

ON A KNIFE EDGE

Penny Siopis in conversation with Sarah Nuttall

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Form and formlessness; violence and eroticism; horror and ecstasy: the precarious slip and a split of making art at the knife edge.

I start simply by being struck by an image. Something odd, curious, dramatic. The image might come from newspapers, books, movies, magazines, other art, my imagination or direct experiences. Many of these images are at once violent, erotic, tragic and beautiful. They are atavistic and elemental as well as social and analytical at the same time. Many allegorise deep human experiences like collapse, disorder, decay and formlessness. Some images emerge out of the vicissitudes of the medium itself. What happens when ink and glue act on a surface is unpredictable and exciting. This unpredictability creates a vital tension or energy between form and formlessness, balancing them on a knife edge. (Penny Siopis, 2009.)

Sarah Nuttall: Your show is titled Paintings, but apart from a small section of the background of Twins, there is no oil or acrylic paint in this body of work. Your medium is ink and glue. Why this change?



Hundred-pieces

Photo courtesy of Penny Siopis and Michael Stevenson

Penny Siopis: The mix of liquid ink and viscous glue involves processes of radical flux and flow that excite me. The fact that these mediums literally have an unpredictable life of their own makes them perfect for the radically contingent way I want to work.

Nuttall: So how do you work these mediums?

Siopis: The process involves the mix of ink and glue and sometimes water through splashing, dripping and moving the canvas to direct the flow. These materials then congeal into different configurations on the surface. I work with the canvas flat on the ground and then on the wall – horizontal to vertical – and work more. Back and forth, up on the wall and down on the floor. Sometimes I try to direct these configurations into recognisable images, other times I just let the medium have its way. I also throw ink or glue on to the surface in a way which emphatical-

ly registers the energy of my gesture. The openness, experimentality and risk this involves is something I love. And the ‘accidents’ that happen as a consequence. What occurs in one work can’t be repeated in another.

The drying time of the glue depends on the thickness of the layer. There is a strong element of surprise in this, partly because the glue is white and opaque when wet and only becomes transparent when dry. Only then can I see what has actually happened to the painting. It’s not all chance, of course. I have long experience with manipulating material, and this experience becomes a kind of second nature that pushes and directs me when I can’t see how the opaque surface is going to settle down. You could say that I set up the conditions for chance to operate along certain lines. I have always been intensely interested in materiality as idea and sensation, as something more than merely a means to make an image.

Nuttall: You assert your strong interest in form and so I wonder: what aspects of modernism continue to offer you critical resources for the practice of painting?

Siopis: Modernism’s struggle for form against reference is still alive to me today – despite the radical critiques that have followed in its wake. Modernism’s emphasis on the relation between form and materiality also remains compelling for me. There are tensions here that still offer critical possibilities for painting. I must stress, though, that my interest in form involves the other side of form, formlessness. In pursuit of purity, modernist formalism recognised that if you push purity of form too far, it risks tipping into its other: formlessness (chaos) or

mere decoration (uniformity).

More generally I suspect that the persistence of painting has something to do with being humane – a human, embodied trace in a time of hyper-mediation, of excessive remediation, for example.



Migrants

Photo courtesy of Penny Siopis and Michael Stevenson

Nuttall: How do the iconographic aspects of your work relate to this emphasis on form, or formlessness?

Siopis: By holding on to reference, and hence to a form of the iconographic, and insisting on a disruptive materiality, I seek to create a slippage between the two, a tension between figure and ground. This parallels the slippage between pictorial reference and abstraction. This creates a space which is crucial for opening the visual field for projection and triggering affect.

So my impulse is to disturb reference or iconography by emphasising figure-disrupting materiality. I am especially drawn to iconography that stresses the arrested moment. Materially, this arrest literally happens when the medium dries and hardens.

Bodily, the gesture – acts of dripping, splashing, manipulating – is also arrested. And, as happens in the photographic process, there are two kinds of iconographic arrest. One is when you take the shot, and the other when the image emerges in the developer and is then fixed. The shot registers a world in a moment which passes and is forever lost, but remains in the fixed image of the photograph itself. Actually the shot is also reminiscent of the moment when I am struck by an image I see in the world.

I am less interested in fixity than in a kind of unsettled arrest. My interest in painting is to hold on to and to show the signs of its becoming.

Nuttall: In an interview with you in ‘Art South Africa’ in 2005 I asked you about your frustrations with painting and you replied that you never seem to be able to keep the formlessness in your paintings that corresponds to what Georges Bataille called ‘informe’. Does this interest in the informe still drive you?

Siopis: Yes, it does. Bataille’s *informe* is an operation, neither theory nor product, and in this I see something of my process. My desire is to go as far as I can in pulling the form (or materiality) away from the subject, to drag form and figuration to the verge of formlessness, to bring form down. But I don’t get to the extreme of what I think Bataille’s *informe* suggests. It’s more like an impulse that drives me to a formlessness that can disrupt the coherence of form as it seeks to usurp content for itself alone, as in the idea that form is content, a major tenet of modernism.

Bataille’s *informe* points to the formlessness of the world, implying its intrinsic worthlessness and



Miracle

Photo courtesy of Penny Siopis and Michael Stevenson

the irredeemable futility of our thinking about it. His *informe* is philosophical and only obliquely related to visual form, or art. Yet his constant use of dramatic visual metaphors in his writing suggests its richness for visual art. In *The Tears of Eros* he does actually use visual images from a variety of sources.

