
The Beach as an Erogenous Zone:

Figuring through Painting

School of Design and Art

Department of Art

The Beach as an Erogenous Zone: Figuring through Painting

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Declaration



To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:

Date:

Abstract



Abstract

The feeling of tranquillity and freedom, so often associated with the zone that lies between dunes and breakers, belies vast complexities and subjectivities that regulate the littoral. The beach is a liminal place both physically and socially, a landscape of hypersensitivity existing in flux with an endlessly shifting environment ... *an erogenous zone*.

A previous postgraduate research project entitled 'The Loaded Image' (Coldicutt 2000) exposed the complexities associated with the politics of the body specifically in regards to the production and exhibition of explicit or erotic visual representations. In addition I revealed a number of links in the way in which the landscape, like the body, is both represented and socially constructed. This current research project acknowledges this relationship between the body and landscape and recognises 'in broad anthropological terms how social realities and identities are borne out of relations between human beings and their natural environment' (Frankland 2008, 94). In this context, one reading of water and the natural environment of the beach is that it may be considered as an important site for enculturation and provide a sanctified public space for liberated expressions of sexuality and pleasure: operating as a stage.

In order to present the performative aspect of the beach as a stage on which social relations are enacted, this exegesis assumes the structure of a play where chapters become **Acts** played out across a series of **Scenes**. 'The beach' within the focus of this performance does not refer to a remotely located, unpopulated 'natural' coastline; it is defined predominantly as a complex cultured space, a zone usually connected to urban living.

Act I: *The Urban Beach*, is staged on a stretch of Western Australian coast that begins at the iconic Cottesloe Beach. **Act II:** *The Generic Beach Fantasy* explores the mythology of the beach and the construction and consequences of 'tropical island paradise' fantasies. In **Act III:** *The Studio*, the ideas and discoveries from the research are *figured* through the phenomenology of painting. **Act IV:** *The Show/no show*, describes the visual research produced in support of The Beach as an Erogenous Zone: Figuring through Painting and how this was intended to be exhibited at the John Curtin Gallery Post Graduate show SoDA 2014 (School of Design and Art). In its final manifestation, the exegetical performance culminates in an Act performed by brush and pigment over a collection of eighty oil paintings. These works entitled *Casting the Net* (Coldicutt 2012–2014), employ the traditions of a time-tested medium to respond to contemporary pixelated imagery endlessly performed as digital fantasies across the internet.

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Acknowledgements



I liken this project to a long distance swim towards a distant vision on a vast horizon; an abstract idea lodged in the imagination. As the ocean floor drops away and the tides and currents get stronger it is the support crew that provide the inspiration and ultimately the direction that guides me through.

My support crew in this project are: Jude my wife, and Will our son. This study was only possible through their unwavering faith in my creative obsessions. My supervisor Dr. Ann Schilo who has been a constant throughout the project, which, under the increased loading imposed on academics, has been no small feat.

To my co-supervisors, Dr. Donal Fitzpatric and Dr. Tim Gregory, who were involved at different stages of the research, many thanks for your input and your encouragement to push the boundaries.

At some point during an endurance swim when the energy is depleted it is possible to hit the wall and find yourself struggling to stay afloat. It is during these critical moments that it is nice to know that there is a life-line. Beyond the family my lifeline has been my dedicated friend and academic, Associate Professor Grant Revell, Dr. Brian and Sally Malone, Matt Dickmann, Louise Dickmann, Professor Kateryna Longley and surprisingly for some, my dynamic 84 year old mother-in-law Anne Annear (OAM). Thank you all for your friendship, generosity of spirit, intelligence, humour and above all your encouragement.

Finally I would like to thank Curtin University for the opportunity to undertake this project and the scholarship that made it all possible.

*I am a painter in the 21st century.
I live everyday with an irrepressible desire to express my world through paint.
I exist on a hinterland bounded by desert,
a neophyte in one of the oldest communities of coastal dwellers on the planet.
Where the beach conceals the secret of crystal in its silica,
I seek through the alchemy of paint to reveal some clarity to the magic of the shore.*

I have grown up with an understanding of a certain magical narrative existing in the shoreline of the beach. Whilst the collection of beach treasures that line the shelves of my studio attest to a relentless fascination for the strange and beautiful spontaneously revealed and concealed within this sandy transformative plane, it is only during the last decade that I have turned my creative and academic attention to a determined investigation of this enculturated space, this place, the beach. The beach now presents to me as of utmost importance in the context of my contemporary world, as I seek to understand the forms and function of this liminal place and the energy that is generated when the waves of culture and nature collide. It is here that I understand that these two social constructs—culture and nature—are indeed indivisible, generating their own and collective identities from their reciprocal relationship.

As my understanding oscillates between perception based on scientific fact, historical records, and an alternative spiritual awareness inspired by growing understanding of an Indigenous notion of *Country*, I turn to the alchemy of paint to creatively express the figuring of this unusual alliance. It is through this iterative rhythm of research and painting that begins, for me, an enriched and meaningful understanding of the landscapes that I inhabit.

Key to this research investigation is the understanding that painting is a valid physical means of documenting, recording, analysing and figuring life. And above all, that art possesses the power to arouse in the viewer a response to these creative disfigurements, both physically and emotionally.

The most appropriate method by which to investigate the deeply physical and spiritual experience of the beach is within the fluid application of pigment on a surface. It is through these paintings that I seek to evoke the essence of our human actions within the site of the beach and evoke in the viewer a sensation, a memory or a rich personal narrative of a space that exists in depth and detail far beyond the image itself.

Introduction

The Criticalities of this Arts Practice-by-Research.

The Criticalities of this Arts Practice-by-Research.

The motivation behind this research is grounded in a personal ambition to develop a thorough knowledge of the history of the beach and to formulate an understanding of its continued relevance as a contemporary site for enculturation.

The place of the beach holds a unique position in Australian culture as a free social space. We are forced to share this shoreline and accommodate the varied and spontaneous performances that celebrate and articulate a growing cultural diversity within the beached edges of Australian life.

This research acknowledges the influence of the internet, social media and digitised picturing on the collective and fantastical imaginations of the beach and how this effects both the expectation of individuals and ultimately the performances that are conducted within these shoreline spaces/places.

Through a reflective investigative practice I focus on the challenges associated with making sense of, and creatively responding to, the perceptions of change and cultural evolution at play within this site—the beach. At times, this research inquiry becomes unavoidably personal, however my own responses are recognised, analysed and reflected upon theoretically.

Whilst the beach is recognised as a significant cultural site that has been visually represented over the centuries, and is the subject of increased investigation by scholars and writers, there is a clear absence of research that has attempted to ‘figure through painting’ contemporary enculturated notions of the littoral. In attending to an epistemological shortfall around this subject, this exegesis explores many performative narratives played out on the beach to unravel social complexities embodied in the shoreline and enculturated functions of this space. In addition it presents the phenomenology of painting in relation to optical technology and stylistic determinants.

Introduction

Structure and Methodology

Structure and Methodology

In order to present the performative aspect of the beach as a stage on which social relations are enacted, this exegesis assumes the structure of a play where chapters become **Acts** played out across a series of **Scenes**. 'The beach' within the focus of this performance does not refer to a remotely located, unpopulated 'natural' coastline; it is defined predominantly as a complex cultured space, a zone usually connected to urban living.

Act I: *The Urban Beach* is staged on a stretch of Western Australian coast and traces a three kilometre transect from Cottesloe Beach to the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR further abbreviated to SAS) firing range at the northern end of Swanbourne Beach. The movement from culture to nature that occurs along this transect is mapped through a series of scenes and relationships that reveal the complexity of this liminal space. Here the changeable physical conditions of the beach find reflection in the variable social and emotional states that regulate this sandy stage.

Act II: *The Generic Beach Fantasy* explores the mythology of the beach and the 'tropical island paradise' fantasy, as authored by explorers and artists. Scenes within this Act trace the cultural appropriation of space in relation to leisure and mobility in sites such as Bali, Tahiti, Thailand and Rottneest Island. As I will highlight, this is a space best described as a neo-liberal capitalist beach where Western cultural values and desires are digitised and disseminated across the internet on a global scale. Framed by hedonism and pleasure, and supported on the premise of selling *free time*, this cyber beach finds form in many beachside and island destinations around the globe, all dedicated to realising and capitalising on these desires and fantasies.

In **Act III:** *The Studio*, ideas and discoveries are 'figured' through the phenomenology of painting. The viability of painting in a contemporary 21st century context is reasoned in relation to the current influence and use of digital technology for artists. The investigation considers the history of Realism and the relationship of optical technology to new ways of seeing; establishing how this has been adapted and extended through painting since the mid-19th century.

Act IV *The Show /no show* describes the visual research produced in support of The Beach as an Erogenous Zone: Figuring through Painting and how this was intended to be exhibited at the John Curtin Gallery Post Graduate show SoDA 2014 (School of Design and Art).

Act IV also introduces two key artworks The Pacific Solution (2012 oil on panel 900mmx600mm) and Casting The Net (2012-14 oil on 80 panels each measuring 298mm x 450mm), briefly articulating their relationship to many issues raised in the exegetical dissertation.

Introduction

Theoretical Frame

In its final manifestation within this study, the exegetical performance culminates in an Act performed by brush and pigment over a collection of eighty oil paintings. These works employ the traditions of a time-tested medium to respond to contemporary pixelated imagery endlessly performed as digital fantasies across the internet.

One of the characteristics of this creative production is the struggle that occurs in the mutation of text into imagery. To articulate this constant negotiation between visual and verbal spheres the main text is punctuated throughout with personal diary entries notated in an italic font. Although notations from the diary may appear to some readers as florid verbosity, poorly poetic and often abstract, they should be considered as part of an autobiographical subtext and a deeply personal working methodology developed throughout a career of image making.

As both actor and director, and at times audience in this production, I am required to undertake difficult transitions; from a primary role as an individual/actor negotiating the vulnerabilities of my own body on the beach; as a spectator and critic attempting to unravel the complexities of the performance; and ultimately as a painter driven by an obsession with both the beach and the medium of paint, simultaneously endowed yet entrapped within the expectations of myself, the audience and the law.

Theoretical Frame

Throughout the duration of this research project I have been relentlessly challenged within the institutional conventions of the University to deliver quality research that represents not only my deeply personal experience and vision of the beach, but also one that has a relevance for broader audiences. As a consequence much of my attention has been diverted to locating and justifying my production through a specific theoretical frame. It is through the work of Laurel Richardson; Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the Ohio State University, that I identify a context for my contribution in academia.

We recognise the historical split between scientific and literary writing that emerged in the 17th century as unstable and mutable. We welcome the blurring of genre, the complexity of writing, the shaggy boundaries between 'fact' and 'fiction', 'subjective' and 'objective', 'true' and 'imagined'. We smile at the oxymoronic genre namings: creative nonfiction; fiction; ethnographic fiction; the nonfiction novel; and true fiction ... Ethnographers should not be constrained by the habits of someone else's mind. (Richardson 2000, 253-4)

Introduction

Theoretical Frame

The theoretical frame for this study is therefore autoethnographic and founded on the fundamental human act of performance.¹ Garance Maréchal describes autoethnography as ‘a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing’ (2010, 43). The rendering of much of this study is reflexive², and determined by an understanding that ‘ethnographic life is not separable from the self’ (Richardson 2000). Autoethnography emerges from a foundation in ethnography: where ethnography can be understood as ‘a form of situated empiricism (Malkki 1997) that is simultaneously, and without contradiction, an improvisational practice’ (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007, 181), autoethnography emphasises and embraces the subjectivity of the researcher rather than attempting to deny it. Highlighting this close relationship are Laura Ellingson and Carolyn Ellis (2008) who maintain in relation to their work *Autoethnography as Constructionist Project* that ‘whether we call a work an *autoethnography* or an *ethnography* depends as much on the claims made by authors as anything else’ (2008, 449). In as much as the intention of this visual research may seek to articulate aspects of an individual or culture, the research often emerges as more of a portrait of myself, the researcher.

For this project, I enter the various beach performance spaces as a painter/performer in full awareness of how my presence within this stage affects the actions and performances of other individuals occupying the same stage. Beyond my inherent abilities and subjectivities with the mediums of painting and drawing, many of the actions and re-actions performed, observed and enacted are fundamentally improvisational and not premeditated. Within the trope of improvisation, both the audience and the actors might expect the unexpected, and witness spontaneous and highly personal interpretations specific to each performance and location.

It is within the bounds of the theories of improvisation and autoethnography that both my personal art practice and the negotiation of the beach are liberated. As Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa Malkki describe, ‘as improvisation, ethnographic research demands forms of flexible intellectual openness and principled efforts to understand knowledge and competence, and also forms of creativity and imagination’ (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007, 181).

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- 1 Theory focusing on the importance of performance emerged in the late 20th century from the work of Wallace Bacon (1914–2001) and was further developed through the collaborative research of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner.
 - 2 Charalambos Tsekeris and Nicos Katrivesis provide the following insight into the notion of reflexivity: ‘No doubt, the reflexive process is multi-dimensional and highly ambivalent. Through self-reference, reflexivity looks for inspiration, as well as for purification from loaded conceptions, but also for a re-formulation of fundamental value orientations. The search and critique of the past of sociology brings our discipline in confrontation with subjectivism. Yet it cannot transcend the elementary matrix on which concepts and symbols have been formulated. That is, the notion of reflexivity constitutes the very beginning for a new meaning-making of categories of thought’ (Tsekeris and Katrivesis 2008, 11).

Introduction

Tableau

In adopting autoethnographic principles as the frame to this investigation I also acknowledge the ongoing critique of this field from within the social sciences. This discussion has included qualitative researchers referred to as ‘journalists’ and autoethnographic work ‘termed unscientific ... exploratory, or entirely personal and full of bias’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 4). Whilst the point of my research is not to argue the validity of the autoethnographic methodology (which in itself is a rich and complex discussion) I embrace this research methodology for the project in the belief that it contributes to the search for new creative, holistic understanding to which others may relate, free of the constraints of traditional scientific methodology.³

In the recognition of this challenge to traditional conventions I present this study. The reality of my lived-experience is shared with the audience along with my vulnerabilities, my humour and specific understandings relative to my culture and heritage. My findings are not presented as definitive. At times I circumnavigate the complexities of convoluted and often contested theory in favour a personal sensorial response in paint and prose. In this context my approach should not be seen as a compromising academic rigour or responsibilities and ‘theory avoidance’, instead it is intended to provoke a range of interpretive creative responses in the hope that it may generate new questions.

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- 3 Described in the Oxford English Dictionary as: ‘a method of procedure that has characterized natural science since the 17th century, consisting in systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses: criticism is the backbone of the scientific method.’

Introduction

Tableau

Tableau



Fig1. Richard Coldicutt, *William the Water Baby*, 1992, photograph, 100mm x 150mm

In a potent memory I recall the sheer delight on the face of my son as an exuberant toddler immersed in the tepid waters of a sandy pool, his salty little body caressed by sunshine, wrapped only in a sea breeze. It was at this moment that I was struck by the intensity and contiguity of our biological connection to the natural pleasures of water and the beach. With compulsive regularity, every day in all conditions, I renew this essential connection with the ocean. On the shoreline and in the weightless wilderness of the ocean I find endless inspiration, bounty, extreme challenges, a sense of freedom, fear, wonderment and peace, a place to seek solace and to socialise. Here between the dunes and the ocean I experienced my first sexual encounter, was married, was where my son took his first steps and ultimately is the place where my ashes will be scattered.

Body³

007

*this body
deep inside another
immersed in the rise and return of each caress
with every thrust a sigh
absorbed a bed of sand.*

– Coldicutt, 2013.

The Beach as an Erogenous Zone:

Figuring through Painting

By Richard Phillip Coldicutt



Fig2. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2012–2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Act I

Scene I: The Urban Beach

009 ◀



Fig3. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2012–2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Act I

The Urban Beach

The Urban Beach

The beach in contemporary Western culture is a critically important socially constructed space. In its primary function the beach presents as an essential free public place—egalitarian, and supporting a broad demographic mix, yet a contested space, zoned and defined within an elusive social order. The beach is creatively utilised for ceremonies and cultural events, yet as a primary site of enculturation, it is also a place systematically appropriated by advertising and the media for commercial activity. Historically the littoral has evolved into its current manifestation as a sexualised space where hedonism reigns supreme, a vital stage on which to perform the latest body archetype to exploit ‘erotic capital’ (Hakim 2010), yet in a movement from culture to nature, its distant shoreline equally accommodates divergent and subversive performances.

Set in the sand, transitory performances appear often amplified or saturated by the powerful physical and liminal characteristics of the littoral environment.

As we follow a path that leads us through imagined, constructed, and experienced landscapes, one thing becomes clear within the multiplicity of gazes and ways of seeing. It is within the landscape that we find and produce our full sense of human being. As the location for both individual and collective memories, it is a sacred place, full of meanings. Through direct and abstract ways of engagement, we have created symbolic and inner landscapes that nourish and sustain us. And yet we have manipulated the landscape, distorted and deformed it, in ways that had and continue to have profound consequences for human values and lives. Past, present, and future coalesce into a paradoxical landscape of fear and desire. However, this is a rich landscape that contains the histories of human discourses and physical interactions with the environment. Within these multiple layers of sediment, we find the traces of our future and what we might become. As we engage with the visions of the artists on display and with our own ways of seeing the world, the possibility of new meanings and forms of representation unfold intersubjectively. It all depends on how we want to see the landscape and which vantage point we choose. (Frankland 2008, 94)

Act I

Scene I

Scene I

I bundle my paints and canvasses into the shade of a limestone boulder and dive into the sea, baptised into the crystal waters of the Indian Ocean. Rolling and slipping beneath the surface, submerged within a hemisphere of sensorial delights, refracted thoughts dwell upon my nakedness and the freedom within this liminal space, arrested only by an awareness of a time and history when the littoral zone was the source of terror, repulsion, confusion and contention. Staring skyward, afloat this salty medium, I feel my body rise and fall, synchronised between breath and current, tensioned by a waning moon and the gravity of the earth. I retreat back to the shore buffeted by a warm blast of sea breeze and nestle into the blazing powder sand.

With the firing roar of a breaking wave, radiant heat douses my body and sparks a *coenaesthetic* experience⁴ that momentarily overwhelms my perception of place. In the squeeze of a handful of sand, compressed memories ignite, freed within its tactility ... armed with bucket and spade I recall the jubilation of establishing personal fortifications against the relentless attack of the ocean and the inevitable squealing retreat as the surging tide reclaimed its own ... then to race from ocean to dune and mould my goose-bumped body, into this timeless medium. Many an imaginary mile was travelled in a veritable range of sand cars decorated in flotsam and jetsam that carried me, and my evolving imagination into teenage years. Scallop shell headlights later transformed and struggled to contain gigantic breasts of mermaids adorned with invariable mounds of seaweed pubic hair.

Sand offered a semblance of discretion as I lay on my front, a bewildered and humiliated teenager ravaged with testosterone trapped in a body that involuntarily and publically responded to any visual stimulation of the female form. It was on this sandy plain between dunes and the ocean that I was first seduced with the beauty of naked body... So it was within the *ménage à trois* of sun, sand and sea that a time-glass trickle onto a bared nipple tantalisingly revealed the veritable fourth addendum ... sex.

I recall the profound wisdom of actor Barry Humphries, in character as Sir Les Patterson, that expresses this period of my life and the intimate mix of sand and sex so succinctly:

⁴ In his seminal work *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside between 1750–1840* Alain Corbin (1995) highlights the essential connection between the unpredictable natural qualities of the beach and the coenaesthetic experience: ‘impressions which created a sense of existence on the basis of a collection of bodily sensations’. In different contexts this experience can exist as a place of terror and purgatorial suffering (in a medieval mind); a restorative cleansing (within the arms of a seventeenth century ‘dipper’) a tantalizing mix of picturesque and sublime trepidation (in a Romantic paradigm); a site of sinful-sexual convolution (in the Victorian mind); a landscape of death, suffering and violation (in the sands of war); and as the erotically charged highly sexualised public stage for the body (of the contemporary beach).

Whenever I go to the beach I dunno whether to lie on the sand and look at the sheilas or lie on the sheilas and look at the sand. (In Dutton 1985, 85)

Now as a crusty old artist etched by the sands of time I sit on the seawall looking northward from a corner of Cottesloe Beach, Western Australia. The imposing limestone architecture of the Indiana Tea House radiates in an impasto of raw umber and Naples yellow; the form of its raking arches pronounced by a series of deep cobalt violet and Prussian blue shadows that streak out across the sand. A line of Norfolk Island Pines, equally deep in the luscious tones of Hooker's green and Ivory black are slowly absorbed into a vast and cloudless cobalt-cerulean sky; an atmospheric perspective shared by a seamless shimmering titanium white streak of fine white sand, punctuated only by a distant gesture of artificial rock outcrops, as they too disappear, sandwiched between turquoise and saltbush blue. The linear perspective of terraced limestone walls fortifies the scene with an inevitable movement towards the singular vanishing point of this beached horizon.

Drawn by the need to seek shady relief from the furnace on the sand I cautiously pick my way through a labyrinth of towels and bodies back towards the Indiana Tea House. Propped against an arching pillar I scan the beach. Beyond the compression of sizzling bodies distorted in the radiant heat rays, back to the grassed terraces to the north, the view resembles a Persian rug with a weave of flesh punctuated with vibrant highlights of umbrellas and towels. From my shady site I consider for a moment the physical environment that comprises this particular corner of Cottesloe Beach in relation to Frankland's 'imagined, constructed, and experienced landscapes' (Frankland 2008). Both tranquil and reflective in its current physical state, this landscape is clearly 'constructed': from the line of cabanas that demarcate a cultured shaded space on the southern end of the beach to the artificial groyne that extends beyond the natural limestone cliffs. A concrete pathway sweeps the curve of the sand at the base of the terraced grass embankment and delivers pedestrians to my current position at the steps of the Cottesloe Surf Club/Indiana Tea House.

The architecture of this limestone building⁵ announces not only Perth's most iconic beach but also a heritage that connects directly to another 'imagined' landscape; the Royal Brighton Pavilion located on the foreshore of one of Britain's most famous seaside locations. The Brighton Pavilion, built in the Indo-Saracenic architectural style in 1787,⁶ was itself modelled on the appropriated style of 'Orientalism'⁷; replete with 'Indian stables, Muscovite minarets, glass arcades, ogee arches and exotic flora' (Inglis 2000). I recognise embedded within the imported colonial landscape of

⁵ The first incarnation of the Indiana Tea House was built in 1910.

⁶ In 1787 Henry Holland enlarged the original existing building, which was subsequently greatly enlarged during 1815–1822 by John Nash.

⁷ This is a term used to describe the imitation of elements of Middle Eastern and Asian culture by European and American architects, artists and writers. Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) the term has been determined as representative of Western culture's patronising attitude towards Asian, Middle Eastern and North African cultures.

the Indiana Tea House, a cultural vestige comprised of 'individual and collective memories' and 'histories of human discourses' (Frankland 2008) that link directly to the sexualisation of the beach in 21st century Western culture. From the mid-18th century to the late 19th century, the seaside provided a unique social space where class distinction was temporary suspended and socialising within the liminal zone took on its own form outside of the normal conservative regulatory restrictions of Victorian colonialism. Brighton was perceived as a pleasure resort: 'a place of sanctioned bodily excess ... a marginal and liminal space, where cultural, social and spatial boundaries dissolve' (Shields 1991, 74), where 'permissiveness facilitated the presence of pornography, prostitution, free love, and homosexuality' (Metusela and Waitt 2012, 6). Yet during this period the body on the beach was highly regulated.

The beach in its 'natural' state was problematic. In order to stabilise the liminal characteristics and sexual activities associated with this space, cultured semiotic frames were applied to manage and civilise it.⁸ The simple act of entering into the water to bathe required a serious culturing of nature. With the necessity to maintain decorum and discretion considered imperative, bathing required the use of cutting-edge technology in the form of the 'bathing machine'. In essence this 'machine' was a horse-drawn wooden hut-on-wheels that delivered patrons across the beach and into the ocean.



Fig 4. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2012–2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

⁸ In this sense clothing provided an important marker and maintenance of moral coding: 'Clothing operated as a masquerade of civilisation. For those in authority, daylight bathing had to be banned to protect the race and empire. At another level, surf-bathing practices mattered because clothes helped colonists define and redefine sexuality, gender and class distinction (Metusela and Waitt 2012, 8).

On Brighton Beach many of the machines tracked into the water on steel rails. When positioned with the axel deep in the ocean, a retractable canvas awning was extended from the cabin. Once dressed in appropriate swimming attire⁹, patrons could slip into the water under the cover of the 'modesty hood' and float discreetly out of range of the notorious 'peeping toms' who invariably lined the shores.¹⁰ In 1838 the Australian Government introduced a ban on swimming during daylight hours (between 6am and 8pm) 'within view of a public place or resort'¹¹ in response to colonial ideologies of the period and jurisdictions defined by laws of the Commonwealth. In an attempt to maintain Victorian Judeo-Christian morality, Australian Government took measures to control the sexualisation of the beach through this legal proclamation. Christine Metusela and Gordon Waitt (2012) emphasise that the unpopular measure of banning daylight bathing expresses the civilising of a society constantly under the perceived threat of the uncouth actions of Aboriginal people (who swam naked) in a 'savage world'.

Legislation seeking to regulate surf-bathing bodies, in a much deeper sense, was a way of taming the spatial. For the colonial bourgeoisie, stability and coherence over the beach frequently occurred at the intersection of three discourses; Romantic naturalism, primitivism and nakedness. (Metusela and Waitt 2012, 27)

'Taming the spatial' or governing the overwhelming sensorial cocktail generated within the littoral appears as an ongoing concern that spans much of the history of the beach. Across the past two centuries various discourses have formed important frames through which to manage both the fiction and the fantasy of this enigmatic place. The inherent power of these discourses continue to resonate with current perceptions and performances played out on the

⁹ Women's bathing fashion in the 1880s required donning a full-length gown or smock (weighted to keep the hems down) over the top of Turkish-style 'bloomers'. This style underwent various incarnations with bathing costumes in the 1890s consisting of black knee-length puff-sleeved woollen dresses often with a sailor's collar, and drawers with ribbons and bows, augmented with slippers and caps. The corset continued to be worn as an essential element to the costume, despite the associated dangers with the device. Apart from all of the related land-based health problems, the corset introduced a new set of life-threatening complications: restricted breathing, the susceptibility to cramps, and the wire supports, which were prone to rusting, proved lethal, when unfortunate bathers were stabbed by the broken device. Whilst the newer designs were 'rust proofed,' it is easy to imagine how cumbersome and notoriously impractical these garments were in oceanic conditions. Until the end of the century the act of bathing for women was usually undertaken in shallow locations either from bathing machines, often with the assistance of a 'dipper,' (or 'bather for men') or holding on to a rope secured to a buoy. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century when ultimately, women began to indulge in the sport of swimming, that the burdensome Victorian costume was replaced by a more practical design in the form of a one-piece.

¹⁰ The 'bathing machine' was also employed on beaches around Australia such as Brighton Beach, Victoria and Cottesloe Beach, Western Australia (see images).

¹¹ Through legislation passed by the New South Wales Legislative Assembly.



Fig 5. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2012–2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

contemporary beach. The language we choose to describe the beach often relates back to ideologies manifest in the Romantic movement of the 19th century: we still value the idea of 'escaping' urban living to immerse ourselves in the sensorial delights and the 'wilderness' of the beach. Metusela and Waitt emphasise how the experience or 'imagining' of the beach is greatly enriched through the ideologies of Romanticism and primitivism:

Hand-in-hand with Romanticism was the environmental determinism of primitivism; where lush tropical vegetation was understood as offering a place to release one's sexuality and heightened sensuality. Consequently these imaginings had already worked to eroticise bodies at the beach through discourses of primitivism. Constituted as a pre-cultural site, the beach was imagined as 'free' from the moral constraints of colonial settler society, including bathing naked. (Metusela and Waitt 2012, 27)

As I will highlight in Act II, within advertising, the beach continues to be presented as an 'earthly paradise', and a place to deeply connect with nature in all of its sublime beauty. An embodied sense of primitivism seems to continue to anoint the awe of the waves, the heat of the sun and the constant shifting of the sands as a special natural place uncontaminated by cultured intervention. So too we enter the beach with a sense of liberation in the knowledge that this is a 'free space' ideologically, economically and physically. Whether under colonial or contemporary order, the hyper-sensorial elements of the littoral environment also stimulate in many an erotic or sexual consciousness.

Act I

Scene I

It is evident that under stringent Victorian Judeo-Christian principles, the pursuit of hedonist pleasure within the space of the beach was intolerable. Without detailing the ensuing historical battle between moral guardianship defined by Judeo-Christian bodily ethics and an alternative beach culture based on free occupation and hedonism, it is enough to recognise that physicality ultimately won over ideology. Australian-born water sports hero Annette Kellermann played a seminal role in radically redefining conservative social attitude towards bodies on the beach and serves as the forebear to the emergence of the athletic body on the beach.

Kellermann was paralysed by polio as a child and when introduced to the water as a cure, discovered her predilection for swimming. As a world-renowned swimming champion, she devoted her life to the sport, but it was her tight-fitting woollen one-piece which provided her instant claim to fame. When Kellermann, dressed in her signature costume was arrested for indecent exposure on Boston's Revere beach, she announced, as discussed by Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker:

'I want to swim ... and I can't swim wearing more stuff than you can hang on a clothesline ...' By the simple expedient of donning this abbreviated outfit, she turned the beach into the world's first public-and free-of-charge-open-air peepshow. (Lenček and Bosker 1998, 191)

It was Kellermann's tenacity, reasoning and fame that dramatically contributed to freeing women from the bondage of cumbersome swimming apparel. Realising the physical (and commercial) benefits in promoting the form of a toned athletic body produced through the activity of swimming, Kellermann published two books: *How to Swim* (1918) and *Physical Beauty: How to Keep it* (1919). Distinguished through the frame of science, Kellermann's celebrated athletic physique was described by a Harvard professor as 'physically the most perfect out of 'ten thousand women scientifically tested' (Sprawson 1992, 34). In addition, pre-empting the Elle Macpherson¹² supermodel style of marketing and contemporary beach body culture, Kellermann launched her own personal one-piece design bathing suit, the 'Annette Kellermann'. Framed under the new healthy athletic aesthetic, swimming bodies were fortified against perceptions of indecency. Increasingly, the *swimming body* became Australianised ... this was a body aesthetic modelled on a regime of health and youthful athleticism synonymous with a proud national identity.

As I reflect on the many performances currently spread out across this sandy stage at Cottesloe Beach, it is clear that this scientific discourse of health and fitness has ultimately amalgamated with ideologies of fashion: the swimming institution drew on science and discourses of physical culture and health to position the sports body as non-sexual;

¹² Elle Macpherson (born 1964) is an iconic Australian supermodel, actress and businesswoman. Following her appearance in *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit issue in the early 1980s, Macpherson became an international celebrity and subsequently known as 'The Body'. Macpherson pursued a career in acting and established a highly successful business ventures including a line of skincare products and designer clothing label featuring lingerie and beachwear.

whereas the emergence of the transnational fashion industry gave greater importance to discourses of femininity and masculinity that disciplined body size, shape, skin colour, and firmness. The beach [may be] ... examined as a site where the boundaries between moral and immoral heterosexual identities were both ruptured and made resilient. (Metusela and Waitt 2012, xxxi)

Body, tanned skin, and muscle appear as the new fabrics from which to fashion and stage the new idealised sexualised erotic body on the beach. It is also evident from these performances either live or framed within advertising and popular media, the beach remains a site to test, reinforce and 'rupture' the many boundaries that define sexualities in contemporary society.



Fig 6. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2012–2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Moving beyond the historical shadow cast by the Indiana Tea House it is time to immerse myself in the performance of the 21st century beach. I approach the tapestry of beach towels and bodies stitched across the sand to the hemline of the water's edge. I feel far from invisible under my faded hat, traipsing the soft sand with easel and paints, indeed the sight of all this clutter was enough to declare myself a spectacle on the corner of this stage. To my neighbouring cast it is apparent that I am about to breach a tacit rule of the sand: it is fine to look but not to stare or to publically scrutinise. The residents of this sandy patch seem to reflect my awkwardness and body consciousness and avert their gaze as I search for my place in the puzzle.

Secure within the bounds of my towel I scan the beach. Physically this beach is timed by the rhythm of the seasons and the performances that manifest through these changes. Whilst the activities and performances that take place within this site may vary in relation to the seasons, they are generally leisure-based. Looking towards the Cottesloe groyne, I recall paddling my board out from this very spot five months earlier into a surging winter's tide to ride the 'lefthander' as it peeled off the point. Any trace of the winter's seagrass that spanned the beach in piles of windrows has been erased from this sandy plane, now groomed and draped in towels.

Roused by the noise of activity behind me, I turn to watch as a steady trickle of near-naked bodies descend onto the baking sand and settle around me in clusters and groups. With ritualistic enterprise, the actors in this beach performance stake their territory with paraphernalia: water bottles, suntan lotion, towels, bags, hats, phones, umbrellas and the odd shade shelter. The choreography involved in this simple action of demarcating space reveals a particularly elusive dynamic of this sandy stage: whilst the beach is at once a public space it also manifests as inherently private by the way in which personal space is mutually acknowledged and necessarily negotiated. Studying several micro-performances currently underway around me, what I witness is not behaviour typically conducted within any other cultural location. Where else could one expect to sit in a free public space compressed amongst a virtually naked cast of hundreds and go about business as if nothing is different, like the Emperor in his new clothes? John Fiske offers:

The beach, with its structure of the natural, legitimates this sexual display and look: the body is permitted a visibility within this anomalous strip that is denied it in more culturally central environments, and the body, of course, is where we are closest to nature. Sexuality may be 'natural' in its origins, but the forms by which it is expressed are specifically cultural, however much this may be disguised. (Fiske 1989, 52)

Intrigued by the challenge of unravelling the cultural forms by which sexuality is expressed on the beach, I extract from my bag *The Bodysurfers* by Western Australian novelist Robert Drewe to reflect on how other creative practitioners have used the beach as a stage to 'figure' the unique forms, functions and complexities of this space. The book falls open at the heart of a scene set upon another Western Australian beach (possibly North Cottesloe Beach) where the central character David is accompanied by his girlfriend, and his two children (from an estranged marriage).

Next to him Lydia was arranging her towel on a level patch of sand, ironing away lumps and wrinkles and placing her beach appurtenances within reach. Then she removed her bikini top and, her breasts quivering, the nipples wide and brown in the sun, she sat down. Reaching for the suntan cream from her bag, she rubbed some briskly into her breasts with a studious circular motion, paying attention to the nipples. More cream was squeezed onto the stomach and legs, even the tops of the feet.

David was slightly unnerved, as usual, by the act of public revelation (there always seemed to be some sort of statement underlying their sudden exposure among other people), but he had never realised how much her breasts actually *moved*. They had three definite motions—they were simultaneously bouncing, swinging and shivering. From the prim, diligent way she pursed her lips while she applied the cream she seemed to be either terribly solicitous of them or disapproving of their independent lives.

David avoided looking at them too openly. Ogling was out of the question. He did, however, glance surreptitiously at his elder son, but Paul, though hardly able to miss them, was staring coolly seawards.

Completing this display, still with a frown of concentration, Lydia flicked a grain of sand from one glistening aureole, spread more cream over her face, and then lay back on her towel with a sigh of contentment. 'I wonder what the poor people are doing' she said.

I wonder if women know what they're doing. David wondered. How did those tits which had been used to sexually tempt him at 3.00am suddenly at 11.30 become as neutral as elbows? Who's kidding who? He was too far gone at thirty-eight, especially after the past couple of years, to read the fine print any more, much less try to keep up with the constant changes in the rules. They were amazing, leave it at that. He was awestruck by the grey areas, the skating-over, the 180-degree turns that women made these days. The breakup and this new status, or lack of status, had made him hypersensitive to the female dichotomies—fashion verses politics, the desperate clash between ideals and glands—and their magical sleight of hand which not only hid it all and kept the audience clapping but left you with a coin up your nose and an egg in your ear.

