



It is a broad generalisation, but much writing and thinking about South African painting has focused on its iconicity, on what or who is portrayed, how, and in service of what ends. There are valid reasons underpinning the sustained critical interest in the complexities of representation in figurative painting, especially with regard to land and alterity, but the intensity of this focus has

unwittingly straitened dialogue around painting in South Africa, its complexity as a material act and fullness as a time-based event. The dominant ontological regime, particularly as it is perpetuated in lay criticism, tends to reiterate the modernist schism between figuration and abstraction. Within this regime, painting tends to be engaged as artefact or relic in need of formal exegesis and taxonomic

View of Siopis's studio at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, 2018



ordering. Signification is paramount; paintings are, in effect, representational ciphers that need to be cracked. Process, that messy, indeterminate and often contingent set of procedures out of which many paintings originate, is somehow elided, or conveniently reduced to a category: abstraction.

For much of her career, whether through her materially diverse practice as an artist or her energised pronouncements as a teacher and scholar, Penny Siopis has directed her viewers, students and readers' attention to what she in 2005 described as 'the essential, slippery shapelessness' of painting. Over the past two decades, a period characterised by the increasing formlessness of her paintings, Siopis has repeatedly spoken about the role of process in this 'carnal medium'. 'I am interested in the stuff that exceeds signification,' Siopis told me in June 2016, at the start of a sustained conversation about her paintings made using cold glue and ink. Her interest in the material excess and viscosity of process, in the thingness of painting, is

longstanding – it is recognisable in the layered abundance of her 'cake paintings' from the early 1980s – but concurs with new materialist cultural theory. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) is an important reference point, in particular Bennett's thinking around 'vital materialism' and focus on 'an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve'.

But Siopis started working on her glue-and-ink paintings before the emergence of the current theoretical interest in vital materialism. They are not simply visual proxies for new theory, far from it. Whether encountered in her studio or in a public environment, be it a gallery or museum, these paintings – marked by their vivid colouration and haptic densities of formless matter – compel and perplex. Their fundamental strangeness, especially when understood as residue of a defined yet open-ended process, makes them tantalisingly difficult to write about. How does one fix in words the becoming of a painting in a way

Siopis at work in her studio, 2016
Photos: Alexandra Karakashian

that respects its inchoate beginnings? How does one do this without offering a mechanistic description that renders process as mere technique? And, more fundamentally perhaps, how does one convey all this knowing that, as Gilles Deleuze reminds us in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981), 'painting has neither a model to represent nor a story to narrate'?

Narration, adds Deleuze in his book about dissolving certainties at the surface of a canvas, 'is the correlate of illustration'. Unlike post-figural painting, critical writing is anchored in a need 'to narrate', to illustrate, to give an account of. This essay is a set of reflections drawn from discussions with Siopis between 2016 and 2018, and offers a site-based reading of her glue-and-ink paintings. Equal parts history, report and sketch, my narrative repeatedly engages with three leitmotifs relevant to thinking about Siopis's recent paintings: location (studio), method (process) and axis (horizontality versus verticality). I quote the artist extensively, drawing from conversations held in her private studio and at the Maitland Institute, where, in 2017, Siopis hosted an open studio to expose her visceral process, in which the vibrancy of the medium is paramount, and further to use this openness as an opportunity for social engagement.

Quoting the artist as I frequently do is not simply an act of journalistic ventriloquism; it is not about ceding criticality to reported statement. Criticism, argued Harold Rosenberg in 1959, 'must begin by recognising in the painting the assumptions inherent in its mode

of creation'. Those assumptions are rarely self-evident, which is why I fall back on Siopis's words extensively. In a 2017 interview, after describing her critical modus operandi as 'always pro-artist', critic Lucy Lippard remarked: 'I was recently accused by a catalogue editor of "kowtowing" because I quoted the artist so often. I've always done that. They know more about the work than I do.' This chimes with my own experience with Siopis, whose ability to speak about her work is enlightening and invigorating, astonishing too.

