantle narratives and manipulate subjects and themes. In this manner she addresses one of the most important subjects in her work, the representation of women within the normal situations of a male and female way of life which inflicts on them a secondary role in the home, the family and within the social order in general.21

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Chapter Three

Angela Carter ‘no limits to useful stories’

Angela Carter (b.1940 – 92, Britain)

Writer – Carter is best known for her literary fairy tales, particularly the stories in *The Bloody Chamber*. She combines fantasy and radical desires in revisions of ‘useful stories’¹ for women. Carter’s narratives are written for adults using creative appropriations and adaptations of fairy-tale patterns, motifs and content.

Carter chooses the *Marchen* – a fictional tale – because of the opportunity it presents for reiteration and variation. In an introduction to her first edited volume of tales, *The Old Wives’ Fairy Tale Book*, Carter neutralizes the term ‘fairy tale’ by identifying it as a ‘figure of speech’ in the sense that they ‘describe the great mass of infinitely various narrative that was, once upon a time and still is, sometimes, passed on … by word of mouth.’²

Fairy tales provide Angela Carter with a diversity of themes in which to explore and uncover the beauty and aggression in gender and sexual relationships. Carter deconstructs the tales exposing the invented universality evident in much of the established stories of Western fictional practice. The fairy tale not only supplies Carter with subject matter, original and innovative in its sexual

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¹ Warner, Marina. in Carter, A (ed), Book of Fairy Tales, Virgo, Great Britain, 2007, 448
and violent expression, but also challenges the position taken by authors such as Charles Perrault (French 17thC), Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (German 19thC), Walt Disney (American 20thC) and their sanitised, stock, standard tellings.

Fig. 16 Glen Keane *Beauty and The Beast* 1991, film still, directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991, Disney.

Lorna Sage describes the position taken by Carter’s working method as ‘going back to these preliterary forms of storytelling … she could experiment with her own writer’s role, ally herself in an imagination with the countless, anonymous narrators who stood behind literary redactors like Perrault or Grimm.’

Angela Carter contends that, ‘Ours is a highly individualized culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs. But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there

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a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of the domestic arts. ‘This is how I make potato soup.’

In making reference to the culinary arts Angela Carter draws attention to women’s resourcefulness, imagination and common sense. Recipes are regularly prepared over and over with varying ingredients and modifications made according to whatever is in the pantry. As to the source of the initial recipe, rarely can it be traced to a specific creator. Carter’s representation of domesticity relates to the many women who share their skills, methods and wisdom. Who go about their daily lives, at the same time as they adjust, revise and amend them to fit in with ‘personal tastes or social, historical, or practical needs.’ Carter is interested in exploring various female situations and conditions, such as maturing, marriage, motherhood or the madam.

The stories Carter tells look at notions of female subjectivity characterized as active rather than predetermined and submissive. These fairy tale revisions assert that women’s perceived universal, sexual and bodily exclusion from action in the world are not inflexible or permanent but a powerful and dominant myth. Furthermore the tales underline the possibilities for reciprocal, gratifying and unrestricted sexual relations. In her work Carter inverts the stereotypes as she mischievously muddles up notions of a sexual male predator and a passive female victim.

4 Carter, A. (ed), Book of Fairy Tales, Virago, Great Britain, 2007, xii
5 Brooke, Patricia. “Lyons and Tigers and Wolves” Critical Survey, Volume 16, Number 1, 2004, 68
6 ibid, 68
In 1988, a series of works by Carter *The Bloody Chamber* was published. Two of the stories in particular ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’ and ‘The Tigers Bride’ are revisions of the fairy tale ‘Beauty and the Beast’. The traditional story is utilized as source material which she then proceeds to satirize, modify, and enhance through distortion and reversals. This is followed by re-telling the appropriated tale from a different point of view. By progressively moving away from the original source the female protagonist’s experience and articulation is clearly established within her own sexuality. Carter’s method of revising and re-telling the stories allows for comment on the notion that refuses to acknowledge that sudden urges whether, ‘perverse’, ‘violent’, or ‘liberatory’, are in fact present in women.\(^7\) However, the manner in which to expose these revelations is uncertain and so Carter adjusts and reworks the tale to examine Beauty and the Beast’s motivations.

