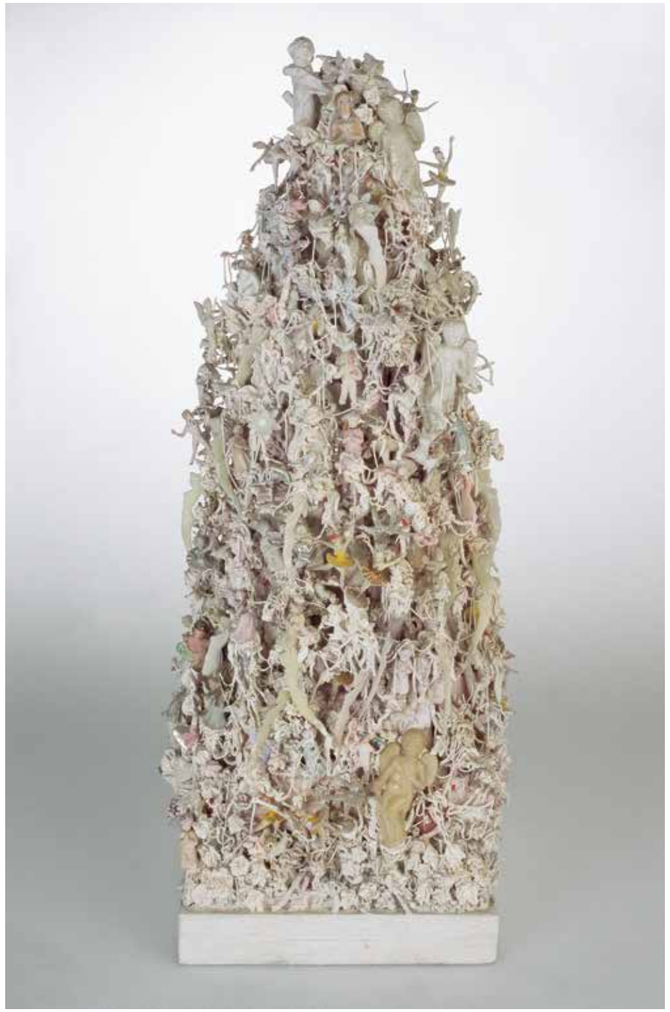


Commentary
2

Historical Delicacies[1]
— Jennifer Law

A great empire, like a great cake, is most easily diminished at the edges.
— Benjamin Franklin, 11 September 1773

Of Cake and Empire

In 'Rules by Which a Great Empire May be Reduced to a Small One', Benjamin Franklin sardonically likens the British Empire to a great cake, about to crumble at the edges. Written in 1773 and based on American grievances against British rule, Franklin's essay takes the form of a satirical letter to 'all Ministers who have the Management of Extensive Dominions', advising them on how best to go about losing an empire.[2] Advocating unbridled tyranny, the letter is effectively a recipe for rebellion. The American Revolution was not the only social uprising in which cake was linked to an over-indulgent sovereign power. Around the same time, on the cusp of the French Revolution, Jean Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions* (published in 1782) recalled the words of 'a great princess', who upon learning that the peasants were starving and without bread, declared, '*Qu'ils mangent de la brioche*.' Although these words, commonly translated as 'let them eat cake', are often attributed to Marie Antoinette, there is little evidence that the Queen ever uttered them. She was, in fact, still a child when Rousseau's *Confessions* were being written, and she is never explicitly named. Nevertheless, she lost her head along with the King, and in subsequent histories the comment became synonymous with corrupt sovereign rule and the decadent excesses of an out-of-touch ruling class.

In the early 1980s, at the height of the liberation struggle in South Africa, Penny Siopis served up a decadent suite of elaborately painted cakes. Temptingly seductive, the thickly painted confections threaten to topple from

Column Cake
1982
Oil paint and found objects on wooden base
63.5 x 22.5 x 22.5cm

tables propped up in unnatural perspective, tipped as if to lure us further. The cakes seem about to slide from their painted surfaces into our ravenous mouths. Since classical times, cakes have been the treats of choice at ceremonial or milestone events, particularly birthdays, weddings, special anniversaries and religious holidays. Cakes are the sweet stuff of wishes and hopeful expectation for the future; delectable reminders of familial celebration and ritual, they transport us back to childhood and the innocence of youthful desire. This is especially true for Siopis. When she was growing up in Vryburg in the Northern Cape, her family owned a small bakery, which was attached to their home. This bakery was an integral part of the artist's early childhood, serving as the backdrop to some of her most powerful primal memories, both comforting and traumatic. Certainly, the cake paintings seem alluring and foreboding all at once.