Often in our conversations Siopis would pivot back to speaking about her process, to the contingent forces and flows that contribute towards the production of her glue-and-ink paintings. It was, she insisted, important to foreground this aspect of her practice, to place it at the centre of the narrative. The reason: a viewer's unawareness of the processes underpinning these works necessarily limits an appreciation of the concept of the medium's agency. She elaborated on this during a 2016 visit to her studio. A stretched white canvas was laid down horizontally on the floor, its surface dappled with formative pools of white glue and orange and red inks. Negotiating the rectangular edges of the large canvas, Siopis told me: 'The process is not just about getting a formal effect. The correlations between what I do here physically and my philosophical and political interests in agency, subject/object and figure/ground distinctions, opacity, immanence, viscosity – it all happens experientially in the work.'



The interconnectedness of practice and theory, of process and outcome too, was, she conceded, difficult to explain succinctly. Her frustration, though, was not with speaking about process – Siopis is a capable and dextrous interlocutor – but rather with how her glue-and-ink paintings are received when they enter the world, once the horizontal flows have dried and the floor paintings shift their axis to become vertical art objects. ‘As soon as they go out into the world they get a narrative imposed on them, which overlooks how the actual materials change, and what can be associated with their transformation.’ This narrative tends to shut down the works, or reduce them to a set of fixed outcomes. ‘Even if the narrative is about unpredictability and chance, people often read it only as formal effect. For me the experiential work of doing is like practical philosophy.’ I watched Siopis kneel and spray a thin mist of water onto the surface of her painting. While watching the medium move, she added: ‘The life of the work in the world interests me.’

To chronicle this life, to fully expound the biography of a glue-and-ink painting, necessarily requires thinking backwards: from the vestigial object displayed on its vertical axis, back into the artist’s studio where the stretched canvas lying on the floor is ‘not merely a cultural object’, as philosopher Jean-François Lyotard reasoned in 1993, but also ‘an excess, a rapture, a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations of its “reception” and “production”’. This process of reversal demands cycling back in time to when – and here again I borrow from Lyotard, from his book *Discourse, Figure* (1971) – the painting is a ‘becoming-object’, a material thing in a studio.

The studio is a generous – and also generative – place to provoke a conversation about ‘the stuff of painting’, its ontological qualities and its basis in ‘an autographic practice that shapes inanimate pigmented matter’, as Siopis wrote in 2005. Painting, after all, is a material practice that occurs in time and space. Site inflects method. Since

moving from Johannesburg to Cape Town in late 2010, Siopis’s workspace has been a north-facing studio on the upper floor of the Ritchie Building on the Hiddingh campus of the University of Cape Town. Here both the verb and noun forms of her chief vocation, painting, coexist; it is where the act of painting yields objects called paintings. Fractionally pictured in the artist’s 2014 monograph, *Time and Again*, this space merits an extended pause.

By its nature, Siopis’s studio is a utilitarian space where she enacts the various aspects of her career. Siopis uses her studio to paint, to edit her films, to consult students and to store and prepare the materials for her large-scale installations. Her studio also functions as a library and storeroom, and an office to attend to the administration of a professional career. Notwithstanding its adaptability, Siopis’s studio is not freely accessible to the public; its functions are not verifiable to simply anyone. It is a private space. I want to gently breach this privacy, partly in a bid to animate the quotidian aspects of her professional life and the material culture that characterises it.

Siopis’s studio on Orange Street makes no pretension to homeliness. It has no couch,



Figurines on Siopis’s studio window sill



no daybed; it also has no kitchen, just a rectangular basin with a tap to wash her hands and refill a cheap kettle. In contrast to her recent canvases, where the ooze and spill of her colours and binding agent are in competition with iconographic certainty, Siopis's studio is orderly and legible – perhaps more so when she expects visitors. Placed in front of the double studio windows is a fold-up table containing various tools of her craft: inks, differently scaled brushes, sponges and sprayers. The inks, many from English manufacturer Winsor & Newton, are mostly flagrant reds, eruptive oranges and fleshy pinks. Colour is an abundant and vital signifier for Siopis, and also an embedded presence.

Her studio is also littered with containers of Alcolin, a South African brand of cold glue originally licensed from Swiss adhesives entrepreneur and antiquities collector Marcel Ebnöther. Siopis began working with glue as a painting medium in her *Shame* paintings (2002-05), intimately scaled tonal works on paper. The visceral materiality of the glue in these figure paintings intrigued Siopis, in particular the skin-like quality it produced once set. The glue's agency in holding and directing her red inks later prompted Siopis to begin using it on canvas. *Ambush* (2008), which references Hokusai's woodblock print *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* (1814) featuring an octopus, was her first large-scale

View of Siopis's studio, 2017

work on canvas using cold glue and ink and the effects of gravity on the horizontal plane. The work was produced in her Melville studio in Johannesburg.