Lying back under the sun he had to smile at the way Lydia pretended she had no exhibitionist's flair, that she didn't have to flaunt what she had, come on strong. He remembered the broad-daylight fuck precipitated by those exposed breasts not long ago on Scarborough Beach down south during their search for the perfect shack. They were sunbaking like this after a surf. A nipple brushed his arm accidentally, then insistently. Then began a sly stroking of his thigh, feathery touches over his groin. The sun, the ocean, the whole salty, teasing, teenage delight of it all! They'd got up without a word and strolled determinedly to the

end of the beach and, behind a low cairn of rocks barely higher than their horizontal bodies, momentarily hidden from at least fifty beach fishermen, surfers and swimmers, had a most satisfying quickie in the sand. (Drewe 1983, 120–1)

Drewe's monologue perfectly announces the moment in which I find myself here at the beach. The physicality in this sandy microcosm seems palpable and packed with convoluted emotions and sexual politics: bodies next to bodies, bodies touching, performing, perfumed, sandy, salty sunburnt bodies where the movement of sunscreen to exotic massage oil is simply a trick of the imagination. Drewe's skilful expression of the super-saturation of meaning that exists within this space is invariably embalmed in the highly eroticised atmosphere of the beach. Rather than a simple place of pleasure and relaxation, an afternoon at the beach can be a demonstrative affair, psychologically loaded, and as changeable as the conditions of the ocean. Determining the elusive boundaries of personal space and sexuality within the physical compression of the beach is confounding and requires constant improvisation and hypersensitivity. As Drewe so incisively expresses, here in sand there is no apparent script. The 'desperate clash between ideals and glands' brilliantly summarises a particular aspect of beach performance that requires delicate and constant negotiation. When Lydia applies sunscreen to her breasts, it is at once both sexually charged exhibitionism requiring an audience, and a highly 'natural' act, supremely personal and 'normal' within the stage of the beach. Susan Brownmiller (1984) considers the difficulty for a woman negotiating the public/private paradox that exists around notions of breasts:

No other part of the anatomy has such semi-public, intensely private status, and no other part of the body has such vaguely defined custodial rights. One learns to be selectively generous with breasts—this is a girl child's lesson—and through the breast iconography she sees all around her, she comes to understand that breasts belong to everybody, but especially men. It is they who invent and refine their myths, who discuss breasts publicly, who criticize their failings as they extol their wonders, and who claim to have more need and intimate knowledge of them than a woman herself. (Brownmiller 1984, 24)

Whilst David in his detailed observation fetishised Lydia's breasts he expressed no apparent 'custodial rights' towards them. Unsure of how to regard her very public/private 'glands' David endeavoured to respond appropriately to Lydia's illusive signals with due etiquette in the context of the social space of the beach. It is apparent towards the end of the passage, for all of the confused ideology, that both David and Lydia were seduced by the hyper-sensorial elements in the highly charged erotic atmosphere of the beach: 'the sun, the ocean, the whole salty, teasing, teenage delight of it all!' (Drewe 1983, 121).

Perhaps some of the confusion that one may encounter entering the space of the beach can be attributed to the need to consciously suppress innate bodily sensations enlivened in the potent corporeal atmosphere of this space.

It is necessary to recognise that the experience of the beach is deeply personal and people respond within this space in varied and diverse ways. An individual's performance within this space may be determined by cultural and spiritual beliefs, or something as simple as the weather conditions, the location, the context (such as on holiday) and so forth. However for a large proportion of the Western population there is an underlying sense of eroticism connected with the beach. Eroticism is broadly defined in The Macquarie Dictionary as:

1. erotic quality or nature, 2. the use of sexually arousing or pleasing symbolism in literature or art, 3. sexual excitement or desire 4. a tendency to exalt sex, 5. psychol an overt display of sexual behaviour.
- (The Macquarie Dictionary Online, 2014)

Broadly interpreted, eroticism can be perceived as an aesthetic focus on sexual desire particularly in anticipation of sexual activity or to incite it. Within this paradigm, the beach features as a prominent site to test and display of our sexualised (eroticised) bodies. Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker in their account of the beach highlight the power of this intrinsic connection of contemporary (Western) sexuality and the beach:

above all, the beach is where we have our most intense sexual experiences. After all, the inherent sensuality of the beach stimulates a thundering chromatic scale of sensations- tactile, visual, olfactory, gustatory, and kinetic. Every age and stage of our lives has its own fixed experience of the beach: courtship, honeymoon, parenthood, divorce, retirement. Budding adolescents discover the bonus of the beach as a theatre of erotic delights as they train their voyeuristic gaze upon vast expanses of human flesh. Young men and women display their bodies in joyful mating rituals, while honeymooners embrace in the shade of solitary palapas, in musky Oceanside motels, or luxurious beach hideaways. Mature conjugal love comes to renew itself—licitly, or more often, illicitly—by the sea. The divorced and the chronically mis-mated come for sexual renewal, and for the one more chance on the erotic merry-go-around. In the end, there is the irreducible simplicity to life at the beach. (Lenček and Bosker 1998, xiv)

Lenček and Bosker establish a strong connection between the powerful physical characteristics of the beach and sexualised social interaction within this space. The documented history of the beach is laden with a legacy of political and moral efforts to deny or regulate this erotic-beach connection. John Harcourt's novel *Upsurge*, published in 1934, serves as one such example, providing an historical perspective on how the beach featured in the lives of Western Australians during the years of the Great Depression. The Commonwealth Book Censorship Board banned the book three months after its publication on the grounds of it being 'communist propaganda' (Jones 2001) and 'grossly indecent'. In the current political and social context, the book fails to live up to any of these accusations, rather it can be seen to sensitively explore the social and economic anxieties of the time. In the introduction to the 1986

republished edition of *Upsurge* Richard Niles emphasises how the beach is a site of seduction, and how ‘the drunken sensuality brought on by wind and surf and sun’ within this eroticised space has an irresistible intoxicating effect on the lives of the characters in the novel. Niles suggests that: ‘they are rendered personally and politically powerless by this combined onslaught’ (Niles 1986).

When the magistrate James Riddle pays a rare visit to Scarborough Beach, he is greeted by his friend, the chemist John Graham, who asks whether Riddle’s soul has ‘rebelled against the poets and philosophers’ for him to have joined this ‘orgy of sensuality’. He goes on to declare: ‘Look at it—a pagan bacchanal!’ He made a gesture which embraced the whole beach. ‘They’re drunk with the wind and the surf and the sun- especially the sun. A thousand half-nude men and women luxuriating in pure sensation. Bare backs, bare shoulders, bare thighs. And half of them not content with the costumes cut away almost to the waist must slip off the shoulder –straps and roll them wholly down. Even the women. Look at them, half concealing their breasts only with their cupped hands making barely pretense at holding up their costumes. (Niles 1986, 17–18)

Harcourt paints a lively picture of the beach under a spell of eroticism. In doing so he also implies that part of the seduction of this space is that it remains freely accessible across the entire social spectrum, and offers a sanctuary for hedonistic pleasure even in the midst of difficult economic times. This egalitarian aspect of the beach lies at the heart of the Western beach experience. This is a space where (as in the case of *Upsurge*) a judge may share the same free patch of sand as a criminal, a situation that would rarely occur in society outside of this stage. On the sand there exists the possibility for an extraordinary trade in power relationships: disrobed on the beach a Judge may feel disempowered and vulnerable in their nakedness, equally a criminal may feel empowered and naturally confident. Both may feel sexually attracted towards each other. It raises the question of what determines this sense of power and confidence, vulnerability or overt self-consciousness: does a unique social hierarchy based on body image operate within the liminal space of the beach?

I reflect on an alternative experience of observing the naked human form within the context of my art practice to help comprehend the unique characteristics of the beach. Life Drawing is perceived historically as a valid artistic practice that entails rapid sketching and colour studies of nude subjects or performers. As an essential weekly exercise I study models who appear empowered in their nudity as they confidently perform, intimately and openly, poses that move between what could be considered sexual, challenging, submissive, classical and so on. Usually conducted under artificial or staged lighting conditions within a suitably heated environment, this is an orchestrated, refined presentation. Whilst this performance might be enacted in the presence of a number of artists, it is essentially a

private event; highly ordered and vindicated in the context of art, and further legitimised by the fact that it is a paid transaction. Within the frame of art such a performance would not be considered erotic, which is in reverse of what appears normal order on the sand. In the studio, models appear vulnerable only when they are actually dressing; at this point discretion is assumed. For both actor and spectator this action provides a clear signal that the performance is over and marks the point at which the model assumes a personality reserved for life outside of the studio. For an individual disrobing and entering the sandy stage of the beach, there is no presumed switch in disposition, yet there is a certain self-consciousness associated with undressing in the company of other beach-goers, and often a sense of power or vulnerability in revealing the body from under the protective layering of clothing. In both these scenarios there is also a distinct difference in how one performs in situations determined as either work or play.

The beach is widely associated with play: a ‘lifestyle’ culture that is shared in a particularly generic Western way and often linked to sports such as surfing, kite surfing, beach volleyball and other hedonist preoccupations such as sunbathing and general pleasure-seeking associated with travel and holidaying. In his 2012 travel documentary on Brazil, Michael Palin presented a short segment on Rio Beach etiquette. The documentary is filmed on Ipanema Beach, the location of some of the most expensive real estate in the Southern Hemisphere. Palin interviews a local who describes the essential position that the beach maintains in Brazilian culture and describes how specific zoning, which occurs along its shores, relates to social structure in the society. Ipanema Beach is divided into eleven *Postos* (lifeguard stations), where, whilst marked on a conventional map, the patronage within these zones appears to shift and change with time and popularity. Each *Postos* is segregated into areas of influence based on a particular beach culture and patronage. For example, *Postos* 9 attracts artists, actors, writers and intellectuals, and adjoins *Postos* 8, which attracts a gay fraternity. *Postos* 7 is dedicated to communists whilst *Postos* 6 is the reserve of a notoriously good-looking set and so on. Therefore if one meets in a bar, a key question in any conversation is ‘*Onde você sentar na praia?*’—‘Where do you sit on the beach?’ As Palin’s interviewee emphasises, the answer to this question is very revealing with regards to gaining insight into the personality of an individual. It also highlights the egalitarian aspect of the beach in Brazilian culture; a beautiful woman who lives and works in one of the *flaelas* (shanty towns) overlooking Ipanema Beach, may trade her overalls for a *tanga* (tiny bikini) and place herself comfortably at *Postos* 6 amongst the wealthy and beautiful set. Palin’s account is by no way unique to Ipanema Beach. ‘Where one sits’ on Cottesloe Beach would equally reveal much of an individual’s traits and aspirations. On any hot Sunday afternoon one can observe the cluster of Italian Nonna’s picnicking in the shade of the Norfolk Island Pines, whilst the freshly oiled bodies surrounding the lifeguard tower compressed between the flags, is a clear demarcation of another order. What constitutes a particular social conduct on the southern end of Cottesloe Beach is markedly different several hundred metres further north where the beach is used for a dog/human exercising area, and north again by a similar distance where the sand is reserved for nude bathing, artillery practice and sex in the

Act I

Scene I

dunes. Unlike the clear structuring based around the *Postos* system in Rio, part of the complexity of this stretch of Western Australian coastline is defining and negotiating the various codings or frames that delineate particular zones. Between the obvious physical boundaries articulated by signage that demarcates dog exercise areas from nude bathing, there exists a stage, saturated with personal narratives and micro performances. Palin's documentary highlights the existence of an alternative social hierarchy and ideological compartmentalisation exclusive to the beach.

In their research of the Australian beaches of the Illawarra region between 1830 and 1940, Metusela and Waitt make reference to a growing awareness of 'erotic capital' (Hakim 2010):

bodies disrobing at the beach became the principal source of social status of becoming modern women, knowing they were going to be carefully scrutinized in terms of their size, shape and form. (Metusela and Waitt 2012, 110–11)

Entering the littoral became a performative act and the beach an essential stage on which to perform one's sexuality. On this podium it was possible to exhibit an individual's awareness of the new demands of an emerging consumer culture and express one's modern attitude towards evolving body styles and beach fashion. Body consciousness and confidence became inherently linked to modern liberalism and signalled a distancing from Victorian conservatism. The beach was now a legitimised public space where intimacy was tolerated. Central to the demands of this new regime of flesh on the beach was an awareness and understanding of one's body image and the hierarchy developed around conformities of the body; this was not about personality, this was social status built on looks.

In her book *Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men Women and Children* Sarah Grogan (2007), argues that there is a noticeable growth in popular interest in 'body image' which has become a lively new area of academic research.¹³ I discuss aspects of Grogan's research later in Act I in relation to the powerful effect of advertising and the media in determining and maintaining specific social values attributed to body archetypes and practices. Relevant to the immediate discussion is the assumption of power attributed to beauty and how this relates to the body on the beach. As illustrated on Ipanema Beach, the perceived value of a beautiful woman supersedes all other social values associated with her economic and demographic positioning outside of this space. Catherine Hakim (2010) refers to this as 'erotic capital' and suggests: 'erotic capital is increasingly important in the sexualised culture of affluent modern societies' (Hakim 2010, 499). In an article for the *European Sociological Review* Hakim proposes that:

¹³ The interest in this new area of research is reflected in recent formation and success of *Body Image: An International Journal of Research* first published in 2004.

Erotic capital is not only a major asset in mating and marriage markets, but can also be important in labour markets, the media, politics, advertising, sports, the arts, and in everyday social interaction. A central feature of patriarchy has been the construction of 'moral' ideologies that inhibit women from exploiting their erotic capital to achieve economic and social benefits. Feminist theory has been unable to extricate itself from this patriarchal perspective and reinforces 'moral' prohibitions on women's sexual, social, and economic activities and women's exploitation of their erotic capital. (Hakim 2010:499)

Hakim's theory presents important implications for the function of the contemporary beach primarily as a key cultural site to socialise, and secondarily as a stage on which to perform and profit from invested erotic capital. Executed through the sexual economics presented in this theory, 'where one sits on the beach' becomes intrinsically linked to 'upward social mobility' (Hakim 2010, 508). Building on the work of sociological theorists (Bourdieu 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Mouzelis 1995), Hakim proposes erotic capital to be an addendum to economic, cultural, and social capital, maintaining that 'erotic [capital] is a somewhat different fourth asset, previously overlooked, but just as important' (Hakim 2010, 500). Identifying that erotic capital is multi-faceted, Hakim defines in descending order, the six main elements that comprise this theory: 'beauty' as the central element, 'sexual attractiveness', 'social grace and charm' (social skills in interaction), 'liveliness' (a mixture of physical fitness, social energy, and good humour), 'social presentation' (style of dress, face-painting, perfume, jewellery or other adornments), and finally 'sexuality' (sexual competence, energy, erotic imagination, playfulness, and everything else that makes for a sexually satisfying partner) (Hakim 2010, 500–1). In summary, Hakim argues that:



Fig 7. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2012–2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Erotic capital is thus a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness to other members of your society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts.¹⁴ (Hakim 2010, 501)

As a primary site for hedonistic pleasure-seeking the beach is tailor-made for performing all of the elements that define Hakim's theory of erotic capital. Under the 21st century franchise of erotic capital 'value-adding' through investment in cosmetic surgery appears not only logical, but in some cases imperative (depending on how unattractive one is deemed to be). Within this 'Surgical Age' (Wolf 1991), standards that determine extreme or ideal beauty are continually raised and increasingly homogeneous. Grogan (2007), drawing on the findings of Gillespie (1996); Viner (1997), Cepanec and Payne (2000) and Villeneuve et al., (2006) highlights a substantial escalation in the number of women having cosmetic surgery in Britain, Australia, Canada, and the USA. In 2003 cosmetic surgery was estimated to generate \$1.75 billion a year with 1.5 million people annually undergoing surgery (Bordo 2003, 25). In the first decade of the 21st century cosmetic procedures are considered 'normal' in Western countries, and support a burgeoning industry in South East Asia where discounted 'cosmetic tourism packages' are offered to Westerners to destinations such as South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines and Malaysia. Bordo (2003) emphasises that one of the consequences of cosmetic surgery is that body aesthetics have been homogenised and normalised to such a point that the scope of what is considered acceptable has been drastically reduced.



Fig 8. & Fig 9.
Richard Coldicutt,
Casting the Net (detail),
2012–2014, oil on panel,
298mm x 450mm

¹⁴ Whilst cultural and temporal variations, such as what constitutes beauty in countries outside mainstream Western culture, are discussed in Hakim's theory they have not been included in my own research.

In the 21st century the new body archetype that extols the highest virtues of erotic capital in affluent Western societies is essentially lean and mean. Where muscularity was once associated with manual labour it is now a hard fought commodity, something that you cannot simply purchase, signifying strength, energy, willpower and control. Discussing the idealisation of slenderness and the sociological interpretation of the current aesthetic Grogan argues:

slenderness is generally associated with happiness, success, youthfulness, and social acceptability. Being overweight is linked with laziness, lack of willpower and being out of control ... at the end of the last century, excess flesh (for men and women) came to be linked with low morality, reflecting personal inadequacy or lack of will ... the firm toned body is seen as representing success. (Grogan 2007. 9)

Unlike cosmetic surgery requiring skills and expertise of a surgeon and expensive specialised equipment, slenderness and muscularity can be pursued through strict dieting and exercise regimes. In its current function, the beach is not only a primary stage to perform erotic capital, but also a site to produce it. Fitness on the beach and the new body culture of muscularity connects to a heritage beginning in the Great Depression era of the 1930s–1940s in Southern California. During this period the Works Progress Administration (WPA) installed exercise equipment along the foreshore south of the Santa Monica Pier¹⁵ (known as 'Muscle Beach'). Similarly, in the first decade of the 21st century, local shires around Australia have installed callisthenic equipment at beachside locations. This capital investment is a political gesture that not only sanctions the new body archetype but contributes directly to the production of erotic capital. This marks a major shift from the function of the beach as a site of leisure, hedonistic pleasure and play to a platform to 'work out' and 'work on' the body. The consequences of this movement inflict even more pressure on social conformity and victimise a vast proportion of the population that falls outside of this stereotype. Lenček and Bosker in their history of the beach summarise this current obsession with body image:

During the last twenty years, the beach has given exhibitionism a new inflection. The desire to see and be seen has always brought people to the beach, but never before have bathers so systematically and deliberately sculpted their bodies for public scrutiny. If in the past two hundred years, fabric did the work of providing form, now skin and muscle must provide the perfect scaffold to the swimsuit, despite phenomenal advances in elastic textiles. Witness the fact that the bathing garment is now styled to showcase buttocks, upper thigh, and hip, parts of the body most susceptible to sag, flab, and cellulite. The ideal body now boasts bulges and declivities in places and shapes rarely given by nature. Only the machine, in conjunction with rigorous training regimens and near-starvation diets, can produce the lean slabs of muscle that have come to constitute beauty.

¹⁵ The site was moved during the 1960s to its current location at Venice, north of the Pier.

Act I

Scene I

This 'Undies, undies-bathers' advertisement is one part of The Simplifying Summer¹⁶ campaign which includes four other scenarios based on the beach. Manifest within the performative frame of the beach these specific beach enactments advise on: how to 're-package' your breasts after 'popping out' of a bikini, how to take a covert 'pee' in thigh-high water, how to perform the perfect 'hair whip'¹⁷ and 'stomach hold-in'. Embodied within the humour of these memorable parodies is the same serious enigma confronted by Drewe—that the beach in contemporary Western culture operates through a shared consciousness and a complex and exclusive etiquette that operates within this liberated yet elusive zone.

The advertising company Colenso's carefully orchestrated events attempt to formalise activity and manage the unpredictability of this liminal space, are carried on a premise that the beach within Western culture remains an endorsed social place to perform exposed flesh. The evidence for this assumption can be mined from the mass imagery available in popular culture and media including magazines, film and television dramas,¹⁸ as well as from the endless flow of advertising available on internet. As the Simplifying Summer advertising series so successfully highlights and continues to advocate; there is something inherently normal (and sexy) about being semi-naked on the beach. Advertising in its essential connection to the beach is highly influential in determining and politicising evolving body culture. Performance tools and cultural frames such as satire, caricature, mimicry and parody are employed by advertising and media to reinforce this exclusive and highly popular connection of sexuality and the beach.

The process of beached-body enculturation through repetitive imaging and its affects on society can be related to theory of Judith Butler. In the production of identity and gender Butler proposes:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within the highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (Butler 1990, 45)

Within the 'regulatory frame' of advertising, generalisations of body culture such as age, body size and structure, may be considered gendered stereotyping and are performed by idiosyncratic gestures (such as the hair flick), continually reinforcing the 'stylisation of the body'. A wide range of advertisements often using specific vernacular and iconography associated with sports such as surfing, tailor the use of beach-based activities to promote products to local markets.

The visualisation of the surfing culture through publications such as *Australian Surfing Life*, *Tracks*, *Surfing World*

¹⁶ This 2006 campaign was developed by Colenso BBDO, Auckland, by creative director Richard Maddocks, copywriters/art directors David Govier and Levi Slavin, and agency producer Jen Storey.

¹⁷ The 'hair whip' (or 'flick') necessarily requires long to medium length hair and is usually undertaken when the hair is wet. The action is carried out in one movement where the rapid flicking back of the head causes the hair to fly to the back of the neck. This gesture is often read through the signs of body language as an indicator of flirting, possibly for the fact that the neck (an erogenous zone) is exposed.

¹⁸ Television programs including the American drama *Baywatch* from the late 1980s, and current Australian productions such as *Puberty Blues* and *Home and Away*.

and *Waves*, are examples of such target marketing and have for several decades maintained a particular masculine identity whilst repeatedly forging a relationship that links the beach and surfing with sex. With the primary financial income for these publications generated predominantly from fashion advertising, predictably the pages contain mass imagery of teenage females clad in the latest skimpy beachwear designs, juxtaposed with athletic blokes in boardies and wetsuits. Within surfing culture the beach is a gendered space and defined within various hierarchies between males and other males, and males and females (Ford and Brown 2006).

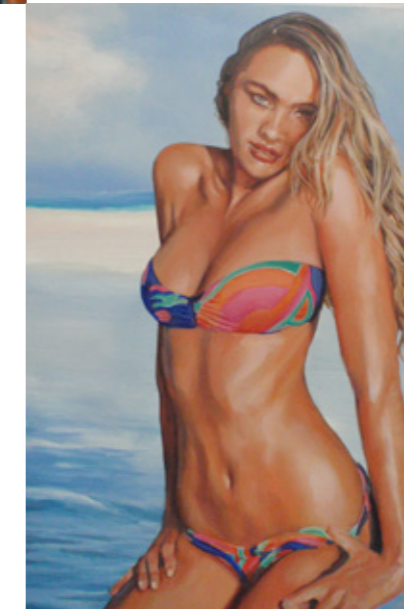


Fig 12., 13. & 14. Richard Coldicutt,
Casting the Net (detail),
2012–2014, oil on panel,
298mm x 450mm (each)

John Fiske extends this notion by analysing the semiotics of gender within the subculture of surfing:

Surfers' writing mingles accounts of mastery of the waves with ones of easy mastery of girls ... They have an exclusive language for each, language that performs the vital function of distinguishing *them* from *us* ... But the key term is *hunting*, which applies equally to waves and females. Hunting is where man first denotes his mastery over nature: it is the prerequisite of cooking, which in turn, becomes the resonant metaphor for the process of culturing nature. And consequently it is seen as a natural activity—man hunting, for food, hunting for females, hunting for waves is man behaving naturally because he is acting according to his bodily needs. (Fiske 1989, 60)

Relating Fiske's hypothesis to my own experience of surfing, it is evident that most of my youth could be defined through this gendered semiotic frame. In this context, surfing presents as an opportunity for the participant to ascertain or alter one's social standing based on feats of strength and endurance; similar perhaps to mating rites in nature earned through battle. The continued promotion of the primal nature of surfing provides advertisers with a powerful marketing angle where a gendered position (the '*them* from *us*' (Fiske 1989) created through the 'repeated stylisation of the body' (Butler 1990) generates a potential double target. A recent surf-fashion promotional glossy brochure is separated into two distinct 'his and hers' sections, presented in such a way that the catalogue has to be rotated front to back and upside down to be read, reinforcing gendered distinctions. Products tailored to sustain the gendering of surfing openly promote an association of surfing with sex from a macho-primal position. For example, wax used to coat the surface of a surfboard for traction is marketed in such a way as to foster and sustain a patriarchal image through brand names such as: *Sex Wax*, *Mrs. Palmer and Her Five Daughters*, *Antix (Rub me all over ... Hard)*, *Mothers Milk*, *Far-King*, *Mighty Mounds*, *Cream*, *Wet Women Surf Wax*, *Mr Zogs Quick Humps Sex Wax (The Best for your Stick)* to name but a few. Clothing labels and sportswear include names such as *Rebel*, *Rampage*, *No Fear*, *No Boundaries*, *Mink Pink* and *Split*.

Whilst it might take a stretch of the imagination to assume a connection between sex and surfboard wax, it is reasonable to associate the act of surfing with primal instinct. As an alternative view to Fiske's focus on the 'mastery' and dominance of man over waves, women and nature, I believe the association of notions of the natural and primal to surfing provide the linguistic means to express a strong sense of vulnerability in the presence of the awesome power of nature. Recounting personal experience:



Fig 15. Richard Coldicutt, 'ANTIX surf wax packaging', 2014, digital photograph, 150mm x 100mm

I stand in a carpeted veneer of tangled, slippery seaweed, acutely aware of the lacerating barnacles and jagged oysters that cling to the rock-face two centimetres beneath my feet. As I time the rhythm of a powerful two-meter storming swell, every passing surge sends me further back up the cliff and threatens to wash me across the serrated rocky face. In the grip of sublime terror I throw myself bonded to my board into the spume of a spilling wave timed to suck me through the driving rapids out across the rocks, down into a trough and into the racing current heading seaward. I pitch my entire strength into the three seconds it takes to fight my way clear of the point and into the rapidly rising face of the next cresting wave that threatens to pitch me mercilessly back onto the rocks. Digging deep with each powerful stroke, lungs bursting with every gasp, I throw myself into the face of a now towering king wave. (Coldicutt 2014)

The thrilling coenaesthetic experience of surfing is unequivocally primal: human mortality intimately immersed in the omnipotence of nature. The intensity of this experience is transformative and effectively defines a metaphysical existence grounded on satisfying immediate and basic bodily needs—survival. In this context the act is not a gendered experience. What is reckonable within an assumption of either mastery or vulnerability is how the extreme physiological conditions of the beach and ocean provide a frame for the formation of identity (within a specific beach culture), and fantasy (generated around stories and performances) that ultimately impacts on society. This particular frame also forges links to qualities and experiences avidly sought by the picturesque 'hunters': the Romantics of the 18th and 19th

century. Surfing could thus be described in language appropriated from this period, as a sport that hunts and thrives on experiencing the sublime, where immersed within the jaws of untamed nature the surfer seeks to experience horror, terror, apprehension and awe.

Having been possessed with the 'hunting' spirit in search of a sublime experience and the perfect wave, I have also witnessed the steady commercialisation of the sport and the transformation of the 'nature' of surfing to the multi-billion dollar business 'culture' of surfing. The successful commercial taming of the natural through a 'set of repeated acts within the highly rigid regulatory frame' of advertising, has evolved in the neo-capitalist version of this 'primal' sport, the 'natural sort' of surfer who is now necessarily moneyed and mobile (Butler 1990, 45). The natured experience has shifted to a new cultured experience for a vast surfing population who with growing popularity now hunt via the internet, for fully catered Five Star 'surf camps' located at top surf locations around the globe and luxury boat excursions that transport surfers to remote and exotic tropical island locations. From its humble beginnings, the sport of surfing is now expressed as a major commercial enterprise, with fashion labels such as Billabong and Quiksilver listed on the stock exchange and supported by a burgeoning surfing tourism industry. The influence of this beach-based activity on social identity provides an illustration of how the power of a wave has swept a culture propagated in the sand, way beyond the bounds of a shoreline.¹⁹

The sight of a coke can buried in the sand reminds me of the long history of the beach as a battleground in the branding war between Coke Cola and Pepsi. 'Within the highly ridged regulatory frame' of advertising (Butler 1990) these companies repeatedly capitalise on being able to utilise sexualised images of near naked bodies in the context of the beach. Utilising this free cultural space as the frame for product promotion, advertisers forge associations between erotic capital; portrayed through a specific youth body culture, and products, made inherently sexy (and more valuable) in connection with the beach. In an early commercial, Pepsi featured famed Colombian actress and model, Sofia Vergara as a seventeen year old negotiating the hot sand trying to get to a cabana stand selling Pepsi. In what basically amounted to a striptease act on the beach, Vergara removes item after item of her clothing to protect her feet from the burning sand, as she hops towards the Pepsi vendor. Tension mounts as all eyes turn to Vergara reduced now to her 'itsy-bitsy teeny weenie bikini' (*tanga*) as she hesitates considering whether to remove final two pieces of the garment in order to take the last few steps remaining. In another Pepsi commercial, again located on a beach, a beautiful young woman removes her top, and strolls to a beach cabana (with her back to the camera) to purchase two Pepsis, which she subsequently holds against her nipples (turning to the camera) to 'cool off'.

¹⁹ Ford and Brown in their study on *Surfing and Social Theory: Experience, Embodiment and the narrative of the dream glide* (2006) provides a seminal text that maps the history of surfing and links the sport to Victor Turner's theory of liminality which I discuss later in Act 1.

A 2012 commercial for Coca-Cola pictures a young woman walking alone along a deserted tropical beach holding a can of coke. She pauses to watch a sexy youthful athletic man emerge from an ocean swim.. Dressed in skin-tight bathers the man, now aware of the woman's attention, performs a hair flick then proceeds to get dressed. The woman gets increasingly excited, stroking her flimsy top, raising the hem of her dress and drawing deeply on the can of Coke. To her great shock and surprise, when dressed the man turns around, his round white collar reveals that that he is in fact a priest. To her further dismay he walks towards her, wets his finger in her can of coke, surreptitiously brushing her breast as he anoints her forehead evoking the 'healing' of 'sin', before walking out of the frame.

Characteristic of the imagery used in these soft drink commercials is the modelling of the beach as a corporeal space, dominated by heightened liminal and sensorial characteristics. Heat, water, sand, particular lighting conditions and bodies, all combine to create a salubrious and sexy hedonistic atmosphere where patrons consciously acknowledge and negotiate other similar beach bodies that occupy the same free space. This is a place to challenge inhibitions, comfortably observe other bodies (weigh-up erotic capital), communicate through symbolism and gesture, and importantly, as clearly depicted in the change from the sexualised swimming beach body to priest, an equitable and transformative social space. Embodied in the gesture of anointing the woman in the Coke commercial is the notion that in the context of the beach (and through the power of Coke) licentious behaviour (including drinking Coke) is exonerated.

Numerous examples exist of other products and filmic references that contribute to the idealisation of the body and the formation of a 'natural sort of being' through the 'repeated stylisation of the body' (Butler 1990)²⁰. Lynx deodorant is one such advertising enterprise that has consolidated its branding power through endorsing the established frame of the beach as a liberated social space. 'The Lynx Effect' refers to the phenomenon created around a deodorant where one short burst of spray (much like saltwater mist) promises to dissolve reasoning by casting a sexual spell on all females within a large radius. In a 2008 advertising campaign the 'Lynx... Spray More Get More' commercial was launched featuring a cast of thousands of women (all bikini clad) descending from the bush, cliffs and ocean to the scent of a single male located on the beach spraying himself in a cloud of Lynx deodorant. The magic extends to the Lynx shower gel advertisement (2011): the screenplay traces the actions of a young man showering at the beach and whose motions are mimicked by a number of young females, who in a choreographed sequence, remove their bikini tops to expose themselves to him as the voice-over caption in a parody to the 'culturing nature' intones '*The cleaner you are, the dirtier you get!*'. Further to capitalising on the liminal characteristics of the beach, this product

²⁰ For early filmic reference refer to the movies *From Here To Eternity* (1953) directed by Fred Zimmermann, *Dr No* (1962) directed by Terrence Young starring Ursula Andress, *10* (1979) directed by Blake Edwards starring Bo Derek and early television commercials including the first Big M commercial (1976) where the spillage of milk is staged to evoke body fluids pouring over breasts simulating an ejaculation.

also exploits the surfing model that links primal instincts, such as the power of smell, and the subversive aspects of 'natural' in the context of sex: where getting dirty implies getting irresistibly sexy. The advertisements in this series play yet again on the liminal characteristics of the beach promoting the notion that it is a space that at once can be cultured and 'clean' and simultaneously natural and 'dirty'. The fact that none of the previous commercials could ever be screened if they were located in a city park or mall is evidence that the beach has its own *modus operandi* in Western society. Dutton contends:

The crowded beaches display a guarded eroticism. It is perfectly safe for the most sexy girl to lie on her back, breasts bare, reading a book, where such a sight in a city park could provoke a race between the Vice Squad and a rapist. (Dutton 1985, 86)

In his case study of Cottesloe Beach, Fiske categorises signifiers that determine the urban culture of this zone such as the *natural* lawn with its carpet-like quality; authoritative signage that controls and restricts nature; and the use and importance of 'furniture' and fresh water showers, applying a connection of the cultured 'indoor' to civilise the 'outdoor'; all set against the uncultured, uncontrollable *nature* of the sea. Fiske analyses the human occupation within these structured zones,²¹ connecting the prohibition of dogs and nude bathing on the beach as two activities associated with *nature* and 'dirt'. Fiske suggests:

The core lies, I think, in the only linguistic category that includes two such apparently disparate natural objects, that is, the category 'dirty'.

Edmund Leach ... has shown how dirt is a condition of boundaries. This derives from excreta, which in a precise physical sense crosses the boundary from man to not-man: excreta are man becoming nature, just as food, ingested, is nature becoming man. Dirty, then, is another characteristic of the anomalous, so dirt has the power and the threat of too much meaning ... Dogs are dangerous because they attract not only sharks, but also disease; breasts, because they threaten conventional morality. On this level, dogs are dirty physically, breasts morally. But in structuralist terms both are dirty because both patrol the conceptual boundary between man and nature ... The naked body is nature-what man shares with animals—the clothed body is culture. (Fiske 1989, 55–6)

²¹ Metusela and Waitt (2012) recount how sexuality was also determined by age and controlled at the beginning of the twentieth century through government legislation ... "The sight of an eight-year-old boy's penis was legislated (in 1906) as an inappropriate display of sexuality in the women's dressing shed. Hence the dressing shed segregated along the lines of age and gender was one means to keep nakedness separate from the sexual at the bathing reserve". (Metusela and Waitt 2012, 31).

Neil Carr and Yaniv Poria draw a clear connection between sexual activity and leisure time in their publication *Sex and the Sexual during People's Leisure and Tourism Experiences* (2010). Their research indicates how tourism campaigns target specific locations (such as the beach) to fortify this connection, particularly through the use of 'innuendo, and erotic images. This marketing focus extends to sexualised marketing particularly aimed at the female body in the 'promise of sex' (Carter and Clift 2000; Ryan and Hall 2001). Among a range of tourist destinations, beachside locations are especially targeted for their liminal characteristics and the ability to forge easy connections to love, romance and sex.

The beach is also used in a variety of sexualised ways, including voyeuristic ones, as is the hotel room which can be viewed as a miniature and more intimate version of the liminal space which the entire holiday destination represents. (Carr 2010, 2)

Voyeurism is a term that is often applied to watching bodies on the beach. As early as the mid-18th century the art of voyeurism became increasingly popular on British beaches such as Brighton and Scarborough, particularly via the aid of a spyglass. As Inglis describes:

There was a lot to do, down at the promenade. Apart from the arduous business of being fit to be seen, there was the seeing itself to be done, especially by men of women. They came flocking down to watch the other bathers, and to see the loosened hair and the sweet curves of hips and bottoms outlined by wet bathing suits in a way forbidden by the full dresses and firm chignons by polite sartoriality. Much genteel discretion could be exercised by the judicious use of a spyglass or a telescope and young women sported at being self-consciously unself-conscious, both as they watched and as they were being carried piggyback by broad-shouldered fishermen the few yards from bathing machine to water. (Inglis 2000, 42–3)

In order to curb the growing popularity of voyeurism during this time penalties were imposed on offenders, and exclusion zones from bathing areas were established. In a contemporary context the form of beach-based voyeurism has shifted and is now very often practiced as an action conducted on the internet, where it is marketed through select sex sites in its own specific category.

Contemporary Australian Indigenous artist and filmmaker Tracy Moffatt explores the notion of voyeurism on the beach through a short film entitled *Heaven* (1997). In a clever twist Moffatt transfers the power usually associated with the White male gaze to herself, eroticising the young masculine body through an Indigenous female gaze. Filmed against a soundtrack of waves lapping the shoreline, Moffatt pursues her voyeuristic exploits through the act of filming surfers getting changed after surfing. Selecting camera angles to appear as if one is peering into a house, Moffatt frames images through windows and curtains, gradually moving closer to her subjects—a range of males from diverse ethnic origins.