Siopis's painted *soetgoed* awaken a childlike appetite lacking in self-control, even as they forewarn those with sweet-toothed cravings of the inevitable consequences of gluttony. Over-indulge and they will make you sick. There are birthday cakes, queen cakes, pies filled with fruit and cream, eclairs, truffles, cream-horn pastries, profiteroles, plum creams, and in the round, a spectacular, towering column cake oozing painted icing and cake toppings. They have been expertly decorated using the tools of a baker: piping bags tipped with icing nozzles for squeezing out delicate rosebud dollops of fleshy, cream-coloured paint. Heavy with embellishment, the cakes threaten to cave in under the weight of their own beautiful opulence. Their baroquely adorned surfaces show no restraint – there are too many precariously balanced plastic ballerinas and candied cupids fighting for prime position, too many candles threatening combustion. These delicacies reek of the uncanny, straddling the line between the familiar and the strange, between cake and flesh, the festive and the macabre. Like all of Siopis's objects, they are not quite what they seem. Their soft centres hide shameful secrets.

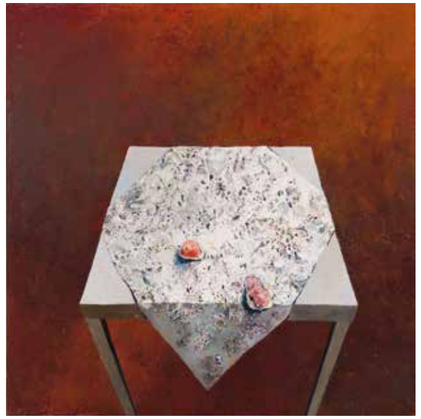
Provocatively displayed, Siopis's fetish-like treats bemoan the loss of youthful feminine innocence. Cakes are split open like vaginas, cherry-topped eclairs and queen cakes resemble disembodied breasts, and a cream-horn pastry becomes a phallus. In *Birthday Cake* (1982), the tapers appear to be stabbed into cakey flesh, like arrows into the body of a martyr. In the blink of an eye, the tables turn to 'sacrificial altars'.[3] Familiar goodies morph into plump, pink-white skins on autopsy slabs, small blushing corpses spilling their blood-curdled insides. These cadaverous desserts are served on lace doilies by deceptively polite company. Siopis's cakes offer a carefully crafted and plated critique of the white South African middle class at a time when many chose to hide behind privilege and tradition, turning a blind eye to the corpses piling up around them. The artist serves up a lavish feast of domestic bliss, poisoned from the inside by a history of state tyranny and violent transgression. Siopis's paintings are a reminder of the old adage that you cannot have your cake and eat it too.

Petit Genre

Siopis shrewdly chooses to present her sugar-coated warnings in the style of *petit genre* paintings, which traditionally depict scenes of domestic life viewed through the lens of the material object world. She thus positions her work within a long historical tradition of still life painting, specifically associated with the Dutch Golden Age and Flemish Baroque schools, in a visual language pointedly aimed at the privileged middle and upper classes schooled in Western conventions. Here, abundance and the accumulation of material capital are linked to a cipher of social morality. Seemingly innocuous objects lifted from the everyday realm are thus never neutral. As Norman Bryson writes, in *Looking at the Overlooked* (1990):

> In Dutch still life affluence is rarely presented through a neutral inventory of goods, but is coded through discourses that impose on abundance their own principles of intelligibility and control, and ensure that 'affluence' remains in the orbit of 'luxury' in its older sense. What controls the cornucopia is in the first place the idea that ethics and economics are inseparable … In the 'still life of disorder', affluence is presented as a dilemma, a crossroads between harmony and disharmony … [T]he regulation of the home is bound up with the moral fate of individuals (and of the society as a whole): what disturbs the peace is consumption let loose and on the rampage, what restores the peace are the values of production and vigilance, not least as embodied in the painting.[4]