'I poured the glue, left it overnight and the next morning I discovered the spill had broken the boundary between the octopus and the surrounding visual field,' Siopis recalled. The dissolve thrilled her, in particular the way the porous boundaries between subject and object traduced the figure-ground relationship central to traditional conceptions of painting. In a follow-on work, *Migrants* (2008), Siopis experimented with the fluidity of her materials. 'There was no pictorial reference: forms emerged through the process; some suggested figuration, which I asserted, not through imposing depiction but through creating opportunities for material coagulations and incident,' explained Siopis. This experiential and process-based way of working enabled her to achieve greater formlessness in her subsequent compositions. To be formless is to be without a clear or definite shape or structure, but it is also, as art historians Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss make clear in *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997), an 'operation' – meaning it is neither a theme, nor a substance, nor a concept. This sense of formlessness as an operation or action is key to understanding Siopis's glue-and-ink paintings.

Siopis has an easel in her studio. It functions as a clotheshorse, though, not as a ledge on which to rest a canvas. Its ledge nonetheless bears traces of use and is splattered with dried paint resembling the colour of a mutating bruise. Evidence of the human figure abounds in Siopis's studio. I counted two reproductions of the Aphrodite of Milos, also two anatomical models of human torsos stored on top of her bookshelf. A wine rack repurposed as a shelving unit displays some of her vast collection of figurative tchotchke as well as the wood-backed rubber stamps containing idiomatic expressions that appear on her *Shame* paintings. Scattered across her studio, on bookshelves and among the things gathered in groups on her floor, are various classical, neo-classical and religious figurines.

These figures were an important component of the artist's 2017 exhibition *Restless Republic*, some incorporated as figural elements into her glue-and-ink paintings (*State and Witness IV*), while others hovered as presences, somehow proximate (*Rock*) and involved (*Witness III*) in works, yet others unmoored and undone (*Mediterranean II*).

The artist's library, only a small part of which is housed at her Orange Street studio, could be the subject of its own essay. I'll limit myself to describing a single shelf. Visible between a Franciscan monk and a brazen nude is *Histories of the Hanged*, political historian David Anderson's 2005 account



of Britain's colonial war in 1950s Kenya; political scientist Eugene Victor Wolfenstein's *Psychoanalytic-Marxism* (1993); psychoanalyst Peter Giovacchini's *Tactics and Techniques in Psychoanalytic Therapy* (1972); and Olu Oguibe's *The Culture Game* (2004). Siopis has two copies of *A Colour Atlas of Human Anatomy* by RMH McMinn and RT Hutchings, first published in 1977, a year before the release of *Life a User's Manual*, novelist Georges Perec's ambitious attempt to exhaustively describe, in acute detail, a fictitious Parisian apartment block whose inhabitants include a painter named Hutting.

A *Pinky Pinky* painting in-between anatomical models on top of Siopis's studio bookshelf

Facing page Detail of shelving in Siopis's studio with wood-backed rubber stamps used in the *Shame* paintings

It is easy to get swept up by the material circumstances of Siopis's studio, and further to associatively draw connections between her work and the things populating her studio. But for such an exercise to be meaningful, in a discursive sense at least, one would have to exhaustively catalogue all of her things. Cataloguing alone would be insufficient. The process would also require careful explication, something akin to a novelist's commitment (such as was displayed by Perec) to explore the biography of objects, in effect, to penetrate the opacity of ostensibly visible things. But I am not writing a novel here, merely using an established literary technique to describe aspects of the material culture that surround and (possibly) inform Siopis's production. This context, which allows a kind of intimacy and offers a partial insight into her professional habitat, however very quickly recedes from view when the artist lays a stretched canvas on the floor and begins pouring glue and ink onto the white substrate. Site, after all, is not process.

My first visit to the artist's Orange Street studio principally involved witnessing. Siopis allowed me to observe her 'throwing' a painting. Her choice of verb perplexed me. 'Yes, it gets thrown,' she insisted. I asked if it was legitimate to also speak of her as performing a painting. 'Yes, absolutely.' Semantics are important. Siopis's preferred verbs locate what is particular about her process, its embrace of chance and performance-based modes of practice. Siopis, however, remains a painter, her receptiveness to unpredictability bounded within an arena: the stretched canvas.