The traditional story of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ begins with a poor father, who on his way home from trying to recover his lost wealth, stops at what appears to be a deserted castle. As he sets off again he picks a single rose from the garden for his youngest daughter, Beauty. At this moment, the anonymous host a beast/man creature, appears and demands that either the father or his daughter as compensation for the theft. Beauty the youngest and flawless sister of two spiteful sisters, freely sacrifices herself. The Beast falls in love with Beauty and although repulsed, she treats him with respect, and, in time, fondness. When Beauty’s father becomes ill she is permitted a trip home. Her nasty sisters, however scheme to delay her and Beauty breaks her promise to

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\(^7\) Brooke, Patricia. “Lyons and Tigers and Wolves”, *Critical Survey* Volume 16, Number 1, 2004, 69
return to the Beast within the week. She eventually returns only to find the Beast near death. Beauty feeling remorseful begs the Beast not to die, and agrees to marry him, whence he transforms into a handsome prince. The prince, Beauty and her father live ‘happily ever after’, while the older sisters turn into statues as punishment.

In Carter’s revisions of Beauty and the Beast she creates an allegory for the many desires and risks associated with sexual relationships. For example Beauty is represented as rescuing the Beast in ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’ whereas in ‘The Tiger’s Bride’, Beauty changes into a stunning animal by means of the erotic caresses of the Beasts tongue. Salman Rushdie (writer) describes the transformation ‘As though her whole body were being deflowered and so metamorphosing into a new instrument of desire, allowing her admission to a new (‘animal’ in the sense of spiritual as well as tigerish) world.’

In The Courtship of Mr. Lyon the title immediately discloses Carter’s intention of an ironic review of matrimony and domesticity. The important distinctions from the customary tale are found in the characterization of Beauty and the Beast and Carter’s skill in underlining the irony in the telling. The characters are inverted such that it is the Beast who is courted and moulded into ‘Mr Lyon’ by the innocent daughter who then seduces the Beast.

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9 ibid, xii
Beauty is depicted as ‘This lovely girl, whose skin possesses the same, inner light so you would have thought she, too, was made all of snow ….. the road is white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal satin’. The dutiful daughter, as pure as the driven snow, is clearly set up for the bridal alter. Carter’s method in embellishing the language implies an ironic parody at work that results in intensifying the demonstration of gender performance. In particular Carter’s exaggerated writing style reveals the distortion and the absurdity of Beauty’s characterization, making it unlikely that the description is read in a simple or serious context.

Mr. Lyon initially meets fairy tale expectations of his character as he releases ‘a mighty, furious roaring’ full of ‘dignity’ yet ‘assertiveness’, and together with an overbearing manner demands compensation for the theft of his rose. However, after seeing a photograph of Beauty he tones down to a ‘growl’ requesting , instead of demanding as in the traditional tale, ‘Take her her rose, then, but bring her to dinner’. Carter’s technique highlights the personal decisions made by the characters and uses them to prompt the story line. She discards enchantment and premonition and uses imaginative emotional, physical and material descriptions as well as the characters’ social and financial situation to develop the plot.

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12 ibid, 71
13 Bacchilega, C. Postmodern Fairy Tales, Gender and Narrative Strategies, Philadelphia, 1997, 101
Beauty’s father when confronted with the Beast sees a huge and aggressive leonine monster. Beauty sees the Beast differently ‘she could not control an instinctual shudder of fear when she saw him, for a lion is a lion and a man is a man and, though lions are more beautiful by far than we are, yet they belong to a different order of beauty and, besides, they have no respect for us: why should they? Yet wild things have a far more rational fear of us than is ours of them, and some kind of sadness in his agate eyes, that looked almost blind, as if sick of sight, moved her heart’ (147). His physical presence may be menacing but it appears to be his frightening and unpleasant disposition that is in question.14 She views a lion of exceptional beauty with a rational fear of humans a creature with a ‘bewildering difference’ (147) that fascinates her.15