Table Two
1983
Oil on canvas
152 x 152cm



Siopis's genre paintings are not innocent, and they are certainly not still. The surfaces of her paintings seem to be crawling with life. The artist scratches writhing, scar-like lines into the paint so that the surface itself appears to be moving. The paint is so thick in places, it casts shadows. Abundance is signified in both the imagery and the materiality of the paint itself. It is all too much. Yet for all their abundance, these are scenes in which the middle-class domestic realm – and by extension society at large – teeters on the edge of decay. Thus does still life shift towards the deeper themes of *vanitas*. If the table is the primary setting at which the domestic scene is staged, then food is perhaps the ultimate symbol linking this *mise-en-scène* to the body through the senses, by which the world is literally consumed. Still life is often centred on the domestic table and food, but in the *vanitas* tradition, such perishables are depicted at the delicate tipping point between life and death. Thus, a scene of comfort and hospitality can suddenly appear ominous and alienating. A spectre haunts the artist's table. Indeed, in a country in which Marxist socialism was the lingua franca of revolution, Marx's words ring out: 'all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned'.[5] Here, the artist displays an incendiary political manifesto in the guise of a deceptively docile still-life painting. The message is laid out on the table.

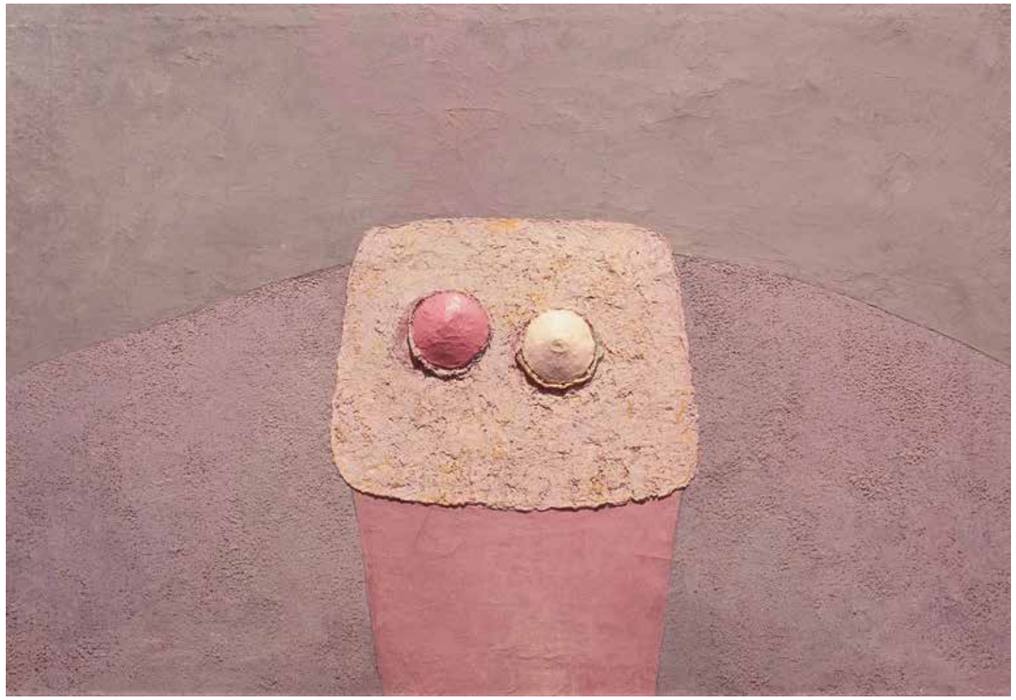
Grand Gestures

Eventually, Siopis began to expand the intimate setting of the feminine domestic realm into much grander banquet-hall settings. In *Still Life with Watermelon and Other Things* (1985), the expansive table in the foreground extends beyond the edges of the frame as if it cannot be contained, invitingly laid out with flowers, fruit, cakes and sweet pastries. Two smaller tables behind are also topped with delicacies. This is a feast large enough to feed a party of revellers, or an army. But there are no merrymakers in this scene, and it remains unclear whether the festivities are about to begin or have already ended. The furniture in the background is shrouded in white sheeting and the deep interior of the room is darkened. Though the setting is grander than in the cake paintings, the menacing symbolism of *vanitas* is still present.