The process of starting a painting involves pouring glue and ink onto a canvas, and then encouraging their diffusion – by spraying the glue and ink with water, by dripping and directing these materials with her hands, and also by tilting the canvas. She does not meld together the ink and glue as a mixture. While there are few fixed rules governing her process, horizontality is a constant.



If I were to put this canvas up vertically and attempt a throw, the glue and ink wouldn't collect. You'd just get a movement of drips running down, which I don't want. What is much more interesting is the collection of incidents that happen because of the way the horizontal canvas dips. That is fascinating for me because it is where the medium shows its aliveness in the most visceral form and in infinite detail. It is also where it takes longest to dry.

It needs to be reiterated that these are ambulatory insights, offered as Siopis circled and breached the arena of her canvas, or lifted an edge to provoke a run. 'If I didn't work on stretched canvas it would signify differently,' she conceded at one point. 'The constraints set the conditions. The stretchers allow opportunity for gravity to act because they lift the canvas off the floor, whereas if it were flat on the floor it wouldn't have that potential. The gravitational pools are what give the image – literally – a pull.' Much of what Siopis offered was spontaneously reasoned, which accounted for why her statements sometimes possessed an aphoristic quality. 'It is not just my hand painting,' she mused at one point while working. And later on, 'The process makes the form.'

Studio shelf with Venus

Facing page Detail from the artist's library

Even if there are now familiar routines and constants, like the particular ‘language of the body’ involved as Siopis bends and crouches at the edge, or leans (and sometimes tumbles) into the centre, the process remains grounded in chance. Her engagement with a given canvas is still principally directed by the reaction of the ink and glue. Initially cold when she pours it, the glue warms, acquiring a hot-blooded character. For Siopis, acknowledging and recognising the ‘aliveness’ of her medium also infers an awareness of the contingency of the process. ‘Of course, I am setting the conditions all the time,’ Siopis admitted. ‘Chance might be partly directed but the materials are co-creators. There are a whole lot of things that you can’t tell will happen. Stuff always reacts differently. I see each instance as an encounter full of surprises. Every encounter has its own dynamics.’ Jane Bennett describes this as ‘the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle’.

After pouring, Siopis lets the glue and ink react and gel, and then she waits for the white glue to cure. Waiting is a subtle but pronounced part of Siopis’s painting process.

Colours will change as the glue becomes transparent. Working in this way means that legibility is forestalled rather than known. ‘It is a strangely delayed process, even though the performance [of painting] is so immediate,’ elaborated Siopis on the material’s shift from opacity and transparency. ‘The actual realisation of what has happened in the transformation is delayed, and mysterious. Even if I think I know how certain pigments will react with the glue, nothing is certain, it all depends – it is so contingent.’ This is another reason Siopis refers to her material as being alive and responsive, not just something to be directed. ‘One usually thinks of a medium as something you master, force to submit to your will through imposing your “master” marks and brushwork. Here there is no brush that shapes the medium, like traditional painting.’

It is possible, I suppose, to view Siopis’s glue-and-ink paintings as time-based experiments in formlessness, but – and here I lightly borrow from the charged political theory of Alain Badiou – it is more productive to think of each painting as an ‘event site’ where radical contingency is modulated by painterly intention. Throws are



Siopis at work at the Maitland Institute, 2017

diligently inspected. Risk and intention – those markers of ‘the dialectical tension of a genuine act’ that Harold Rosenberg observed in his euphoric criticism of American action painting – overlap. Opportunities to develop a painting, Siopis explained, are actively sought out:

When something suggests itself in a work and I want to strengthen the suggestion, I will have to do another throw, and spill and run around that area. I might also rub and pull away the set glue to allow for some sense of frail figuration to emerge. The figuration is never imposed; it always comes through the process.

In past interviews Siopis has appreciatively, albeit not without argument, spoken of her interest in Georges Bataille, notably his idea of *l'informe* (the formless). ‘Bataille’s *informe* is an operation, neither theory nor product, and in this I see something of my process,’ Siopis stated in 2009 in an interview with Sarah Nuttall. Her painting practice is in many ways an extended conversation with formlessness, its necessity, but also its inoperability as an end goal.