In a Gonzo²² styled approach, the audience is always conscious of Moffatt's presence behind the lens; at times she engages in conversation with the subjects and in one sequence is playfully fended off by one of the surfers as she attempts to film his genitals. Seeking to highlight the history of the ethnographic gaze and the astute twist that Moffatt achieves through parody, Natalya Lusty maintains:

The intense scrutiny of Moffatt's ethnographic gaze as she films and contemplates this particular beachside ritual serves as a reminder of the colonial gaze of white anthropologists who documented the naked and semi-naked bodies of indigenous subjects. (Lusty 2005, 3)

The success of *Heaven* resides in the fact that it works across many levels both culturally and socially. Moffatt has singled out and sexualised an everyday occurrence associated with beach activity. Liz Ellison identifies that:

Moffatt's work, on one level, captures the universal experience of the beachgoer that can unwillingly (or perhaps willingly, as in this case) witness surfers changing in car parks or footpaths. By examining the male body through such an obvious, appreciative gaze, Moffatt almost eliminates concepts of ethnicity and nationality and creates beach space that is a place of admiration for aesthetic, physical beauty. (Ellison 2011, 20)

Whilst Moffatt's *Heaven* can be celebrated for its artistic vision and complexity, what may be perceived as the simple and playful action of voyeurism on beach can become instantly complex and illegal. As is later discussed in Act III a man was recently prosecuted by police on Cottesloe Beach for voyeuristic behaviour with a camera. He was arrested for taking photographs of young women and children on the beach and charged with one count of committing an indecent act in public.

Growing sensitivities to such action within the frame of the beach are indicative once again of the common understanding that a specific decorum exists within this very public space. In a reflection of the colonial order embedded in the history of the beach there appears to be a continued need to 'regulate surf-bathing bodies' and 'tame the spatial' (Metusela and Waitt 2012, 27). Difficulties arise when the use of imaging technology on the beach is determined to be a voyeuristic act. Particular to my current investigation is the question of whether it may also be deemed inappropriate to draw or create images through 'natural' imaging technologies such as charcoal, pencil, and brush and paint. In 2014 Rolf Harris²³

²² Gonzo pornography filmmaking requires limited technical and financial resources 'little or no acting required and no complex narrative structure other than the naturalistic one of an everyday sexual conquest...Gonzo brings the representation of sex closer to the experience of a lived sexual interaction not only in terms of the sexual action itself but also in terms of its context or framing.' (Hardy 2008, 61)

²³ Rolf Harris AO, CBE is an Australian-born, British-based well-known television personality, painter, composer and musician. In 2014 Harris was stripped of many of his awards and honours following his prosecution for indecent assaults perpetrated in the 1980s.

stood trial and was prosecuted in Britain on charges of indecent assault that occurred in the 1980s. In addition to these charges Harris was charged with four counts of 'making indecent images of a child'. Under British law related to the protection of *Children Act 1978*, prosecution council interprets the act of viewing images on a computer screen as 'making' images. Harris's council successfully argued that the case of producing indecent images and the indecent assault be tried separately. After defence lawyers obtained the identity and age of the internet models referenced by Harris, charges were dropped on the basis that the models were above 18 years of age and the websites used by Harris were not linked to disseminating illegal material.

The complexities associated with the legality in the use of imagery as source material for painting may ultimately present as a minefield for artists and social researchers. How is the artist able to determine the legality of painting imagery referenced from life, the imagination, or the internet? Is this source of referencing more indecent than referencing imagery from historical works for instance such as John Singer Sargent's *A Nude Boy On A Beach* (1878) or Balthus's *Guitar Lesson* (1934) (Figures 16–17).

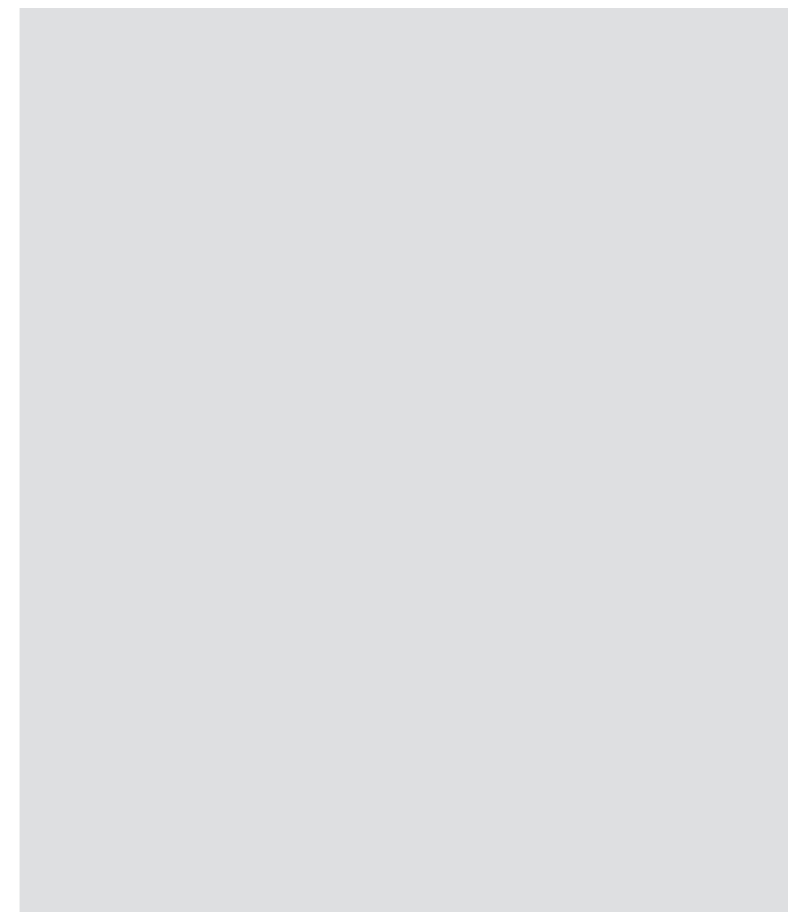


Fig16. Balthus, *The Guitar Lesson*, 1934, oil on canvas.

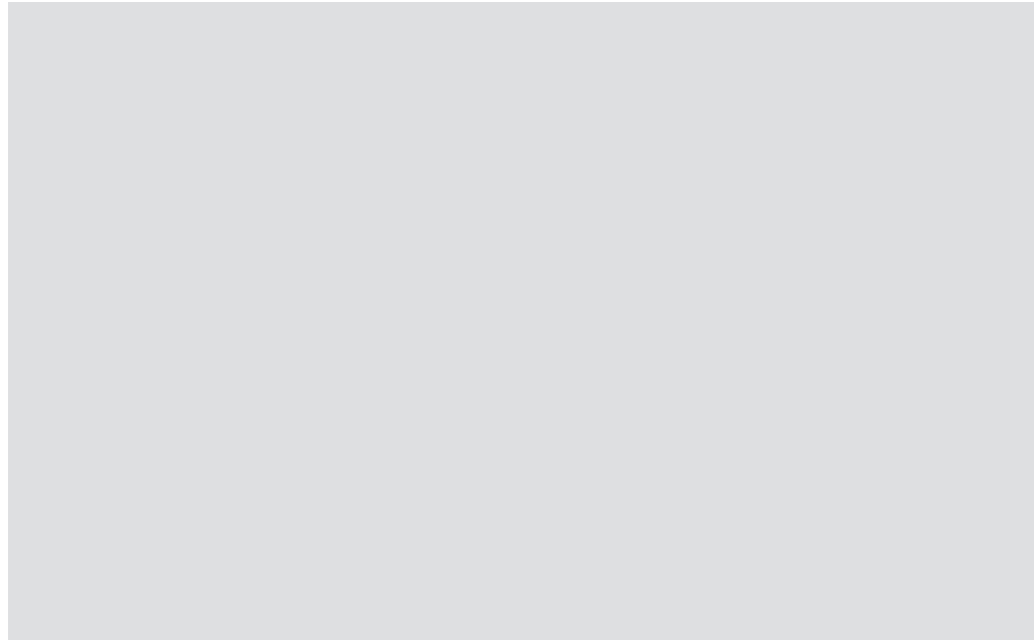


Fig 17. John Singer-Sargent, *Boy on the Beach/The Sun Bath*, 1878, oil on panel, 19 x 29.8 cm.

Perhaps if 'viewing' is deemed to be 'making', these canonical images are no longer appropriate for display to a contemporary audience. The enigmatic coding that prevails in relation to visually researching taboo subjects such as the representation of pre-pubescent bodies on the beach raises many issues for the artists as it does regarding the protection of rights of children and individuals and matters of privacy in a public space.

As I squirt a generous blob of sunscreen onto my ripening flesh I realise that in the palm of my hand is the vestige of a previous era and evidence of a growing hypersensitivity towards particular imaging of the body. Revealed in the bottom corner of this bottle of Coppertone sunscreen is a logo that has carried the brand over the past 60 years. Styled as a cartoon image, the logo depicts a chubby pig-tailed young girl looking in shocked surprise as a boisterous terrier puppy pulls determinedly at her bathers exposing a white (un-tanned) bottom. This advertising image has been modified several times since its origin in 1953 in accordance with the changing social attitude towards images depicting nudity of children. At the beginning of the 21st century Coppertone modified the iconic image: the bathers have been enlarged and raised to be less revealing, some versions show only the child's lower back erasing evidence of her buttocks completely. Alternative versions depict her clothed, wearing a hat and a t-shirt which the puppy now pulls upon. The size of the logo has been dramatically reduced on all the products and is no longer the dominant feature on the bottle. Early in the history of the company, Coppertone Corporation advertised their product from coast to

coast in America by way of huge kinetic billboards of the 'Coppertone Girl' image. At one point 500 signs existed on the east-coast of America alone. The mechanically driven signage traced the movement of the dog continuously pulling down the bathers. Currently only remnants of these signs remain. It is apparent that the Coppertone Corporation have responded to evolving community attitude towards the sexualisation of children in advertising.



Fig 18. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Advertising standards in Australia are self-regulated and are broadly directed to respect and uphold community values.²⁴ As represented within the findings of the 2008 Australian Senate Committee Report on the sexualisation of children in contemporary media, the sexualisation of children may be perceived across a sliding scale determined on a broad range of personal and collective attitudes. It is clear that the representation of children is an extremely sensitive issue, particularly within the context of the beach. One of the many questions raised by the history of the iconic Coppertone logo is whether the beach and society have become sexualised to the point where the antics of a playful puppy and a young child (represented in a cartoon) are no longer viewed as innocently amusing? Instead is this performance expected to inspire in the minds of contemporary Western adults undertones of bestiality or provide titillation to a deviant population obsessed with imagery of the flesh of children? Whilst it is beyond the scope of this project to further explore issues of sexualisation and the visual representation of children in society, it is worth noting that the issue has impacted on my ability as a visual researcher to freely generate realistic imagery around this extremely sensitive subject. As a father I find myself in conflicting subject positions: in the first instance my interests and allegiances are to the protection of my child and to ensure that he is raised in a safe but free environment. Part of my obligation as a parent is to nurture my child to develop a healthy respectful and confident attitude towards sexuality. As an artist and researcher my imperative is to preserve the rights to investigate society in all of its darkest corners. Using art to casting light on subversive, antisocial or criminal activity provides the means to enter into meaningful open and intelligent discussion of such subjects. To cloak or censor visual representation of certain subjects is to inspire hypersensitivity towards the matter, with the added risk of mythologising or promoting fetishist behaviour. The greatest risk I believe is to lower the bar of society's visual dexterity (or broad visual vocabulary) based on the deviant and extreme behaviour of a relatively few individuals. Ultimately censorial and legal implications ensure that no images of children will be depicted nude in this research project. Self-censoring by artists in the early 21st century to avoid the risk of legal prosecution contributes to a growing void of visual imagery of children in art. No matter how humorous, or how it is caged, colloquial or otherwise, sexualised imagery that stands outside of this 'highly regulatory frame' (Butler 1990) continues to be strongly contested moral territory.

²⁴ In 2008 a Senate Committee was established by the Australian Government to report on and respond to a growing concern about the sexualisation of children in contemporary media. In summary the Senate Committee defined sexualisation of children: 'Thus the committee has viewed sexualisation as a continuum from the explicit targeting of children with images, attitudes and content that inappropriately and prematurely seek to impose a sexual identity on a child, through the presentation of one-dimensional and stereotypical images of children and young people, predominantly girls, in content, products and advertising directed at them, to what might be described as the 'background noise' of society at large where products, advertising and other materials made for and directed at adults are readily accessed by children and reinforce the sexualising messages they are receiving (Commonwealth of Australia 2008, 6).

Under the shadow of my hat I survey the 'natural sorts of beings' in my present company (Butler 1990). It is clear to me from my site in this corner of the beach that several of the 'repeated acts' cleverly lampooned in the Colenso Simplifying Summer advertising campaign are currently being performed around me; as bikini tops are being adjusted, and 'hair-flicks' being performed in the water, lifeguards patrol the beach sporting freshly oiled six-packs.²⁵ It is also clear that the occupants of this site can be categorised into a particular demographic based on age (under 35), athletic (gym) body type, tanned skin tone and predominantly Caucasian. I wonder if this is life repeating advertising or advertising repeating life? Why also is this demographic confined to this particular corner of the beach when less than 300 metres to the north, the function and occupancy of the beach is entirely different? Metusela and Waitt in their book *Tourism and Australian Beach Cultures: Revealing Bodies* relate this territorialisation to particular cultural practices associated at these sites:

How the beach becomes culturally, socially and spatially bounded and territorialized is illustrative of how through particular cultural practices, bodies at the beach, are ascribed changing sexed, gendered, aged, and classed identities. Bodies at the beach are therefore always political. (Metusela and Waitt 2012, xxiv)

Assigning value and meaning to performances, particularly through a culture/nature binary, inspires connections to the early research of John Fiske and his semiotic readings of the beach. In a chapter entitled 'Reading the Beach' Fiske theorises the process by which the beach is bounded and territorialised. He maintains that the beach can be 'read as a text ... a signifying construct of potential meanings operating on a number of levels' (Fiske 1989, 43). Charting the movement from land to sea, the 'culture' zone begins with the city, road, lawn, esplanade, and ends on the beach, where 'nature' zone is assumed in the movement from shallow to deep water. Within the binary that exists between the land and sea Fiske maintains the beach is perceived as an anomalous category and contains characteristics of both and as such is loaded with 'an excess of meaning potential' (Fiske 1989, 43).

Fiske builds on the work of Lévi-Strauss, identifying that underlying the culture-nature binary is the concept that nature is 'pre-cultural reality': in a state that exists before 'any sense-making process has been applied to it', rendering *natural* as a 'cultural product' (Fiske 1989, 43). By extension the land, city and civilisation become *culture* in binary to the untamed, uncivilised, raw, ocean - *nature*. (Fiske 1989, 44) This early construct aligns with Frankland's (2008) belief that 'we have manipulated the landscape, distorted and deformed it, (effectively culturing nature) in ways that had and continue to have profound consequences for human values and lives' (Frankland 2008, 94). This theory can extend to the landscape of the body, where culturing nature may amount to working-out on exercise equipment on the foreshore in pursuit of extreme muscularity (and increased erotic capital) to evolve a more generic masculinised form forged through obsessive repetition; both culturally and physically. Framed within Fiske's semiotic theory, other grooming or body culturing activities are called to mind including: cosmetic surgery, tattooing, body piercing and sun tanning (or 'baking', a specific culturing action).

²⁵ Australian vernacular for toned or pronounced abdominal muscles.

Tableau

Compressed within this five-kilometre arena of sky, sand and sea, performers assume their various roles.

Cottesloe Beach; supersaturation; waterlogged meaning and identity.



Fig 19. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Scene II

As I pack up the painting equipment to continue my transect northward along Cottesloe Beach, I consider the implications of Fiske's semiotic observations. It is clear that nudism within the context of the Cottesloe Surf Club and the Indiana Tea House would be perceived as a subversive culturally loaded 'natural' practice because it would be in a cultured space. But as I make my way steadily northwards signs and signifiers indicate a definite shift towards 'natural' and a place for more visceral bodily activities. Within the first 300 meters 'natural' areas that have been fenced off for regeneration replace the cultured terraces. This regeneration program might extend to unofficial yet equally 'natural' human night-time activities if the few barely distinguishable trails that I observe formed between the plantings are any indication. Adjoining the dune plantings are areas dedicated to free-to-use exercise equipment and play areas. Activities within this space would appear to be associated with grooming or culturing the body and parenting. On the seaward side of the exercise zone, numerous bodies perform yoga, Tai Chi, boxing and other similar body maintenance regimes. Rather than a zone dedicated to socialising and pleasure seeking, this area clearly is a place to 'work-out.'

This current performance of fitness, presumably carried out in preparation for later display further up the beach, is a language or expression of oneself through action. Phillip Vannini and Aaron M. McCright (2004) argue in their article 'To Die For: The Semiotic Seductive Power of the Tanned Body' that the body is constructed culturally. Based on Norbert Wiley's (1994) view that all bodies are essentially agentic, reflexive, and semiotic, Vannini and McCright maintain that how individuals interact is directly related to the signification of bodies;

Through our bodies we perform, express, and (re)present ourselves, and others judge our appearances and performances. The body is both subject and an object of action, and it is through our self-directed action and reflection that we communicate with others (Vannini and McCright 2004, 312)

Accordingly, I am witnessing a series of performers increasing the perceived value of their body currency through a series of repeated acts. By such action, the tanned and fit contemporary Western beach body may assume other values such as exuding wealth, sociability, beauty and youthfulness (Vannini and McCright 2004). When understood through this semiotic frame, many of the beach performances I have observed along this transect clearly announce the desires of an image-centric culture and highlight the importance and obsession with the fashioning flesh. In reference to Baudrillard's work, Vannini and McCright (2004) emphasise how in our image-obsessed society we increasingly and willingly communicate through seduction and exhibitionism. The consequence and influence of the seductive power of body imagery in contemporary culture has seen increased trends in body modification performed through techniques such as tattooing, body piercing, dieting, fitness programs and cosmetic surgery (Barry Glassner 1989). In this context the beach appears to lie at the heart of the contemporary body culture. This is no longer simply a place

meet and to be seen, this is an arena; a primary sandy stage to perform sculpted bodies for scrutiny. Parallels could be drawn with the function a livestock auction where natural value is calculated in direct relationship to body aesthetics or cultured form; composition, muscle structure, weights, fat-size ratio, breeding, colouration and desirable markings.



Fig 20. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net (detail)*, 2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Muscle = cultured natural flab.

With the sun moving towards its final quarter I am conscious that it is time to continue along the transect. It is apparent that my observations and findings along the way offer only a small window into the complexities of each performance. It is clearly beyond the scope of this painterly expedition to dedicate the time necessary to explore in great depth and from various aspects many of the performances I have encountered. Perhaps through an anthropological eye and dedicated studies in the areas of the social sciences, a specific range of conclusions may be drawn but these are disciplines outside the scope of this thesis. Within the focus of this autoethnographic investigation I acknowledge the principal and final act of this project is ultimately performed in paint and framed within a gallery.

Now at the water's edge, and a point in the transition from culture to nature where all evidence of beach and body grooming has ceased, the beach itself evolves into an outcrop of rocks. Fishermen line this rocky shoreline casting towards a submerged limestone reef and into the zone where two swimmers were taken in 1999, in a very 'natural act' by a Great White Shark.

A sign confirms that I have now entered into a zone dedicated as a 'dog exercise area'. I note with amusement; here at this halfway point between Cottesloe and the Swanbourne nudist beach, semi-nudity, in the form of topless bathing is permitted ... perhaps body exposure has been calibrated in relation to distance. It seems that this is the point things might start to get 'dirty' (Fiske 1989); physically from stumbling across dog shit and morally from the possibility of confronting exposed breasts. At this location the road veers away from the coast, rendering the beach both 'physically and conceptually' (Fiske 1989) further from the city.

Away from the intense social compression of Cottesloe Beach, I sense a difference both emotionally and physically. Here the vastness of the sea and the sky dominates my senses. Awash this stretch of shoreline the characteristic roar and regularity of the waves sets the rhythm of my walk.

Past the rocks and towards the final reef that defines the southern boundary of the Swanbourne Surf Club, I enter familiar territory. On the surf lifesaving tower I spot the camcorder that records my daily real-time surf report. Ritualistically, I check the internet surfing sites every morning, often several times a day for an update on local wave and wind conditions. Within this virtual-beach it is captivating to watch, when replayed in one image per hour sequencing across one day, not only the changing light and weather conditions as the sea breeze rises, but also the peopled performances animated within the space. Whether by accident or intention couples are often foregrounded, performing in the web-image, nestled into the dune vegetation. How am I to reconcile this form of inadvertent virtual voyeurism delivered to my computer by a Government funded website?

Unlike the dominating presence of the Cottesloe Surf Club building, the Swanbourne Surf Club seems to be absorbed

into the landscape with a noticeable absence of ‘clubbies.’²⁶ Here the main activity seems to revolve around the restaurant/café tucked further into the secondary dune in the lee of the surf club. Patrons look out across a small car park and provide an unsettling sense that I am being watched as I make my way towards the nudist beach two hundred meters further north. Whether by way of its reputation or my oversensitivity based on its reputation, I liken my approach to the nudist beach, and this powerfully ‘natural’ space, to entering into a game park where the boundaries at this site are not fences but social constructs.

I feel a bit weird laden under all my drawing equipment, arriving at a space reserved for shedding cultural markers. I recall an important observation offered by Fiske in relation to location of the ‘scandalous’ activities conducted on this section of the beach; they often occur ‘on boundaries between named beaches’ or liminal spaces (Fiske 1989, 54). Approaching a sign that announces the boundary of the nude bathing area, I ready myself with great anticipation to experience the associated ‘scandalous activities’. It is apparent on entering this space that the sentry in a pride of what resemble meerkats immediately acknowledges my presence. From the cluster of sun-shelters and encampments scattered throughout the dunes, one head retreats behind windswept dune grass, replaced by another further up the beach in a strange kind of silent choreographed performance. Notably there are few teenagers, no children and an obvious presence of same-sex partnerships.



Fig 21. (Left) Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Fig 22. (Right) Richard Coldicutt, ‘SAS Signage’, 2013, digital photograph, 150mm x 100mm

²⁶ Western Australian vernacular term for surf lifesavers.

Some of the residents of this dune community lounge naked, tucked into the undulations of the fore-dunes and occupying some form of naturally partitioned real estate. Within the soporific atmosphere, a meerkat languidly strokes his flaccid cock as if trying to generate some life back into a piece of beef jerky, whilst another bobbing in the waves times his exit from the ocean synchronised to brush passed me for a close inspection. Beneath broad brimmed flax hats a couple communicate in muffled voices casting me a glance as I move further up the beach towards a red flag planted in the sand. The surreal atmosphere is instantly heightened as a barking round of machine gun fire is followed in quick succession by the exploding boom of several grenades. Atop the sentry box of a nearby viewing tower located in the fore-dune an SAS²⁷ officer dressed in military uniform, surveys the scene through a pair of binoculars, slowly scanning the dunes of the nude beach and back to the firing range: the source of the commotion.

At the top of a dune, a meerkat returns the gaze through his own set of binoculars before aiming them in my direction. I am bemused by the thought that binoculars in the hands of an army officer in the frame of war may be read as an instrument of power, yet simultaneously in the hands of a naturalist dune dweller framed within this liminal subversive space they may be read as a tool of decadence and perversion. Either way I appear to be in the midst of a battle of culture over nature. I try to imagine the Officer’s view from the turret of the watch-tower; in one instance witnessing the stealth of armed and uniformed soldiers in commando battle dress crawling through saltbushes and perhaps in another, the ambush and torture of an alternative army of gay naturalists having sex in the dunes; moaning and elated sobs matched with battle cries, lubricant mixed with camouflage grease. Perhaps it is the ghost of Georges Bataille²⁸ on the turret behind the binoculars!

I arrive at red flag embedded in the beach and to a banner that reads ‘NO ENTRY LIVE FIRING IN PROGRESS’ and wonder if this gay battalion may proclaim its own victory in the dunes with an alternative banner that reads ... ‘LIVE ENTRY IN PROGRESS FIRE AT WILL’.

The erotic dream of my youth, where the nudist beach existed as a secretive place inhabited by wonton young nubile nymphs is shattered! Where is the overt ‘free’ and ‘natural’ heterosexual activity I had come to expect? Clearly this was the end. Physically determined and militarily maintained beyond this point it was death by firing squad. And psychologically as it was where cultural freedom and ‘natural’ sex existed simply as a myth. Perhaps this is now a liminal zone where sexuality comes to die... a place where weathered bodies parade upon the highest dune their conviction

²⁷ Special Air Service Regiment abbreviated to SAS.

²⁸ Georges Bataille was an early 20th century French intellectual, philosophical theorist and literary figure who wrote around subjects such as sex, death, eroticism, sovereignty and transgression. From a candid perspective I believe that if Bataille had lived in Western Australia he may have found inspiration for his work in the unique combination of sex, death and transgression at play within the Swanbourne Beach sand dunes

in the battle for freedom ... by nudity ... decorated in carcinomas within the constant sights of the guardians of our territorial borders and beliefs. How is one to reconcile this site of sex and death played out across this sandy stage; where military might engaged in exercises commanding culture in its highest order is synchronised with homosexuals engaged in their own exercises of 'natural' yet 'dirty' sex (Fiske 1989) both sharing the same dune. What is represented at this site is more than simply the end of the beach. Buried at the base of this military signage is the myth of the 'free' Australian beach. Yet I realise there is a historical determinant, a link that unites sex, death and the beach that is bound in three tiny triangles of fabric.

Through the frame of war, visions of the beach during 1939–1945 invoke images of carnage and death. As the first point of contact and defence, the beach became a place of fear and vulnerability. Remnants and ruins of concrete bunkers and pillboxes lining headlands and fore-dunes across the world continue to mark one of the darkest periods in world history. Many former sandscapes of pleasure seeking and beauty, such as the beaches of Normandy and Dieppe, were forever transformed into graveyards and sites of mourning. The 425,000 allied and German soldiers recorded killed, wounded or missing during the battle historic D-Day invasion in June 1944, were from battles fought on the beaches of Normandy. In light of such death and destruction fresh in the minds of so many, it seems unimaginable the garment that promised the ultimate freedom for the body on the beach, was conceived during this time, and furthermore, took its title from site of the first post-war atom bomb test.



Fig 23., 24. & 25.. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2012, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

The *bikini*, designed by Louis Réard in 1946, owes its name to the tiny Bikini Atoll located in the South Pacific and was released in France less than three weeks following the first nuclear test at this site. Whilst both explosive in their historical impact, it seems difficult to the point of ridiculous to reconcile a meaningful connection between an interesting garment that embodies hedonist, narcissistic pleasures, and an atoll sacrificed in the creation of an ominous nuclear future and death. The answer lies in the sequence that led to the creation of the costume. The bikini actually followed the earlier release of Jacques Heim's *Atome*, a one-piece costume named after its diminished dimensions that at the time was the world's smallest bathing suit. It was commonly mused, that like the bomb, an immense reaction was generated when Réard essentially split the *Atome*.²⁹ Aware that much of the contemporary Western history of the beach is connected to the few centimetres that comprise this garment, I realise, like the power of the bikini, the imperative of my painted research will be to cover so much with so little. With this thought in mind and against a backdrop of a West coast sun setting into the Indian Ocean and to the cracks of machine-gun fire and naked meerkats panting in the dunes, I note the final entry for the day into my visual diary: *At the end there is only sex and death ... and the sea.*

In the fading light I retrace my steps back towards Cottesloe Beach. As I trek along the water's edge I consider the powerful influence of liminal characteristics of the beach on its function as a site for ceremony. In a previous research project (Coldicutt 2000) I examined an artwork entitled *Initiation* (Coldicutt 1994)³⁰ as a way to highlight the difficulties experienced by teenage males in the late 20th century, as they negotiate an unguided passage into adulthood.³¹ Recognising the interconnectivity between the environment and social constructs, and theory that suggests 'space always informs, limits and produces the subjectivities of bodies' (Probyn 2003), I posit another function of the beach: as a site for a contemporary rites of passage demonstrated through the annual ritual of *Schoolies*.³²

Whilst many Indigenous cultures maintain tradition through formal transitional processes or rituals for teens entering adulthood, it is apparent that some modern Western cultures have evolved alternative celebrations that mark this

²⁹ Booth recounts the explosive nature of the bikini when first released on Bondi Beach on Sunday 19th October 1946; 17-years-old Pauline Morgan, a dressmaker by occupation, walked along Bondi Beach in a bikini. As she proceeded, Morgan attracted a crowd of several hundred young men. According to press reports, young males rushed across the beach, trampled canvas shelters and knocked over women and children in their determination to see her. Young men congregated around Morgan with some even jumping on others' backs for a closer look. In the ensuing pandemonium Morgan fell to the ground and was in danger of being trampled until a middle-aged man intervened and guided her to the dressing sheds where inspectors ordered a change of attire. (Booth 2001, 50).

³⁰ *Initiation*, Oil on canvas, 1100mm x 1600mm

³¹ This work is inspired in part by Steve Biddulph's book *Manhood* (1994).

³² Many of the following ideas were presented in a paper entitled *The Beach as a Liminal Space* (Coldicutt 2013) at the *Time, Space and the Body* conference held in Sydney in 2013.



Fig 26 Richard Coldicutt,
Initiation, 1994,
oil on canvas,
1100mm x 1600mm

significant period of transformation.³³ The *Schoolies* ceremony is traditionally performed during early summer at key seaside locations throughout Australia and staged in the week following the final year school examinations. Graduates (the initiants) head en masse to prearranged destinations for seven days of endless partying. During this period, and integral to the transitional rites, initiants expose themselves to excess alcohol, illicit drugs, sex, music, and the beach. If the beach is described in terms of its ever-changing conditions; where calm and tranquil can turn wild and unpredictable, tides and oceans move to forces both Lunar and atmospheric, and the shifting sands remain unbounded, it is possible to presume emotional parallels experienced by many teenagers during the liminal time pre-adulthood.

The beach, in recent academic literature has consistently been referred to as a 'liminal' space.³⁴ 'Liminal' derives its meaning from the Latin word *limen* meaning 'threshold': traditionally that of a doorway, something that needs to be crossed in order to enter into another space. As a threshold between land and the sea, the physical landscape of the beach fits comfortably within this definition. The term first appears in 1884 applied in context with psychology. Later, in 1909 it appears in relation to anthropology, from its origins in Arnold Van Gennep's pivotal work *Les rites de passage*. In its most simple form liminality was used in connection with *Les rites de passage* to theorise the coming of age through a ritual that involved a three-part structure: *separation*, *transition* (or liminal period) and *reincorporation*.

³³ A similar ceremony to the Australian tradition of *Schoolies* is celebrated in America under the title of *Spring Break*. In Germany a similar rite-of-passage ceremony is referred to as *Jugendwehe* and in Finland, *Prometheus-leirin*.

³⁴ Including: Alain Corbin (1994); Douglas Booth (2001); Fred Inglis (2000); Geoffrey Dutton (1985); Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker (1998); Nick Ford and David Brown (2006); and Gordon Waitt (2012); Tom Selänniemi (2003, 23.)

In this process the *initiate* (the person who was determined to be undergoing the ritual) was first stripped of all previous social status and then inducted into the liminal phase of the transition. Within the third and final stage, in accordance with Van Gennep's structure, the initiate was then reassimilated back into society empowered with a new status. This theory only found its popularity and widespread usage as late as the second half of the twentieth century when Victor Turner expanded and interpreted the original theory. He maintained that 'the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically 'invisible' (Turner, 1969). Developing Van Gennep's theories, Turner further focussed on the middle stage of the rites of passage, namely the transitional liminal stage, maintaining that individuals or entities within this stage are 'neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony' (Turner 1969, 95).

Clear distinctions may be drawn between the three independent stages when mapping the *Schoolies* rites of passage in relation to the structure of liminality. Separation or the preliminal phase occurs between the conclusion of school and the journey to the destination of the ceremony. Initiants gather and travel en masse to beachside destinations often wearing *leavers* clothing representative of a symbolic detachment from the former self. The transition or liminal phase follows when initiants gather in what Turner describes as a *spontaneous communitas* or unstructured community in which all participants are deemed equal. The final postliminal phase occurs when initiants are reincorporated back into society; having survived the ceremony and developed a *sacred bond* between initiants, individuals return with a new assumed identity as young adults.

Part of the anticipation that heightens the experience of *Schoolies* within a beach environment may well stem from the inherent collective imagining of this space. In his article *A Beach Somewhere: The Australian Littoral Imagination at Play*, Bruce Bennett (2007) discusses the work of some leading Western Australian authors in the context of the beach. He concludes that the coast and beaches are vital elements in the literary consciousness of Western Australians. Writing set within the littoral often contain two critical elements essential to the transitional passage under the theory of liminality: destruction and renewal: 'sexual, emotional and spiritual crises occur in concert with or against the elements, and human lives assume a place in the universal dramas of destruction and renewal' (Bennett 2007, 42).

Destruction, in the context of the *Schoolies* ceremony may apply to the self-destructive behaviour associated with binge drinking, illicit drug use, fighting and overt sexual activity. In recognition of the destructive behaviour and the hazards associated with these high-risk activities, police and community groups have, over the last decade, set in place formal arrangements in order to maintain some element of control amongst the chaos. Live music venues are often provided and restricted drinking areas established for those of legal drinking age. Identity bracelets have

been issued in recent years in order to help identify and separate the Schoolies from the 'Toolies'³⁵ who notoriously descend on the event with the intention of seducing the younger, often vulnerable (drug and alcoholically impaired) initiants, for sexual relations.

Renewal, applied to the ceremony may include; the development of longstanding relationships and sacred bonds with other initiants including sexual relationships; drinking games and drug taking, water based communal activities such as swimming and water frisbee, dancing, sun bathing, recuperation and ultimately on return to society the notion of a new identity: a coming-of-age.

Robert Preston-Whyte in his article entitled 'The Beach as a Liminal Space' asserts that the beach in its physical sense is a 'zone of uncertainty' as well as a cultural space a 'borderland that allows both difference and hybridity'. He maintains that corporeal properties experienced within the littoral zone contain liminal characteristics:

For some the simple act of stepping into the sand may be accompanied by a feeling of upliftment, a frisson of awareness, and a holistic sensation in which action and consciousness are merged at the moment of crossing into what we call a liminal space. (Preston-Whyte 2008, 349)

What Preston-Whyte describes could equally relate to Alain Corbin's notion of the coenaesthetic; impressions experienced within the littoral 'which created a sense of existence on the basis of a collection of bodily sensations'. With augmented sensorial perception, whether through sleep deprivation, drug/alcohol and/or musically induced, initiants entering the liminal space of the beach (during the rites of passage), may experience what Mihály Csikszentmihályi (1974) titled the power of the *flow* effect. Flow, expressed through the Schoolies ceremony, targets the psychological state of an individual or group fully immersed or focused on a singular activity. Expressed in Schoolies vernacular, flow equates to being *in the zone, in the groove, on a roll, totally wired, fully sic or tuned in*. Daniel Goleman (1995) further describes flow as a feeling of spontaneous joy or rapture when performing a task Daniel Goleman (1995, 91). Turner adds insight to Csikszentmihályi's theory of flow describing it as:

a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future. (Turner 1982, 56).

Such an analysis applies to one of the great highlights that occurs during the transitional stage of Schoolies—dancing. Large compressed crowds of school leavers pulsate till dawn in unison to hypnotic techno, trance, drum-n-base, hip hop and house rhythms, often adorned in fluorescent paint and glow sticks, frequently high on illicit drugs including ecstasy, marijuana and alcohol. Selänniemi observes:

³⁵ The term Toolies applies to older people, outsiders such as tradespeople or individuals who may have previously undertaken the Schoolies initiation.

The Liminality in rituals or the more popular festivals includes dancing and singing, eroticism and orgy, intoxication and ecstasy and lack of restraint in general (feasting, drinking, debauchery)—in other words the manifestation of human corporeality in which sensuality and pleasure play a leading part. The articulating of corporeality is a major part of the dual dynamics in which the profane or everyday order is momentarily laid aside and replaced by a sacred or festive order. (Selänniemi 2003, 26)

In my understanding it is apparent that much of the function of the contemporary beach is ritualised and relates closely to Selänniemi's reading of liminality. Certainly the beach has featured throughout my life as a site for ritual and celebration, whether realised in the form of the daily swim or surf, or a place to party but in any context, the first step into the sand is the point where 'everyday order' is *beached* ... if only until the next tide.

It seems fitting that in all its forms and through its endless performances, when the curtain lifts on the stage of the beach the audience may expect a myriad of acts that move between the unbridled sensuality and the pleasure of a sparkling turquoise ocean, to the pounding of grenades reaping death and destruction washed up in the blackened sky of a storming surf.

Ultimately in the 21st century, the powerful influence of this liminal zone also thrives as an imagined, fantasied, virtual space that is deeply embedded in the technology which inhabits our private and public worlds. These worlds are explored in Act II through the new economy of leisure.

With a cast of thousands, this is a performance on a grand scale. As if modelled on the latest episode of Bondi Rescue³⁶, heroic lifesavers patrol the set bringing order, control and spectacle to the performance, serving always as a constant reminder of the unpredictability and expectation that hangs over this space.