Similarly, in *Melancholia* (1986), Siopis lays out a sumptuous banquet, but this room is even grander with its heavy draperies and panelled walls and ceiling. Alongside the feast, examples of hedonistic statuary from classical antiquity and other markers of European high culture mingle with flora and fauna from the 'natural world', specifically grounding the scene in

p57
p58

Queen Cakes
1982
Oil on canvas
90 x 130cm



Africa (fynbos flowers, porcupine quills, cowrie shells, an empty tortoise shell, a monkey). In this, the artist positions her ancestral lineage between Europe (Greece in particular), where both sides of her family trace their roots, and Africa, where she was born and lives. Here, where two worlds meet, a party is waiting. As Julia Kristeva writes, the point of contact or meeting, 'a crossroad of two othernesses', often calls for a celebration or feast, for 'the banquet of hospitality is the foreigners' utopia – the cosmopolitanism of a moment, the brotherhood of guests who soothe and forget their differences, the banquet is outside of time'.[6] In Siopis's banquet, exotic foods and luxurious edibles threaten to spill over the edges of the tables and platters, while classical icons aspire to elevate the setting culturally. These are the references to a so-called Golden Age, past eras of heroic civilization and the triumph of culture over nature. But here Siopis presents them as Benjaminian ruin. The banquet as utopia is revealed as a grand theatrical illusion.

Melancholia is a vision of colonialism in decline. While this is a scene of *vanitas*, it is also a history painting of sorts. In this, *Melancholia* marks an important transition for Siopis, as she shifts from *petit genre* to the *grand genre* style of painting. Art historically, genre paintings were hierarchically categorized: the *petit genres*, particularly still-life arrangements (associated with the feminine and the domestic realm) were at the bottom of the ladder, while the *grand genre* of history paintings (with their overt references to masculine conquest) was at the top. Rooted in allegory and traditionally depicting triumphant scenes of religious, mythologized or secular history, history paintings were widely accepted as the highest and noblest form of Western art, requiring the greatest mastery of painterly skill.

Melancholia is emblematic of work produced by Siopis during the mid- to late 1980s which set out to reveal the caveats of history and the artifices of a faltering regime. The spoils of Empire, objects of myth and monument, are thickly painted into increasingly claustrophobic spaces – tables threatening to collapse under the burden of luxury, mountains of affluence blotting out the horizon. The protagonist of these works emerges as the personification of psychic disorder. This image of a nation terrorized from within parallels a subject that envisions itself as diseased. It is a self that longs to be whole and yet remains irreconcilably incomplete, and seeks to fill its sense of lack with gross accumulation: a desperate act of acquisition mimicking the scramble to collect territories and possess a continent.

The works produced during this period – *Melancholia* (1986), *Patience on a Monument: 'A History Painting'* (1988), *Piling Wreckage Upon Wreckage* (1989), *Exhibit: Ex Africa* (1990), *Terra Incognita* (1991) – are built, both literally and figuratively, upon the debris of history. In *Patience on a Monument*, an African woman is perched atop a mountain of cultural debris, idly peeling a lemon. Scenes of colonial wars and European settlement photocopied from school history books are collaged onto the surface of the canvas and painted over, stretching out infinitely around her, indelibly embedded in the landscape. This is the swag of history and she – Patience personified – waits indefinitely to reclaim it, as the plunder continues around her.