The Beast’s character is revealed mainly through Beauty’s own observation so the reader’s insight into his temperament is filtered through her view. The story progresses and when at the first opportunity Beauty leaves to meet with her father, the Beast is forlorn asking ‘You will come back to me? It will be lonely here, without you’ (150). His response is bashful describing a besotted boyfriend more accurately than a bully Beast. The traditional character-type for the Beast is turned upside down and intensified. He is illustrated as ‘frightened’ (148) and ‘helpless’ (150) when in her company again disrupting the usual role of a bossy, nasty figure and his manipulative relationship with Beauty. And so this Beast is domesticated by the woman’s influence from the outset, perhaps purely from seeing her photograph. Nevertheless Carter’s story often

15 Bacchilega, C. Postmodern Fairy Tales, Gender and Narrative Strategies, Philadelphia, 1997, 93
describes Beast’s animalistic traits and thus hints at the possibility that he goes beyond this subdued characterization.\textsuperscript{16}

Carter’s Beauty embraces her role of good and dutiful daughter with a lovely disposition, valuable virtues when in the market to secure marriage and prosperity. However the picture becomes mocking when Beauty describes herself ‘And such a one she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial’ (148). Carter’s whimsical description draws attention to Beauty’s character as a ‘lamb led to slaughter’ but also that this woman has a ‘sense of irony’ regarding her situation. Patricia Brooke (writer) emphasizes ‘Carter’s revision opens up ironic space that draws the reader’s attention to the self-conscious articulation of femininity.’\textsuperscript{17}

In ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ Beauty returns to find a Beast dying of hunger. Whereupon she begs the Beast not to die declaring ‘If you’ll have me, I’ll never leave you’ (153). A marvellous transformation follows, ‘the bones showed through the pelt, the flesh through the wide, tawny brow. And then it was no longer a lion in her arms but a man, a man with an unkempt mane of hair and, how strange, a broken nose, such as the noses of retired boxers, that gave him a distant, heroic resemblance to the handsomest of all the beasts’ (153). Beauty is not at all shocked at this metamorphosis implying it is all in the eye of the beholder. The Beast transforms into Mr Lyon ‘able to manage a little breakfast’ (153) with his Beauty however as Bacchilega contends it is unlikely

\textsuperscript{16} Bacchilega, C. Postmodern Fairy Tales, Gender and Narrative Strategies, Philadelphia, 1997, 93
\textsuperscript{17} Brooke, Patricia. “Lyons and Tigers and Wolves”. \textit{Critical Survey}, Volume 16, Number 1, 2004, 73
to be ‘vegetarian’ as the ‘Lamb is now Mrs. Lyon.’ The Beast has been ‘tamed and remade ……[he] has lost the mating game, and has instead been successfully courted, captured, and domesticated.’

Fairy tales often function in culture to explain, instruct and forbid natural and instinctive behaviours. Repeatedly tales, myths and narratives fabricate limitations for women in the home, in customs and in society. In her stories Carter has chosen to reject cultural and social restraints entirely. In retelling Beauty and the Beast ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ takes apart male and female characteristics breaking down the peculiarities and differences separating them. In the traditional version marriage is the ending, however the focus of marriage in Carter’s tale draws attention to the public and private gender boundaries as illusory and therefore initiates opportunities for discussion. The societal expectation of what constitutes normal male and female characteristics become validated through the course of everyday life. However the refusal to accept prescribed gender roles facilitates agency and self-determination. Specifically culture is a sphere of influence which makes it possible for intervention and empowerment in representations of ‘woman’ through imaginative, creative and originality in both visual and written narrations.

18 Bacchilega, C. Postmodern Fairy Tales, Gender and Narrative Strategies, Philadelphia, 1997, 94
20 ibid, 85
21 ibid, 85
22 ibid, 85
Marina Warner (writer) maintains ‘both Angela Carter’s and Paula Rego’s work excites contradictory and powerful feelings in their audience, because while openly challenging conventional misogyny in the very act of speaking and making images, they also refuse the wholesome or pretty pictures of female gender (nurturing, caring) and deal plainly with erotic dominance as a source of pleasure for men and for women.’