In a constant switch between actor and audience, furtive glances amplify the sexually charged atmosphere; oils and potions generously applied to breasts and chests, thighs and torsos add fresh varnish to tattooed surfaces and polish to sparkle to the latest piercing... a mysterious performance mimed in rhythm to silent iPod beats... a pulse that demarcates the timelessness of this hedonistic pleasure zone. Sculpted bodies perform seamless surgery and muscularity that certify energetic discipline; dietary commitment and solidarity in defence of mortality and decay... new recruits perform circuits upon freshly appointed callisthenic equipment that line the foreshore... the new body culture officially endorsed.

Captured within the android screen, individuals perform Snapchats, selfies, Tweeting and sexting:³⁷ erotic real-time pixilation bounced from satellite to shore scripted in tempo to a restless ocean that relentlessly laps the sandy stage ...

³⁶ The title of a television series that presents the daily events that occur on Bondi Beach in Sydney in the form of a reality-TV drama.

³⁷ Vernacular relating to image-sharing via mobile phone technology.



Fig 27. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

The Generic Cyber-Beach* Fantasy

*Foucault (1982, 25) referred to *heterotopic space*, as the 'juxtaposing in a single real place [of] several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible'. However, many writers today believe that the 'heterotopic space and disembeddedness do not adequately convey the unique features of postmodern space. This is because postmodernity involves the dissolution of the link between signifier and sign, referent and reality. As such there is no longer any basis for determining the local from the global or real space from fictional or fantasy space. For this reason the term *cyber-space* is now often used to fix postmodern space more precisely. By this term is meant the encompassing world of computer technology which supports an admixture of codes of observing, commentating, imagining and fictionalizing to construct and support the immediate space in which human relations occur. (Rojek 1995, 147)

Compressed between the pixels in my tropical island screen saver is a vast Western history of the beach. This is a beach at first confined to the Mediterranean coast; places treasured by local populations and visited by foreign aristocracy by way of the 'Grand Tour'. Through the course of discovery and mass mobility, the bounds of beach occupation expanded to encompass islands and archipelagos tracing sites along desire lines in tropical latitudes. Ultimately in the 21st century, populations circumnavigate the globe seeking hedonistic pleasure zones, for the annual 'escape'. With every turn of the neo capitalist wheel, populations flock to redeem earnings to buy 'free' time in places formed in reflection of metered illusions and pixelated beach fantasies; all timed and designed to occupy bytes of our imagination and income.

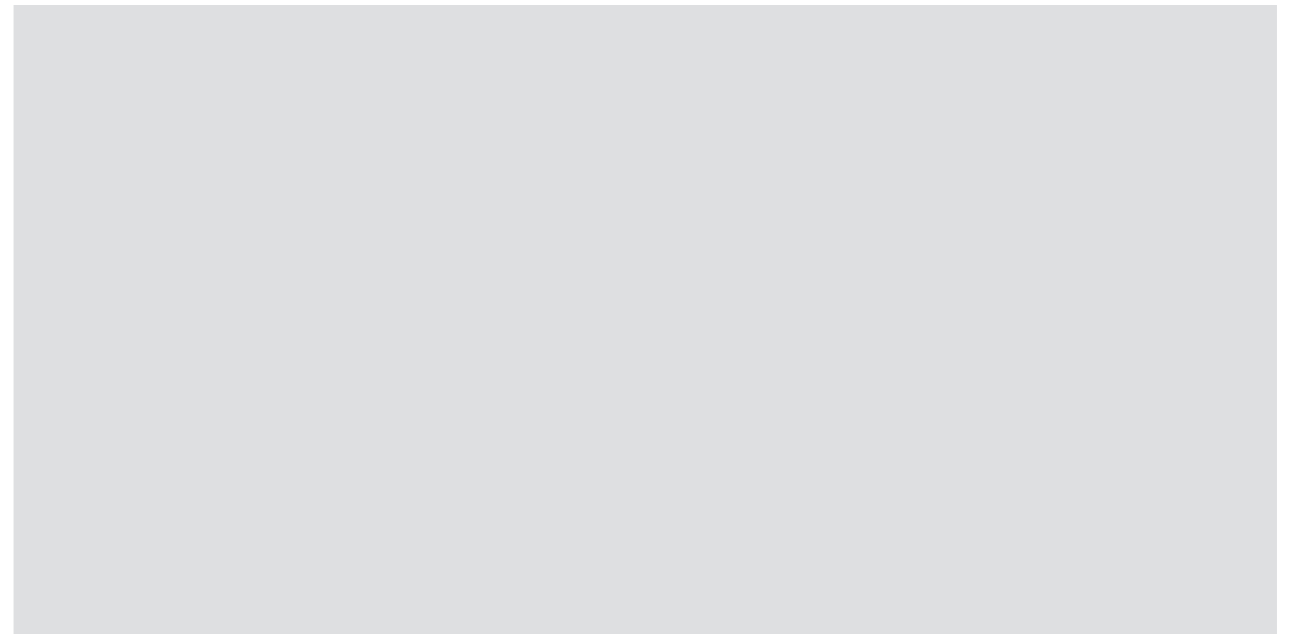


Fig 28. 'Tropical Island Paradise', Yacht Island Designs, 2014, advertisement drawing

Hyper-realities and the homogenisation of desire

Many of the beach performances in Act I are founded on the premise that the littoral is essentially a 'free space' and utilised by beach patrons for leisure or socialising activities in 'free time' or during 'time off'. Act II moves from studying the complexities of these micro performances to pursuing a macro perspective that traces the expanding boundaries of the beach through a neo-liberal capitalist frame based on the new economy of leisure³⁸.

Chris Rojek suggests that 'leisure experience is not an essence of human societies, but an effect of systems of legitimation' (1985, 178). As such leisure may be perceived as a luxury rather than a need, which is granted through established orders (such as Government legislation) in a direct relationship to systems of production. Based on the notion that leisure is a product of industrial capitalism and intimately linked to the process of modernisation (Burke 1998; Marrus 1974), the initial focus of Act II is to investigate how the beach features within this historical transformation.

As increasingly mobile and moneyed populations migrate around the globe in search for holiday destinations in which to spend leisure time, the beach assumes its special role as a premium hedonistic leisure/pleasure zone. Lodged within our Western imagination is a beach formed on fantasy and mythology and fortified in relentless digital simulations screened into our public and private worlds. The vision of white sand, turquoise ocean and coconut palms are three essential ingredients in a potent tropical cocktail which may induce in the viewer spontaneous hallucinogenic fantasies of island paradises. Act II explores the evolution of this intoxicating mix and the cultural hangover of this Island addiction.

To comprehend the process of contemporary idealisation of the beach (in both its physical and digital form) and its function in a market-based economy, it is first necessary to trace the formation of beach fantasy as relative to the expanding economies of free time, technology, global mobility and the holiday. It is only within the context of this history that it possible to see the essential significance of the beach: past, present and future.

³⁸ The definition of leisure is consistently connected to 'free time, time off, or time at one's disposal' (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2014). The Australian Bureau of Statistics 'Time Use Survey' (ABS, 2008b) classifies the use of time into four categories: 1. *Necessary time*: for personal survival (for example eating and sleeping) 2. *Contracted time*: such as paid work and education 3. *Committed time*: used for such things as community activities, and 4. *Free time*: for recreation and leisure.

Tableau

Setting the Scene

Sous les pavés, la plage (Under the cobble-stones, the beach).³⁹

In mapping the evolution of the beach into a premium site of leisure, it is possible to recognise fundamental ideological changes that affect the function of this important cultural site. For example, the mention of Club Med conjures in the minds of many, images of extravagance: salubrious architecture, situated in premium natural maritime locations, exclusive pleasure palaces with all of the associated refined services. Remarkably this description equally relates to the lifestyle of many affluent Romans living on the shores of the Mediterranean around 15 B.C. Like their Classical Greek counterparts, the ocean in this part of the world, offered all of the fundamental elements necessary for both work and pleasure in which they gratefully indulged. An appreciation of the sea was highly celebrated by both Greek and later Roman cultures as part of an ideology that revered the beauty of the natural world.⁴⁰ Drawing on research spanning to the end of the Republic and the first two centuries of the Empire, Alain Corbin maintains that the seashore 'had once been places of meditation, rest, collective pleasure, and unbridled voluptuousness'⁴¹ (Corbin 1998, 251). During this period, highly developed Roman infrastructure in the way of roads and bridges, aqueducts and fleets of boats, serviced a string of resorts and villas including settlements on various islands that flourished along the Latium and Campania coasts. Whilst the similarities and use of the beach during this period may resemble a close relationship to the modern vacation, it becomes clear that an important distinction exists in how time spent at the seaside was valued and perceived. According to Corbin (1994) in his seminal work *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside 1750–1840*, time at the beach was seen as a time of self-development, *otium*⁴² or 'cultivated leisure', a time that allows for the 'play of intelligence' in preparation of future direction, in essence, *time out*, and not as we have come to expect, *time off* simply for rest or to pursue endless superficial performances and spectacles. Unlike the modern vacation laziness and boredom were to be seriously avoided (Corbin 1994, 251).

³⁹ This was a Situationist slogan used during the 1968 demonstrations in Paris.

⁴⁰ The value that Greco-Roman aristocrats of ancient Sparta and Athens placed on the act of swimming is reflected in a saying of the time that maintained 'an imbecile was an individual *who could neither read or swim*' (Lenček and Bosker 1998, 32).

⁴¹ Also significant in a contemporary context is the discovery during the 1950s of a Roman floor mosaic dated between 286–305AD that depicts what we have come to know as the Bikini; a two-pieced costume that was used by young women as water dress or for use in the gymnasium. The image of this garment, captured in the floor mosaic of a fourth-century A.D. Sicilian villa This floor mosaic was excavated by the Italian archaeologist Gino V Gentilli in 1950–1960 in the Villa Romana del Casale in Sicily and dates back to 286-305 A.D. The body-forms of the women represented in the mosaic wearing this 'bikini' styled garment also share a similar body aesthetic with the contemporary Western populations: one of youthful athleticism.

⁴² A Latin term broadly referencing leisure-time, but combining virtuous and enlightening activities.

Gradually many of the earnest values associated with the term *otium* were compromised in pursuit of beach-based pleasure-seeking;

For five hundred years—a record the modern era is yet to break—Baiae (located on the Bay of Naples) reigned as the greatest fashionable beach resort in the ancient world. In Baiae Rome's gilded youth paraded their pomaded hair and tunics of the finest wools, and dissipated *bons vivants* squandered borrowed money on women, wine, and oysters. This gay outpost by the sea was legendary for its dissoluteness, and Romans found its erotic spell irresistible. Seneca the Younger, the first-century philosopher, called Baiae a vortex of luxury of harbor and vice. (Lenček and Bosker 1998, 35)

It seems extraordinary that this early relationship to the littoral, which relates so closely to contemporary performance within this space, was all but lost with the collapse of the Roman Empire in A.D. 476. From this point in history right through to the beginning of the Enlightenment in the 17th century, vision of the sea was directed through harsh scriptural interpretation based on fear and repulsion. To be able to see the ocean through new eyes in a way that could liberate the spirit and open the mind to new sensorial delights required a new directive and vision that science came to provide. Growth in empirical scientific knowledge during the Enlightenment focused on understanding the major functions of the body. Corbin (1994) maintains that as a consequence of accruing evidence based on new scientific findings concerning the positive effect of the purified ocean air on the respiratory system, 'discovering the virtue of sea water led to the invention of the beach' (Corbin 1994, 70); health, was the driving force that popularised a way back into the water. Through an alternative perspective of the world based on science, reason and discovery, an emergent capitalist economy coupled to these advancements drove a social revolution from the factories to the beaches.

Massive change during the 19th century forged a major social evolution relative to a world driven by commerce and a developing consumerist economy. Along with the rise of industrialisation was a shift in how society came to define itself through work. Also key to this shift was the empowerment of the individual through a growing disposable income; the necessary ingredient to fulfil the consummate worker's role as the all-powerful 'consumer'. Henceforth, time away from the workplace afforded opportunity to define oneself through dreams and desires, which the arts and literature of the time provided plenty.⁴³ Within this burgeoning industrial revolution, a critical element emerged that dramatically influenced the evolutionary course of the contemporary beach; 'free time' and the notion of leisure. In its most fundamental form this has become the primary currency and directive to the enculturation of the beach.

⁴³ The powerful landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich and seascapes of J.M.W Turner evoked intense emotional connections to the aesthetic experience offered by nature whilst William Wordsworth espoused similar virtues of Romanticism in poetry.

One way of writing the history of the nineteenth century is as the slow process whereby labour won some time for itself from capital in order to call such time 'free': free from work and from producing things for the profit of others. (Inglis 2000, 3)

As a growing toxic plume descended upon the squalor of an industrialised landscape, mechanised transportation by way of a newly developing railway system, provided an opportunity for a growing working class population to escape to bluer horizons and to spend money on free time; in essence the 'holiday'.⁴⁴ 'Day tripping', initially packed into a Sunday was initiated in 1833 with the introduction of the Factory Act enforcing two full days and eight half-days of holiday per year⁴⁵ (Inglis 2000, 50). These designated public holidays witnessed the movement of vast moneyed populations to the seaside seeking to exploit for the first time in history the notion of hard earned leisure.

Within industrialised Britain a commercial enterprise emerged based on the formation of a supply chain necessary to provide goods and services for a growing population with money, mobility, spare time, and new desires. Many early capitalists in an entrepreneurial spirit were quick to realise the commercial potential of investing in leisure and adopted the seaside as the perfect location to develop the infrastructure and anticipate the growing needs of this newly liberated population. As the expanding labour force pursued travel adventures modelled on the typical itinerary of the aristocratic *Grand Tourist*,⁴⁶ tourism assumed the role of a currency representative of affluence and leisure.

⁴⁴ The 'holiday' as we have come to understand it, finds its roots in connection to particular 'holy days' that fell at specific times throughout the religious calendar year. On these rare occasions, communities were offered a temporary reprieve from the intensity of labour to participate in recreational activities including dancing, sport and feasting. The common festivals included Maypole, Harvest and Christmas. The *Lord of Misrule* (Lent, the carnival before fasting), a pagan character whose origins date back to antiquity, was absorbed into the festival activities in the build-up to Christmas. During this time a peasant or sub-deacon was usually selected to run the festivities and had the power to command anyone to do anything. The anointed Lord possessed the power to reverse normal civic behaviour and command the masters into subservient roles whilst slaves were temporally empowered. Excessive drunkenness, sex, swearing, undignified dressing and generally wild partying usually characterized festive behaviour. This annual venting of frustrations associated with repression and labour, finds a surprising relevance and close association with behavioural characteristics of many contemporary holidaymakers or High School Graduates attending 'Schoolies'. Inglis maintains: 'Sacred-pagan recreation and ruling-class tourism: the birth of the vacation lies there' (Inglis 2000, 6).

⁴⁵ This was further extended by the passing of the *Bank Holidays Act 1871* to include specific leisure days for religious holidays such as Christmas, Easter and Whitsun, importantly this was extended to include a number of extra days in August during the British summer.

⁴⁶ The word 'tourism' is derived from 'The Grand Tour', which began in 1763 with the signing of treaties that marked the end of hostilities in Europe and opened a pathway for safe passage from England across Europe. Typically the reserve of the heirs of the bourgeoisie, the Grand Tour operated from the 16th to the 18th centuries. The antiquities and the beaches of the Mediterranean were favoured destinations and on location under the guise of education, Grand Tourists would experience the best of local cuisine and, most importantly for male contingents, supplemented with the greatly anticipated sampling the exotic women (usually paid sex workers). Essentially, within the context of the Grand Tour, these early tourists enjoyed the opportunity to seek sexual escapades without tarnishing one's reputation; which seems to resonate closely with the contemporary catch cry 'what happens on tour stays on tour'.

The process by which the beach became steadily aligned with notions of the exotic and erotic finds its genesis in the period of global exploration from the early 16th to the 18th centuries. As the empire was driven to expand in search of riches, new sovereign territory and knowledge, accounts of voyages into uncharted oceans of the world revealed an abundance of earthly paradises. For the early explorers including among others, Cook, Magellan and Bougainville⁴⁷ the tropical islands of the Pacific provided ocean weary sailors with a heavenly respite, where they could indulge in the plenitudes of tropical climes, fruit, water and a boundless supply of exotic and erotic feminine beauties. Accounts and letters by these explorers record how within the turquoise waters and palmed beaches bronzed islanders would appear in canoes and scrambling aboard present themselves half-naked offering sexual favours as was customary to greeting visitors.⁴⁸ Visiting the *Friendly Islands* in 1643 Abel Janszoon Tasman recorded in his diary:



Fig 29. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2012–2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

47 Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan was the first to circumnavigate the Earth early in the 16th century. Following in the 17th century was British explorer Captain James Cook a contemporary to French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville.

48 Note how this early connection with sex, sea and, exotic populations extends into the spectre of modern global vacationing. In destinations such as Thailand, sexual tourism contributes significantly to the local economy. According to a CNN report in December 2003 the sex trade in Thailand was worth \$4.3 billion dollars per annum ('Sex debate: Prostitution is a \$4.3 billion industry in Thailand', <http://www.thaivisa.com>, Accessed 20 June 2013).

Some women took off their clothes and bartered them for nails. Others felt the sailors shamelessly in the trouser-front, and indicated that they wished to have intercourse, while the men on the island incited our ships' company to such transgressions. (Lenček and Bosker 1998, 48)

Literature expounded the numerous new discoveries detailing customs of the Indigenous inhabitants, many of which challenged to the core, dominant European religious beliefs. The 'naturalness' of the Polynesian cultures was understood in relation to the concept or myth of *the noble savage*,⁴⁹ which advanced in the 18th century, the idea that humans in a *state of nature*⁵⁰ are essentially good and happy, and attributed all negative vices to a result of indoctrination. Fiction too exploited the excitement of new discoveries in exotic destinations. Deserted islands were populist features in the literature of the day, (then as they are now) providing idealised, and romanticised utopic visions. The classics of the period: *Gulliver's Travels* (Jonathan Swift, 1726), *The Tempest* (William Shakespeare, 1610), and *Robinson Crusoe* (Daniel Defoe, 1719) played out in fiction, accounts of true explorations from the dairies of explorers and of castaways such as the Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk who was rescued in 1709 after spending four years on an uninhabited island off the coast of Chile.⁵¹

The awakening of the collective imagination, particularly of the rising middle class, was inspired at this time through the convincing style of authors such as Daniel Defoe⁵² and was expounded through the imagery by poets and artists⁵³

49 'Noble savage', is an expression that was first used in 1672 by British poet John Dryden. It is a term also associated with 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who believed human beings born in the state of nature uncorrupted by morals were essentially good and spared from the self-consciousness and corrupt influences of civilization. Terry Ellinson (2001) in *Myth of the Noble Savage* identifies how the 'savage' and the 'Oriental' were two great ethnographic paradigms developed by European writers during the age of exploration and colonialism, and how the symbolic opposition between 'wild' and 'domesticated' peoples, between 'savages' and 'civilisation', was constructed as part of a discourse of European hegemony, projecting cultural inferiority as an ideological ground for political subordination' (Ellinson 2001, xiii)

50 Hand-in-hand with Romanticism was the environmental determinism of primitivism, where lush tropical vegetation was understood as offering a place to release one's sexuality and heightened sensuality. Consequently, these imaginings had already worked to eroticise bodies at the beach through discourses of primitivism. Constituted as a 'pre-cultural' site, the beach was imagined as 'free' from the moral constraints of colonial settler society, including bathing naked." (Metusela and Waitt 2012, 27)

51 One particularly significant account published in 1771 that was instrumental in fuelling the philosophical imaginings of an 18th century Parisian public around the idea of the 'idyllic islanders' was Bougainville's journal *Circumnavigating the World on the Royal Frigate 'La Boudeuse' and the Armed Transport 'L'Etoile'*.

52 Defoe is credited for his innovative writing style where the reader is uncertain of what is genuine of fictitious Ian Watt (in his research on Defoe) suggests *emerges* from his journalistic background. The 'narrative realism' through 'the manufacture of corroborative evidence' delivered with the authority of Defoe's style, determines why the reader is left feeling uncertain whether the work is fictitious or genuine. Watt maintains that the story of *Robinson Crusoe* was widely regarded as authentic at the time of publication.

53 Including painters: Richard Wilson, John Robert Cozens, William Turner and poets: William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Samuel Coleridge.

Tableau: Setting the Scene

and the growing popularity of ‘travel guide’ literature.⁵⁴ Social implications of the massive change imposed by a world driven by commerce and a developing consumerist economy were far reaching. Within this emergent travel culture, premium coastal destinations were increasingly pursued with the promise of a sublime experience offered by the wild beauty (and terror, in the context of the sublime) of the northern coastline of Scotland or the indulgent Mediterranean Rivera’s of Italy and France.



Fig 30. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2012–2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Corbin (1994) points out that around the early 19th century a division was appearing in how the beach and seaside were experienced. On one hand natural sites were attracting particularly the working-class for the pleasures that could be experienced in a ‘spontaneous’ way, and on the other hand the emergence of carefully contrived experiences designed for a ‘distinguished public’⁵⁵. Debbie Ann Doyle maintains from the mid-1800s to the beginning of the 1900s the pleasure resorts that serviced distinguished clientele were ‘complicated moral landscapes where people flirted with the line between playful sensuality and improper behaviour’ (Doyle 2005, 95).

⁵⁴ Influential authors including: Edward Wright, Thomas Taylor, Thomas Cook, the travel notes of Eliot-Drake and Wortley Montagu.

⁵⁵ This division between the working class and the wealthy holiday at the beach shifts by the 20th century. From the early 1930s vacation company chains such as the *Butlins Holiday Camps* became popular and highly successful. For working class families these holiday camps offered affordable beachside vacations (and entertainment in the form of family fun activities), whilst the wealthy pursued ‘natural escape’ packages in exotic destinations accompanied with the essential luxury demanded by this exclusive clientele.

The invention of the holiday marks a seminal moment in defining the beach as a social space reserved for leisure. Within this new paradigm dreams emerge fuelled by great anticipation and a collective social imagination. The principles that evolved out of the invention of ‘free time’ forged an integral link to the beach particularly in the relationships between desire, luxury and leisure.

holiday makers travelled in order to work so hard at being leisurely, and so insouciantly to be the object of others’ envy. These are the origins of modern glamour, one of the strangest as well as most familiar values to feature in, as well as cause, the rise of consumerism. (Inglis 2000, 43)

From its conception, leisure was rapidly absorbed into the consumerist model and vigorously traded; the expanding seaside leisure industry witnessed increased investment into salubrious accommodation in the form of the hotel. With ‘luxury’⁵⁶ as the presiding quality, hotel enterprises embraced an ongoing formulaic approach to designing the dream, where access to water and the groomed white sandy beaches stand as an essential element. It is often within the context of a vacation at the beach, where spare time and surplus (beyond need) align to present an opportunity to relish in luxury. A veritable and expanding list continues to evolve our expectations and definitions of luxury; from the regal nomenclature at the palatial hotel entry, to the private room-serviced, air conditioned boudoirs, equipped with ensuite bathroom, television, wi-fi, bar fridge, and the balcony, overlooking pools and spas, providing access to saunas and steam-rooms, tennis courts and flotillas of free sea craft beside tapestries of beach towels; Luxury lies not only at the heart of the holiday, but is an essential element of neo liberal capitalism.

The refinement of need into luxury is an infinite gratification. Nowadays one can say quite plausibly, ‘I not only want, I need a holiday’ and indeed this need is recognized as some kind of legal right by the existence of legislated holiday-with-pay. (Inglis 2000, 59)

The further we distance ourselves from life at a subsistence level, sustained by surplus, the further the boundaries of need are extended and refined (Berry 1994). The slippage that occurs between our wants and needs, fantasy and reality, are constantly being redefined; a switch that transforms the luxury of dreaming to the dreaming of luxury.

⁵⁶ At the risk of denying a complex history that belies the current understanding of the term *luxury*, for the point of this research the term predicates on the notion that it is a commodity; that is in essence, unnecessary. Christopher Berry in his book *The Idea of Luxury: a conceptual and historical investigation* (1994) promotes the idea that luxury may be classified under the headings *sustenance* food and drink, *shelter*, *clothing* and *leisure* (1994, 5). To all of these categories Inglis adds that sex is: ‘a leisure pleasure (or luxury) which is also a necessity ... Sex, in other words, is imbricated in each, and carries its luxurious charge ‘when it is leisurely’, which is to say, when it is freed from time and commodification (Inglis 2000, 58).

Tableau: Setting the Scene

As increments of leisure time increase⁵⁷ it is simultaneously absorbed by the flourishing capitalist economy by which it was conceived. The *Situationist International*, founded in 1957, presented the idea of 'free time' as simply an illusion; maintaining that social and economic forces appropriate free time and sell it back to the individual as a commodity understood as 'leisure'. Under this proposition in a contemporary neo-liberal capitalist system, an individual is encouraged (largely through advertising) to [re]purchase free time often in the form of a vacation; a performance caged in luxury, and sold through fantasy; living the dream... at the beach. In his seminal work *The Delicious History of the Holiday* Fred Inglis (2000) similarly concludes:

The creation of leisure and the competition to buy and sell it are best understood as a history of how to feel, how to imagine, how to yearn, and how to go places and do nothing. (Inglis 2000, 114).

What is being manufactured and marketed under this regime of leisure are fantasies and formulas designed to maximise and trade pleasure for profits. For this the beach is a premium site: a hedonistic pleasure zone ready for exploitation. Guy Debord⁵⁸ proposes that 'capitalist production has unified space', in an 'extensive and intensive process of banalization' (Debord 1967, 165). Under this model originality, cultural heritage and difference is steadily compromised as a consequence of the corporate management of our imagination, social space and time. In essence, our collective imagination of what constitutes both the space and experience of the beach is designed and determined within 'dream package getaways'. Essential to the process of insidious uniformity of space and the creation of a collective fantasy is the notion that in modern societies, defined within an ideology based on production, life is experienced as 'an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (Debord 1967, 1). Embodied within Debord's observation is a major clue in my quest to reveal the form and function of the cyber beach fantasy. The subsequent series of beach performances provide form through which to consider aspects of his philosophy.

⁵⁷ A 2006 report in *The Economist* titled 'The Land of Leisure', demonstrates that based on statistics gathered in 2006, over the past four decades the average working American devotes between four to eight hours extra a week to leisure, which equates to between five to ten extra weeks holiday per year (accessed 22 May 2012). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 'Time Use Survey', Australians currently spend 21% of their time on leisure (ABS 2008b).

⁵⁸ Guy Debord a French Marxist theorist, writer and filmmaker was a key figure in The Situationist International. His writing is credited as playing an influential role in the 1968 May revolts in France.



Figure 31. (Left) Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Fig 32. (Right) 'Tropical Island Paradise', Yacht Island Designs, 2014, advertisement drawing.

Act II

Tableau / Scene I

Tableau

Seeking a tropical destination to spend my mid-winter vacation I pluck from my shelf the essential travellers bible *The Lonely Planet*.⁵⁹ The book falls open at a page featuring the Gili Islands which lie off the coast of Bali to the east of the Wallace Line in the Lombok Strait.

Referring to the section headlined 'Why Go?' I read:

Picture three miniscule desert islands, fringed by white-sand beaches and coconut palms, sitting in a turquoise sea: the Gilis are a picture of paradise. (The Lonely Planet 2011, 286)

In my quest to define the Westerner's utopic (wet) dream it seems I have struck gold! The Gili Islands appear as a perfect testing ground for many of the popularised assumptions of the contemporary beach.

Scene I

It was clear entering the Virgin queue that I, along with what appeared to be a thousand others, was on a winter pilgrimage to paradise. Flanking the baggage check-in counter, expansive reproductions of familiar island scenes provided a comforting lure. This was the same daily reminder that greeted me from the screen saver image on my laptop; the promised *getaway* so eagerly anticipated and marked with digital regularity across the year on the dashboard screen calendar.

Casting my eye over the thrumming line I note the distinctive casual attire that clearly reflected my own selection that morning. Tee shirts spouting: *Mambo, Billabong, Quicksilver, Rusty, Animal, No Fear, Insight, Pornstar* announce the demographic and origins of my travelling companions. Thongs and sarongs, short colourful skirts and tank-tops confirmed our collective destinations. This was certainly not a business trip to Europe.

Duty free was equally bustling as patrons scrambled to pack their limit of cigarettes, vodka, rum and Jägermeister: the liquid essence of a holiday. Anticipation, and promise, the excitement was palpable. As the electronic gong signalled the seatbelt sign I sipped on my gin and tonic and pushed the recline button releasing an audible sigh as I closed my eyes. I was officially *on holiday!* Reflecting on the fact that I lived five minutes from my local beach I could still taste the salt from the ritual morning swim. But this was different. What was the allure of this tropical destination that surpassed the endless iconic pristine West Australian beaches? This was an *island* holiday; a time dedicated to *time-off* away from the routine of the working week. This was a journey to an exotic destination where one could experience the delights

⁵⁹ *The Lonely Planet* is a travel guide publisher. Founded in 1972 publications were originally only available in a series of travel guide books but is now available also as digital applications.

and abundance of Asian cuisine cooked in the pungent tropical air and served by acquiescent local staff endlessly keen to cater for 'all' your needs, for a fraction of the cost I could expect to pay at home. I recalled the fine-featured Balinese women who would vie for a chance to massage away the stresses of an unrelenting Western city existence, with the secret promise of a *happy ending*.⁶⁰ Luxury! Yes that was going to be the key to this holiday. Behind my weary eyelids I visualised the dream. Flicking open the pages of my traveller's bible I read:

These islets have exploded in popularity, and are booming like nowhere else in Indonesia- speedboats zip visitors across direct from Bali and a new hip hotel opens every month. (The Lonely Planet 2011, 286)

I note the departure times for *Fast Boat* transport to the Gilis for future reference then flick through the pages of the latest *Virgin Voyeur* in-flight magazine and study the *special edition Rolex* offerings that seemed to speak in secret conversations with *Rush* and *Obsession* located on the facing page; as flawless models wantonly caress the phallus of the bottle that strains to contain their perfumed spell binding promises. I'm reminded of the quote on the back cover of the Lonely Planet by travel writer Ryan Ver Berkmoes:

The mere mention of 'Bali' evokes thoughts of paradise. It's more than a place; it's a mood, an aspiration, a tropical state of mind. (Ver Berkmoes, 2011)

From the chauffeured airport pick-up to the air-conditioned delivery upon the marbled steps in the lobby of the Bali Hai; this was just like the brochure, this was really *'living!'* My suite overlooks the cabana bar in the horizon pool with maximum views to the chaise-lounge surrounds laid out in the precision of a Cartesian grid. Elevated in stiletto heels, bikini-clad forms basted in fresh coconut oil exuding smells of pure sex slip in and out of the pool and return to their dedicated chez lounge in an endless circuit. Conspicuously absent in the face of this pleasure palace was the annoying banter of the old and the pitched squeals of the young, both replaced instead by the reassuring sound of piped music wafting in the warm tropical air to the rhythm of the gently swaying palms.

An overnight stay in Kuta enabled enough time for an evening stroll into the centre. Beyond the veneer of the pillared gates of the hotel, my island fantasy is shattered as a marauding mob, the drunken remnants of an 'Auzzie Rules' amateur football team, try and negotiate a narrow fractured pavement down Poppy Lane in search of the next Bintang and 'bitch'. They shout profanities at the local girls who cram the darkened doorways to seedy massage parlours; young women resigned to bargain away their remaining dignity for the price of a *happy hour* Tequila shot at the Hard Rock Café. A volcanic stone temple wedged between nightclubs is bathed in strobe lights, which animate the movements of an elaborately costumed local woman as she carefully places intricate offerings to her Hindu gods; the remnants

⁶⁰ Euphemism for an orgasm.

Act II

Scene I

of the previous days smeared and crushed in the clumsy tourist stride. A recess appears between dividing streets and gives way to an ornately carved white stone shrine. Inscribed in a black marble plaque are listed the names of the victims of the 2002 Bali bombing; a Hindu shrine to the flash point of cultural terrorism - on both sides.

Back in a utopic bubble of the Bali Hai I sit at the bar sipping my *Sex on the Beach*⁶¹ aware of the performance underway across the pool. Clapping signals the end of a gamelan sequence choreographed to a flash of gold as performers contorted limbs strike a sculptured pose; the brilliance of *dine-in* culture! From the elevation of my balcony I watch silhouetted lovers suspended in the turquoise light of the pool negotiate their way to a darkened corner and listen to the distant cacophony of a thousand beats mixed with the thrum of Bemos and scooters punctuated by the endless pulse of the waves.

An early morning chauffeured pick-up/delivery to the Blue Water Bali Express sees me pounding up the Lombok Strait in a roaring high-powered fizz boat; life jacketed in bucket seats with a squealing bikini clad consignment. A local bare-chested young skipper taking every opportunity to impress his alacritous guests leans heavily on the throttle leaving resident fishermen in their colourful outriggers to deal with the turbulent plume. As the emergent forms of the Gilis grow steadily into *The Lonely Planet's* 'picture of paradise' it's difficult to imagine it was as late as 1970 that Bugis fishermen from Sulawesi first settled these islands. Going by the bustling waterfront of Gili Trawangan, the catch-of-the-day was clearly one of tourists. The skipper, negotiating a rising current, vies for a space large enough to nuzzle the bow on a patch of white sand between a throng of jostling craft. As eager porters scramble aboard and contend to discharge the bikinied consignment, I secure my bag and, making my own way ashore, reflect on a passage from *The Lonely Planet*:

[Gili] Trawangan (and Air to a lesser degree) have a resident population of wannabe local gigolos, much like the Kuta Cowboys of Bali. Girls can expect plenty of interest and comments from these chancers as they walk around. (The Lonely Planet 2011, 286)

From the outset it is obvious that the Gili Islands are a popular international destination. German, French, Italian, Japanese, over ripe Britons, and the usual large serving of Australians largely comprise the tourist make-up of the Islands. Also evident is the clear divide among the Indigenous population. Westernised local males peruse the main strip that occupies the shoreline and hustle tourists into patronising various clubs and pubs laid out along this line. A separate local population, predominately comprised of practicing Muslims, inhabit a village that encircles the only hill on the Island and is located one street behind the main strip. The cultural contradictions that proclaim this island

⁶¹ Cocktail consisting of two parts vodka, one part peach schnapps, two parts orange juice, two parts cranberry juice shaken with ice and garnished with orange pieces.

paradise are undoubtedly the result of a delicate and enduring negotiation. No place is this more evident than on a sandy strip on the eastern shore beyond the water taxi depot. At this point a welling population of tourists sporting the latest French Riviera mono bikinis, some topless, others strutting the latest G-string codpiece, baste each other's bodies and rotate. Local beach vendors keenly pick their way among the slow broiling carrion, offering massages, magic mushrooms and a range of alcoholic beverages. Smoke rises from a ring of tanned tourists standing waist deep in the cooling current. Above the reggae sounds other locals, many dressed in burqas and robes are called to prayer at the local mosque a hundred meters from the main strip. Signs on the strip request *no wearing bikinis in the town* sit alongside others proclaiming... *We sell the best fuck'n magic mushrooms on the island*'. Happy hour on the island evolves into a carnivalesque atmosphere highlighted by the clattering and jingling bells from the local pony-driven carts and weaving bicycles that comprise the only transportation on the island. Rehydration is via mandatory mixes of exotic island cocktails and for many supplemented with the famed local *mushies* conjures up a surreal intoxicating scene. DJ western club music pumps from beachside *Warungs*⁶² as strobe lights animate ghostly forms that weave through a fog of smoking seafood satays. Bikinis and skin on skin is the order on the dance floor, consummated with a lover on the beach, in a nightly ritual that fades by dawn. Call to prayer is issued in with the soft sounds of sweeping as the locals go about their customary street cleansing, removing windrows of debris to horse-and-carts; polishing paradise before a rising sun.



Figure 33. Richard Coldicutt, Casting the Net (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

⁶² The Indonesian term for a small family-owned business that includes a small shop or café.

Behind the strip I negotiate a labyrinth of narrow streets exploring territory clearly the reserve of locals. As I make my way through the bustle of freshly polished children uniformed for school, scurrying poultry, and mothers supporting babies on hips, I am conscious of the raised eyebrows and questioning gazes which confirm that I have strayed beyond the invisible line. Humbled, I feel that at this moment, perhaps by default, my life belongs in Disneyland; where expectations are fuelled by the excitement and anticipation of the ride, thrill seeking hedonism, where money ensures a seat in the front row and where the rest of the world exist outside the security of the gates.

On a mission to circumnavigate the island, I walk a sandy track that puts kilometres between the rising morning tourist-tide. Leaving my boardies⁶³ at the base of a palm, I pick my way across the reef and carefully slip into the ocean between two outcrops of coral. The soothing water unveils kaleidoscopic clouds of fish suspended within magnificent coral gardens. Within this familiar medium my body feels restored, reinvigorated and tantalizingly sexy. Drifting in a steady current, with the vision through my diving mask split between two hemispheres, this for me is paradise found.