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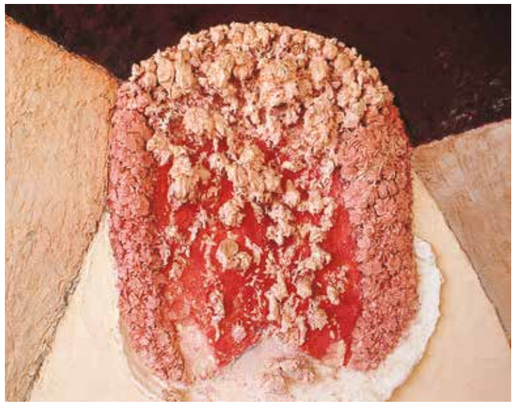
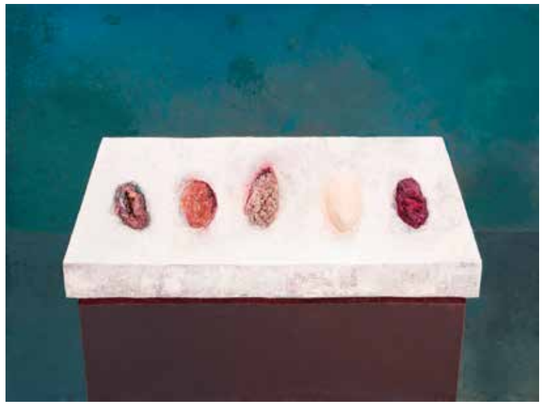
Queen Cakes Cast
1997
Bronze
37 x 45cm

Left
Plum (detail)
1982
Oil on canvas
149.5 x 201.5cm

Right
Slab
1982
Oil on canvas
100 x 220cm





In *Piling Wreckage Upon Wreckage*, a distant figure, perhaps Walter Benjamin's Angelus Novus, pulls back a white veil from a monumental pile of objects, priceless heirlooms scattered alongside domestic commodities, *objets d'art* reduced to kitsch. The shift from treasure to debris is almost imperceptible. Andreas Huyssen writes that 'objects that have lasted through the ages are by that very virtue located outside of the destructive circulation of commodities destined for the garbage heap'.[7] But not even their aura can prevent these treasures from succumbing to obsolescence. Gilded frames, silver candelabra, marble cornices, fragments of classical statuary are piled up like refuse. The monumental is exposed as ephemeral. The pile of debris represents that which longs to be whole and seeks to be renewed. But the artist retrieves these things not with the intention to recover them intact, but rather to exploit their partiality, to interrogate them as fragments, to transform them in the present, and thus exorcize the trauma that keeps them obligated to history. The resurrection of these things represents a political awakening. Benjamin writes: 'Every smallest act of political reflection marks a new epic in the antique trade. We are constructing here an alarm clock that calls the kitsch of the previous century "to collect *en masse*."'[8]

The senses here are expanded to include something often taken for granted – a sense of home, the security of knowing where one belongs and how one is defined in relation to a group, a culture, a nation. History, as official rationalizing narrative, remains an empty affiliation, an attachment maintained

tentatively through inheritance. There is a self-reflexive cynicism in this work and a critique of a deteriorating, paranoid and deeply flawed society. The past and present are fully in evidence in the picture, but the future hesitates at the edges, lurking in slow and uncertain anticipation.