Pinky Pinky (2002-07), a precursor series to her current paintings that is named for an imaginary sexual predator mentioned in interviews the artist did with schoolchildren, was an important bridge to her current formless figuration. The work materialises an urban legend that was shaped and informed by radical social change in post-apartheid South Africa. In 2014 Siopis described these macabre ciphers as constructed entities ‘onto which we can project psychic states of fear and moral panics’. What is most striking about *Pinky Pinky*, and makes it a useful companion series to consider in relation to the artist’s current ink-and-glue paintings, is the way Siopis has long eroded distinctions between figure and ground as an important destabilising element. The outcome is a generative tension: between material circumstance and projective inference, between formlessness and what the encounter thereof might provoke in the viewer.

During our 2016 conversation, which developed in tandem with a painting dominated by a mutant Rorschach inkblot with a muddy



orange pool at the centre, I asked Siopis if her process had disrupted how she now thought about her colours. ‘It has, in a way but in other ways asserted them more.’ The evolving labour pulled Siopis back into the canvas. The viscous quality of her materials causes them to ooze, leak, puddle and coagulate in unspecified ways. ‘I don’t like it when it runs like this,’ she said. ‘It means there is not enough glue, not enough body.’ This unruly process required intervention. Shortly, Siopis returned to my question about colour.

Colour is not something you contain or control. It can’t be pinned down in language. You say orange; I say what kind of orange? Maybe red? Colour is sensation. You’re touched by it. It’s not reducible to anything else.

She invoked Deleuze on Bacon, as a processed reference that one either got, or didn’t:

The sense of sensation interests me, but it is impossible to speak about. What do you do? You either sense it, or you don’t sense it. Maybe that is why I also fancy the significance of the canvas, because painting is the one frame that sees colour – sensation – as within its bounds and at its core.

Pinky Pinky paintings and *Cake Box* sculptures in a corner of Siopis’s studio, 2018



In April 2017, Siopis began a four-month residency at the Maitland Institute, a former meat-storage warehouse on Cape Town's Voortrekker Road repurposed into a non-commercial art space by collector Tammi Glick and dedicated to the promotion of 'art and ideas'. Rather than isolate herself in this temporary workspace, Siopis used the residency to engage a willing public in her process of painting on a horizontal canvas with cold glue and inks. For the duration of the residency, which she titled *Open Form/ Open Studio*, an interested and diverse group of visitors interacted with Siopis, through conversation, observation and, occasionally, direct participation in her process.

A month before her residency, I visited Siopis at her Orange Street studio where she told me:

I am hoping something will shift because of the scale and the context, and because I *do* want to engage with an audience. It is another way of breaking open or un-containing the work. It has always been weird for me being so engaged with process, even through bounded forms, and yet having this engagement not seen as integral to the work. They are not pictures; they are objects that hold experience that continues endlessly.

Siopis, aided by studio assistants Jo Voysey and Alexandra Karakashian, with members of the public during the *Open Form/Open Studio* residency, 2017

Facing page Siopis with students and schoolchildren during *Open Form/Open Studio*, 2017
Photos: Alexandra Karakashian

The experience Siopis speaks of occurs within the frame of her canvas, not the larger studio. To this end Siopis did not attempt to recreate her Orange Street studio in Maitland. Siopis was purposefully avoiding theatricality, which an object-based mise en scène would have invited. Siopis was not interested in the simulacrum of a milieu. Instead, she laboured in an impersonal space with undecorated white walls, large windows and tall ceiling. But for her tools (inks, glues, buckets, sponges, sprayers, blank canvases), her studio included no diverting objects and minutiae. For four months Siopis functionally inhabited a frugal verb-space where visitors could experience the aliveness of her medium and her process, and engage in the wider social and philosophical questions informing her process.

Conversation was an important aspect of the residency. 'My way of working with cold glue and ink has involved me in a very open engagement with materiality,' Siopis told a large audience gathered inside her temporary studio one Saturday afternoon. The first of three critical talks, this particular conversation, in which I was a participant, was framed around ideas of materiality and performance, chance and contingency.

I was always very aware in the process of making, whether it is behind closed doors at my Michaelis studio, or here, that the medium is more than something to use to depict something. The medium is something in and of itself: the medium performs. It actually asks not to have a will imposed on it, but rather to work in relation with me.