Paula Rego is inspired by a nonsense rhyme, *Baa Baa Black Sheep* 1989, **Fig. 17** to probe the darker depths of women’s imagination. The Black Sheep is represented as a large, handsome sardonic beast. This sheep is all ram as he confidently looks down on the girl in a speculative manner. The ram encloses the girl and she accepts the embrace provocatively at the same time as waving to the boy down the lane. This picture radiates with forbidden but visibly pleasurable desires.

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The Wild Domestic Scenes 2008-9

The following images are examples of the exhibition work.

Fig. 18 and 19 Helen Irene Thomas *Tea Cosy* and *Spic an Pan*, 2008-9, oil on canvas, 105x80cm

Fig. 20 and 21 Helen Irene Thomas *Steamin’ and Loven Oven*, 2008-9, oil on canvas, 105x80cm
Chapter Four

Studio Practice ‘The Wild Domestic Scenes’

“The space of art is one which narrates and in doing so legitimizes that which is made visible in its recurring stories. The script of figurative painting in the west has been massively masculine, servicing its fantasies and representing its white dominance. Women desire to write new stories, their stories, into this narrative.”¹

Women artists have engaged the female body since the 1970s as a means to examine ‘woman’ in culture and society. They continue to utilize the female form in the investigation of various roles, situations and conditions idiosyncratic of women. It is in this sense, that my work attempts to engage through paintings and drawings, a visual discourse exploring notions of a feminine identity.

In 1999 I created a series of drawings titled *Naughty Naughty* fig. 22 and paintings *Curiouser and Curiouser* Fig. 23 both exhibited at Watt Space Gallery in Newcastle. The concept for the works evolved from the story of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Both these books were written by the author Lewis Carroll whose real name is Charles Dodgson a man who could arguably be described as an early sufferer of the ‘Lolita Complex’.\(^2\) For

\(^2\) The ‘Lolita Complex’ original interpretation is of a young girl’s vulnerability to an older man’s desires, as in Vladimir Nabokov’s novel in 1955.
a period of many years in the mid nineteenth century Dodgson obsessively photographed young girls, often naked. During this time Dodgson was not perceived as a problem, certainly not by the family of his favourite model, Alice Liddell his model for *Alice in Wonderland*. It was not until Dodgson, a middle aged man, asked to marry the by-then seventeen year old girl that the Liddells severed relations.³

*Now is the time for her to come on stage herself. With her violet eyes. Blue and red. Eyes that recognise the right side, the wrong side and the other side: the blur of deformation: the black or white of a loss of identity. Eyes always expecting appearances to alter, expecting that one will turn into the other, is already the other.*

'The Looking Glass, from the Other Side', Luce Irigaray

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³Townsend, C. “A Picture of Innocence?” *Cross Current*, 10
My techniques in *Naughty Naughty* Fig.22 and *Curiouser and Curiouser* Fig.23 began with drawings and photographs of the model. The model’s dress, shoes and wig were similar to Alice in Lewis Carroll’s book, although this Alice has high heeled shoes. The model was directed by myself and encouraged to take up different postures and poses such as lifting up her skirt or arms and legs into the air. Photographs were taken from different heights, angles and for the most part in close proximity to the model’s body. The photographic compositions particularly focused on awkwardness and cropping the body which were not altered once the picture was taken. Mostly the model’s face was hidden from view an association with self-consciousness, look at me don’t look at me. The original motivation for making the images of a pubescent Alice figure was to foster a connection with the audiences shared memory of heightened sensitivity and vulnerability. The story in these pictures is about the experience of the teenage years and a young woman’s developing sexuality. For that reason Lewis Carroll’s Alice is hardly cut from the same psychological cloth as the Alice in this series of drawings and paintings. In this story heads and limbs are cropped, the images are fragmented and dislocated, together the images form a visual sense of tumbling. This Alice is a bundle of contradictions both in and out of control, and at times Alice’s behaviour is decidedly questionable.
Since the early 1990s artist Lisa Yuskavage (b.1962 Philadelphia) has painted girls and young woman glowing in seductive, monochrome fields of colour. Sometimes the images represent prepubescent girls, or curved pregnant women with rounded fruit scattered nearby. Others appear as overstated, outrageous imitations of pornographic models, whose bodies and sexuality are distorted, an example of these body forms is Yuskavage’s *Hairpuller*, 1999.