Exquisite Corpse

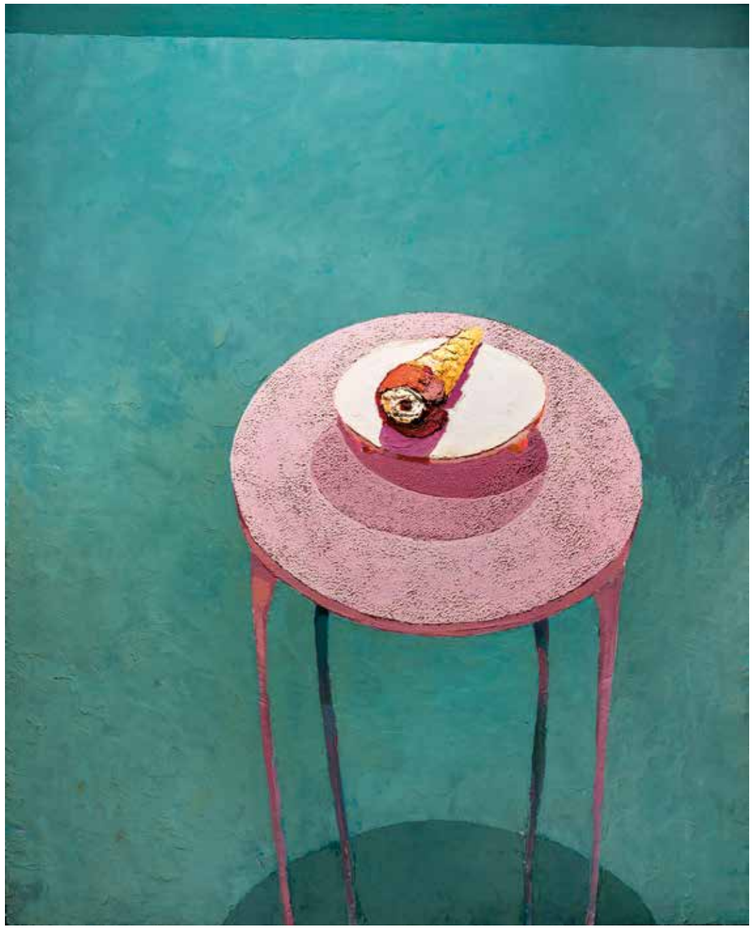
From the history paintings, photomontages and collages of the late 1980s and 90s to her more recent object-based installations, Siopis represents history itself as exquisite corpse. The primal image of the pile recurs throughout her work: for over three decades, the fragmented bodies, heirlooms, kitsch, object-ruins have continued to amass. These are fetishes of personal and collective memory, ever returning to and layering over an originary moment of trauma embedded deep in the Freudian unconscious, as if the rupture had always been there, under the surface, waiting to emerge. Here, the exquisite corpse looms as embodied catastrophe – an internalized point of both negation and compulsive return. The artist explained that she wished to produce work

> emblematic of the catastrophe that is our history. The idea of trauma is fundamental to this emblem. Trauma might be explained as a psychic state of loss a child must experience to become a subject. It is a state that is periodically involuntarily revisited during significant moments in the subject's life. The concept of trauma is also used as a metaphor for a community's psychic experience of radical social change marked by extreme pain and loss, guilt, grief and the like. I am interested in trying to evoke this image of trauma – or wound as it is understood in its original context – in a material amalgam suggesting both individual and collective experience.[9]

Siopis is interested in recovering a genealogy of origins, seeking out the first, and deepest, wound. For the artist, this nascent moment requires both a return to puerile innocence and the instant of its irredeemable passing. In the moment of trauma, the eye shifts unsteadily from the wound and settles on the surrounds, displacing the centre to the periphery. Such a displacement of the wound onto the domestic realm is not an uncommon strategy of remembrance amongst women – what Freud might have associated with hysterical symbolism. In her reflections around the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings held in 1996, for example, Fiona Ross examines the ways in which women, in speaking of violation, often centred their focus not on the broken bodies of their husbands, sons and brothers – the wounded body – but on the violation of the surrounding domestic realm.[10] In such tellings, the transgression of the body is illustrated through the violation of the everyday: the walls of the home are scaled, the gate torn from its hinges, the flower beds trampled, the curtains ripped and bespattered with blood. Detail is embedded in the mundane, and events chronicle the ordinary as it turns extraordinary. The moment of violation – the wound – is located through the disruption of the trajectory of the everyday. That which is normally taken for granted suddenly acquires exaggerated meaning in remembrance.

The piles of material debris that form the foundations of Siopis's practice are rooted in loss. The artist recalls an incident in Amsterdam, where she lived for a while. One day, in the street near her flat, she saw a pile of objects cast out from someone's home, perhaps a person who had died or had gone away and not come back; a lifetime of accumulation – furniture, clothing, knick-knacks, family photographs – abandoned in the open, thrown away to the scavenging desires of strangers. Siopis acknowledges that it is the very materiality of the pile, its 'thingness', which is essential to projected loss. She recalls:

> The power of representing loss comes through the power of the objecthood, the physicality of that object. It is there and is in front of you. The sense of having seen this big pile outside in this little Amsterdam street triggered something that was very primary and beyond my sense of lived experience. It seemed to be a very part of me. In a way, I don't even know how to say this, but it seems to me that the marker of a certain kind of culture, and