I consider for a moment how this might also be representative of parallel universes I have experienced on my island getaway. In one instance a deeply religious culture possessed by relative economic poverty is charged with the pragmatic maintenance and fulfilment of the generic consumerist island fantasy of another. It comes somewhat as a disappointment to recognise that the place where I have felt most 'real' is probably grounded in a prescribed pixelated screen island fantasy based on the luxury of isolation: a place without needs. To the local Indigenous population this concept of their island must seem as foreign and abstracted as the more obvious Western alternative 'island fantasy' that exists as a place for taboo, liminal transgressive performances in a sandy stage on the edge.

⁶³ Australian vernacular for board shorts or beach bathers.



Fig 34. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Anxieties run deep in our frenetic Western world where solace resides in sand and saltwater.

Back in the studio I endeavour to align the experience of my exotic Island escape with the expectations of the trip and wonder how the physical beach has developed into this site of fantasy, something that is necessarily pursued abroad? As I watch my screen saver dissolve from one idyllic tropical island beach scene into another I realise that the scope of this contemporary performance space has grown. This is no longer a stroll along my local beach in a study of micro

performances; it is a beach performance on a grand scale played out in pixels and paint tracing the colonisation by capitalism sandy island shores. What I am attempting to 'figure through painting' no longer simply exists as a physical space comprised of millions of sand particles, but simultaneously exists as a cyber-beach in a hyper-reality comprised of millions of pixels. Through my artist's eye, the utopic dream embedded in my screensaver connects seamlessly with visual clues and aesthetic markers, a continuum linking the colours of a tropical palette, sun, sand, sea, sex; the fecundity of a *Gauguinsque*⁶⁴ fantasy. A myriad of compositions and painted surfaces merge into a visual heritage that has defined over time how I observe and feel within certain landscapes, how fantasy may be transformed to doctrine, and how certain frames now determine cultural sovereignty. As an artist I am somewhat reassured how the potency of painting has endured with sufficient power to orchestrate contemporary social conventions. Yet studying the simulations and spectacular illusions of tropical destinations comprised of flickering light on the monitor of my 21st century computer, I am reminded how life appears to be traded in bytes of time and money spent in the pursuit of fleeting formless fantasies.

As I mindlessly observe the endless pastiche of imagery emanating from my monitor I subconsciously forge a charmed relationship between the fantasy of this generic cyber beach and leisure. Chris Rojek (1995) provides a vision on how he believes leisure is framed in a neo-liberal capitalist system. From an essentially Marxist perspective Rojek maintains not only have we lost any personal claim to leisure, but also by way of the same capitalist system, the spontaneity of the human imagination and creative expression is 'sacrificed to a world of produced commodities and packaged experience' (Rojek 1995, 16). This does not presume that island fantasies are necessarily all the same, there is obviously a selection of experiences from which individuals may choose; the party island experience, the 'booze cruise', the eco holiday, the cultural tour, the tropical dive trip and so forth. However the experiences associated within each category are comprised of predictable clichés which are neither unique nor inventive. Whether experienced in digital simulations of deserted tropical beachscapes or physically within the various packaged island getaways, the imagining and marketing of these experiences has evolved through a process of 'banalisation' Debord (1967) that is reflected in the predictability and artificiality of my Gili Island escape. Before even booking the tickets, my holiday leisure experience and expectations had been framed within the pages of the *Lonely Planet*; it is clear that my experience was not going to be in any way unique or even unpredictable. Rojek isolates four factors within a leisure economy driven by modern capitalism that are responsible for this loss: privatization, individuation, commercialization, and pacification (Rojek, 1964). Under a capitalist regime, inside a society fashioned on 'the spectacle' (Debord 1967) where everything is up for sale, these powers are seen to reinforce the alienation of individuals and any specific allegiances. Rojek suggests 'privatisation' is what keeps individuals bonded to the screen while watching endless glistening imagery of distant places. 'Individuation' reinforces the narcissistic nature of leisure with a focus that presents pleasures as being specifically

64 In reference to the painter Paul Gauguin.

personal, unique, (getting away from it all) and is something that is often expressed through body image or clothing. 'Commercialisation' he believes simply converts profit into value whilst 'pacification' maintains order and obedience; while we are busy being exploited (Rojek 1985, 18-23). On all counts in the context of my holiday, and in life in general, I have been thoroughly seduced; essentially as a consumer I have been consumed.

Tracing the evolution of the contemporary 'getaway' Inglis (2000) defines its expectations, generalisations and characteristics. He suggests the word 'utopia', founded on the Greek translation 'the place of human flourishing', foreshadows the notion of 'paradise'; paradise 'lends its aura to all our holiday fantasies' and as a word and concept it remains 'gratifyingly indestructible' (Inglis 2000, 9). From his research Inglis has produced a set of ten 'maxims', that order the holiday experience and form the basis on which to define my interest in the generic fantasy of the beach. Whilst Inglis maintains holidays don't necessarily include all ten maxims and some are in fact contradictory, I seek to use this structure as a check-list against which to define my Gili Island Getaway holiday.

First, vacations take place in bracketed time. That is to say, they are anticipated as 'time out, 'time off' ... 'free' time. (Inglis 2000, 9)

Typical of most working environments, my year is generally metered relative to accumulated annual leave and the statutory days off such as Easter, Christmas, New Year's Day, ANZAC Day and so forth. Within the academic calendar, the mid-year semester break is greatly anticipated as an opportunity to escape the cold and head to the tropics for a ten-day mid-winter beachside break. The timing is not randomly selected at my own discretion.

[Second] ... there must be no work while on vacation ... it cannot be the work for which one is normally paid ... one meaning of the holiday... is that it marks free time won from work. (Inglis 2000, 9-10)

Relative to my particular occupation as an artist, this maxim may not actually apply. Whilst my income is predominantly generated from teaching, another aspect of my livelihood is based on painting, which is something I continue to do on holiday. Technically speaking this could be perceived as an obsession rather than work.

Third, the places may be strange or familiar; they may be both (Inglis 2000, 10)

Inglis suggests some vacations might involve returning to a familiar place: the haunts of one's youth for instance. An alternative holiday may be specifically seeking new strangeness and the unfamiliar to delight in the foreign and exotic. My holiday experience was a mixture of both. Within the confines of the hotel everything appeared familiar: the layout, the signage in English, the Western menu, the service and so forth, however outside of the confines of the tourist complex all appeared suitably exotic and uncontrived.

Fourth, the place must be beautiful *and* luxurious ... The hotel, the villa; the aircraft, the bus; the shops, the museums; these must all signify luxury, luxurious display, luxurious vegetation, implements and adornments. To say that these are accoutrements and illusions of old power is to miss the point. The power lives in luxury ... Luxury is ripest ... Pastiche being what it is these days, and the imitation of the iconography of luxury being so readily reproduced, as jewellery, gilded glass, blue marble and indoor fountains playing over mosaic peacocks, luxury is pretty well synonymous with kitsch. (Inglis 2000, 10)

As Inglis emphasises, luxury forms the basis to most contemporary holiday experiences and is a presiding quality most eagerly sought. Even the physical proximity to the ocean assumes precious cultural capital; an ocean view is perceived as luxury. Every aspect of my winter tropical escape involved some aspect of luxury sanctified through the usual aesthetic markers; tropical islands surrounded by turquoise water (pool or ocean), palm trees, frangipanis, hibiscus, white sand, sunbathing equipment such as chaises lounges, umbrellas, beach cabañas, hobby craft such as small yachts, sailboards, kite surfers, water-skiing, para-skiing, all augmented with exotic tropical fruits, cocktails and music at the end of the day. Here lies the foundation for the generic beach fantasy.



Figure 35. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Fifth, the vacation must be safe and it must be dangerous. Home is neither ... The holiday ... encloses us in the safety of luxury ... and piques us with the scent of danger (don't go down to the edge of town, take care of the waves on the sea front). (Inglis 2000, 10)

Whilst some tourists pursue thrill-seeking holidays generally for the purpose of participating in sporting activities that might involve danger such as rock climbing and surfing to name but two, for a large vacationing population the holiday might provide an opportunity to try something adventurous in a controlled environment, such as scuba-diving in a swimming pool. My own personal experience moves between the two; after a day's snorkelling, or surfing on the reef, I retreat back to the safety of the hotel.

Sixth, contrariwise, the good holiday relieves us of the grubby city and restores us to the fresh bosom of nature. Nature-as-good-for-you has deep roots ... Holidays make time to recover that gentleness and complicity-it is surely this restoration which is covered by the catch-all 'relaxation'. (Inglis 2000, 10)

This element seems synonymous with most island holiday experiences and is often gauged on the reaction of others on one's return through comments such as 'you look so well, so relaxed'. The sight of a horizon framed by ocean may represent to the beholder a fleeting sense of freedom and liberation from the grind of work. For many contemporary travellers the restorative aspect of holidaymaking is the prime reason for travel and is determined by such things as booking into particular coastal yoga retreats, health spas, meditation workshops and so forth. The restorative element of my own holiday is often experienced drifting in the warm tropical currents surrounded by a spectrum of fish.

Seventh, the vacation must improve and enhance our minds, spirits and bodies. Western spiritual development theory is piled high in recent doctrines of earnestness and puritan self-improvement for everybody ... [the Grand Tour] took out a license on learning as well as licentiousness, and the tourist has always travelled with the heavy burden of improving literature and a clear duty to see the sights and take the walks ... A brown body, in the sexual aesthetics of today, is healthier than a white one. (Inglis 2000, 11)

One of the highlights very often discussed in relation to a trip to Bali is the intriguing cultural aspect of the holiday. At this destination one anticipates the constant body pampering by way of the daily massage, organic treatments, yoga retreats and detox regimes. All this augmented with the busy Hindu festival calendar and time spent attending cultural events such as performances and ceremonies whilst making attempts at learning aspects of the local language.

Act II

Scene I

Eighth, being both civic and solitary ... At home there are only intimates and the anonymity of the crowds. On holiday there are traditional social roles occupied by cordial strangers ... one acts up to their walk-on part in one's private play ... like all good societies it expresses an ideal balance and a clear but implicit boundary between public and private life. (Inglis 2000, 11)

Typical of many of my holiday experiences I might participate in civic activities such as attending a cockfight, or going to the markets, whilst on other occasions fervently seeking private time away from the fray to swim, dive or surf in remote locations. In the context of the hotel, the distinction and boundaries between public and private are a constant negotiation. The design of the balcony usually ensures a sense of privacy from other patrons, yet one is forced with other guests into an intimate yet public space in the compression of lift on the way to the lobby. In order to claim the best private space under the palm tree, (poolside, with a view to the ocean) one is forced to rise early to beat the German tourist who has successfully managed to secure the spot in the previous two days.

Ninth, the holiday must be plentiful and it must be licentious. The end of every holiday is a vast meal. Every holiday lives on the liminal, which is to say at the edge of things: duties, work, routine, financial responsibility. On the edge, those clouds lift. I shall eat what I like and drink more than I can. I will behave disgracefully, wearing weird clothes or no clothes. I will be invisible to my reputation and my respectability, because here such actions have their license and misrule its day. I will buy food such as I would never buy at home and cook dishes never attempted there either. I will drink gin at midday and chardonnay at three ... And easy, edenic and guiltless sex will assail and delight me, in fact and fantasy, on any corner and at every hour. (Inglis 2000, 12)

It is within this maxim that the power of generic island fantasy ultimately resides. The type of behaviour associated with being on vacation in these exotic locations would only be possible (and tolerated) under the pretext of this holiday-performance. This maxim lies at heart of any 'getaway'; a place (in fantasy or fiction resembling the fantasy) where one can shatter the routine and restrictions that define our daily existence at home. Under this maxim one can live the alter-ego in a performance with few constraints and no regrets. This was behaviour that I had regularly observed throughout my holiday abroad. A recent miniseries television documentary entitled *What Happens in Kavos*⁶⁵ follows the lives and antics of young Britons on holiday at the party island destination of Sunny Beach Kavos on Corfu Island in the Greek isles.

⁶⁵ The documentary was produced by United Kingdom's Channel 4. According to the *New York Daily News* (9 January 2013), Channel 4 topped their ratings in 2013 drawing 1.61 million viewers to the show. <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/british-show-kavos-earns-record-ratings-article-1.1236495#ixzz32WRLhVv> Accessed 19 May, 2014.

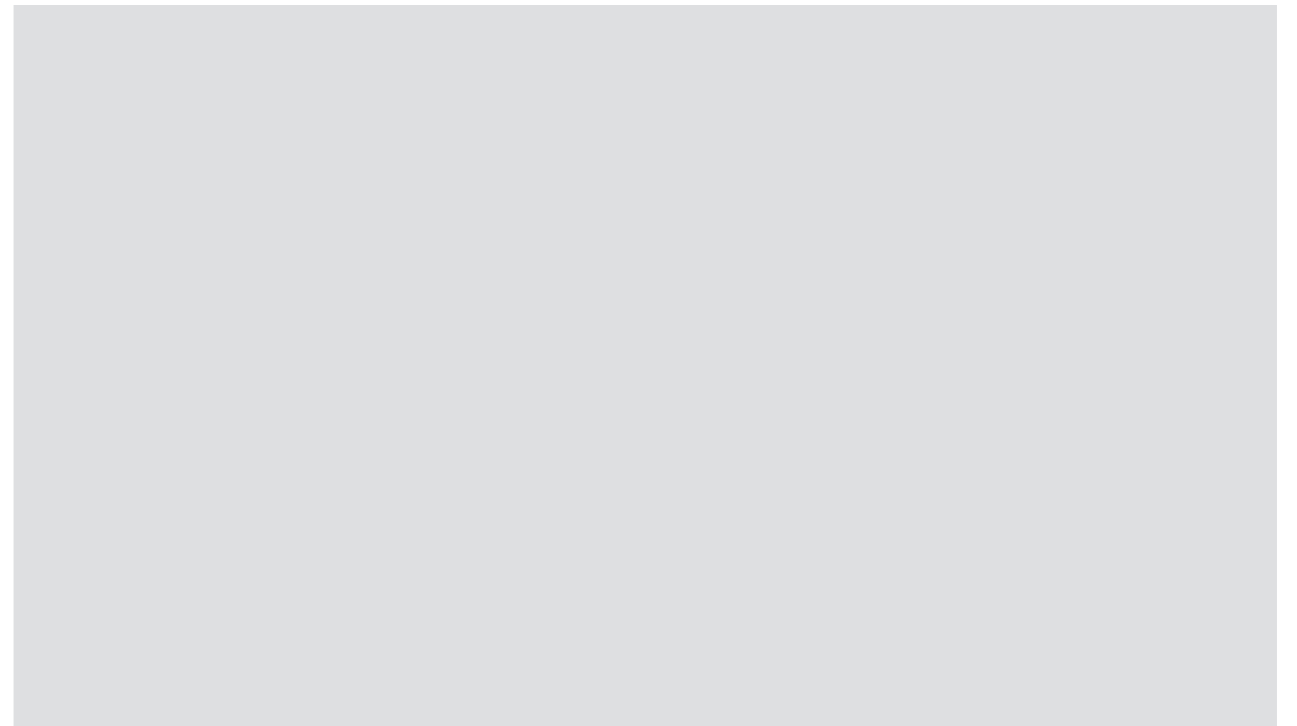


Fig 36. 'Kavos Boat Party/Booze Cruise 2014 Promo', Kavos Cruises, still from online video

The documentary features boats overloaded with young tourist 'booze-cruising' around the island. Another show focuses on 'love rats' and gay men converting straight men for one-night stands. One subsequent scene traces the actions of a 21-year-old bartender named Will when he is shamed into drinking someone else's urine as punishment for breaking a stringent Kavos rule and sleeping with the same girl three times. The great irony of this show is that it is titled on the saying 'what happens on tour stays on tour', which implies that no reputations will be compromised through indiscretions whilst on holiday. The reality and popularity of this documentary ensures the exact opposite.

Tenth supreme fiction ... Wallace Stevens [poet] said: 'It must be abstract ... it must change ... it must give pleasure ... [in relation to poets Wallace Stevens, Keats, Wordsworth, Emerson]... Such poets and philosophers confirm by their trade the last of my maxims which is a platitude. It is that all good holidays, abstract, changeful, pleasurable as they are, must leave a deep sediment of folklore, myths and family jokes in the collective memory and the culture which carries it. The immorality of the vacation lives in the recollection of a past which causes laughter and fond tears in the present. (Inglis 1998, 9–12)

As the concluding maxim in Inglis's series, this bares an essential relationship to the previous; where many of the antics and liminal activities undertaken on holiday evolve into special events that are permanently remembered in the form of myths and stories. The highlights of each journey are remembered and recalled as a series of unique holiday tales, often posted on Facebook; tales that reinforce ongoing actions associated with social behaviour within the holiday paradigm.

What becomes most apparent in the context of Inglis's research is the predictability of not just our expectations when we travel to particular tourist destinations but also our actions. A sure consequence of the unification of space in the context of the beach resort holiday is the inevitable appropriation and banalization of culture and place. In the formation of Island holiday resorts local communities invariably relinquish much of their autonomy for the economic gains generated in performing and sustaining the Western fantasy. Driven by a highly mobile, and moneyed Western population and their endlessly expanding appetite for unspoiled exotic holiday destinations,⁶⁶ what begins in the sands of a tropical beach permeates into and ultimately defines the social and economic strata of island populations.

Whilst this may appear as a somewhat nihilist vision it is a view shared by controversial, award-winning contemporary French author, filmmaker and poet Michel Houellebecq. The banal genericism of the contemporary fantasy island paradise provides a particularly relevant landscape for Houellebecq's 'Depressive Realism.'⁶⁷ In both his novel *Platform* (2002) and novella *Lanzarote* (2003), Houellebecq documents a present-day journey from the spectacularly barren landscape of the island of Lanzarote⁶⁸ (in the Canary Islands) to hotels set in the tropical locations in the archipelago's of Thailand and the Caribbean. The islands provide the necessary setting to follow the lives of characters seeking to break from the monotony of their everyday (European) lives in their winter escapes to getaway vacations. Houellebecq's writing depicts a soulless world through emotionless narrative, which Ben Jeffery (2011) describes as 'dystopian nihilist vision' presented as 'contemporary realism'. Houellebecq establishes sex tourism as the determining reason that inspires his key characters (and a large proportion of tourists) in their selection of particular island holiday destinations. Through writing that is often criticised for its detached vulgarity, Houellebecq pursues the idea that free-market

⁶⁶ Statistics indicate that whilst disposable incomes in Western Europe and the USA have increased substantially within the last decades, airfares and the cost of car travel, measured in real terms, have decreased (Frandsberg and Vilhemson 2003, 1755; Tarry 2003, 82; Szerszynski and Urry 2006, 116) The Australian Bureau of Statistics identifies that short-term departures to Indonesia from Australia (92.9% being for holidays) have risen on average by 9.8 % per year between 1999 and 2010 (ABS 2010).

⁶⁷ As Ben Jeffery points out 'the term refers to a psychological study performed by Alloy and Abramson in 1979 that suggests depressives routinely demonstrate better judgment in how much control they have over events' (Jeffery 2011, 3).

⁶⁸ Lanzarote is the fourth largest Island in the Canary Islands archipelago located in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Africa.

economics intrudes into sex and relationships, where the 'theoretical connection of both sex and tourism exemplify the free market at its most free' (Barnes 2003). Believing that in the modern world sex is fundamentally a capitalistic exercise,⁶⁹ in the eyes of Houellebecq, sex comprises an essential component for the international division of labour.⁷⁰



Figure 37. Richard Coldicutt, Casting the Net (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

⁶⁹ Fred Inglis suggests that: 'everybody has a sexual tourist hidden in some corner of their nature. There must be thousands of tourists that come to Patpong simply as spectators ... The omnivorous consumer goes to buy sex; buys the transaction, feels the sensation, finishes. Consumption, apart from a slight tremor at its ingestatory semantics, is a precise enough word to describe the exchange' (Inglis 2000, 144).

⁷⁰ Brian McNair offers: 'the phenomenon of the 'pink pound' is one manifestation of the fact that the pleasurable, recreational dimensions of sexuality have long made the lucrative object of capitalist entrepreneurship, based on the transformation of desire and the promise of sexual pleasure into various types of commodity (pornographic books and films, sex aids, fashion and appearance enhancers of various kinds, and all the sex-saturated products of art and popular culture. Sex sells indirectly too, routinely used in advertising and pop video as a powerful promotional tool to sell other commodities in the marketplace.) ... 'that commodified sex in all its forms, targeted at most sexual communities with the resources to indulge in their preferences, is of major economic significance in cultural capitalism of the twenty-first century, is indisputable' (McNair 2002, 6).

in societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions just as mercilessly. The effect of these two systems are, furthermore, strictly equivalent. Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces a phenomena of 'absolute pauperization'. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their lives, or never. Some make love with dozens of women; others with none. It's what's known as 'the law of the market'. (Houellebecq 1999, 99)

In *Platform* Houellebecq builds upon this premise tracing the life and philosophy of his main character Michael as he assists in rejuvenating a failing hotel chain through re-theming and re-structuring. In essence Michael helps to formalise an already established market through a new chain of beachside resorts dedicated to a more up market version of sexual tourism. In justification of this new (and incredibly successful) capitalist enterprise Houellebecq writes;

You have several hundred million Westerners who have everything they could want but no longer manage to obtain sexual satisfaction: they spend their lives looking, but they don't find it and they are completely miserable. On the other hand, you have several billion people who have nothing, who are starving, who die young, who live in conditions unfit for human habitation and who have nothing left to sell except their bodies and unspoiled sexuality. It's simple, really simple to understand: it's an ideal trading opportunity. (Houellebecq 2001, 242)

Houellebecq's transposition of capitalistic values into a scenario for a new sexual economy may seem radical but in doing so tests to the core many of the principles that underpin consumerism and 'unrestrained economic liberalism' (Houellebecq 1999). Jonas Vesterberg (2003) perceives the contemporary human condition in similar terms, suggesting without a vestige in religious doctrine and a belief in the afterlife, existence appears temporary and alienating;

Today, human relations are defined by means to consumerist ends; ends that do not seem to lead us anywhere, but towards a more all-encompassing alienation... Materialism has become so dominant that human relations are not mediated through external objects, humans are the 'de-facto' objects themselves. Thus we are free particles, detached from the world and ourselves. (Vesterberg 2003, 16)

The image *Live Trade: The Pacific Solution* (Coldicutt 2012 Oil on Panel) parodies this sexual economy of globalised leisure and its intimate connection to the beach. Played out on the deck of a boat as it approaches a desert island (booze cruising), this painting attempts to push to an extreme manifest desire, fantasy, abundance and power, and by extension alienation through reification. The actors in this performance appear as 'free particles' (Vesterberg 2003)

yet are compressed in a suffocating orgy aboard a vessel as it prepares to colonise or run aground perhaps the last remaining exotic tropical landscape. Of course much of the colonizing has already been done through the global dissemination of pornographic imagery via the internet, on which much of the material for the painting was based. Viewed through the frame of burgeoning capitalism, the beach, in fantasy and fiction, reality or pixelated cyber imagery, may be seen as a real front for cultural invasion.



Fig 38. Richard Coldicutt, *Live Trade: The Pacific Solution*, 2012, oil on panel, 900mm x 600mm

Scene 2

Looking seaward from my easel positioned on the Cottesloe groyne, I glimpse the bow wave of the Island Express ploughing through an azure Indian Ocean and delivering yet another consignment of pleasure seekers to Rottnest Island. For a moment I turn my artistic gaze away from the mainland coast to consider the attraction and relevance of the Island dream in a contemporary Western Australian context.

This observation point on the Cottesloe groyne has a particular significance for me as a swimmer. It marks the official starting point of the Channel Swim to Rottnest Island. Twice as a competitor in this open ocean event I recall standing at first light in the cold sands nervously awaiting the starter's gun. In a spume of white-water and a fray of limbs, swimmers lurch into the shore-break like a pack of wildebeests bashing and jostling into the cool autumn currents. From the water it is impossible to see the island and truly sense the 20 km that separate Rottnest Island from the mainland. Two kilometres from shore the ocean floor drops away and the excitement and nervous energy subsides. With an ever-increasing distance separating competitors, my body falls into its special rhythm timed by breath and flow. Matching mental endurance to the physical demands of the swim I let my mind drift afloat deep ocean currents, kilometres from land ... perhaps I am surviving a shipwreck far from home and swimming for the shores of an exotic tropical island ... an island encircled by coral reef.

Mustering a few powerful strokes to catch a rising wave I spill through an opening in the reef and wash into the effervescent waters of a turquoise lagoon. Exhausted yet exhilarated I float suspended in a hemisphere exploding in a spectrum of tropical fish. Within the security of the lagoon I drift in a gentle current towards the curve of a white sandy beach, tantalised by the utopic scene laid out before me. In the shadow of coconut palms I brush the coral shore and for an expectant moment lie waiting to be discovered by naked vixens.

Further along the beach between clusters of smooth grey boulders, a bubbling stream carves a path to the lagoon. Following this slippery rock trail bordered by frangipanis I feel as though ensnared in saturated tropical atmosphere and lured along by an overwhelming erotic scent. The foliage parts to reveal crystal fresh waters spilling over warm rocks into an enclosed natural pool. A cascading waterfall drums the moss-covered rocks where exotic fruit drip from lush-laden trees that encircle this secret spring. Intoxicated with the fermentation of fruits I feel myself swell like the fruit as the sunlight strikes my naked body and I melt into this verdant scene. Such bounty!

Following the source of the water two volcanic peaks appear through a gap between the trees, offsetting a utopic scene. To the left in a clearing, the entrance to a cave appears camouflaged between large outcrops of rocks. The flicker and glow of embers from a recent fire animate ancient drawings on the internal walls of the mossy cavern.

A nearby rock promontory provides vistas from where I can survey the island and if necessary, signal passing vessels. From the safety of this headland in the sinking light it is still possible to identify the topography of the island and how its remarkable resemblance to the body of a reclining woman. Between the thighs of this tropical beauty I detect a swamp and mangroves that provide a natural barrier to the other side of the island. This would afford obvious protection from the savages, who presumably, in sequence with a lunar calendar (and several castaway stories), will beach their canoes on the sand to enjoy a barbeque featuring human flesh.

In the fading light I venture from the safety of my paradisiacal refuge, drawn as though hypnotised to the source of loud beats. Mesmerised by the rhythms I fail to realise I have been *ambushed!* Muscular bodies stripped bare to the waist and adorned in exotic tattoos gyrate around me whilst flame, blinding lights and strange apparatus disorientate my senses. I realise in horror that I have stumbled upon the set of the latest *Survivor* show! And only 200 metres up the beach filming is underway for the sequence to *Tropical Heat* (2002) the latest tropical porn clip. As my mind generates cliché on cliché this particular island fantasy I realise through the intensity and detail of the dream how deeply the fantasy island paradise is etched into my Western psyche.

Refocussed now back into the reality and rhythm of the Rottnest swim I am painfully aware that with every stroke I am carried closer to an island that exists and functions simultaneously as two separate entities; primarily as a contemporary fantasy island playground in the Indian Ocean, and in an alternative reality as an Indigenous site built on loss and suffering. Whether by erasure or convenience a vast majority of the population that occupy Western Australian coastline are entirely unaware of an Aboriginal history that records another 'imagining' of this place. This is a history, retained in song-lines, that talks of a time when the ocean formed its shoreline at the base of the Perth Hills.

Rottnest Island⁷¹ is the third in a chain of three islands reserves that run north from the Cockburn Sound. The Island is a low lying limestone outcrop containing no fresh groundwater supply only several salt lakes surrounded by hardy salt tolerant vegetation and populations of quokka. In the utopic dream, what the island lacks in the way of waterfalls and palm trees, tropical fruit and exotic Indigenous population, it makes up for in its many white sandy beaches bounded by the coral reefs and warm turquoise waters of the Leeuwin current.

Known as *Wadjemup*⁷² to the local Indigenous Noongar population, the nomenclature identifies a separate history and understanding of place. Whilst evidence suggests the Island was occupied by the Aboriginal population when it was part of the mainland 30,000 years ago, with the rising sea levels the Island was formed and as such

⁷¹ The first Dutch explorers named the Island *Rattenest* meaning 'rat's nest' in reference to the populations of large rat-like native marsupials (quokka) that inhabited the Island. Ultimately through subsequent interpretation the Island became known as *Rottnest*.

⁷² 'The place across the water.'

remained unpopulated until colonization in 1830. From as early as 1838 the Island was established as a prison for dissident Aboriginals imprisoned often for cultural practices that fell outside colonial civic behaviour of the time. The Aboriginal prison was officially closed in 1904 although prison labour continued to be used to build roads and other infrastructure on the Island until 1931. Following World War II the Island became established as a prized holiday destination, where to this day it is considered a jewel in Western Australia crown. Annually, thousands of tourists occupy the historical buildings that line the various bays on the Island; constructed (including the prison and the seawall at Thompsons Bay) through hard labour by the incarcerated Aboriginal prisoners. The local history of Rottnest Island is witness to a cover-up on the grandest scale. Even when holidaymakers camping on the island had the misfortune of collapsing into a number of shallow unmarked graves of prisoners buried on the Island,⁷³ the event was seen as an inconvenience for tourism not a violation of spiritual rites and the Indigenous heritage. Denis Byrne and Maria Nugent (2004) in their work *Mapping Attachment: A Spatial Approach to Aboriginal Post-Contact Heritage* suggest:

There is little exaggeration in saying the Aboriginal people are virtually invisible in the local post-contact landscape as described in archival records, in settler reminiscences, and in local histories. An illusion is created that they had vacated this landscape, leaving it as an open field for intensifying white occupation. (Byrne and Nugent 2004, 11)

As an expression of this invisibility of Indigenous cultural heritage on the island, it is possible to book into the exclusive Rottnest Island Lodge and be entirely unaware as you order champagne to drink in the gazebo in the central courtyard ('The Quad') that once swinging from the rafters above your patio chair were the bodies at least five Aboriginal prisoners condemned to death by hanging.⁷⁴ No plaques or didactics indicate this dark history or demarcate the gazebo as the Quad of the Rottnest Island Prison (R.I.P). Alternatively one may sleep restlessly in ones air-conditioned room at the lodge without knowing that more than 13 men at any one time occupied your single bedroom suite.⁷⁵ With not enough room to lie down, prisoners took turns standing while others slept, until breakfast when they were 'served' 'green porridge'.⁷⁶ Strangely none of the details of this history are published in the promotional material for the Lodge and are instead buried in the archives within a non-descript museum tucked away on the Island. In 2013 the Government

⁷³ There are 369 recorded deaths of prisoners on the island.

⁷⁴ There are five officially recorded deaths by hanging on Rottnest Island however local Noongar elders believe there were more that were not officially recorded.

⁷⁵ Which was originally half the size prior to removing an internal wall for the hotel renovations.

⁷⁶ This was made from cabbage and grain. Many Aboriginal prisoners came from tribal groups whose primary diet was meat based. The consequence of this green porridge diet was realised in the deaths of many prisoners through dysentery and other gastrointestinal diseases.

of Western Australia invested \$6,800,000 in upgrades for Rottnest Island to ensure the Island continued to live up to its perception as a premium Western Australian tourist destination.⁷⁷

Rottnest Island, with its abundant offering of sun, sand, sea and (by association) sex, is an established mecca for tourism, and the annual Schoolies celebrations. Yet for Noongar people (the local custodians of the site) and for the greater Indigenous population affected by the dark history of Wadjemup, it is alternatively perceived as the Auschwitz of the Indian Ocean (Lenny Collard 1998). Not only have these 'First People' as a population lost their lands and sacred islands, they have witnessed the appropriation and reinterpretation of their history and culture. Tom Selännemi in his work *On Holiday in the Liminoid Playground: Place, Time and Self in Tourism* describes a cultural evolution that could be directly applied to the history of this site:

The meaning of a place is a sum of intersubjective and cultural interpretations. Thus the same place might once have been considered to be sacred by a local community, and now exotic and attractive as a tourist resort by tourists and tour agencies, where the sacred elements have been disconnected from the cultural systems of meaning and moved into a museum. (Selännemi 2003, 20)

Western Australian Aboriginal artist and academic Sally Morgan produced a painting entitled *Greetings from Rottnest* (1988) that visually confronts this cloaking of history and reinterpretation of place. Finely painted in vibrant colour, this graphic image depicts a stylised geological cross-section of Rottnest Island which can be perceived as a stratification of time and meaning. At beach level on the top layer of this stratum, tourists stand smiling and waving as if posed for a holiday group photograph whilst beneath their feet, under what appears a spinal form of the earth's crust are painted rows of bodies in egg-like forms depicting Aboriginal prisoners wrapped in blankets and buried in a seated position in unmarked graves.⁷⁸ Through the use of patination, styled through a playful colour palette, Morgan skilfully highlights the paradox of a history defined by hedonism and cultural genocide.

Whilst Morgan's work documents an alternative 'truth' applied to the cultural interpretation of a specific historical event on Rottnest Island, in a broader sense the visual representation of the generic island beach fantasy in both pixels and paint is largely an 'untruth', a simulation⁷⁹ based on imitation, pastiche, allusion and parody. The inevitable

⁷⁷ Rottnest Island won three gold and one bronze medals in the Western Australian Tourism Awards and then went on to win the national marketing award at the Qantas Australian Tourism Awards in 2013 (Rottnest Island Authority Annual Report 2012–2013, 7)

⁷⁸ This is how prisoners on Rottnest Island were buried.

⁷⁹ Baudrillard (1983, 2) defines simulation as 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality'; as Rojek (1995, 9) describes 'all those processes and objects which are designed to duplicate, imitate or extend original objects and processes.' Schechner (2002, 133) suggests that 'a simulation is neither a pretense nor imitation. It is a replication of ... itself as another'.

generalisations, editing and simplification that occur in the construction of imagery is inherent to the process and limitations of all historical documentation. By this course mythologies are created and often lie at the core of fantasy.

In his work 1957 *Mythologies* Roland Barthes argues that it is through myths that history is essentially removed from language. He contends that history is transformed into nature by making certain signs appear natural, absolute or frozen. This is achieved by reducing complex phenomenon to only a few elements, which are then delivered as definitive. Suggesting ‘myth is depoliticised speech’, Barthes proposes that:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of explanation but that of a statement of fact. (Barthes 2001, 169–70)

Using Barthes’s theory it is possible to identify the process by which complex cultural landscapes such as Rottneest Island have been simplified and often misappropriated, particularly when applied to canonical imagery that documents the Western history of tropical island occupation. Foremost in my mind are the images and colourful palette of the quintessential 19th century island-artist-legend, Paul Gauguin, whose name continues to invest coral sands and tropical isles with ideas of abundance and hedonistic pleasure. Many of Gauguin’s images are bathed in a vermilion glow that fortifies a tropical Eden embalmed in a bounty of fruits and flowers. Naked young Tahitian girls feature as a dominant theme (and part of the bounty); golden-bronzed sexualised flesh innocently exotic (primitive); all signs and signifiers that have come to define the stereotypical *Gauguinesque* image of the tropical wet dream. Within this visual mythology images have been streamlined, reduced to the depiction of the simple plenitudes of island living, at the exclusion of an entirely contrasting and alternative reality; such as sickness and suffering due to the prevalence of rampant diseases introduced through European occupation.⁸⁰

Gauguin’s literary autobiographical accounts recorded in his book *Noa Noa* (Gauguin, 1972)⁸¹ are equally colourful when it comes to his depiction of young alluring nude Tahitian women, and provide the authenticity or ‘fact’ behind the myth. As historical records reveal, by the time of Gauguin’s arrival in Tahiti the population had been decimated by European disease,⁸² Indigenous religion destroyed and ‘virtually nothing remained of the ancient Tahitian religion and mythology’ (Bengt Danielsson 1965, 78). Even the brightly-coloured cloth used for clothing, bedding and curtains that so often features in Gauguin’s painting was designed and manufactured in Europe (Solomon–Godeau 1989, 324).

80 Such as syphilis of which Gauguin was a carrier.

81 Paul Gauguin’s, *Noa Noa* exists as at least three different versions in print, not including translations.

82 Reducing the population to one third of the original estimate of 35,000 in 1769 (Solomon–Godeau 1989, 324).

The reality of Gauguin’s occupation of Tahiti was entirely counter to the exotic myth perpetuated by his artwork and writing. Unable to participate in the communal collection of staples such as fish, bananas and breadfruit, Gauguin relied entirely on costly preserved food and biscuits purchased from a Chinese trading store, supplemented only by the goodwill of the Tahitian villagers and the inherent generosity afforded him by the families of his adolescent mistresses.

Unravelling the contemporary tropical island fantasy reveals a long legacy of evolving mythologies: one built upon the next. Gauguin himself was drawn to the South Pacific from the riveting accounts of early explorers such as Herman Melville’s *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846). Mythologies constructed around voyages between the 16th and 18th centuries romanticised the discoveries of earthly paradises located in the previously uncharted oceans of the world; exotic spoils in search of riches, sovereign territory and new knowledge. Within the framework of castaway mythology the island is necessarily domesticated in a European way; taming nature whilst savouring the abundance of free natural resources. An essential element of this free island economy is the mandate it assumes on sexual freedom⁸³ which sustains all its potency in the contemporary holiday (outlined in Inglis’s maxims) and ultimately the cyber-beach fantasy.