Freely bearing witness like this raises questions around public engagement and spectatorship. As a seasoned lecturer Siopis is familiar with discussing and demonstrating the essentials of painting as a practice to university students. However, up until her Maitland Institute residency she had never held an open studio showing her glue-and-ink painting process. In my very first conversation with Siopis in 2016, speaking about performance and contingency in her practice, Siopis expressed hesitancy about showcasing her process, 'because that's a spectacle'. The programming of her Maitland Institute residency was designed to limit this slide into theatricality, in particular by foregrounding her process and the essential 'vulnerability and doubt' that underpin it.



Siopis repeatedly spoke about how doubt and uncertainty are implicated in her work. Seated in her studio a month before the residency, she linked it to her 'fundamental interest in radical unsettlement'. She said opening up her studio process was a natural extension of this interest:

What does it mean to open up your physical and mental space? Of course, people always have boundaries of one sort or another. Setting the conditions as I have shows this in an obvious way within a boundedness, but I am really interested in how *Open Form/Open Studio* relates to our moment in South Africa, and also the world with its conflicts and bounded terrains. Metaphorically, what does it mean to break down your own boundaries, your own mystique of being an artist? And it is not just about me wanting to break the boundary in a performative sense. I want to breach boundaries to do with a larger set of thoughts around contemporary culture.

She returned to these ideas in our public talk at the Maitland Institute, which in a rare accession

to theatricality featured a triptych of large-scale residency works latterly titled *Transfigure I* (2017) propped up vertically behind us. 'Being an uncertain human being, not knowing what you are doing, vulnerable, open: that is not expected of an artist.' Uncertainty, offered Siopis, was not just an idea but an operation, something encoded in her self, her body and her work. Siopis was remarkably candid as she spoke. 'Vulnerability, for me, is an exposure of the self, and a sense of the self as skinless. I am interested in the poetics of vulnerability, a form emerging and spilling out of the subject, and that being an opportunity to think about the surface, about the spill and mess. To think openness means to be open.'

This grappling with unknowns, manifest in particular with the alterity of her materials as they seep, break boundaries and eventually settle, was rich with metaphor – not simply a matter of procedural quirks. 'You don't know what it is, so you constantly work with something you don't know. That "something" then becomes a model for thinking about the uncertainties in the larger world with which we are implicated and engaged, and questions of power.'



Siopis in conversation with Sean O'Toole at the Maitland Institute, 2017

As part of her spirited talk at the Maitland Institute Siopis projected a selection of photos and videos of Jackson Pollock, Yves Klein, Ana Mendieta and Carolee Schneemann – avatars of the performative turn in mid-20th-century western painting – at work. Writing about the legacy of Pollock, Allan Kaprow in 1958 remarked:

In the last 75 years the random play of the hand upon the canvas or paper has become increasingly important. Strokes, smears, lines, dots, etc became less and less attached to represented objects and existed more and more on their own, self-sufficiency ... With Pollock, however, the so-called dance of dripping, slashing, squeezing, daubing, and whatever else went into a work, placed an almost absolute value upon a kind of diaristic gesture.

We briefly and inconclusively deliberated on what Kaprow meant by ‘diaristic gesture’ during our talk. Perhaps he viewed the aggregated notational marks left on a Pollock canvas as accumulations of experience. It is possible to view Siopis’s paintings as diaristic in this sense, but such a reading wilfully ignores the agency of her materials and reduces every painting to narrative artefact. It also assumes the marks have been made by hand, however mediated. Siopis prefers to speak of her paintings as ‘residue’, a semantic gesture that nonetheless foregrounds their origin and primacy in process and experience.

Pollock is a difficult precedent in all of this. He is an irrefutable ancestor to Siopis’s method of painting, but he is also a cliché entombed in amber by Hans Namuth, who in 1950 photographed Pollock dripping paint onto a horizontal canvas in his East Hampton studio. Namuth’s photographs have come to represent what Siopis has described as representing the ‘performative machismo’ of Pollock’s defining gesture as a painter. Best to move on. Schneemann is a far more useful foil for thinking through Siopis’s work. Like Siopis, who studied at a traditional art school anchored in an expressive tradition,

Schneemann was trained as an easel painter. Her early paintings were plein-airist landscapes in the mode of Cézanne.