Cream Horn
1981
Oil on canvas
145 x 115cm

> here I'd probably say a European culture, seems to be quite deeply ingrained before you actually become conscious of it. Allegorically, I'd say it's in the blood. It's that sort of experience that I have of these piles. And I think if I look at any kind of image of European catastrophe, and this goes back to Holocaust images as well, it's that sense of piles … the accumulation which makes nonsense of a singular symbol. It's a sense that those things, those fetishes that make the piles, have become disembodied, so that the body of the pile is the body of disembodiment.[11]

The piles are representative of the catastrophe lurking within the body that is absolutely the language of the body, played out through allegory. Here, trauma lies in the abandonment of the body, a life discarded as debris, without lineage or heirs, thus negating the possibility of continuance through remembrance. This is an image of dissemination robbed of will and agency. It is an image of the body left vulnerable to chance.

The exquisite corpse, of course, is built upon the principles of chance. In French Surrealism, the exquisite corpse originated as a game of random fate and automatic association, bridging the literal and the pictorial; a means of revealing the secrets of the unconscious. As a materialization of the non-rational or irrational, the exquisite corpse image became interchangeable with the Surrealist description of feminine beauty as 'convulsive', as 'incorporeal hallucination',[12] which was as much an erotic representation of sexual submission as a signifier of the subject's own 'death by reification'. Indeed, despite inflated talk of the emancipation of a universal humanity and perfunctory attempts to address their own intrinsically patriarchal attitudes, the French Surrealists persisted in contradictorily portraying women in idealized, subordinate roles (wives, lovers, mothers, muses, diviners, hysterics, others). Nevertheless, the image of convulsive beauty was not conceived or represented as a negative ideal, nor was it an image of mere passivity, but was rather hinged on both shock and hysteria, and accordingly was actively coveted for its chaotic transformative power and ecstatic feminine potential to challenge and dismember the boundaries of the rational.

The hysterical body has traditionally been identified and defined by the male analyst, artist, voyeur. And yet, resisting all attempts at taxonomic incarceration, hers remains a body whose hysterical symptom is both desired and feared for its resistance to social constraint. Tapping into this potential, women Surrealist artists have historically produced images of the hysterical as psychic compensation. They have produced startlingly (auto)biographical self-representations, which collapse the boundaries between the personal and the political, and have turned to strategies of enchantment to engage and transform a domesticated object world which offers up the possibilities for ephemeral transcendence, even as it keeps them tethered to tradition and social expectation. It is in the image of the exquisite corpse that the (feminized) subject confronts its greatest fear and perhaps desire – its own fragmentation and disintegration, hinged on the transcendent promise of renaissance.

As Fate Would Have It

Throughout her career, Siopis has employed Surrealist-inspired strategies and references as a means to critique white bourgeois complacency in the face of the state's blinding rationalization of mass oppression. Indeed, as I have written at length elsewhere,[13] Surrealism was adopted by artists throughout the Second and Third World as a politicized language and aesthetic strategy with which to challenge the perceived limitations of modernism, liberal capitalism and the patriarchal embrace of Western imperialist development. Surrealism has come to represent a diverse and often contradictory set of practices or articulations, rather than a cohesive, synchronized movement; it was – and *is* – conceived as a politicized mode of being and acting in the world, a mode of social resistance, rather than a consolidated style per se. Informed by both Marxism and psychoanalysis, Surrealism seeks to accommodate the unconscious, non-rational and outright irrational aspects of social and psychological reality into a radical strategy for challenging and re-presenting the rationalized

Split Paw Paw
1982
Oil on canvas
32.5 x 48.5cm

Opposite

Tapers
1982
Oil and candles on canvas
99 x 99cm

world, as it appears to us at the most fundamental or primordial level, and thereby shift or transform that reality.

Siopis's treatment of history as exquisite corpse continues to be at the core of her practice. The hysterical body is the central subject of her *Shame* series of prints and paintings (2002 onwards), as well as her most recent body of 'ink and glue' paintings (2007 onwards), which focus on the often violent eroticization of the female body in images that pit sensuality against violation and trauma. In these most recent history paintings, chance is integral to the making of the composition, embodied by the medium and the unpredictability of working with liquid ink, viscous glue and water. At times, the material seems to take on a life of its own, influencing the form the image ultimately takes. But Siopis simultaneously exerts her will on the process, alternately guiding and standing back from the flow of ink and glue, as it leads the artist and is in turn led by her.