Ian Watts (1957) in his work *The Rise of the Novel* perceives Robinson Crusoe as a bourgeois capitalist who makes himself the ideal holiday home which he conveniently maintains through the labours of his slave, Friday, who, when he is not cooking and cleaning, interprets for Crusoe the stranger elements of the island whilst remaining the always loyal, obliging and an admiring ‘friend’ (possibly lover). It appears little has changed. Gregory Woods reflecting on the great ocean voyages and the exotic discoveries made during the Enlightenment and its impact on contemporary society maintains:

Ever since the eighteenth century, and throughout the era of Empire, Western culture has been imposing its values on tropical ‘desert islands’ while persuading itself it wants to throw off the trappings of ‘civilisation’. This trend continues in modern high and popular cultural forms. From the UK radio’s ‘Desert Island Discs’ to newspaper cartoons and from sentimental romance to gay soft porn, desert islands provide contemporary culture with fertile landscapes for fantasies of pre-industrial peacefulness and prelapsarian sexuality. It is here that the human body can resume its ‘natural’ condition. (Woods 1995, 126)

83 Lenček and Bosker argue that ‘sex and the beach were natural bedfellows long before the age of Club Med. As it turned out, sexual favours were customarily offered as a ritual form of greeting newcomers throughout the South Pacific. When the French visited Tahiti in 1767, they received the same sort of welcome’ (Lenček and Bosker 1998, 48).

Evidence supporting Woods's assumption can be seen across contemporary film and advertising that uses the tropical island fantasy to market anything from chocolate Bounty Bars, Linx deodorant and Quilton tissues, to Jamaica's Hedonism Island Resort, to *Playboy* cartoons or numerous island reality television and travel shows; tropical island fantasies based on the castaway model⁸⁴ are both extremely popular and big business.

The beach island scenario provides the necessary fantasy to feel instinctively 'natural' and escape the social constraints associated with work and home, whether experienced in 'reality' (television or as a holiday abroad) or caged in the regularity of a virtual screensaver reminder. Rojek (1995) suggests that the high-fidelity and scale of new visual and sonic technologies challenge our ability to make 'common-sense distinctions between the domestic interior and the external world' (Rojek 1995, 7). Like a visual sedative, the screen transports the viewer to a virtual beach where all the comforting signifiers align and in a conditioned response the body reacts like Pavlov's dog;⁸⁵ one can virtually hear the lapping of the waves and feel the warm tropical breeze rustling the coconut trees and smell the scent of frangipanis.

Selänniemi (2003) suggests the way in which an individual develops a particular meaning of place is structured around three foundations: 'the static physical background or the setting, the activities, and the intentions and meanings of those activities':

a sandy beach at a sunlust resort is a place that necessarily does not have a location. The setting is the beach and the sea, the activities are sunbathing and swimming, and the intentions are relaxation, vacationing, and tanning. (Selänniemi, 2003, 20)

Seen in relation to Selänniemi's (2003) ideas, the consolidation and meaning of the tropical island cyber-beach fantasy is established in a similar way to the beach at a sunlust resort; the background to this high definition pixelated image is essentially static, and not specifically situated at a recognisable location. The ocean and sand inspire connections to freedom, the getaway and the activity of escaping back to nature. The intention of escaping is for relaxation. Thus

84 This castaway framework is sustained by a continuum of stories beginning with the classics of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Paul and Virginia* (1788). Modelled on the classic frame develops through a growing legacy including: *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), *The Blue Lagoon* (1980), *Return to the Blue Lagoon* (1991), *Lord of the Flies* (1963 and 1990), *The Coral Island* (1858), *The Island of Beautiful Things* (1913), *John Dollar, Island* (1962), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1993). Correspondingly the island theme has provided a manifesto to explore and critique the depths of the human condition from political systems, sexuality, and sanity.

85 Ivan Pavlov was a 19th century Russian physiologist who is remembered for his work on the theory of 'classical conditioning'. Pavlov conducted experiments based on an observation of how dogs salivated when given meat powder. Before administering the meat powder to an animal Pavlov would ring a bell. Ultimately after a number of repetitions of the same action Pavlov discovered a dog would begin to salivate at the sound of the bell alone. This experiment demonstrated what is known as a 'conditioned response'.

the meaning of place developed around this simulated reality emerges from artifice and replicated memories; visual prompts sparking connections to activities associated leisure and pleasure within this space.

Douglas Booth (2001) also detects a shift towards fantasy in the value and perception of the ocean and beach. In his book *Australian Beach Cultures: The History of Sun, Sand and Surf*, Booth suggests:

The meaning of the sea has fundamentally changed. Rather than something that is inhabited, the sea by extension the Beach, is now something to be contemplated like an expensive painting. The sea and the beach are now sites of fantasy, sites to ponder rather than to actively engage or conquer. (Booth 2001, 163)

Booth's metaphoric reference links the contemplative viewing of the beach to that of a painting. However this is not in reference to an ordinary painting or image, it is specifically to an 'expensive' painting. By aligning the significance of a sea view to its economic value, like that of an expensive artwork the idealisation of the contemporary beach resides in its value as cultural capital. A sea view framed within the architecture of ones dwelling evokes strong connections to economic wealth, evidence of a cultured appreciation of the natural and wild (in the after-glow of Romanticism), luxury; both in having the free time to enjoy the view and ownership, through the possession of a view (as surplus beyond need), freedom through unlimited access to the horizon and as a bonus, the inherent possibility of being socially defined as an edgy, fashionably unpredictable character in reflection of the inherent liminal characteristics of the littoral and living under its influence.

Recognising the significance and heritage of the historical construct of the island fantasy Amy Greenberg in her research into reality television posits how the tropical island paradigm in a contemporary context enters into a generic form; a fantasy without a specific location:

Temptation Island, *The Real Gilligan's Island*, and portions of *The Great Race*—in all of these reality shows the tropics function as fantasy spaces, where otherwise undistinguished individuals can single-mindedly pursue riches and usually sex as well. Where is this new Gilligan's Island? Does it matter? Like the first *Survivor*, originally set on an unidentified beach on an unidentified island, the TV tropics are fiercely anonymous and never actual countries whose governments, cultures, and societies have significant bearing on the behaviour of the American interlopers... they revel in cliché. (Greenberg 2005, 1)

Whilst the reality television shows of Greenberg's research are more representative of 'unreality' based on the staging of these performances, the worlds which evolve out of leisure culture are simulations inspired by the spectacle of these 'reality' shows; in this way it is the fantasy of reality reflecting the reality of fantasy, both are fabricated and artificial.

It is within the vacuum created through the anonymity of space and culture that the fantasy and meaning of the generic cyber-beach screen saver may be best understood. These are images built mythology on mythology and visual histories formed on representations of representations depicting an endless spectacle; it is by way of this process that space and culture are ultimately uniformed and nullified.



Fig 39. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

Framing the painting. *Wet dreams ... hyper-realities and the homogenization of desire ... appropriation of space in the construct of a generic beach ... tropical island fantasies.*

Colonisation begins on the beach ... The Western system of 'culturing nature' into marketable structures requires strategic editing to ensure the appropriation of exclusively desirable elements, in its current form this operates as a generic digital cyber-beach fantasy embedded in my screensaver ... a simulation; a repeated display of selected pixelated imagery.

My imagining of this space is determined through layering, pastiche and purification much like the process of my painting; to create a reality that exists between a pixelated fantasy and a 'simulation' of a cultured myth.



Fig 40. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

The Studio

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence ... illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness. (Feuerbach 1843, quoted in Debord 1994)

Figuring through Painting

Research in Act III shifts from an investigation of the beach that explores the inherent complexities of this sensitive cultural site, to consider the notion of *Figuring through Painting*. I use this title to point to a number of interrelated issues about painting. First, questioning the phenomenology of painting, thinking or *figuring* through its history; the alchemy of the medium, its stylistic heritage, its cultural and critical value, and its political potency. In a second manifestation the title presents painting as a means of analysing or *figuring out*: investigating the beach through pigment in an alternative representation to a scripted theoretical inquiry. Ultimately this phrase implies *figuration*: representing figuratively notions of the beach, or peopling the beach through painting. To understand how the term is located in contemporary culture, 'figuration' is explained:

Since the arrival of abstract art the term figurative has been used to refer to any form of modern art that retains strong references to the real world and particularly to the human figure. (The Tate Glossary of Terms Online, 2014)

Scene I

Retreating from the intensity of the beach to the sanctity of my studio space, I am provided with welcome relief. Nestled into the old couch, I soak up the odour of fresh paint as if fuelling my addiction to this medium. Within this supremely personal space I observe the vignette of my life laid out amongst scatterings of books and articles, a pastiche of postcards, reproductions and photographs blue-tacked to any flat surface, magazine clippings stacked by treasures that chronicle my daily pilgrimage to the beach, some developed into studies next to drawings and artworks in various stages of completion. Within the studio I am excited by the possibilities contained within the simplicity of paint tubes and palettes, and contemplate the potent mix of mind, body and matter that is set to generate an intimate and honest expression of a personal relationship with the beach and its performances.



Fig 41. Richard Coldicutt, 'Photograph of the studio', 2013, digital photograph, 100mm x 150mm

Can the beach, like painting, be perceived as a liminal space that exists between physical reality and an illusion?

I review the spoils of the day's production. Transported back to the beach by the scribbled notations, sand vested drawings, and a few colour studies, I consider the amplification of the experience in the context of the studio. To move from a deeply personal creative instance where my entire consciousness dissolves into impulsive, involuntary acts of mark-making, and now to sit and reflect upon this assemblage, is to witness the transition of an action so innate and simple into the creation of an object so layered and complex. There are so many questions. What has happened in this transaction between sight, site and cite? How closely do the 17th century principles of the picturesque apply to and influence the way I perceive and visually render the contemporary peopled landscape? Does painting still function as a guide for an audience on how to experience a landscape within certain conventions or is in fact digital imagery of Google Beach simply the contemporary Claude Glass?

Tracing the heritage of visual conventions such as the use of the Claude Glass may contribute to understanding the continued influence of technology in contemporary painting and how vision is commodified. The term picturesque finds its origins in the Italian term *pittoresco* meaning 'in the manner of a painter' and was adopted by the British travel writer William Gilpin (Buzard 2001). Modelling the concept with reference to the work of 17th century landscape painter Claude Lorrain, Gilpin promoted a formulaic pictorial view *the picturesque* as a way to negotiate a balance between two divergent aesthetic experiences: one of beauty, and the other the sublime. The rationalist ideals of the Enlightenment maintained that aesthetic determination was a natural thing that was instinctual rather than contrived. Edmund Burke in his work *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756) sought to define the two concepts. To use Inglis's analysis, beauty was seen to relate to feminine attributes 'softness, delicacy, a hint of gratifying voluptuity and of humane congeniality', whilst the sublime was perceived as 'a fearsome patriarch, full of horrid power, bleak, massive, unyielding, enormous' (Inglis 2000, 15). Through such an interpretation soft gentle curves were seen to appeal to male sexual desire, whilst an innate need for self-preservation was imbued in the terrors of the sublime. Invariably, the ocean and the coastline which was infused with an abundance of both these essential qualities, provided a most popular source of this new desirable terror.

Highlighting the influence of the painted image on the population during this period and the power possessed by artists in fashioning social change, Inglis writes:

The aesthetic judgments from here [England in the 18th century] are less important than the formative social power such paintings possessed then and for which Wilson stands as the most distinguished producer at the moment at which the new mercantile class began to commission him in a large way. What we are looking at, in considering these paintings, is a moment of correspondence between the shape of a landscape, the framing power of a sociable way of seeing, certain conventions about what to feel in the presence of aspects of nature, all this as orchestrated by the painter. (Inglis 2000, 28)

Paintings produced by Wilson and his contemporaries for an emerging 18th century mercantile class art market provided a new order through which to visualise the world. By the mid-19th century an emergent travel culture, increasingly pursued premium coastal destinations such as the northern coastline of Scotland and the Mediterranean Rivera's of Italy and France specifically to experience the sublime offered by their wild beauty and terror. Progressively painters developed formulaic compositions in the form of the picturesque, to focus on and unravel the beauty of nature as an alternative perspective to an ocean shrouded in a scriptural doctrine of fear and repulsion.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ This is an example of the continual reinterpretation of place, a process integrally linked to political, religious and environmental determinants. Corbin (1994) describes how the century between 1750 and 1840 marked a shift in the perception of the beach and the ocean from a place of terror, a remnant of the Great Flood reflecting Gods unfinished business, to a therapeutic environment of great bounty and picturesque beauty.

In the 21st century the ‘formative social power’ has moved in a large extent from the creative hands of the artist to benefactors of the neo liberal capitalist regime. Fine Art occupies a position in today’s culture on the premise that it is a luxury item that ‘expands civilized consciousness’ (Simpson 1981) and as such is traded as cultural capital and as a commodity based on supply and demand. Bram Dijkstra’s recently published book *Naked: The Nude in America* summarises the appropriation of cultural production by investors:

It is disconcerting to watch talented artists resort to cheap irony to get attention in an art world run by dealers who seem to have decided that honest passion, direct statement, and humane values don’t sell. The upper-tier market for contemporary art is clearly dominated by investors. But corporate CEOs and hedge-fund managers are unlikely to invest in art that is expressive of real pain or makes them feel guilty about the crass nature of their own concerns. (Dijkstra 2010, 445)

Despite the influence of powerful market forces on painting I contend the medium still possesses ‘formative social power’ and may continue to influence the way in which we understand the world. The evidence may reside, at least partially, in exploring the relationship of optical technology in the advancement of particular pictorial notions during the 19th century in connection to the current use of visual technology in the form of the mobile phone. For example the power of William Gilpin’s theory on the picturesque inspired not just the work of Wilson and his contemporary artists but also a growing movement of picturesque hunters in their quest to encounter and capture (through their Claude Glasses) new land/sea-scapes. The Claude Glass, named after the revered 17th century landscape painter Claude Lorrain, referred to a small portable mirror with a slightly tinted, convex surface. This device enabled the viewer to determine a picturesque view within the natural landscape by adjusting the reflection on the surface of the glass in accordance with the principles of landscape painting. It was used extensively by artists (for sketching and painting) and tourists during the 18th century who became the brunt of much satire at the time, lampooned for the irony imbued in the action of having to turn one’s back on the preferred scene to fully appreciate it.

One indispensable item of kit was the Claude glass, which when held up to the prospect, would thereby frame it so the spectator could adjust his or her vision correctly, ensuring the foreground, middle ground and background; an overarching tree just ‘so’; a declivity ahead, a lake at its foot, the hills mounting beyond; the great orb of sun (or, with an appropriate darkening of detail, the moon) not quite touching the horizon, slightly off centre. (Inglis 2000, 23)

The mobile phone and its capability for digitally imaging the world may find its genesis in the smoked surface of the Claude Glass. First-hand experience gained from students in my drawing classes identifies a growing dependency on viewing or framing the world through the instant imaging screen of the mobile phone in order to make art. Delivered in a two-dimensional format and manipulated via inherent software, students appear to confidently transfer digital imagery to traditional drawing mediums without the need to physically reference the subject or scene of their interest. When required to produce drawings ‘from life’ without the use of this technology, many students struggle to visualise⁸⁷ their experience and are very often disappointed with results, which in charcoal appear distorted and abstracted in relation to a digitally assisted version. The popularity of this prescriptive visual order is commodified through optical technology and visual software and presents as a visual benchmark based on a high degree of accuracy and standard rectilinear photographic composition. Contemporary artist Marilyn Minter, who is both a photographer and painter, describes her co-dependency on optical technology:

I don’t make art unless I have photographs ... For me the issue is how you get your effects. Are they transcendent or more like an annual report? All you ever get from photographs are clues. You still need to make the space three-dimensional. You need to create the illusion. (Godfrey 2009, 422)

Minter raises some important points that are further explored later in this Act regarding the dependency on photographic medium in the production of illusion. Many of the ‘clues’ referred to in Minter’s observation are imbedded in ideas explored in my work *Casting the Net* (2014). This body of paintings relies primarily on digital imagery as a tool for visual analysis, yet simultaneously exploits the visual technology for the politics embodied in its stylistic qualities, particularly in relation to its current use in commercial applications. The use of optical technology in the creation of painting has a history that spans over two centuries. Later my art practice is explored in the context of this history and through studying the methodologies of other practitioners and their relationship to this technology.

⁸⁷ The Macquarie Dictionary defines visualise as: *-verb (i)* 1. to call up or form mental images or pictures. *-verb (t)* 2. to make visual or visible. 3. to form a mental image of. 4. to make perceptible to the mind or to the imagination. (The Macquarie Dictionary Online, 2014)

Scene II

Caught in the Act: Pigment of the Imagination

When Chrissie Iles, a curator at the Whitney Museum New York was asked her opinion of the current role of painting in art, she responded:

Painting has come to represent a crucial irritant within that vastly over-determined collective identity, reasserting the personal in the face of conceptual and abstract language that has been co-opted by the commercial advertising and design world. (Godfrey 2009, 427)

In highlighting the political function of painting in the 21st century Iles implies that the subjectivity of painting liberates possibilities for individual and collective identity. Painting offers a personal and crafted vision to an alternative visual world highly refined by technological precision that is instantly and endlessly reproducible and globally disseminated. In its absolute simplicity, the technology of painting—requiring only a few mounds of paint, a brush and a surface on which to apply it—conceals a complex and mesmerising trick: the phenomenon when pigment applied to a surface transforms into an illusion. From the moment that I first became conscious of my ability to transform a two-dimensional surface into a three-dimensional illusion, I have been consumed by this trick; creating illusions in reflection of the world around me. The seduction for me is not pursuing philosophies of abstraction, and the manifestos of great thinkers who bring meaning into the world using minimal modernist construction.⁸⁸ My visual armature is both the physical and social worlds. In my passage through these I am as deeply affected by the pursuits and struggles of other artists as I am with my own limitations, but the urgency remains the same: to define and reflect an illusion of my own reality.

Theoretical refinement of such terms as ‘reality’ in art assumes a connection to ‘realism’: a complex word that defies simple definition. Gerry Souter author of *American Realism* posits:

The concept of ‘Realism’ as applied to the style of art embraces too much with too little. You might as well try and define ‘Dance’ without looking at ballet, tap, jazz, clog or folk. (Souter 2012, 7)

⁸⁸ I refer to texts and essays on the subject of minimalism by art historians and critics including: Clement Greenberg, Donald Kuspit, Lucy Lippard, Robert Morgan, Barbara Rose and Roberta Smith.

Realism in art finds its historical genesis as a key aesthetic movement that occurred in France between 1848 and 1870 and is largely defined on its political implications and its revolutionary influence during this period. However in a 21st century context, realism reveals a split between its perception as ‘a bourgeois phase of style, associated with empiricism and individualism’ (The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought 1988, 726) or existing as a valid continuum of the 19th century model in its ‘concern for the actual or real, as distinguished from the abstract, speculative’ (The Macquarie Dictionary Online, 2014). Whilst as Souter suggests this term appears particularly elusive and broadly interpreted in contemporary writing on the subject, I am surprised to discover a specific detail in the Macquarie Dictionary’s seven-point list that determines realism as a ‘deliberate depiction of ugly things or people in art’ (2014). To add to the complex mix of interpretation, the definition of this term extends to include other terms such as ‘figurative’, ‘representational’ and ‘verist’⁸⁹ that are often associated with the style. With the boundaries of realism constantly being redefined literary theorist Rachel Bowlby offers a broader insight into unravelling the concept:

Realism normally comes stuck with one set menu of regular adjectival accompaniments, and whether it’s gritty, or vulgar, or kitchen-sink, or photographic, the standard formulations reinforce the way it is seen as itself formulaic, something we already know about and need have no interest in exploring: it is predictable and simple, and serves only as the foil (or cling film) for showing up the more exotic or more complex courses that are always to be preferred to it. (Bowlby 2007, xi)

Bowlby articulates a common perception that realism is a simple reworking of the natural, the banal duplication of a quantifiable material world. Much of the criticism emerging out of the innovative decades of the 1960s and 1970s was levelled at the artistic style of Photorealism on the basis of this perception. This particular ‘realism’ was considered a conservative art form in the context of other ‘more exotic’ contemporary radical avant-garde movements including minimalism, performance, conceptual art and fluxus. Sentiment for the practice of painting in the late 1960s is famously expressed by a number of art critics including Douglas Crimp in a united decree on ‘the end of painting’.⁹⁰ Surprisingly the negative legacy of conservatism associated with realism continues to be indoctrinated through recent art historical publications. *Art Since 1900*, a comprehensive two-volume textbook dedicated to the last century of Western Art

⁸⁹ Verism is a form of realism that defines the artistic preference of contemporary everyday subject matter instead of the heroic or legendary in art and literature.

⁹⁰ Crimp believed that painting as an arena of practice had become ‘outmoded, inbred, inward looking and incapable of functioning in the capacity of critique.’ He also argued that painting was compromised by a relationship to museums; institutions and the art form became codependent, maintaining one another’s centrality’ (Crimp, 1981.) True to postmodern practice, Crimp appropriated this declaration from painter Paul Delaroche who first used the expression in 1839, when he viewed one of the earliest examples of photographic reproduction in the form of the daguerreotype: ‘an early photographic process in which the impression was made on a silver surface sensitised to the action of light by iodine, and then developed by mercury vapour.’ (The Macquarie Dictionary Online, 2014)

published in 2005 by distinguished art historians Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh fails even a 'parenthetical mention' of the Photorealism movement (D'Amico 2011). As a foundational text adopted by major art schools worldwide, such discrimination by omission overstates the novelty of experimental, conceptual and performance based works at the exclusion of other emergent equally diverse and innovative styles of the time.⁹¹

As a painter, my delight and concern is primarily motivated by the alchemy of image making, independent of the process by which the authorship and control of the object is relinquished to inevitable institutional practices of art history and theory. As a thinker I also understand how the vital process of interpretation by theorists and historians adds rich possibilities for the classification of the 'art' of artworks, particularly for the purpose of defining a work's cultural relevance and impact. However, as I have discovered within my own research, history is a moving target, constantly up for reinterpretation relative to the changing social values and the context of the culture in which it is being consumed.

To explore the true extent of the quandary surrounding the appropriate positioning of realism within the history of art is beyond the scope and focus of this research but it is necessary to present some possibilities that highlight the relevance of the medium in a contemporary context. Historian David Lubin in his essay 'Blank Art: Deadpan Realism in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction',⁹² maintains that during the 1960s and 1970s photorealism generated important discussions that questioned the function of visual technologies:

[Photorealism] ... was the art form that perhaps best posed the question only then emerging in media studies and information theory: how do sophisticated modern technologies transform sight (and other modes of sensory perception)? Do mechanical devices of transcription and reproduction bring us closer to reality-the world outside ourselves- or ultimately make it more remote? (Lubin 2009, 55)

Key to Lubin's argument is how artists working within this genre endeavoured to critique the mechanisms by which perception is determined and transformed through photographic technology and by this 'advanced a thoughtful deconstruction of modernity and its relevance for science, technology and empirical fact' (Lubin 2009, 49). The depth and validity of these questions that are raised and explored through this particular form of realism identifies a large shift from the assumption of realism 'as cling film' (Bowlby 2007), to realism as the ingredients in a recipe of new understanding. The function of painting as a 'crucial irritant' (Iles 2009) is also confirmed within this critical questioning of the influence of technology.

⁹¹ Alvin Martin describes the decades of the 1960s and 1970s as 'incomprehensible in style' (Martin 1981, 15).

⁹² Written for the 2009 *Picturing America* exhibition catalogue held at the Guggenheim, Berlin.

Seeking a common thread that may serve to more specifically describe the form of realism and logical structures that emerge in work I refer to The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought:

one of its [realism's] triumphs is to limit complex techniques and mannerisms so that (as Ortega y Gasset puts it) art becomes 'humanised'. Thus it emphasizes character, controls fantasy and idealism, and insists on experience, fact, and sceptical view in the spirit of W.D Howells's 'Is it true—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the lives of actual men and women?'. (The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought 1988, 725–6)

Within this definition I find motives and structures that relate closely to what drives my own art production such as the need for 'humanising' the image. Where I find difference is in my intention to actively create fantasy spaces and idealist imagery that merge with the truth of realism to highlight and critique contemporary idealism in representations of the body. Part of the humanising begins with responding to the sensuality of the medium of paint; the pressure and direction of each stroke of the brush determined in a complex transaction between the eye, mind, and hand. Consider for a moment the vital point of contact where all the sensitivities ignite: the *stroke*. It seems fitting that the word expresses both the simplicity and complexity of this fundamental painting action. The term evokes an immediate and personal connection to my experiences in the water; when a stroke in surfing becomes the means and point of entry into the power of a breaking wave, or the pull of my arms as I carve through the ocean on an icy morning swim or the dip of an oar into a glassy pane of water, to watch the ocean swallow the coiling eddies and the trace of my passage. Perhaps stroke as a delicate action; the caress that carries my mind to intimate moments in the dunes and rhythms coupled to the stroke of the waves as they spread and are swallowed across a thirsty shoreline; a far cry from a stroke as a blow, yet perfectly relevant to my desire to engage the potency of a brush as a political weapon, or as a means to deliver some unsettling truth. For some, a stroke embodies notions of an overwhelming epiphany, an experience that is realised sometimes within the personal space of image making, or the occasional stroke of genius which I am yet to experience. Alternatively, the Macquarie Dictionary defines the word as 'a vigorous attempt to attain some object', which seems to perfectly articulate the struggle and goal of much realist figuration in the construction of an illusion, or where stroke, as 'a measure adopted for a particular purpose', embodies my current quest to figure through painting the function of the beach as a performance space in contemporary Western society (The Macquarie Dictionary Online, 2014) Tony Godfrey author of the book *Painting Today* emphasises that the power of painting resides in the visual transaction which expresses the experience, independent of critical textual analysis:

painting is at the start and at the end a matter of seeing and experiencing. We need words to help explain, enjoy and muse on painting, but we need always to keep coming back to that actual experience. (Godfrey 2009, 411)



Fig 42. Richard Coldicutt, *Stroke*, 2010, oil on panel, 1170mm x 880mm

Consulting my bookshelf for reflections and recollections in words by other contemporary artists on the very subjective action of creating realist imagery, I refer to the words of artist Eric Fischl:

I think painting is an alchemy, taking this greasy, colourful material and putting it on a flat surface and having it create an illusion that is believable, a sensation that is palpable, and investing it with consciousness that travels across time. How much more magical can things be? With a painting you have a frozen moment that is an instantaneous recognition of significance, so it's revelatory. But it's also handmade, built brushstroke on brushstroke, paint on paint. It's shaped, and all the decision making is there. (Danto, Enright and Martin 2008, 326)

Fischl expresses the experience and excitement shared by many realist painters. The reconfiguration of life into imagery, whether referenced from life or in reference to photographic and pixelated realities, mitigated or enhanced in varying degrees by a painter's imagination, skills, and sensitivities, all present a complete range of sensorial possibilities exclusive to the medium. However, I am acutely aware that the enchantment of the process experienced by the painter is but one side of a coin; a side often distorted in the reinterpretation by an audience. The shift that inverts the object of painting to the painting as object, is swift as it is profound; the image, whilst simply the resonance of an obsessively personal activity, objectified within a gallery, proclaims another message. For some viewers, in the context of the gallery, a realist image may embody memories and connections buried within the film of a painted surface. For others the illusion may become so convincing that it inherits the authority or 'truth' of a photographic image.

Art critic Robert Hughes, offers an insight into the collective challenge experienced by realist painters during the past two centuries:

The realist's work means summoning up imaginative reserves to get the visual truth at angles, to outwit but not evade the resistant surface. (Hughes 1989, 21)

When Hughes's quote is applied to nude or semi-nude realist renditions of the figure painted on the beach particularly children or adolescents 'the resistant surface' may equally describe the attitude and ideologies of the audience as much as the canvas support. In an age of burgeoning discourses of complex gender and ethical politics 'to outwit but not evade the resistant surface' becomes the supreme challenge for any contemporary painter of the human form.

So what is the 'truth' that seems to emerge in discussions around realism in art. I recall a quote by Picasso who reminds us all: 'we know that art is not the truth, it is a lie that makes us recognise the truth.'⁹³

From my own experience, based on the reaction from the audience and media to several of my paintings,⁹⁴ I contend that many viewers do not challenge the lie expressed by the painted surface. Some viewers perceive the painted illusion as a photograph, or a simple replication of pornographic imagery and in doing so deny the authenticity of concepts infused in a handmade artwork such as historical references. Part of what may be overlooked in a realist painting which is created in the look of, and in reference to, photography and popular culture, is an irony, previously

⁹³ This quote by Picasso is taken from a 1923 interview conducted with art critic Marius de Zayas, subsequently published in 1923 as 'Picasso Speaks' in *The Arts*, New York, May.

⁹⁴ I refer to the following articles which discuss the possible legal implications for my paintings that were exhibited in 1996: Wearne, Michael. 1996. 'Who is Jack Moore?' *The Fremantle Herald* 2 November, 7; 'Artists' work may test censor laws.' 1996, *The West Australian*, 5 December, 4; 'Artists risk suppression.' Storey, Ross. 1996. *The Australian*, 11 December, 36.

raised by David Lubin (2009) that the work may be serving as a critique of mechanically produced imagery.⁹⁵ Yet the purity of the message may not be as refined as the time honoured realist techniques. As Gerry Souter author of *American Realism* suggests:

Realism has always dealt with the baggage carried by the interpreter of the scene. The practice of realistic painting produced an elitist class schooled in effects and techniques, and the secret paint-and preservation-formulations, like alchemists granting eternal life to reality seen through their eyes and granting reality to scenes played out in their impassioned minds. (Souter 2012, 7)

Souter extends the possibilities for painted realism by identifying that the alchemy of paint possesses the power to 'grant reality' to the fantasy of the artist's mind. The mysteries presented by realist performances in paint constantly challenge the viewer and their ability to discern fact or truth from the ever-present fiction.

It is within the 'baggage' of the artist that a distinct difference arises between the realism created in a 19th century epoch and today. Where my intention is to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction through the use of realism, this is not a sentiment that would relate to the original integrity of the movement. Gustave Courbet first articulated his sentiment to develop a new artistic practice during a revolutionary period in Europe in the mid-1800s. He perceived that the Romantic emphasis on feelings and the imagination was escaping the realities of life at that time. Believing that 'the modern artist must rely on direct experience he stated: 'I cannot paint an angel because I have never seen one' (Greenspun 1995, 702).

Surveying the painted images on my studio wall, I realise that they align with a contemporary documentary/advertising aesthetic; graphic and unromanticised; yet equally exploiting aspects of 19th century realism. Blue-tacked next to my painted images hangs a reproduction of Courbet's *Woman in the Waves* (1868). This reproduction serves as a constant inspiration and reminder of an image that still derives its erotic spell from water and a Realist perspective, once rejected for its deconstruction of the idealised classicist female form.⁹⁶ It is necessary to briefly contextualise the revolutionary nature of Courbet's ideologies and truth of his imagery against the power and coveted position that Academic painting maintained over art production at that time, particularly in relation to the display of sexuality within Western visual culture. Two works produced by other artists within this Academic genre present examples of how

⁹⁵ To those who get lost in the translation, Linda Chase offers in her book *The Not-So-Innocent Eye: Photorealism in Context*: 'No matter how realistically painted a [photo]realist painting may be, you know you are looking at a picture. There is no mistaking it for the real thing—unless of course the real thing is the photograph, which, in a way, for the Photorealists it is' (Chase, 2002).

⁹⁶ This refers to an inherent stylistic motif associated with Greek classicism manifest within Renaissance artwork features the idealisation and valorising of the human form. This expression of the idealised sexualised human form culminated in the mid-19th century in a style described as Academic or Salon painting.

during the mid-1800s, sexualised imagery was sanitised and appropriately presented through this institutionalised regime. Two versions of *The Birth of Venus* (1863) by Alexandre Cabanel and by Adolphe Bouguereau (1879) are depictions of the birth of Aphrodite (or *Venus* the crafty Greek goddess of love and beauty). Venus is believed to have emerged from foam created by the castrated sexual organs of divine Sky (Uranus). According to the legend, the god's own son Cronus, took the liberty to remove Uranus's genitalia before casting them over his shoulder into the sea. The interpretation by artists legitimised within this legend provides the visual framework for explicit sexually charged images of the idealised female form in connection with water and the beach. To fully appreciate the distinguished position painting maintained (under the auspice of the Academy) and the forum that it provided to visualise sexuality, a visit to the beach during this time reveals another reality. As I discussed in Act I, at beaches such as Brighton, Scarborough, Boulogne and Dieppe during the mid-1800s, entry into the ocean involved a complex negotiation to ensure utmost privacy and decorum was maintained. Dressed in the formal attire of the period, individuals would tread the wooden steps to enter a horse-drawn bathing machine (essentially a cabin on wheels), one would then be driven into the water to the appropriate depth in accordance with traction of the broad wagon wheels (or on rails), at which point one would change into the necessary bathing attire of the period. For a woman this would be a corseted mid-rift, beneath long trousers (bloomers) that were gathered at the ankles, covered with an overskirt (often weighted, to avoid lifting in the waves) all constructed in dark fabric serge or flannel (to avoid showing body curvature), bathing shoes would be donned to cover the feet, and a bonnet to conceal the hair. Alighting the machine entailed descending wooden steps under the cover of a 'modesty canopy' (an extendable hood that projected out from the cart) to ensure complete privacy from any inappropriate voyeurism. Alternatively individuals could gain another experience of the beach through entering the Salon to view the latest in academic painting by Bouguereau, Cabanel and other artists painting in the style of the time. Here one could ponder at length and in detail an image like *The Birth of Venus*; imagery of a classical Greek beauty presented in a scallop shell or wrapped seductively in her golden locks (and mythology)⁹⁷ and offered for the sexual gratification of the viewer. These life-sized renditions of innocent, young, goddess-like female figures submissively posed, were presented to the audience; fully nude unblemished marbled complexion surrounded by hovering Putti figures. To announce the birth of Venus, Putti figures blow upon a conch shells; surreptitiously placed and painted in colour and detail to reveal, in metaphorical form, the labial folds of both the instrument and the goddess. Placed upon the surging ocean, embedded with the cyclic rhythms and loaded symbolism alluding to menstruation, Venus offers the sense of a 'sensual, primitive pre-consciousness' (Frescas 1999, 3).

⁹⁷ John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) provides a detailed discussion that explores the use of mythology and the representation of the nude in art.