**Fig. 24** Rather than reject male fantasy about women as sexual objects Yuskavage investigates these fantasies from a female point of view and in so
doing makes them her own. Yuskavage and many others including myself challenge paintings traditions of aesthetic taste in the use of various colours, forms, and imagery by calling them into question. Her method of actively working against these established modes of practice by contradicting and rejecting them results in negation. The label of ‘bad girl’\(^4\) can easily be applied to Yuskavage in her wicked combination of unseemly subject matter and accomplished oil painting techniques.

Artists Lisa Yuskavage and Julie Rrap use feminist strategies in their artworks from a position of choosing not to ignore expectations and boundaries placed on women and art but to use them in a rebellious and cheeky manner. These artists, and of course many others as well as myself, challenge the convention and decorum of ‘traditional femininity to define themselves according to their own pleasures, their own interests and in their own way.’\(^5\) Furthermore these artists’ methods often combine a mischievous and shocking sense of humour.

The young woman who posed for the series of works in *Naughty Naughty* 1999 fig. 22 also modelled for my more recent work referred to as *The Wild Domestic Scenes* 2008-9 fig. 18-21 & 25-27. The model is a relative, my daughter who was comfortable in being directed in a sort of role play, this became an important aspect. The relaxed naturalness of knowing a person developed into a confident performance with images subsequently recorded

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\(^4\) In ‘bad girl’ ideology, the power of women’s resistance is positioned in their being naughty, in not playing along with the system.

\(^5\) Bad Girls, (Marcia Tucker), The Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1994, 5
with the use of a camera. These photographic images of the model I next developed into drawings elaborating and inventing various characters with each figure placed within a domestic space, an example is the painting *Fettuccine* 2008-09 **fig. 25**.

![Fig. 25 Helen Irene Thomas *Fettuccine*, 2008-9 oil on canvas, 105 x 80cm](image)

In *Fettuccine* the top half of the figure makes a vertiginous drop to the floor below. Covered in strong shades of yellow and red tiles the floor tends to warp and fall away to one side. Bright blue kitchen gloves cover the figures raised
hands in a position of pushing forward and up. Her blonde hair or possibly wig
is out of place resembling fettuccine with its thick flat strands. The facial
expression is absorbed in concentration on some unidentified task. Fettuccine
engenders a narrative of an unknown drama within a domestic space however
the female character conveys an impression of active participation in the
performance.

Although the figure, clothing and background are described in a natural,
realistic manner there are elements within the picture that are irrational and
incoherent. Compositional space and the figure are distorted with other
aspects selectively exaggerated such as the enlarged pink shoe. This mix of
invention and truth together with the descriptive process in making the image
generates an obscure visual narrative. The pictures in The Wild Domestic
Scenes work in a similar way to Paula Rego who references the ordinary and
the domestic in her imagery that results in a conflict with the unusual situations
and events she portrays.\(^6\)

\(^6\) Fernandes, Joao, Paula Rego, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Portugal, 2004-5, 14
The young woman pictured in *Stomp* 2008-9 Fig. 26 appears to have completed her house duties of mopping and cleaning as all the surfaces in this kitchen look spick and span. Furthermore the figure represented is a model of wifey domesticity, herself spotless in sensible dress, head band and matching shoes of green. In this picture the character is intent on eradicating or controlling the wicked technological contraption of a 1960s hair dryer. The apparatus in question has twisted and tangled itself across the floor and around her shoes. This tale is confusing as to whether this piece of equipment is endeavouring to capture her or escape the stomp.
The figure is most important in this series of pictures and they are wholly
enclosed within the frame. Observation of the figure’s posture, clothing, and
expression are sketched onto the canvas and expanded. Attention to the
arrangement of the surrounding space in the form of shapes, lines and colours
are next considered compositionally. The floors evolved into a key component
developing into pattern formations and contributed to warping the picture plane.
My approach in the use of colour and colour combinations began in the
background working outwards to include the figure and clothing. The process
of making the picture is worked on as a whole with constant reworking and
adjustment to colour and form. This repetition of going over the surface of the
painting in fact references domestic repetitive wiping and cleaning of surfaces.