In this work, Siopis has chosen to engage images that speak more broadly to the issues of sexuality, subjectivity, social conflict and agency. While South African history remains the tacit vantage point from which all other histories are engaged and read, she seeks out the sympathetic points of convergence and commonality between narratives across historical time and space, in order to tap into our shared experience of the world in the present and what it is to be human. Fate is a key protagonist, but one that is revealed to be vulnerable to external forces – of nature and culture – and individual agency. In this, Siopis is interested in the inherent, sometimes unsettling openness of historical possibilities and the vision of a future that can become something other than what fate appears to have predetermined.

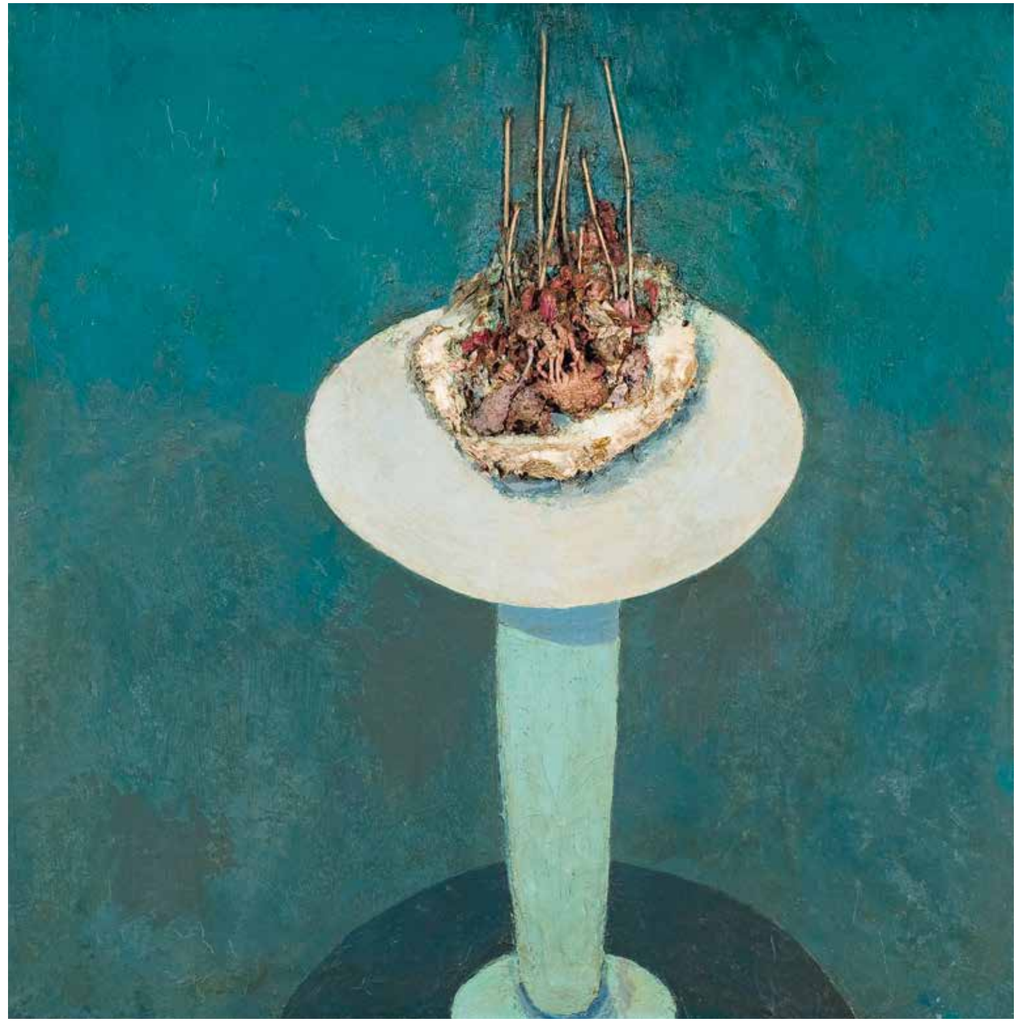


Table
1983
Oil on canvas
108 x 180.5cm