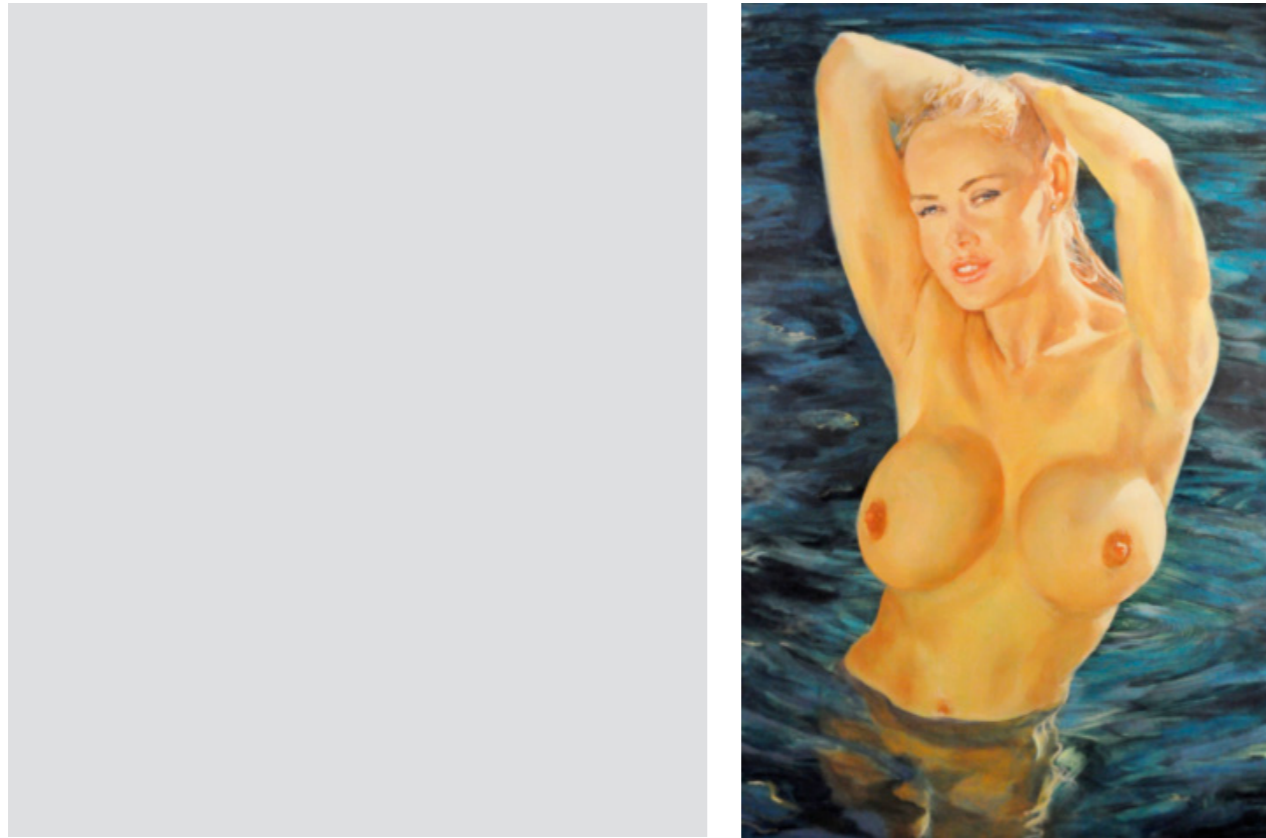


Fig 43. (Left) Gustave Courbet, *The Woman in the Waves*, 1868, oil on canvas, 65.4 x 54 cm

Fig 44. (Right) Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2014, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

When my 21st century realist figurative paintings are juxtaposed alongside Courbet's one hundred and fifty year old *Woman in the Waves*, both appear to be located comfortably inside a contemporary aesthetic that celebrates, through mass media and popular culture, an idealised, sexualised female form. In this context *Woman in the Waves* appears as the Page Three 'cover girl' in a Sunday newspaper and 'close up' as if captured through a telephoto lens. No longer a mythological goddess caged within an inherent stylistic motif of the time, the figure of this woman derived from Courbet's realist narrative appears liberated both by paint and pose. Here this *Woman in the Waves* relishes in the sensorial delights of the ocean in reflection of Courbet's own passion for the sea.⁹⁸ His expressive brush and palette knife work, vigorously applied in a fluid expression of ocean, plunges the female figure into the cool tonal depths of a darkened viridian. Carefully modulated flesh, highlighted in the warmer complementary pigments of cadmium orange

⁹⁸ Courbet was an enthusiastic swimmer and painted many seascapes at times occupied with the human presence and others capturing the sublime energy of the ocean.

and Naples yellow, provide the optimum contrast for this invigorated and sexualised body immersed in a sea of viridian green. As I respond to the alchemy of Courbet's painted scripting it seems somehow timeless and profound how the reassembly of life through pigment is retained and still discussed within a nomenclature of a few tubes of paint and physical gestures. The language of colour and the descriptive movements used to apply paint remain unchanged across successive centuries. As a painter I am connected across time in a shared understanding that the soil of Sienna for instance, burnt and bound in oil, may glaze a surface and embalm within its warm flush the sexualised impulse of an artist and a woman in a specific moment in time. As this *Woman in the Waves* bursts from the composition, pushed almost to the frame on three sides of the painting, she appears not a defenceless or vulnerable female absorbed in a colossal landscape but a colossal figure in a diminished landscape.

Seemingly within touching distance of the viewer, Courbet's model appears empowered and confident with her sexuality rather than diminished in her relationship to the viewer. This resembles a woman in the contemporary world, invigorated and feeling sexy within a cool and moving ocean; a *Sunday Times* goddess, and not a goddess levitating in paradise or adrift a luminous mythological seascape. Posed to amplify the sexually charged moment, her breasts are framed between her raised arms and presented to the viewer rather than captured by a voyeur in a fleeting moment. In its current reading the composition seems to pull the viewer not only into the very personal space occupied by this sexualised subject and the artist but also into the 21st century. To the contemporary voyeur, it would come as no surprise if this performer in a subsequent sequence turned to address the camera ... with a smile a wink and a Gonzo gaze. In a less staged performance *Woman in the Waves* may also inspire a connection to the current practice of amateur photographers discreetly or otherwise capturing imagery of people at the beach.

I turn my focus beyond the particular aesthetic and stylistic qualities of realism, to reflect on how the sensorial qualities of paint may be intimately infused with the artists' infatuation or passion with a subject. In *About Looking* (1980) John Berger connects the 'true nature of the materiality, the density, the weight' of Courbet's images' to Courbet's intimate connection and deep understanding of the physical landscape of the Loue Valley where he spent his youth. Citing Courbet's core belief that art is 'the most complete expression of an existing thing' (Berger 1980, 134) Berger notes:

Courbet painted everything—snow, flesh, hair, fur, clothes, bark—as he would have painted it had it been a rock face ... there is no hierarchy of appearances. (Berger 1980, 138)

I wonder whether this intimate understanding of the subject embodied in an enlivened painted surface extends to Courbet's eroticised paintings of the female form. From my perspective as an artist who shares Courbet's obsessive passion to depict the human form in paint, it is clear that his images are not mere formulaic or banal duplication of

bodies. They are enlivened expressions of intimate hours spent in the presence of the model and the image. His deep understanding of the body in its myriad of expressions retains timeless intensity and a sustained relevance to a contemporary audience. In the presence of *The Origin of the World* (Courbet 1866) (during a visit to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris in 2010), I observed a potent erotic spell continues to exude from Courbet's painted surfaces.

To understand how the painted surface becomes infused with emotional qualities and layered sensations distinct from similar imagery mechanically produced, I consider the metamorphosis of sight to cite through brush and pigment. Fundamental to the process of Realist painting is observation or sight that begins the evolution of an image. Through the many hours of concentrated scrutinisation of the subject, invariably a two-way emotional exchange is generated between the model and the artist. In a charged atmosphere this liaison is recorded stroke on stroke, layer on layer through physical instinctive gestures. Here the act of painting could be described as visceral, similar in many ways to an intimate sexual act.⁹⁹ In this capacity painted realism moves beyond the 'formulaic' and 'banal' and is neither 'predictable, simple' nor a 'foil' for the more exotic complex alternatives (Bowlby 2007) but is instead layered in meaning.

Just as a realist painting may connect emotionally to the viewer through an energy layered in its construction, so too can its power in paint be manifest politically. Berger points out in the 1860s painting could be seen as a potent political tool. He maintains Courbet's 'genuine hatred of the bourgeoisie' is embodied in the way in which he depicts the nude in paint (Berger 1980, 139). Whilst Courbet's virtuosity in paint relates to traditional skills developed from his studies in the techniques of the masters¹⁰⁰ he didn't inherit 'the traditional values' normally associated with those skills.

the practice of nude painting was closely associated with values of tact, luxury and wealth. The nude was an erotic ornament. Courbet stole the practice of the nude and used it to depict the 'vulgar' nakedness of a countrywoman with her clothes in a heap on a river bank.¹⁰¹ (Berger 1980, 139)

Berger's observation bares reference to Kenneth Clark's pivotal work *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (1956). Clark articulates the position occupied by the 19th century Academy and how for the centuries prior to the 20th century the representation of the nude in art was defined by an aesthetic and cultural fiction. Against the flawless flesh of Classical

⁹⁹ Painter and intellectual Barbara Bolt (2000; 2004) references the work of Martin Heidegger to detail the relationship between the artwork and its referent. Bolt discusses through the work of Gilles Deleuze to theorise how painting has the potential to extend beyond its structure as representation. To illustrate this, Bolt cites a quote by Lucien Freud: 'I wish my portraits to be of people not like them' (Freud quoted in Bolt 2004, 163). Freud recorded by Gayford (Martin) 1993, 22.

¹⁰⁰ Including among others: Rembrandt, Velasquez, Zurbaran, otherwise referred to by Berger as 'the Venetians' (Berger 1980, 139).

¹⁰¹ Referring to Courbet's *The Bathers* (1853)

art and beauty devoid of imperfection and eroticism or tainted by any association to sexuality, the realism of Courbet's *Woman in the Waves* may be seen as crossing the invisible line imposed by traditional art values. Imperfections or aspects of 'realism' and over-exposure serve to heighten the sexualised the body form, possibly inspiring a physical response in the viewer; here the body is rendered 'naked' as opposed to 'nude'.¹⁰² As the popularity of the amateur aesthetic in Gonzo pornography attests, and in a direct connection to Courbet's subversive practice, there is something inherently sexy about naked realism.

When one considers how the figure is currently presented in popular culture through advertising and across the internet, a new cultural fiction emerges. I perceive the contemporary stylised, sexualised, athletic, muscled body aesthetic as a visual regime based on fantasy that is powerfully conforming much like the influence of academic and Salon painting in 19th century France. A visit to the beach reveals a different 'reality' in the presence of a widely eclectic mix of body shapes and forms.



Fig 45. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

¹⁰² Kenneth Clark in *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, writes:

'The English language, with its elaborate generosity, distinguishes between the naked and the nude. To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word 'nude', on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed' (Clark 1956, 3).

Many of the innovations that Courbet consciously made through paint in rejection of Academic painting of the time have been readily absorbed into a visual mainstream where they now present as technical conventions. Tracing the realist legacy one discovers the politics expressed in Courbet's paint is itself subverted and absorbed into Socialist Realist painting in Russia and Germany¹⁰³ at the beginning of the 20th century and as subsequently discussed later in the Act, in 21st century Russia.¹⁰⁴

Theorists including Richard Schechner (2002), Samuel Cameron (2006) and Andrew Ryder (2006) identify that a visual desensitization of both the 21st century painter and audience has occurred that reflects not just the sheer volume and dissemination of more sexually explicit imagery across popular media and the internet, but also its broadened scope and content. Citing works expressed through both performance and the visual arts, Schechner (2002) emphasises how practitioners have pushed 'off-limits signposts' to new limits through works that include 'surgery, body parts, and even cannibalism' (Schechner 2002, 140). The revolution in internet communication and the widespread use of social media ensures the constant redefining of boundaries to the point of what Cameron describes as sex-saturation;

The Internet is helping to create an image where it is seen as a more everyday thing to express sexual fetishes, buy sexual 'toys', hire escorts, look at pornography, etc... to the point that we now live in a sex-saturated society. (Cameron 2006, 17)

Ryder (2006) comments on 'a general global trend towards liberalisation' believing this factor could equate for 'toning down the established taboo on discussions and public displays of sex and the sexual' maintaining: 'This trend has arguably led to previously hidden sexual desires and experiences being displayed more publicly than in the past' (Ryder, 2006). However, despite the current 'trend towards liberalisation', the reality is far more conservative. Berger highlights that during the mid-19th century expectations on the artist demanded they perform within a particular code of artistic practice determined by the standards set by the Academy. In the 21st century whilst restrictions still apply within institutionalised practices, artists outside of these organisations are under the illusion that we possess the ultimate mandate; 'artistic freedom'. Based on my own experience¹⁰⁵ realist painters continue to be restrained in relation to current censorship laws and gallery protocol. Censorship legislation demands the forewarning of patrons through specific signage indicating the explicit nature of the work, consequently the display of artist's work is organised around discretion and the policies of each specific gallery. Furthermore, artists producing explicit erotic photographic imagery that may be interpreted as

¹⁰³ Examples are the work of Russian social realist painter Izaak Brodsky and his portrait of *Joseph Stalin* (1933); and German painter Käthe Kollwitz's *The Carmagnole (Dance around the Guillotine)* (1901).

¹⁰⁴ A current example of the continued recontextualisation of historical paintings may be observed in the current advertising campaign for *Keri Renewal Skin-Care* products. Here the canonic work *Grand Odalisque* by Ingres (1814) is appropriated and reinvigorated in a contemporary context. This is discussed in detail in an essay by Jessica Ziegenfuss entitled 'The Grande Odalisque and Feminist Psychoanalysis: Hegemonic and Subversive Re-Interpretation of an Image' (Ziegenfuss 2008).

¹⁰⁵ Refer to *The Loaded Image* (Coldicutt 2000) in which I detail the legal implications for the artist and gallery under Section 53 (b) of the *Censorship Act (1996)*.

pornography, continue to be exposed to the possibility of severe legal or economic implications.¹⁰⁶ The very public debate surrounding the production and display of photography by artist Bill Henson in 2008 and again in 2012 highlights Australian society's sensitivity to visual representations of the body and importantly, the legal implications for contemporary artists working with the body politic in Australia. The personal and politicised nature of figurative visual research may be gauged through the opinion offered in 2008 by the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Following the seizure of Henson's artwork from the Roslyn Oxley9 gallery by police as evidence for prosecution, Rudd maintained that the work was 'revolting'¹⁰⁷ and 'devoid of artistic merit.'¹⁰⁸ Rudd's reaction to the depiction of adolescent subjects in Henson's artwork followed in the wake of legislation designed to prevent the production and dissemination of child pornography. Under existing censorship laws, my current visual research is without exemption and is exposed to another level of complexity requiring careful negotiation in its creation. The current dilemma surrounding censorship of art resides in the historical understanding that the process of mimicking or simulating social behaviour is simply exercising one of arts most powerful functions; the manifest ability (and right) to test and move traditional boundaries in a critique of social norms.

Legal boundaries imposed on the public exhibition of sexually explicit photographic art, by default present additional challenges for Realist painting. Separate to key objectives in my investigation of beach culture, this research reveals an extra sense of urgency in support of the freedom of expression. The politics surrounding the production and display of sexually explicit imagery, currently favour realistic illusions created through paint and pigment over mechanically produced imagery. To openly document and critique the unique social site of the beach involves recording a range of social behaviour performed within this liminal site, including various degrees of nudity and sexual activity. Given the physical limitations of painting on the beach and the nature of particular performances, the most obvious source of reference is digitised imagery freely available on the internet. As a realist painter for me there is a particular irony embedded in my production. On one hand painting provides an exclusive means over the use of photography, to present sexually explicit imagery and critique a conservative edge that is present in contemporary culture, within the current censorship laws. This is despite the fact that an illusion or simulation of reality created in paint may be referenced from (and closely resemble) digital imagery or photography. On the other, when placed alongside avant-garde digital imagery, the practice of realism in itself is considered conservative within the context of the contemporary art world.

¹⁰⁶ For example if artwork is omitted from an exhibition and not able to be presented for sale. The artist also is liable for a fine if the work presented in the gallery is deemed to have breached current censorship laws.

¹⁰⁷ Rudd's comments were recorded by reporter Andrew Taylor and published in the *Cowra Guardian* on the 9 November, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Whilst produced in a photographic medium, Henson's work may be described stylistically as *painterly*; where formal painting techniques such as chiaroscuro and bokeh are applied photographically to figurative realism. Correspondingly, painting produced through skilful application of the medium, utilizing clarity and focused detail, may be stylistically referred to as realism. Note: Chiaroscuro is a term used to describe specific lighting conditions that employ strong tonal contrasts between light and dark. As a painting technique it is particularly useful when applied to modelling the illusion of three-dimensionality. Bokeh refers to the blur in aspects of an image.

Techno-tools

As an artist who utilises photography within my practice I am interested in how other painters view the use of photographic mediums. I pull from my shelf a book on the work of Eric Fischl a contemporary painter who has used photography as an essential tool throughout his career.

I think about the relationship painting has with photography in a lot of ways. First of all, I've been influenced and inspired by photographers and film in terms of picturing the world. There are certain things that photograph and film have done-compositional and point-of-view stuff that painting had as part of its vocabulary a long time ago and that were taken over and advanced by these other mediums. So it's a reclamation on my part to reintroduce the photograph into the language of painting. I use the photograph as a sketch, something that helps me remember. The issue in painting is always what's enough information to convey what you're trying to say ... Because memory fails you on little things. That's one of the reasons that I use photography. The other is that photography slices life so thinly that everything is in motion. (Danto, Enright and Martin 2008, 325)

Such 'reclamation' of visual territory is not a point often raised in discussions around the relationship of realist painting with photography. The seduction of the mechanical image owes much to its genesis in painting where formalist painting structures such as the use of perspective, lighting conditions and compositional principles have been constantly employed in photographs. To trace the roots of the introduction of optical technology into art is to witness a history of constant change and exchange. The frame of art has been employed to legitimise the use of optical technology from the time of its invention, cloaking and tracing the course of photographic imagery as it began to penetrate traditional modes of representing the body.

Lauren Weingarden in *The Photographic Subversion: Benjamin, Manet and Art(istic) Reproduction* (2006) explores this relationship between optical technologies in the 19th century and artistic and cultural shifts. Weingarden highlights how during the rapid development of commercial photography in the early 1850s, photographers 'turned their technical devices to the more profitable commodity of erotic-pornographic photography,'¹⁰⁹ (Weingarden 2006, 226). Within this flow of new imagery certain 'genres' emerged; specifically *études après nature* or *académies*. Initially these *académies* (often produced by traditionally trained painters turned photographers) mimicked classical poses, which were arranged under studio lighting conditions to emulate the painted effect and technique of chiaroscuro. Painters also provided a ready market for commercial photographers who from the mid-1800s produced stockpiles

¹⁰⁹ A phenomenon observable in the late 20th century with the introduction of the Internet and the rapid expansion of Internet porn.

of imagery based on both classical and modern themes. These supplied artists with a proliferation of affordable visual references and reduced the costs involved in hiring live models. What happened as a consequence of this transaction is the evolution of a particular realism. As Weingarden points out:

because most viewers regarded the photograph as a mimetic image of the thing itself, the model posing for aesthetic purposes represented no one other than herself, a real woman inscribed with a specific social identity. (Weingarden 2006, 231)

Embedded in the detail of this new realism that photography presented to the 19th century Parisian society, was the immediate recognition of the model not as an 'idealised product of artistic creation' but as potentially a prostitute living and working in everyday Paris. When considering the use of photographic reference in the context of my current artistic production I am aware of a number of parallels that connect to this 19th century foundation. The costs involved in generating my own 'original' compositions using professional models and specific lighting conditions over the necessary period that it takes to paint my imagery, renders the exercise financially prohibitive. Out of necessity and interest, much of my visual resources are selected from digital and mechanical reproductions. In doing so, I am critically aware of and affected by visual stylization and distortion that relate to the reading of my work.

In practical terms, the littoral environment is a site exposed to extreme conditions such as wind, sand, sunlight, and heat; conditions that are not conducive to the act of painting. Under these circumstances painting from life or *plein air* is challenging in the extreme and supports the logical alternative to produce studio paintings inspired by photographic imagery and quick notational drawings collected in situ. Collecting visual photographic material in public spaces such as at the beach can be problematic and is highlighted by the growing sensitivity and legal implications surrounding the protection of an individual's privacy. In 2012 a 35-year-old male from Perth was arrested and charged for taking photographs of young women and children sunbathing and swimming at Cottesloe Beach. The charges laid by the police were for one count of 'indecent acts in public' and one count of 'obstructing police'. The man was alleged to have been 'using the zoom function to zoom in on breast and groin areas without their knowledge'.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ The article 'Man accused of taking lewd beach photos at Cottesloe' published *The Australian* 8th October 2012 reported as follows: 'A man will face court after allegedly taking photos of people sunbathing and swimming at Cottesloe beach. The 35-year-old Maylands man was allegedly caught taking a series of photos of young women and children on the beach on Saturday, between 10.30am and 10.50am, and using the zoom function to zoom in on breast and groin areas without their knowledge. It will be further alleged the man struggled with police and refused to give them his camera before being arrested. He has been charged with one count of indecent acts in public and one count of obstructing police and will be summonsed to appear in court at a later date.'

Many questions are raised by this prosecution: how is it now appropriate to photograph in public spaces? How is it possible for one to establish where the delineated boundary lies between an image being close enough to the subject to become too close, and where and how it is appropriate to use such imagery? With the sophistication of modern optical technology it is possible to zoom into an image until it becomes an unrecognizable geometric abstraction. At its most extreme, a single pixel, can be targeted out of the thousands from which the image is comprised, simply by using the capacity of a zoom function available on most modern cameras and further extended within imaging software such as *Photoshop*. Does a pixel extracted from an explicit image therefore render it offensive? Tim Gregory who writes about the pornographic in art, concludes that this is not just a practical consideration for painting, it is a practical consideration for desire, since ‘you can’t masturbate on the beach’ (Gregory 2013).

Ironically, many personal images of people are legally available and are easily accessed by anyone across the internet. Imagery uploaded onto the myriad of social media websites such as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Myspace, Tumblr and Twitter, are widely disseminated, frequently without the consent of the person featured in the photograph. It is outside the scope of this project to focus on current theory generated around the ethical concerns emerging from digital image collection, particularly the use and ownership of visual information gathered from public surveillance systems and the tracking of individuals. This research is directed to the use of digital imagery as a tool in the creation of paintings representative of the contemporary Western beach.

The 2012 arrest of the Cottesloe photographer forces a distinction between the potentially ‘indecent act’ of amateur photography and the ‘art’ of a professional photographers such as Bill Henson. Yet even in the context of art, the work of this iconic Australian artist is not protected from the law. What becomes apparent is a broadening separation between what Ryder (2006) identifies as a ‘global trend towards liberalisation’ and the political determination to control this progression. The introduction of Section 53(b) of the *Censorship Act (1996)* effectively removed the notion of ‘artistic merit’ as a defense for artists and galleries in any legal challenge to the pornographic nature of a work. Under such law the legal boundaries that ultimately contain the function of art in contemporary Australian society are elusive and untenable and diminish the possibility of painting to fully engage its critical role as a ‘crucial social irritant’ (Iils 2009). However I find it in somewhat reassuring to recognise that in the course of history the current situation is not unique; censorship in 19th century France, as it is now in Australia, was effectively left to the police.

In the mid-1800s the French Government introduced censorship in response to a legal loophole created around the notion of artistic merit and the ‘slippage’ of commonplace imagery (referred to as ‘*académies de la rue*...or street academies’) into material for ‘legally designated restricted use’ (Weingarden 2006). Outrage by art critics and the general public during this period was levelled at artists who were seen as employing the new realism of new technology

(in the form of pornographic photographic imagery) in a direct violation on the sanctity of the myth contained within the lineage of an original painted image.¹¹¹

Whilst this historical reference underlines the early politicisation of realism in association with the use of imaging technology, it also highlights how even from the outset artistic ‘values’ were perceived as compromised by its influence. Yet research undertaken by David Hockney published in his work *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Techniques of the Old Masters* (2006) reveals a cover-up that occurred from as early as the 14th century regarding of the use and the dependency by artists on of visual technology. Hockney discusses the secrecy that surrounded the widespread use of optical devices¹¹² and highlights their enormous impact on the ‘immediate and coherent’ art historical ‘shift towards greater naturalism’¹¹³ (Hockney 2006, 51). One particular ‘naturalism’ that evolved out of this technology was the shift in the subject’s gaze from the fleeting sideways glance to a direct ‘head-on look into the camera’s aperture’ (Weingarden 2006, 234). In the context of the time, the difference between the averted or ‘sideways’ gaze and confronting front-on or ‘direct’ gaze (into the lens), was enough to determine the difference between art and porn:

[Manet] ... signalled his modernity in two photographic ways: by replacing the model’s indirect sideways glance with a direct (or female) gaze and by painting a copy of an erotic photograph rather than an *académie*. (Weingarden 2006, 234).

Stereoscopic photography invented during the mid-1800s also extended a growing relationship with the lens and proved to be even more spectacular for the viewer and artists of the time. This technology worked on the principle of simultaneously producing two photographs taken at a slightly offset position and presented to the eyes through a binocular apparatus. When these images combined it created an apparent three-dimensionality. This new 19th century technology quickly moved from the fairground, where it was a huge attraction celebrated for its novelty often depicting ‘real-life scenes of distant lands’, and was absorbed into the high arts where it transformed ‘stereoscopic Venuses’ from erotic renditions into a ‘pornographic extreme’ (Weingarden 2006, 236). To relate the influence of this new technology on the tradition of painting Weingarden reveals that the emergence of Manet’s unique style defined by his modernist application of paint and a particular stylisation, is a consequence of his endeavour to use and copy the effect of stereoscopic photography.¹¹⁴

111 For example Weingarden cites the response to Alexandre Cabanel’s *Birth of Venus* (1863) by a conservative art critic of the time Maxime Du Camp for ‘merely depicting an *académie*—an actual paid model—and nothing more’, which translates from French as ‘she is not the “chaste” Venus born of the waves’ (Weingarden 2006, 232)

112 Including the Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida, mirrors and lenses.

113 Ironically ‘naturalism’ is a particularly elusive quality that may rapidly become generalised inside a visual genre. It is possible to note the shift in current camera techniques particularly popular within current pornography where an ‘amateur’ aesthetic is desired for it’s apparent ‘authenticity’ and ‘naturalism.’

114 Recent scholarship supports Weingarden’s findings which are premised on the findings of Elizabeth McCauley

By viewing Manet's *Olympia* and *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* alongside stereoscopic photographs, features that have been considered technical aberrations can be better understood as deliberate copying of stereoscopic effects. (Weingarden 2006, 236)

Inspired by Charles Gaudin's stereoscopic photographic images (that closely resemble both setting and figuration of Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*) Weingarden proceeds in great detail to outline the distortions and particular idiosyncrasies associated with the technique and relates these to Manet's attempt to emulate the effects in paint;

These effects include harsh frontal lighting – on surfaces parallel to the camera lens- which diminishes tonal contrasts and shadows of the flesh. Conversely, an appendage – an arm or a leg – projecting at an oblique angle to the lens obtain shaded or highlighted effects ... Similar effects also caused critics to see Manet's nudes as poorly modelled and flat. (Weingarden 2006, 236)

Manet's innovations that evolved out of his use of and interest in new visual technology, and his use of photographic references to prostitutes of the time are key to subverting the previous historical frame of the Académie to present the naked human form. This historical insight contributes to understanding the possibilities presented by technologies today. An alternative range of visual inconsistencies specific to the new optical vision provides for painters in the 21st century exciting new possibilities and challenges.

The extraordinary advancement of visual technologies beginning at the end of the last millennium has commanded a further reconfiguration of many traditional perceptions in relation to the image. As the emergent *point-and-shoot* generation fuel a relentless flow of mass imagery, instantly catalogued, generously disseminated and generally uncensored by information juggernauts across the internet and into social media pages such as *Facebook* and *Grapevine*, the consummate value of imagery is transformed. Digital imagery is as disposable as it is transmutable (through image manipulation software) and contributes to a vast visual cacophony. For a painter this presents as a double-edged sword. From one perspective as an artist I have unlimited access and insight into the images representative of a digital society, on the other, my work is absorbed within this visual pool. Here the inherit challenge for the 21st century painter is to vie for the viewer's sustained attention, particularly when presenting complex and contemplative images.

A visual phenomenon associated with the internet that I find intriguing and also useful in my own art production is the mashing of imagery gathered from disparate contexts. Search engines present endless arrays of images collected

Industrial Madness: Commercial Photography in Paris 1848-1871 (1994) and subsequent studies that have expanded on her work including Sylvie Aubenas and Phillippe Comar's *Obscénité* (2001) and Serge Nazarieff *Early Erotic Photography* (1993). The history and techniques of stereoscopic photography are detailed in Helmut Gernsheim's *The Rise of Photography 1850-1880, the Age of Collodio* (1988, 61-69).



Fig 46. & 47.. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

and collaged around key words. What begins as a Google search of 'people on the beach' yields a widely eclectic mix displayed on a single screen of children playing in the sand next to wounded and dying soldiers on Omaha Beach, next to a couple having sex in the sand, next to herdsman tending livestock on a beach in Somalia.

Whilst much of the imagery that appears in pages such as Google Images on the internet are related in some form to advertising, almost all images are *linked* in equally diverse directions to other relative and random material. For example returning to the results from the 'people on the beach' Google Image search; hundreds of images appear from which I select an innocuous image of three African women beautifully dressed in colourful clothing on a long sweeping beach. Clicking on this image links through to an image of another African woman dressed in sexy black lingerie leaning on a red couch, clicking on this image brings up an album containing 133 photos of African Girls on the title page displaying images that range from a nude woman doing the splits on a couch, two having sex in the shower, another with her entire buttocks tattooed with an image of a colourful butterfly ... whilst animated imagery

Act III

Techno-tools

automatically scrolling in a column on the side of the screen reveals links to a website entitled 'Date Sexy African Women.' I watch in fascination as images are batched and commodified within the algorithm of an internet search engine, whilst automated advertising that scrolls on the side of the screen is insidiously targeted to match my user's internet profile. It is the intrigue of this 21st century tool that has inspired my current artistic investigation. Within the screen I have discovered the existence of a cyber-beach, an alternative 'reality' that moves freely between fantasy and fiction. I test the inherent 'truth' of painted realism in a visual response that attempts to humanise and vindicate this seemingly autonomous visual technological mechanism.

The parallel existence of this cyber-beach reveals an enigmatic space; at once unique and at the same time familiar in its unpredictability and eclectic image delivery. The separation from any personal connection to the subjects presented in the imagery provides interesting artistic potential and the opportunity to create my own personal narrative and dialogue; forming strange and often-unrelated connections between images. Beyond mashing imagery to create fantasy, the internet generates a specialised resource to develop visual generalizations around a subject. Whilst these might seem simply quotidian ramblings, large samplings make it possible to identify specific patterns around notions of particular body types and gestures, cultural similarities, fashion and pictorial formalities such as framing and focus, and relative social speculation determined by the programming of the search engine providers. With this also is the realization that the capacity of the search within the limitations of search-engines is also restricted to what has already been previously searched for.

As I peruse this digital imagery, questions arise around the gender of the author, the relationship between the subject and the photographer and the authenticity of the image; whether it is the product of indiscernible image manipulation through programs such as Photoshop. Some imagery may be second or third generation, mixed and remixed like the sampling that is popular in contemporary music.¹¹⁵ This hyper-real-multi-focused-representational digital imagery framed and projected *real-time* across the internet into my own studio offer windows into private visual worlds previously the reserve of the imagination.

But is there anything left to the imagination? I fear that inside my world the imagination has been subjugated, determined and delimited thru profligate imagery of the internet; regurgitated, reprocessed, rendered down, refined to an essence and repackaged? ... 'Bananalised' (Debord 1967).

¹¹⁵ Sampling in contemporary music is 'the process of creating a new piece of music by combining various extracts from other artists' songs, musical pieces, etc.' (The Macquarie Dictionary Online 2014).

Act III

Scene II

Scene II

On its dais, lodged between bookshelves brimming with printed visual histories of the beach, throbs my personal electronic portal. The cobalt flicker of the laptop screen announces the latest pixelated cyber beach fantasy; the quintessential remote tropical beach paradise. Between sculptured boulders, across white coral sand, knee deep in a turquoise lagoon wades a young woman; bronzed, blonde, hips covered with a colourful sarong, bikinied breasts like the ripe coconuts hanging from the palms that frame the scene ... virtually beckoning me with a promise of hot sex on the beach. With the slightest touch of the cursor the vision is gone. In an instant I am returned to my place within a nameless population, a pixel in the endless pulsing Id; residing beyond this moment only in the memory of an already out-dated hard drive.

As quickly as my computer *timed-me-in* to the fantasy, I had been *timed-out*. Sensing inactivity, with digital regularity, the computer triggers another beach fantasy; bound up in a visual reminder that my productivity is being monitored, literally, but embodied deep within this visual prompt is also the reminder...that this is in fact and in fantasy what I am working for... *free time* ...the capitalist's reward... the annual ten day tropical escape. How do I reconcile the various and illusive realities of these spaces both the beach and the internet, defined by their changeability and extremes? Is it the seduction and excess bound up in each layer; the hyper-sensorial qualities of sun, sand, surf and sex, compressed within the convoluted histories (or the reality of cyber-imagery), that inspire the imagined fantasies played out on this stage?

Sitting amongst my sketches scattered across the studio floor I search for other clues that might help to define the relevance of contemporary realism in its relationship to photographic and digital technology and the beach. Flicking through works by Eric Fischl I pause to read:

A photograph is a witnessed moment, and great photographers have incredible skill in recognizing that moment. A painting arrives at that frozen moment through accumulation. It's not something that is taken out of the world; it's something that is actually put back into the world. The viewer not only experiences the poignancy of that frozen moment but also participates in its reenactment. We're given all the decisions that go into it—what was included, what was excluded, what was distorted, what was refined—building a different bond between the artist and the viewer. We feel the reality of a photograph because it slices a moment. It leaves us apart from reality, and we become witnesses rather than participants. (Danto, Enright and Martin 2008, 92)

The idea of 'giving' back to the world through painting I find truly appealing and so easily understood when considered against the act of 'taking' photographs. Fischl articulates with great clarity in his notion of 'accumulation' an understanding

experienced by many painters how the essence of a creative process is inseparably bound up in collection and layered meaning infused with emotions. Fischl also highlights the important function of editing as an integral part of the process of painting. Whilst this may determine stylistic qualities specific to an individual artist such as the use of certain colour palettes, particular gestures in the application of paint and so forth, it also signals another point of departure from the photograph. Here subjective decisions and idiosyncratic gestures by the painter establish the evolution of an image. This is not a chemical reaction or mathematically determined sequence of pixels, this is the construction of a handmade object; a record in pigment of embodied physical energy. As Marilyn Minter's earlier statement suggests, in the creation of an illusion the photograph simply provides a source of clues for the painter (in Godfrey 2009, 422). The challenge and delight for a realist painter is to give life and form to a moment 'taken' in time.

Painter Mira Schor is concerned with the layering of time within the painted image and the 'displacement of pictorialism' within the modern gallery space in favour of motion-based imagery:

Painting is always under attack, as a prime example of art as commodity and an exemplar of the modernist idea of the autonomous artwork. And most of us are conditioned by media to prefer movement. I often talk about the idea of the displacement of pictorialism, the way the exact same area of wall space that might previously have been occupied in a museum by a large painting, let's say Courbet's *The Studio of a Painter* or his *Funeral at Ornans* is now the site of the same-sized projection of a video. There's image, narrative, pictorialism, the only difference is motion, sound, and the specific time of the particular video. However paintings also contain time. In fact at best they contain time in a way that opens up contemporary time and defies spectacle. It is not Fordist time of the minute by minute, digital time of the microsecond by microsecond, it is the layered time of your experiencing it through vision and your relation to it in space. That experience contains, whether you're consciously aware of it or not, the time of the painting's making, the time of its layers, edges, and surfaces. A painting can open up time, liberate it—when you paint or when you look at a painting. That's the time I'm interested in and I think that kind of time does defy commodity culture. (Schor, 2013)

Within Schor's considered philosophy lies an important key that plagues the contemporary viewer and painter alike. There is a certain impatience and expectation placed upon an inanimate image in the face of the overt drama and spectacle of contemporary moving imagery. Could the contemplative quietness of painting offer a decompression chamber in a frenetic visual world? Here the viewer may gaze upon a painting as one would reflect upon a rare artefact seeking clues into a civilisation. What Schor detects as a liberation of time embodied within the layers and surface of a painting, confirms what becomes apparent in the process of creating an artwork; the effect of time standing still

or alternatively disappearing within the traditional structure of a metered day. Whilst the camera has the capacity to freeze a moment in time, painting may be considered as a thawing of the instantaneous; where a concentrated understanding of the subject is reconfigured in reflexive motion; liquefied and layered in both paint and 'liberated' time.

One of the many questions examined in this research, 'Figuring through Painting' is to ascertain whether the painted surface still serves as a political platform to new understanding.

Painting realist, simulated, digitised representations of performers on the beach would no longer be considered a political act based on the stylistic qualities of the work, yet painting might still remain one of the few visual mediums with the capacity to deliver uncomfortable truths. The popularised vision of the beach conveyed through advertising and popular culture is increasingly sanitised by ethical and legal concerns regarding the photographic representation of individuals in public spaces. Visualising body culture by non-mechanical processes such as painting continues to be broadly tolerated within contemporary Australian culture. Rather than its perception as 'formulaic, predictable and simple' (Rachel Bowlby 2007, xi) painted realism now offers the means, not only to critically examine in fact and in fantasies across the internet, the culture and function of the beach but also highlight current limitations within visual culture.