Some of the paintings in *The Wild Domestic Scenes* 2008-9 began with acrylics
but they dried fast not allowing enough time in which to manipulate the paint to
my satisfaction. The ‘Alice’ series was painted in acrylic on board although
they were much smaller. Acrylic paint is inclined to shrink and darken in colour
whereas oil paint is slow drying with sensual qualities and better colour
retention. For me an interesting and exciting quality in painting that motivates
the work is the continuous imaginative commentary in thoughts combined with
the substance of paint, pigmented matter, and the physicality in the process.
During the development of *The Wild Domestic Scenes* an array of imagined stories and female characters evolved and began to take shape. The female protagonists in these narratives could be considered clever, shrewd, witty, unconventional, determined or perceptive. Such a character is *Plaits 2008-9 Fig. 27* who demonstrates tenacity and purpose under adverse conditions as
she hauls on the detached plait. There is trouble brewing in this tale, the plait looks more like rope and not just cut off but ripped apart. Whatever might be on the other end appears to have met its match with inevitable retribution to ensue.

Similarly Angela Carter’s protagonists represent desirable feminine qualities such as wisdom, cunning, perception, practicality, lyricism and eccentricity to describe a few. Furthermore these characters take delight in expressing themselves with women’s skilful verbalization, ‘however the quality of that skill is defined.’ A example of this skilfulness can be found in Beauty as ‘well-disguised’ virginal victim, in The Courtship of Mr. Lyon when she describes ‘herself to be, Miss Lamb, splotless, sacrificial.’ Another is the Red Riding Hood character, ‘the wise child’, in Carter’s story The Company of Wolves, who knows when she is threaten by the (were) wolf that she is ‘nobody’s meat.’ Carter’s literary fairy tales are not variations from a simpler straightforward tradition, rather her style is an inventive and sophisticated narrative mode.

Historically precedents were established in the 1630s in Paris, by women of nobility who arrange social events ‘called salons in their homes for the purpose of intellectual discussions of literature, art and concerns on love, marriage, and proper manners and morals.’ These women often told oral stories,

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9 ibid, 219
11 ibid, 10
sometimes exploiting children’s tales as a foundation where they exaggerated, enhanced and, with wit, transformed them into sophisticated tellings. It became fashionable to recount fairy stories orally in the salons but also by the end of the century some of these narratives were published and known as *conte de fees*.\textsuperscript{12} What is most important is the socio-political function of these oral and written fairy tales for the salon women. Telling the stories from a female perspective and featuring female characters the plots were frequently complex and deliberate fabrications creating opportunities for women to comment on relevant issues of the day such as forced marriages and everyday life.\textsuperscript{13} It is within this context that Carter was attracted to the fairy tale as a structure for socio-political observations.\textsuperscript{14}

In my series *The Wild Domestic Scenes* 2008-9 **Fig. 18-21 & 25-27** female protagonists reveal a similarity to many of the characters in the stories of the French women and Angela Carter in that they often faced situations of ‘enclosure’. However the characters in their stories finding themselves in a situation of entrapment also inevitably create a solution to them. In Carter’s narrations she consistently distorts the ‘boundaries which purport to fix reality one way or another.’\textsuperscript{15} In fact Carter repeatedly establishes arguments against actual or perceived limitations, fully aware that identifying restrictions necessarily comes before their ‘modification’ and ‘dissolution.’\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} ibid, 11
\textsuperscript{14} ibid 12
The women in the *Wild Domestic Scenes* may appear to be enclosed but not contained there is considerable activity in their performances. They are pushing the boundaries of normal or typical behavioural expectations. Some of them are on ‘mission impossible’ while others are engaged in unfathomable tasks. The pictures refer to the ordinary and the domestic however there is incongruity in the unorthodox scenarios being played out. The narrative is fluid and reality is flexible.
Conclusion