In the 1960s Schneemann began exploring three dimensions with collage, objects and motorised elements. ‘This was the obvious implication of abstract expressionism,’ wrote Schneemann in 1999. ‘The work of Pollock, de Kooning, could only be viewed with optical muscularity – the entire body was active.’ Her subsequent performances were all grounded in painterly concerns. First performed under the title *Trackings* in late 1973, Schneemann executed *Up To and Including Her Limits* on several occasions between 1974 and 1976, in London, New York and Basel, in conditions that – similar to Siopis at the Maitland Institute – approximated a residency rather than a time-based performance. The work marked a shift for Schneemann from choreographed performances towards durational events.

Allan Tannenbaum’s 1974 photographs of a naked Schneemann, suspended by a rope and harness at The Kitchen, New York, producing random marks in crayon on horizontal and vertical sheets of paper, are the most widely circulated documentation of *Up To and Including Her Limits*. Schneemann has described the work as the ‘direct result of Pollock’s physicalized painting process ... My entire body becomes the agency of visual traces, vestige of the body’s energy in motion.’ Siopis’s painterly concerns are not as narrowly tied to the legacy of abstract expressionism, much of her painterly practice an exploration of the complementary relationship between figure and non-figure, and the role of material expression in negotiating the porous boundary between the two. But Siopis shares with Schneemann an abiding preoccupation with body politics. The rupture of containment, in all possible senses, proposed by Siopis’s ambulating, crouching, crawling and once briefly floating body as she paints is an expression of a performative provocation that her materials invite.

The passage of *Transfigure I* – and five other studio experiments, a diptych and another triptych, titled *Transfigure II* and *III* – produced during the artist’s Maitland Institute residency

into named objects for vertical display at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in September 2017 touches on a longstanding argument around the reading of performance-based painting. When does an accumulation of materials become an image? What role does verticality play in prompting legibility? What are the consolations of legibility? Is a figure, however malformed and abject, somehow more reassuring than – in Siopis’s work – a settled liquid haze of ink and glue? At what point as a viewer do we cede ourselves, wholly and completely, to the illegible and inscrutable image, not in exhaustion but delight? Is this ever possible? The unavoidable movement of art objects out of an artist’s studio into consecrated spaces devoted to the viewing of art necessarily complicates the answer.

The art-interested poet Charles Bernstein in 2013 characterised abstraction as ‘visual marks unmoored from utility or representation’; he further described abstraction as a ‘recurring impulse in the history of inscription whether we frame it as the unconscious or primitive’. Inscription is an appropriate word when engaging the formless. Among other things, it invokes a far earlier and wholly indigenous tradition of mark-making, one that diverted Walter Battiss as a young man. For much of his early career Battiss devoted himself to the passionate study of rock engravings (or petroglyphs) and rock paintings, two distinctive art forms linked to South Africa’s first people. Petroglyphs are far older and encompass both figurative and non-figurative subjects. They are widely distributed across southern Africa’s inland plateau.

Writing in 1948, around the time Pollock recognised that the axis of the made image had shifted, Battiss noted: ‘We are so accustomed to seeing art on vertical walls that we have never had to consider an art seen below us on the ground or on surfaces at many angles except the vertical.’ The vertical, as Battiss reminds us here, is both axis and visual ideology. It is only latterly that his insight, which is self-evident, has been elucidated, and chiefly in relation to the western tradition of canvas painting that Siopis operates within.

The Renaissance picture plane, noted Leon Steinberg in his influential essay ‘The Flatbed Picture Plane’ (1972), ‘affirms verticality as its essential condition’. This mode endured through countless stylistic movements, and even encompassed Pollock, who in Steinberg’s words relied on the vertical axis to ‘get acquainted’ with his work, ‘to see where it wanted to go’. Steinberg thought Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Dubuffet – not Pollock – broke the hegemony of verticality by proposing a ‘radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes’. I would include Siopis in this tradition, her glue-and-ink paintings expressions of what Steinberg neatly referred to as a ‘special mode of imaginative confrontation’. That her works are displayed vertically does not negate their origin in a horizontal process. Horizontality remains the founding epistemology of Siopis’s glue-and-ink paintings.