Whether this painted research becomes an 'irritant' to the 'vastly over-determined collective identity' (Iles 2009) or adds yet another layer in an overtly self-conscious 21st century visual economy and is simply absorbed into the cacophony of imagery of a visually over-stimulated population, remains to be tested. Tracing the visual history of the Australian beach seeking a truly *Australian* gaze or a visual frame, Geoffrey Dutton observes:

It is fascinating to see how the artists interpreted the beach, not only visually, but emotionally, in terms of the developing tradition of Australians at the beach. At first they saw the long lines of sand and water, and defined humanity in terms of a few small vertical figures. Then the sensuous qualities of the beach began to demand recognition, and finally the artists drew close to the sensual response of bodies gradually becoming naked. (Dutton 1985, 6)

Dutton's reframing and reinterpretation of the view and emotional experience of the Australian beach alludes to the gradual lifting of an inherent colonial filter that had blinkered many possibilities of new vision and understanding. In the latter frame of Dutton's 1980s re-visioning of the Australian beach, the camera in the hands of photographer Max Dupain becomes a defining influence, particularly through his iconic images such as *Sunbather* (1937). Monumental in scale, bleached in the sunlight, the close-focus of this image follows the artist's eye and an evolving determination to express the physiology of the beach. Played out for the viewer is an intimate experience of suntanned flesh peppered

with salt-water droplets and sand where clothing and distance is supplanted by sexualised flesh and detail. It is in the detail of this imagery that I recognise the emergence of a current aesthetic archetype; a 21st century generic visual play of flesh on the beach. Whether expressed in the latest fashion photography shot in remote tropical locations by *Sports Illustrated*, images designed to set style for this season's body benchmark, or the exploits of the paparazzi that document the latest bikini'd waistline to slip from the mould, in the context of current imagery, the boundaries of the beach are experienced as appropriated flesh and transacted in a global visual exchange. As the old colonial filter is superseded by a reconfigured digital version in this latest foreign exchange, as a painter I look for visual markers and clues to interpret this globalised visual lexicon: the new language of flesh.

The work of collaborative contemporary Russian painters Vladimir Dubossarsky and Alexander Vinogradov is pinioned on the expressive use of this visual codification. In his catalogue introduction entitled 'The Artists of a Generation', Viktor Misiano (2009) credits these painters with expressing the mass consciousness of a generation. Their image production is based on the use of visual material appropriated from digital technology predominantly the internet and other widespread visual material gleaned internationally from popular culture. Misiano contextualises the work of Dubossarsky and Vinogradov within a Russian culture embroiled in momentous social reform in the early the 1990s. He describes how the focus of artistic discussion during this period revolved around 'social planning' and learning to negotiate a new system based on 'international parameters':

This system was seen as being unshakably market orientated, because market relations, as the spin doctors explained at the time, are the source of the Western world's material happiness and the wellbeing and a guarantee of its uncensored freedom of creativity. (Misiano 2009, 50)

Dubossarsky and Vinogradov were creating artwork into a culture caught in a vacuum between two regimes; that of the past defined as Moscow conceptualism¹¹⁶ of the 1970s and 1980s and a new system that only existed as a possibility for the future.

The answer for both Dubossarsky and Vinogradov lay not in the alienation of the audience by presenting the personal vision of the artist but rather to embrace and present what the public wanted. Misiano does not perceive this as compromising or denying the high social significance of the artists, but instead entering the new system as both a 'pop star and social engineer' and in doing so, reinforcing the belief in the power of the artist to 'change the world'. (Misiano 2009:52)

116 As Misiano describes 'with its diffident underground foundations and its almost sectarian elitism refined by intellectualism' (Misiano 2009, 52).

Of key interest relative to my research is the decision by Dubossarsky and Vinogradov to present their work and ideologies through the tradition of painting. As Misiano points out, in the early 1990s this decision was exceedingly risky in the face of the rejection of painting by Moscow conceptualism and the radical Actionists vying for public attention through 'shock media effects and public scandals' (Misiano 2009, 50). With the hindsight of history, the collaborative painting strategies of these two accomplished artists played directly to the heart of the ordinary citizen in Russia:

it is the picture that remains the bearer of ideas in art in the consciousness of the masses. Moreover this is true not only for the taste of the average person on the street in Russia but also in the West. At the end of the day, despite the power of the institutionalized modernist machine of the West, even there the easel figurative painting is the artistic format, which excites the most interest in art from the wider public audience. (Misiano 2009, 52–53)

Most refreshing in Misiano's observation is the challenge it raises towards a failing Western post-modernist perception on the limitations of painting.

In a clear association with the methodology of my own painting practice, Dubossarsky and Vinogradov garner imagery from advertising, cinema, press photography, publications and the internet and then compose their paintings like a collage. Whilst the framing of characters and objects within the image reflect closely an aesthetic often associated with early 20th century Socialist Realism, the power and genius of their work resides in the multi-layering of concepts and strategic imagery, both to imbue the work with a specifically 'Russian essence',¹¹⁷ whilst simultaneously positioning itself within a modern deterritorialised global economy. One such example is *Harvest Festival* (1995 Oil on canvas 200x400cm (three parts)). Using the format of a popular Socialist Realist painting (and to a large extent the coloration) Dubossarsky and Vinogradov appropriate a painting by Sergei Gerasimov entitled *Collective Farm Harvest Festival* (1937), and reconfigure the utopic scene. The artists convert an abundant harvest into something of a scene of an orgy lifted from any regular pornographic movie available internationally across the internet. The warm glow of a light usually reserved to symbolize a bright Socialist future in the 1930s presents in a new, radically overheated, cadmium red swathe where the tractor, the agricultural landscape, the fruit, cattle and porn stars all merge and explode from the scene. This scene truly epitomises a 21st century capitalist utopia; the Western hegemony daringly expressed through an overabundance of both fruits of the field and of the internet. Quoting the words of Igor Zabel, Misiano claims that Dubossarsky and Vinogradov demonstrated that:

117 Refer to Misiano (2009, 55).

‘... modern civilization is not necessarily Western, and Western culture is not necessarily modern’ ... They demonstrated that ‘in the conditions of globalization power... is deterritorialised, becoming globalized, transitional and abstract’ and causes ‘the disappearance of any identity.’ (Zabel, quoted in Misiano 2009, 57)

Identity, in the work of these artists, is absorbed into an over-abundant patination of people, flowers and objects compressed into traditional pictorial structures; many revealing the horizon and emphasising an important connection to landscape or place. Dubossarsky and Vinogradov’s paintings have been fittingly described by Misiano as *Neo-Baroque*.¹¹⁸ Painted in the exuberant colouration of a palette resembling the *vivid* button used in image manipulation programmes such as Photoshop, the place and the people portrayed within the work create a fantasyland resembling Steven Marcus’s *pornotopia*.¹¹⁹

utopian cleansing of the differences between illusions and reality takes place in the contemporary mass media consciousness, which as Gianni Vattimo formulated, leads to the ‘fabulation of the world—the transformation of the world into a fairy tale’¹²⁰ (Misiano 2009, 60)

By defining the system and context by which illusion and reality are fabulated, Misiano situates new possibilities for painting as a medium reinvigorated and integral in the expression of this new world fairy tale. This painting methodology employed by Dubossarsky and Vinogradov based on the transformation of realist imagery into the phantasmagorical is a construct used within my own painting practice.

Jean Baudrillard analyses the successive phases of image making and provides a window into understanding the process of ‘utopian cleansing’ and how this may affect contemporary mass consciousness. In his work *Simulations* Baudrillard (1983) determines that there are essentially four successive phases of the image: in the first instance Baudrillard maintains that the image is a faithful copy, of good appearance, made in reflection of a basic or profound reality; in the order of the sacrament. In the second instance the image perverts reality, masking and denaturing it and only hinting at the existence of an obscure reality; in the order of a spell with an evil appearance. In the third it masks the absence of a profound reality and pretends to be a faithful copy and plays at being an appearance; in the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it bears no relationship to reality or the order of appearances; it is pure simulation (Baudrillard 1983, 11–12)

¹¹⁸ Misiano (2009, 59). Neo-Baroque assumes strong connections to its genesis in 17th century Baroque. Inherent characteristics of this movement include: extravagance, virtuosity, and exuberance, it may also be considered vulgar, chaotic and impetuosity all used for great effect in the creation of spectacle.

¹¹⁹ A fantasy world in which everyone is ready and willing to indulge in all kinds of sexual activity. Steven Marcus explores this in his book *The Other Victorians: a Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1966).

¹²⁰ Reference to Gianni Vattimo’s *The Transparent Society* (2003)

Within this sequence that maps the transformation of the image, it is possible to identify how the reality becomes progressively transmuted to a point where signs are simply reflecting other signs and entirely independent of any reference to reality. Using Baudrillard’s theory of simulation, reading imagery becomes progressively more difficult as one loses the ability to discern the difference between the real and the imaginary, true and false. Within the structure simulation it is possible to trace the order by which history evolves visual mythologies.¹²¹ Essential to the evolution of reality into simulation is the part that technology plays where the old is absorbed by the new and vice-versa. By this process a pixel in digital photography can be manipulated through the ancient alchemy and sorcery of painting, to produce a painted simulation of a new reality. I believe in the 21st century the potency of realist painting resides in this incumbent power of simulation. Within this capacity the image as illusion possesses the ability to evolve and surreptitiously subvert reality in a critique on itself. In critique of Baudrillard’s theory, Schechner argues:

Simulation as a concept continues to evolve in the twenty-first century. At the level of popular culture, simulation is closely related to ‘reality’ television and ‘real life’ internet sites. A simulation is neither a pretense nor imitation. It is a replication of ... itself as another. That makes simulations perfect performatives. ... There is no difference between ‘copy’ and ‘original’ ... Simulation is important to the arts—especially with regards to works that occupy a liminal area between what is socially—legally acceptable and what is beyond the pale. (Schechner 2002, 133–140)

In a world where the separation between visual or virtual truth and reality is indiscernible, and in reflection of a complex social site that is loaded with enigmatic regulatory processes, I prepare to simply, honestly, truthfully, and originally paint a copy of ‘a lie that makes us recognise the truth.’

As the erogenous zone of this social body flexes to the movement of flesh and tide across its sandy skin, I am drawn to figure through painting, motions of this unique experience.

¹²¹ Paintings produced by Gauguin in Tahiti offer one such example. In their original state Gauguin’s work was based on fantasy, yet in the course of history the contemporary imagining of tropical island space is influenced by his imagery. A subsequent legacy of simulation has been progressively built upon what may be perceived as the ‘truth’ of Gauguin’s fantasy.

Act IV

The Show / no show

The following is a description of the visual research produced in support of this project and how it was intended to be exhibited at the John Curtin Gallery 2014 Post Graduate show.

Because of the challenging and provocative nature of some aspects of the performance it was deemed unsuitable for the broad general audience for the Graduate Exhibition and withdrawn.

However, the following description of the proposed performance read alongside the relevant digital images enables the reader to visualise the scene and allow interactivity of a different and perhaps even more diverse and renewable kind.

The Show /no show

Entering the darkened space one is first struck by the tapestry of colourful images that stretch out in rows across three walls of the gallery. To one side, an island of white sand radiates under the glow of a powerful spotlight that illuminates a colourful beach umbrella and two striped canvas deck chairs. The walls suddenly become activated as two long ribbons of running LED text scroll across the top and beneath the rows of painted imagery. At first, the text resembles typical URL numerical internet addresses punctuated with words such as 'bodies on the beach', 'bikini', 'budgie smugglers', 'bathers', 'bathing machines', 'gonzo gaze'. A small didactic on the wall presents instructions for viewers to enter comments and words into the running text via a tablet located on a nearby plinth.

As in a visual puzzle, one is drawn to create graphic parallel connections between the paintings that at times appear sequenced in some elusive narrative as images move across a range of body types, sizes, and subjects of portraiture who confidently stare back. Palettes of turquoise and flesh, bathing under bleached, cloudless skies, are wedged against others under stormy, tropical skies as the horizon of one image carries through to the next.

Responding to the possible sounds of laughter and loud voices (aberrant behaviour within this particular cultural space), one turns to watch as a youthful group irreverently enters the sandy stage, seemingly oblivious of both gallery protocol and other audience members. To add to the outrage, the members of the group proceed to strip down to their bathers (possibly to nakedness), spread beach towels across the sand and extract from their bags numerous items such as suntan lotion, mobile phones, magazines, books, bottles of water, sunglasses and so on. Orientating themselves for conversation and to maximise exposure to the rays, individuals rub sunscreen on themselves and each other whilst others take 'selfies' and listen to music. As one youth begins to read aloud a passage from Robert Drewe's *The Bodysurfers* (1983), two others enact the monologue. The space is transformed by this opening night event.

Act IV

Live Trade; The Pacific Solution

In the following days the ungroomed sandy stage remains as a memory of this opening performance and representative of so many others. This remnant of sand enclosed in a painted net of cyber-beach fantasies, may serve as a reminder that the beach, in both fantasy and fiction, remains a highly charged social space deeply embedded in both our individual and collective psyche.

Live Trade; The Pacific Solution (2012, oil on panel, 900mm x 600mm)

Desire is the passion that consumes the littoral shoreline space of Australia. Whether experienced as seeking dominance over a seascape through possession of prized coastal real estate, or seeking consummation through sun, sand, sea and sex during the annual winter migration to an exotic foreign destination (the ultimate *Getaway*), or as a simple skinny-dip with a lover on a hot balmy night, historically, the beach is a critical location of desire within a contemporary Western consciousness.

For Indigenous inhabitants and custodians of the popular, seemingly 'exotic' vacation destinations, interpreting the enigmatic expressed culture of this migratory Western invasion presents a dilemma. One perception, based on the 'live time' imagery and advertising gleaned from the internet, highlights a society obsessed with sexuality and body image. At a time when many Australians question with suspicion the virtues of other cultures 'invading' our shores, it may be worth reflecting on the integrity and export of our own *Live Trade*.

Live Trade; The Pacific Solution is not intended to moralize or make judgment on this cultural invasion, but simply to present a visual scenario that emanates out of an internet cyber-culture most often reserved for viewing within the seemingly private space of a computer screen.

Casting the Net

Casting the Net (Coldicutt 2012–2014) is a single artwork comprised of eighty oil paintings and presents as the final Act and performance within this research of the contemporary beach. The work is an integral element in *The Beach as an Erogenous Zone; Figuring through Painting* and responds to many issues raised in the exegetical dissertation.

Stylistically, to create convincing illusions in paint and a particular high level of realism demands detailed visual reference. As I have discussed, the inherent difficulties and legal implications encountered in the process of documenting actual beach performances renders this source of reference material untenable. The financial cost of employing actors and life models to simulate and document beach performances are equally prohibitive and seems unnecessarily contrived. Therefore, to ultimately arrive at the internet as the primary source of contemporary visual reference for this investigation seems not only logical but imperative. It is from within this font of endless pixelated imagery that I discover digital fantasies and personal moments that often display a new social relationship with the lens. As a painter, I find that the many ironies and loaded contradictions presented through this contemporary medium inspires huge possibilities. I am hopeful that my work is not simply contributing to a visual cacophony and the current overload of disposable imagery, rather, in mining this resource, my investigation seeks to give voice to the silence and anonymity of the internet and embed mechanically generated pixelated imagery with substance and personality through paint.

The title of the work *Casting the Net* (Coldicutt 2012–2014) speaks of the process of both painting and rationalizing the function of the internet; it simultaneously represents myself as artist (and director) ‘casting the net’ as one would in selecting actors for a play, whilst alluding to throwing out a net when fishing before retrieving it to inspect the catch. In another iteration the title can also be interpreted as creating or ‘casting’ a mould of something.

My function as the author and director of this work reflects in many ways the role of an internet search engine; accordingly, at times the works produced appear random, extreme and unrelated. True to the medium and nature of the internet, what begins as a seemingly innocuous image search for ‘bodies on the beach’ quickly yields a host of sexually explicit imagery, very often lacking any connection to or the sight of a single grain of sand. The paintings that comprise this work simulate much internet based imagery which is often distorted and manipulated. In this painted series such distortion may be as a result of images having been drawn and developed into paintings freehand without the use of image transfer technology, whilst in other images the onus is to fully test my abilities and skills to faithfully reproduce every detail and the integrity of the source material (if such an illusive quality actually exists on the internet). Ultimately viewers will have to discern for themselves the ‘truth’ or ‘lie’ that remains buried in this collection of contemporary cyber–beach fantasies.

Plunging into a cresting wave I kick hard to free myself from the magnetic pull of the shoreline. Beyond the breakers I relax into a rhythm, stroke on stroke, and feel my body settle from cold-shock and exertion. *Stroke, breathe ...* over a jostling sea to the endless horizon, *stroke, breathe* into a weightless atmosphere of creatures and currents, *stroke, breathe* toward a familiar shoreline... *stroke, breathe ... stroke, breathe ...* I am reminded that it is this insatiable connection to the ocean that has fuelled my enthusiasm throughout the project. Through a rhythm of research and painting my understanding of the landscapes that I inhabit has been greatly enriched. I am no longer in doubt of the relevance and necessity of painting in the 21st century as a physical means of *figuring* life. With the same assurance I understand the fundamental importance of the beach as a stage for performance. It is within this space where the transitory and mighty forces of nature decry our cultural dominion and reminded us, if for a moment, of the vulnerability of our existence. It is fitting that within this formidable arena, cultural performances are delivered; some acts personal, ephemeral, lost on a breeze and carried out to sea, whilst others in their power are blown inland and etched into our cultural fabric. Whether activated by the stroke of a wave, the flow of sand across its skin, or the whisper of rushes in its dunes, this is a place of hypersensitivity; an *erogenous zone*.



Fig 48. Richard Coldicutt, *Casting the Net* (detail), 2013, oil on panel, 298mm x 450mm

‘If the origin of my work is scandalous, it is because, for me, the world is a scandal.’

Hans Bellmer (1974)¹²²

In keeping with theatrical tradition, the following epilogue presents as a conclusion both to the script and painted performance, highlighting issues and further possibilities raised through the production.

The initial focus of the epilogue considers the nature of artistic researching¹²³ and the challenges faced by studio-based academic researchers and universities in processing the results within traditional institutional pedagogy. This introduction is intended to contextualise the decision by Curtin University not to exhibit the artistic research produced for this project.

A subsequent discussion expands on the production of the painted series presented in Act III with specific focus on my relationship, as a male artist, creating explicit realistic images of both male and female forms. Part of this discussion considers potential misreading of these paintings.

In conclusion, the epilogue offers an insight into the emerging genre of ‘Post-Internet Art’. Connections to my current research are forged with this genre highlighting how the research may be expanded in a subsequent investigation.

¹²² From Hans Bellmer’s *Instructions to Sexuality II* 1974

¹²³ It is important to note that this is distinctively different from ‘Art Research’ which is directed at studying objects and ideologies of art. Art Research prescribes to traditional academic research methodologies and the results are transcribed textually. See Kaila *Artistic Research Formalised into Doctoral Programs* (2011,115)

How to sing without a voice.

In her publication *Art as a Thinking Process; Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*, Angela Vattese maintains that for contemporary studio-based research to be seriously legitimised within traditional academic structures it is essential that ‘the visual arts must be considered a field of knowledge and that an artwork should be considered, first and foremost, a thinking process.’ (Vattese, 2013,8). What is paramount to this thinking process yet difficult if not impossible to align with science-based research, is the nature of the results and the broad interpretations it invites.

...art is a difficult subject to subjugate, and art education is such a difficult field to cultivate that a frequent criticism of both—which has also been brought to the point of censorship and threats—is highly predictable, today as it was long ago. Art is not a reassuring tool. It brings about anxiety and a sense of loss. It asks us not to rely on our certainties. It wants us to rethink the world. (Vattese, 2013,15)

Vattese exposes an inherent suspicion of the arts and the historical perception of its subversive, challenging and unstable nature. A great challenge for contemporary art practitioners working within traditional academic systems is to endure the frustration of negotiating a model where knowledge is communicated textually through dissertation that draws upon a self-referential system and powerbase. When new knowledge is pursued by means of art and the results are presented in a range of forms for example painting, drawing, sculpture, performance, electronic media, such artistic research presents a challenge to specifically textural systems. The dilemma facing traditional academic institutions is how to validate and embed often complex and ambiguous visual results within the current systems.

In his article *Artistic Research Formalised into Doctoral Programs* Professor Jan Kaila proposes alternative perspectives and expectations in support of producing and valuing artistic research that run contra to existing academic regimes;

[artistic research] ...does not necessarily have to be scientific and academic, but it does have to produce knowledge in its own field, and at best also serve others who are interested in art. (Kaila, 2011,116)

Much discussion regarding the difficulties of artistic research is focused on the subjective nature of both the methodology and results. Whilst emphasizing the greatest potential for new knowledge exists at the point of fusion between cognitive and sensory artistic research (specifically writing, theorizing and contextualizing/production), Kaila highlights the shortcomings of current academic systems in processing, defining and valuing both the methodology and the findings. Simon Njami in his article *Fictional Faculties* also challenges the integrity of existing university knowledge systems in dealing with subjective material, and suggests ‘when we want to transform subjectivity into an undisputable

Epilogue

How to sing without a voice

truth we become liars' (Njami, 2013, 178). Both Vettese and Njami identify the integrity of artistic research resides in a willingness to embrace subjectivity as a legitimised outcome and an essential aspect of knowledge production.

As an artist examining body politics in art and author of this and previous creative research projects, I have experienced first-hand the limitations and inadequacies of an institution geared to the traditions of quantifiable knowledge based systems. The intention of my current research is directed to thinking through art; gathering valuable knowledge in the process of exploring ideas often subjective by nature and never in pursuit of a single defining 'truth'. Ironically one definitive truth has emerged, not from the findings of the research but as a consequence of the subject matter of the artistic research itself. In November 2014 the Curtin University post-graduate exhibition committee deemed the explicit nature of the artistic research that comprises this Doctoral project was inappropriate to be exhibited and examined in its entirety within the John Curtin Gallery space on campus. This action defined not only the Institutions limitations, reluctance and insecurities in processing and presenting difficult subjective visual thinking through traditional academic structures, but also the relevant value accredited by the university to findings that were generated and funded within its own program of higher learning. It must be emphasised that this outcome is not specific to Curtin University; it presents as an ongoing struggle across many institutions both nationally and internationally¹²⁴. Consequently the presentation of my current artistic research for this PhD is necessarily conveyed textually and in pixelated imagery scaled to fit a computer screen from where it evolved. Without the inherent authority of the gallery space and the ability to guide the audiences' experience through performance and specific lighting conditions, the work is significantly compromised. Scale and visual relationships created between each painted portrait which are both fundamental to the reading of *Casting the Net*, are lost in a digital translation. Also lost in the censoring of this artistic research was the opportunity to study the collective interaction of the audience and the dialogue generated between individuals within the gallery space during the associated performance, and ultimately to the physicality of each painted illusion.

¹²⁴ Australian authors Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt ((Eds.) 2010) and Barbara Milech and Ann Schilo (2004) also contribute ideas and methodologies for reconciling creative practice within institutional pedagogy. Progressive institutions such as The Finnish Academy of Fine Arts are members of European Art Research Network (EARN) and are part of a new type of university, essentially 'Art Universities'. As such these small, autonomous institutions embrace artistic research and 'thinking through art' and positively engage in defining and promoting the new role of visual arts in the globalisation of knowledge and thought outside of traditional institutional models.

Epilogue

Beware of the loaded paintbrush

Beware of the loaded paintbrush.

As a male visual artist/researcher, my art practice, spanning the past 20 years, has been dedicated to visual representations of the contemporary body in art. During this time I have been called to defend my position/role as a male artist/voyeur and the images I depict. In this role I position myself as a protagonist not simply a painter passively representing the status quo. My artistic gaze is necessarily intense and forensic. It openly stares upon objects, individuals and societies directly scrutinizing blemishes and cracks in the contemporary armor. It seeks out the darker places and looks for what hides in the shadows. This artistic gaze utilizes contemporary technology in the same way as the picturesque hunters of the 19th century used smoked lenses to compress and reflect detail beyond the overwhelming glare.

As discussed in Act I (p22) my practice as a painter is sustained and constantly reinvigorated by a strategic program of working from nude life models. My decision to work from internet imagery evolved firstly out of necessity for ethical and legal reasons and practical grounds associated with painting within the extreme conditions of the beach environment (also investigated in Act I). What was subsequently revealed by the visual exploration of the Web underpins the work currently presented. When questioned as to my relationship as a male artist with the images gleaned from the net, my answer is clear; they are visual resources and available to anyone with access to the internet. The story that I have composed around the 'casting' of these characters is necessarily open to interpretation or miss-interpretation in relation to my own intentions.

As a (male) painter trying to represent the visual world I associate my intentions and authority in exploring the body to performing visual surgery. In medicine, when a surgeon (regardless of their gender) enters the body with the intent to expose and repair, the work is validated within a medical/scientific discourse. Paradoxically, society may regard the action of a (male) artist/painter visually exposing the body through imagery as highly suspect, offensive and unnecessary. In *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* Michael Foucault (1963) theorizes the right to such authority and where the vested power of interest lies. Foucault coins the term 'medical gaze' to describe the dehumanizing medical separation of the patient body when caged within the intellectual structures of analysis and knowledge. As an artist and researcher working within the parallel structures I experience a similar dehumanizing effect. This accompanies the intense and prolonged scrutinization of the body necessary in the process of creating an image. In this context, close artistic examination or analysis of what may be considered a pornographic image on the internet becomes 'dehumanised' and transformed within the action of constructing a painting. As previously discussed (p106), in seeking visual knowledge the image is looked upon and processed through a series of artistic activities and skilfully rendered through a thorough knowledge of light, form and the alchemy of pigment.

I contend the Artworks that comprise my practice should not be seen as simply contributing to a history of creating titillating paintings for the entertainment of a predominantly male audience. Such a market was long since relinquished to the more expedient, profitable and instant means of photographic technology as witnessed by its evolution into the burgeoning business of internet porn. In contrast the artworks I have generated over the past two decades serve to critique explicit sexualized photographic imagery insidiously woven into the fabric of contemporary Western culture.

It is within the structure of the narrative and the composition of my imagery that one might ascertain whether a visual production simply replicates or disrupts normative attitudes and social values. At first glance the characters portrayed in *Casting the Net* replicate an endless ensemble of two-dimensional cover girls and internet avatars, predominantly sexualized females and all in the context of the beach. What begins with stereotypical, hetero-normative bodies are then punctuated with a series of transgressive bodily forms; the bi-product of surgical design, excessive steroid use, extreme fitness regimes and starvation diets. Almost without exception the subjects are within arm's reach of the lens and are all hyper-conscious of the camera. Most subjects confidently assume poses and performances relative to generic modeling moves sometimes in the form of 'selfies' many of which have been 'enhanced' through standard digital software. Across these 80 portraits the paintings articulate what I describe as 'the globalised visual lexicon of the flesh' (p 124).

As the author, director, producer and at times the subject of this performance, I believe the work is essentially about banality (as discussed on page 80 in association with Debord's (1967) theory); the replication of a 21st century phenomenon that describes an ubiquitous image overload where sexualized imagery has been normalized to the point of appearing trite and pedestrian. *Casting the Net* was produced as simulations of the originals and inspired by philosophies including Jean Baudrillard's 1981 treatise on Simulacra and Simulation. Under this theory the work invites a visual examination and the associations between reality, symbols and society. The work finds resonance also with the theory of Catherine Lutz' and Jane Collins¹²⁴ and their observation related to internet culture;

'mirror and camera are tools of self-reflection and surveillance. Each creates a double of the self, a second figure who can be examined more closely than the original - a double that can also be alienated from the self - taken away, as a photograph can be, to another place'
(Lutz & Collins 1994, 376).

124 Lutz & Collins build on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic 'the mirror stage' theory, a stage at which looking into the mirror allows the infant to see itself for the first time as other which is perceived as a significant step in ego formation.

The painted portraits that comprise *Casting the Net* relate closely to Lutz & Collins observation. As a mirror of the original or the previous simulation each image invites careful examination both of its construction and its meaning particularly un-tethered from the internet and represented in the context of a gallery space. The artwork oscillates in a subtle shift that occurs between what the audience perceives as authentic 'real' original paintings, yet as constructed simulated reflections, they also appear as fabricated fictions.

This suite of works was in part inspired and composed with similar intent as the plot of *The Truman Show*¹²⁵(1998) and attempts a painterly adaptation of the cinematic phenomenon of 'Bullet Time'¹²⁶ utilized in the making of *The Matrix* (1999); collectively each painting offers an opportunity for the audience to see through the cracks in the façade of life as we experience it on the surface, to an alternative 'reality' that lies beneath the painted surface.

Relative to the research methodology *Casting the Net* seeks to invite more questions than it does answers. Extracted from the communal space of the screen I question; do these painted portraits contain any sense of life? Have they been reinvigorated to the point where a dying spark of personality has been tenuously nurtured back to life through the energy of the artist and the alchemy of paint? Alternatively, are these simply reproductions of reproductions that sit as curiosities supported not by ideology and complexity of the culture from which they were extracted, but simply by a nail in a gallery wall devoid of all meaning and value?

The work of Roland Barthes specifically his philosophies contained in *Death of the Author*¹²⁷ offer theory that relates to how I position myself as the author of this contemporary production. In this essay Barthes promotes the idea of relinquishing authority and authorship of a text in favor of the reader's/ viewer's varied interpretation, thus exposing a much broader range of possibilities and readings for the work,

125 *The Truman Show* written by Andrew Niccol and directed by Peter Weir is a satirical social science fiction comedy-drama. The narrative of the film traces the everyday life of leading character Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) who is initially unaware he has been born into and raised within a constructed reality television show. Ultimately Truman begins to question his perceived 'reality' and embarks on mission to uncover the truth about his life.

126 'Bullet Time' is represented by a number of titles including; flow motion, adrenaline time, frozen time, dead time, time slice. This effect is created by slowing aspects of the action within the main frame of the scene that appears to progress at a normal speed. As used in *The Matrix* (1999), 'Bullet Time' is intended to inspire the viewer into an understanding that certain characters have a heightened perception and possess the ability to see through the cracks in the reality that is presented before them.

127 The essay was first published in English in the *American Journal Aspen* and later in an anthology of Barthes's essays, *Image-Music-Text* (1977).

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but as a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. (Barthes 1977,170)

This quote, taken from an anthology of Barthes' essays entitled *Image-Music-Text* (1977) exposes a clear relationship that exists between what Barthes describes as 'text' to that of 'image'. Images like text, are encoded with rich possibilities in the way they may be widely interpreted relative to the viewers' /readers' personal experiences of the world. Simply put, the reading of an artwork may be a case of 'what you see is what you get'. This may be determined by the spectator's knowledge of the history of art, their reading of symbolism and metaphor, philosophical beliefs, one's understanding of painting mediums, the processes involved in creating illusion, or their particular relationships to real-life experiences determined through memories, race, gender, demographics and context. These are but a few influencing factors that will personalize the reading of an artwork. As an artist I seek not to control or attempt to validate my own singular vision from the 'Author-God' perspective, rather I am inspired by the scope and complexity of the raft of alternative perspectives entwined in complex readings by individual viewers. In this regard there is no risk of 'misreading' the work; all views are valid. Barthes determines 'in the multiplicity of writing everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered' (1977,147). In a similar accord Susan Sontag suggests 'The function of criticism should be to show how it is, what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.' (Sontag 1964,10) Within systems dedicated to generating objective quantifiable truths, the instability of meaning within an artwork may be perceived as a failing. Yet such failings are an essential element in pursuit of new understanding and yield the potential for other unexpected possibilities. The power and subversion of *Casting the Net* may reside in it emerging as a failed attempt at imitating the status quo (Butler,1990)¹²⁸. In its failing the work may expose the subterfuge and inevitability of normative social systems.

¹²⁸Judith Butler (1990) theorises that identity is formed and maintained through repeated 'performative' acts or imitation (including sex, gender and sexuality as discussed in Act 1 pg 30). Whilst *Casting the Net* may seek to visually translate aspects of Butler's theory through repeated performative acts in paint of stylised generic bodies, such a reading may be lost to a viewer who fails to identify the subtle shifts occurring between the painted representations and the 'original' digital reference material.

Post-internet Art... Online/on the line

In light of evolving contemporary notions of authorship and spectatorship *Casting the Net* explores the communal space of the computer screen of the 21st century; a cultural practice based on simulation, misidentity, collective authorship and anonymity. The work presents voyeurism and spectatorship sustained by electronic interconnectivity as integral to the fabric of contemporary life; from reality television, to social media, personalized sites or surveillance systems, whether delivered on smart phones, computer screens or television. Inside the digital communal space generated within this work the gaze of social convention is a continuum of an open visual exchange. This is not cloaked voyeurism that sits within the private plane of a digital monitor, it is bringing to life painted representations of digitally manipulated avatars supported by the historical credibility presumed by portraiture on a gallery wall; portraits that confidently return ones gaze in a simulated/manipulated, reflection of your own.

As Marion Rankine (2014) points out, on the internet 'we are all actors and some better than others'. Online our image may move fluidly between projecting only our best professional attributes through sites such as *Seek* or *LinkedIn* whilst simultaneously laying our lives bare and exposing all our vulnerabilities to our 'friends' on Facebook. We live in a world in which it is increasingly difficult to escape one's identity yet the very net in which we are encapsulated ironically provides one of the last bastions where 'identities can be fashioned and discarded at will' (Rankine 2014). This is a space inhabited by 'real-world' identities and the invented, where it is often impossible to distinguish between the two... 'usernames stand for people but sometimes don't; meaning and accountability slip away'. (Rankine 2014.1).

It is within this new regime of mis/multiple identity on the internet that the current project could be expanded into subsequent research. Whilst the internet offers real-time interaction that is instantly available to a global audience, assuming an alternative identity or gender as an artist or writer is clearly not a new phenomenon and has many precedents. One such example is Elizabeth Durack, a white Australian woman artist who from the early 1990s painted under the persona and signature of an Aboriginal male by the fictitious name of Eddie Burrup. After disclosing her identity, under a storm of controversy Durack's previously acclaimed works were removed from the walls of the Gippsland Art Gallery in Victoria¹²⁹. What I wish to explore further and find intriguing and insightful as an artist is to observe how in this instance what is being tested is not the power and integrity of the award winning artwork, but the social expectations of the audience relative to the ethnicity and gender of the author. In our narcissistic world one may actively choose across a range of genders and opt via the internet to be both author and spectator, the viewer and the viewed simultaneously.

¹²⁹Other example includes the work of writer and lawyer Helen Dale who writes under the pseudonym of Helen Demidenko. In 1994 Dale won the Miles Franklin Award for her book *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. In 1995 a major Australian literary controversy erupted over her false claims of Ukrainian ancestry.

Complexity and ambiguity are inherent characteristics of many artworks produced for sensory perception and are particularly relevant in an increasingly hybridized global culture of ideas, imagery and knowledge sharing. As the hub of this global transaction, the internet provides the spectator with the opportunity and means to actively participate in cultural output; to contribute to and manipulate both ideas and imagery. In this sense the world appears somewhat as a work in progress. This participatory structure enabled through communications technology is one aspect that underlies both the production and reading of *'Casting the Net'*.

My continued interest in the internet is its function not simply as a tool of reference but as a social condition that has been described as 'Post Internet'. Artist, Marisa Olson is credited with first coining the term which was developed further by writer Gene McHugh in the critical blog *'Post Internet'* during its activity between December 2009 and September 2010. One of McHugh's many definitions of Post Internet Art suggests it is 'art responding to [a condition] described as 'Post Internet'—when the Internet is less a novelty and more a banality... [and] what Guthrie Loneragan described as 'Internet Aware' when the photo of the art object is more widely dispersed [&] viewed than the object itself' (McHugh 2009)¹³⁰. McHugh's analysis draws upon Baudrillard's work on *Simulation* (1983) previously discussed in pp:126-7 of this exegesis and presents for myself a raft of new possibilities to explore in a subsequent study, particularly around the new distribution channels and performativity of the internet. Such investigation would consider the process of endless image reproduction and how artwork simultaneously devalues and revalues within the context of the internet.

Contemporary post-internet artist, Oliver Laric shares an interest that relates to my own investigation; he challenges the hierarchy of an authentic or auratic 'original' image. The works included in his exhibition *Versions* (2010) can be seen as a critique of contemporary internet culture. Rather than appointing greater value to original or primary objects, Laric proposes in the age of digital production a 're-direction' for image making. Under this system copies and remixes, often sourced from bootlegged material, are seen to usurp the value of the original.

A defining factor of post-internet art is its return to the production of the art object that ultimately is displayed in a gallery and does not simply exist online. Within a gallery space, art objects and works reference an 'internet state-of-mind' (Ian Wallace 2014). Typically work within this spaces focus on the process of content creation and how it presents as inherently democratized and intangible. Within this new genre the internet is broadly explored around notions of its affect on contemporary aesthetics and culture. As 21st century painter it is indeed heartening to confirm that the walls of the gallery remain valid and deeply relevant for progressive critical discourse and supported rather than compromised by the tools of technology.

Casting the Net has offered an investigation of the littoral zone of the beach exploring the intrinsic transaction between the dynamics of landscape and culture. As I trace the prints across the foreshore of this loaded social space I have come to recognize the characteristics and significance of each micro performance. With each tide and generation new patterns emerge in the ebb and flow of pixels, paint, and sands. Confronting the patterns of our fears and desires through this compound mix may offer a window into the histories of our future.

¹³⁰ Building on McHugh's theories, Artist Artie Vierkant in his article *The Image Object Post-Internet* (2010) defines Post-Internet as; a result of the contemporary moment: inherently informed by ubiquitous authorship, the development of attention as currency, the collapse of physical space in networked culture, and the infinite reproducibility and mutability of digital materials'.

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