Judith Butler put forward that gender is representative of a performance, through a sequence of repetitive acts over time. Furthermore ‘If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.’\(^{17}\) Butler argues women play a role from birth, which becomes strengthened over time through frequent repetition. Moreover this performance is further reinforced by society’s validation and expectations.\(^{18}\)

Rrap is aware the female form is enclosed within a social and sexual history and therefore already part of a performance. The performing body in her art practice is literally doubled with subsequent actions recorded through the camera lens. Photographic images give the impression of an exact representation, the copy at times so believable it may stand in for the real, appearing as a ‘body double’. The artist’s approach to doubling the body becomes a ‘subversive repetition’ with the purpose of the artworks intended as a means of expression for change.\(^{19}\) Ruth Rosengarten contends ‘The body is both generator of meaning and a place where meaning is enacted.’\(^{20}\)

\(^{17}\) Judith Butler quoted in Lynn, V. Julie Rrap: Body Double, Australia, 2007, 52
\(^{18}\) Lynn, V. Julie Rrap: Body Double, Australia, 2007, 52
\(^{19}\) ibid 52
\(^{20}\) Rosengarten, Ruth - Paula Rego, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Portugal, 2004-5, 41
Angela Carter’s fairy tale revisions ‘open up ironic space that draws the reader’s attention to the self-conscious articulation of femininity.’\textsuperscript{21} In the work \textit{The Courtship of Mr. Lyon} Beauty embraces her performance and character as a virtuous, dutiful daughter with a lovely disposition, however the picture becomes mocking when referring to herself as a sacrificial lamb. The whimsical description focuses attention on Beauty’s character but also that this woman has a sense of irony regarding her situation. Beast’s traditional character-type is reversed and exaggerate as he is portrayed as ‘frightened’ (148) and ‘helpless’ (150) when in her company. The stereotypes are inverted as Carter mischievously mixes up traditional roles of sexual male predator and a passive female victim.\textsuperscript{22} The retelling of the story highlights the changeableness of earlier characterizations of Beauty and the Beast, suggesting fictitious and distorted representations of ‘female/male or good/evil’.\textsuperscript{23}

The ‘fairy tale’ considered a ‘figure of speech’ for describing the countless narratives that was once passed on by word of mouth and sometimes still is, presents infinite opportunities for adaptation and imagination. Carter’s stories are not revisions from an undemanding simple tradition instead her style is a creative and sophisticated narrative form.\textsuperscript{24} Fairy tales exist in culture often as a means to educate and validate social customs and prohibit normal experiences. Repeatedly such tales act to restrain women in particular from

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[22] ibid 68
\item[23] ibid 69
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contravening cultural limitations. Carter’s tales challenge the innate aggression in traditional narratives that construct and normalize gender and sexuality, revealing the deceptive, misleading characteristics inbuilt in fairy tales, myths and similar narrative modes.²⁵

Paula Rego’s key strategy of subversion through modification, transformation and the unexpected makes it possible for her to pull narratives apart and manipulate subjects and themes. In her artwork she stages a drama that generates a space to develop her own message and meaning as in *The Soldiers Daughter* Fig. 2 and the abortion series Fig. 10-15. ‘I have this pull towards what some people call fantasy, and it has to do with the transcendental imagination. I am always happier when I find something like the abortion pictures, because that is something that I know about, and putting across a good message…. With pictures it has got to be convincing, emotionally convincing.’²⁶ Rego’s imaginative stories reference the ordinary and the domestic but conflict with the unexpected situations and events represented in her artworks. Ruth Rosengarten discusses one of Rego’s most recurrent themes as ‘The mutual interdependence of obedience and rebellion…it is the tension between a resistance to, and a complicity – or even an erotic bond – with authority that constitutes female subjectivity itself.’²⁷