Steinberg’s arguments were taken up and also challenged by Rosalind Krauss. Notwithstanding Marcel Duchamp’s experiments with horizontal techniques of making – for example, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23) was partly produced by laying a sheet of glass in the studio to gather dust – Krauss proposes Pollock as the éminence grise of horizontality. Pollock’s sustained method of using the base level of the floor decisively subverted the vertical axis of ‘the easel, of the studio, or



Carolee Schneemann photographed by Allan Tannenbaum at The Kitchen, New York, 1974



the wall of the bourgeois apartment, or high-cultural ideals of the museum', writes Krauss in her entry on horizontality in *Formless: A User's Guide*. Inspired by Steinberg, but also committed to refuting some of his assertions, Krauss notes:

The power of Pollock's mark as index meant that it continued to bear witness to the horizontal's resistance to the vertical and that it was the material condition of this testimony – the oily, scabby, shiny, ropey qualities of the self-evidently horizontal mark – that would pit itself against the visual formation of the Gestalt, thus securing the condition of the work as formless. It makes no difference that the

most prestigious reception of Pollock's work in the years succeeding his death would read past this mark, repressing its implications by a series of complicated recodings that turned the metallic paint into transcendental fields and the ropey networks into hovering, luminous clouds, thereby, attempting to resublimiate the mark, to lift it into the field of form.

It is a persuasive statement, and useful too. Substitute Pollock's name with Siopis, change a few descriptive details (oozing for ropey, gooey for oily), and the passage reads as an eloquent rationalisation of Siopis's process and her long-standing interest in the fluid boundaries between form and formlessness.

Siopis at the Maitland Institute, 2017

One afternoon, I visited Siopis's exhibition *Restless Republic* at Stevenson. Along with the presentation of some of her Maitland residency works at Zeitz MOCAA this exhibition now reads as a coda to a distinctive way of working, as the artist contemplates making shifts in her practice. Materials and ideas I had seen experimented with at Maitland Institute and Orange Street were held in suspension in variously scaled canvases mounted vertically in Stevenson's central gallery. The exhibition exuded colour, notably wounded and eruptive concentrations of orange and red, although I gravitated towards the stillness of her blues, first to *Mediterranean I* (2017), two rectangular canvases evoking arctic cavities, and then to an installation of 14 circular canvases, *Mediterranean II*, the bubbling forms suggestive of fatal passages across the titular body of water.

Perhaps my reading, which was more a kind of imaginative drift prompted by Siopis's formless paintings, was influenced by the broken figures from her studio incorporated into the installation. 'Older gestalts join the fray in my mind's eye – Plato's Republic, clashing orders in the French Revolution, Hobbes' Leviathan,' wrote Siopis in an accompanying text. 'Physical objects fall in and out of the painted world.' While an emphatic presence within her exhibition display, the classical bodies had a tenuous agency; they were refugees from an older history whose assertions and certainties are being re-negotiated, in South Africa and elsewhere.

The figure is a recurring constant in Siopis's work, sometimes explicitly portrayed but as often inferred. *Gravity's Wave* (2016), exhibited as part of *Restless Republic*, includes three strategically placed black dots in a figurative coalescence of green and blue inks. The intervention, slight as it is, helps suggest a becoming subject. *Restless Republic* (2016), for which the show was named, is a liquid exuberance of balloon reds and sullied pinks. Just left of the centre of the canvas, where the glue and ink welled and dried, forming a distinctive epidermis, I saw a semblance of a veiled figure. 'Vertical viewing has a distancing

effect that opens perception for outside eyes,' wrote Siopis. But, she also noted, 'Everyone sees according to her own template, yet nothing is settled within the bounds of the picture, or in relation to other pictures or objects in its orbit.'

Siopis's writings have long served as a reference point for me. In her 2005 essay on contemporary South African painting, written for *Art South Africa*, which I edited at the time, she wrote: 'Many artists choosing painting today do so because painting offers the potential for exploring experiences not easily accessed through other media.' Looking at her blue canvases, their formative unpredictability nominally stilled, I thought about edges and borderless flows, about intention and risk, about doing and its material trace, about the difference between an obstacle and a refusal, about the affective potential of painting in relation to the descriptive capacities of words – lots of undisciplined thoughts that somehow cohered into an ecstatic experience of painting.

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Installation view of Siopis's *Restless Republic* exhibition with *Mediterranean II* in foreground, 2017

Overleaf View of Siopis's studio with works from *Restless Republic*, 2017