²⁶ Paula Rego (interview), in Paula Rego, Museo Nacional Centro de arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2007, 197
²⁷ Rosengarten, Ruth. Paula Rego, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Portugal, 2004-5, 45
Rrap and Carter both exaggerate gender performance. Rrap creates multiple images of the female form creating repetition at the same time highlighting the photographic process as in *Disclosures: A Photographic Construct* 1982 Fig. 4. These methods combined with poses focused more on private and indirect actions alerts the viewer to the gap between representation and reality. In the series *A-R-Mour* 2000 Fig. 5-8 Rrap uses a number of different guises accentuating the costumes, accessories and surroundings of the female archetype of the temptress. These characters are seen as both fascinating and threatening although in Rrap’s performance the costumes are put forward as armoury and with that a declaration of war.

Carter’s method of embellishing language in her revisions of fairy tales suggests an ironic parody at work that intensifies the demonstration of gender performance. Her exaggerated writing style reveals the distortion and absurdity of Beauty’s characterization of a virtuous, dutiful daughter in *The Courtship of Mr. Lyon*. Furthermore her strategy in overstating descriptions makes it unlikely that the story will be read in a straightforward or serious context. The female protagonists in Carter’s stories habitually find themselves entangled in various situations but inevitably resolve the dilemma or predicament in an unusual or unexpected way.

Rego’s pictures depict stories from a feminine point of view which is clearly representative of the strength and confidence of women in various roles and situations. The inspiration for her pictures may come from ready made
narratives but as Rego explains ‘I start to tell one story but then as I tell it, it turns into something else. The story is always subverted somehow. I never know what’s going to happen with it.’

Rego’s imagery draws on a combination of imagination and theatricality forming a different reality that is unlike standard portrayals. She focuses on everyday life, on the women behind the scenes such as *The Soldier’s Daughter* 1987 Fig. 9 where the figure in the foreground is left to weep while the man goes off to war. But the daughter is brought to a central position and represented as an independent and powerful woman in her own right.

Culture is an important area of influence which creates infinite opportunities for disruption and empowerment in images of women through imaginative artworks. Rrap, Rego and Carter develop subject matter and themes boldly and tenaciously as they reveal feminine identity as subjective and limitations as unfixed. Their innovative artworks and subversive strategies repeatedly challenge, disturb and at times shock the audience but most importantly they stimulate discussion.

Julia Kristeva discusses the imaginary in an interview with Catherine Francblin ‘the visual factor, the plastic aspect of the icon as signifier, which lends itself more readily to playfulness, to invention, to interpretation, than verbal thought,

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which can have a repressive intellectual weight…..The need for the imaginary, in fact, never ceases to make itself felt and is never exhausted.²⁹

The exegesis for my Masters ‘Subversive Pleasures’ Drawing on Myth, Mischief and Mayhem in combination with the exhibition paintings *The Wild Domestic Scenes* 2008-9 strengthen my directions in concept and practice. The pictures in *The Wild Domestic Scenes* 2008-9 explored performance, humour and narrative throughout their development. Compositional strategies include line, colour, characters and objects filling the picture plane which enabled the structure of the narrative element. The resultant imagery in this series demonstrates distortion in the figures, space and narrative. Each female protagonist may appear conservative in her choice of attire however they all engage in disorderly conduct. These pictures engender a flexible narrative as the central character performs within a domestic space. In these scenarios the focus is more on aspects of the imaginary and the everyday as an insubordinate strategy.

Marcia Tucker relates ‘Humour is an exercise in mutual experience and empathy; when you laugh it means that you’ve understood or ‘gotten’ the joke, that you’ve been able to see a new set of relationships in a given situation….The central activity of the carnival, itself a kind of giant playground, is playing, which Susan Suleiman describes as ‘fantasy, as free invention, as mastery, as mockery, as parody [and] as transgression.’³⁰

²⁹ Francblin, Catherine. “Interview with Julia Kristeva” Flash Art, Feb/March, 1986, 45
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