Nuttall: Your psychic and painterly interest, in these works, relates to balancing on a knife edge. The knife edge seems to be the concatenation between the beautiful and the cruel, the violent and the erotic. Why is this such an interesting, exciting place for you?

Siopis: The space, friction and energy between contending, even irreconcilable, desires are critical for me. The beautiful and the cruel, or the violent and the erotic, are not such odd bedfellows really. Each is tied to the other. And in art, the aesthetic is all

but constituted though the play of contraries. The knife edge is a precarious condition where a slip and a split can happen. I want to hold this condition in a state of suspended animation rather than resolve or settle it, one way or another.

Nuttall: Your recent work has been almost exclusively in the registers of red and pink. You have long described yourself as drawn to the passions and traumas of ‘redness’ (the hot red of the candles of Catholicism) rather than to the cool colours (the blues of the Virgin’s robes). And then we walk in to this new work and we see great swathes of blue and green, and some brown. Are your internal chromatic landscapes shifting? Might it have to do in part with the fact that this new work developed from your recent sojourn in Greece?

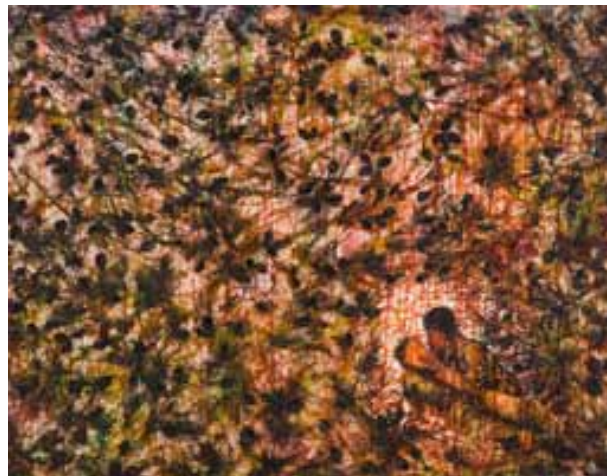
Siopis: It’s true. I love red for all sorts of reasons. But blue, and water, have come on stage of late. I have an ancient feeling for water, as far back as I can remember. I would rather drown (almost did) than burn. Fluid and flow are my *métier*. I suppose it is also linked to an abiding interest in Sigmund Freud’s ‘oceanic’, to the openness of life before language, an openness we imagine, seek, but never really know.

But this recent turn to blueness might well have a great deal to do with my time in Greece last year. It was a kind of interruption in my life and being so close to the sea marked this. I found myself just staring at the sea, stunned at its expanse, intensity, beauty. That the Aegean is so very blue is a shock. Blue seems so foreign to the reds of the body.

The Aegean was not without its traumas, of course. My mind was often filled with the horrific stories I heard at the time of African migrants drowning –

thrown overboard by traffickers in their bid to get to Europe. I made work which tried to give form to my feelings here. Mostly they were small works, but the influence of these mental images is also manifest in *Still Waters*.

But the idea of the sea reaches beyond trauma. Perhaps it’s the indeterminacy of water. Things float and sink. In a way, water approaches perfect formlessness. I have always liked what that old flux philosopher Heraclites said about water, that you never step into the same water of a river twice.



Pine

Photo courtesy of Penny Siopis and Michael Stevenson

Nuttall: What made you want to paint such huge canvases this time? Compared, for instance, to the miniatures of your earlier *Shame* series?

Siopis: I needed an expanded field to act in, and to register energy. Ironically, while the larger field offers more scope for the expansive gesture, it also allows for intense intimacy. You can be both distant and close up; you can stand back and see the whole

scene and come close and engage the body, the surface, the matter of the scene.

Nuttall: Many – though not all – of these works are violent, sometimes traumatic. In many ways, these emotional registers are signal in your work. But the physical deposits of emotion which accrue in these paintings also suggest a deep life force.

Siopis: My imagery is often violent, and the materiality itself often suggestive of violence. But at the same time you can see a vitality that is buoyant and libidinal. I like Bataille here when he sees art as entranced by horror and links this to the idea of sacrifice. In *The Cruel Practice of Art* he writes: ‘Yet it is in this double bind that the very meaning of art emerges – for art, which puts us on the path of complete destruction and suspends us there for a time, offers us ravishment without death.’

Nuttall: I’d like to ask you now about some specific works on the show, and the kinds of references from which you have drawn. *Miracle* shows a tiny baby falling through space and a great twisted column of fire, which also has something of the look of an umbilical cord seen in colour on a medical scanner. What were you looking for in the making of this image?

Siopis: This work came from two separate stories I read in newspapers. One happened in a small town in Germany in 2008, the other in downtown Johannesburg in 2006. Both occurred in places where migrant workers live. They are uncannily similar. In each a mother is faced with a dilemma as she is trapped on a floor high in an apartment block which has caught fire. Should she hang on to her baby in

the hope that the blaze will be extinguished? Or should she throw the baby out of the window in the hope that someone will catch the baby down below? Both mothers chose the latter. The babies were both caught and miraculously survived. I was struck by the elemental quality of these almost identical stories; like Sophie's choice, or King Solomon's threat to cut the baby in half to settle a dispute between two mothers claiming the same child. In this work the fire is entirely gestural, while the baby is more or less illusionistically depicted.

Nuttall: *Three Trees* is an overwhelmingly violent and emotional rape scene and yet you mentioned that it was based partly on a Japanese woodblock print. These woodblock prints, though, contrary to your work, seem to contain or disavow, or perhaps even infer by excluding, intense emotion or the kind of knife-edge places you're pursuing in this collection.

Siopis: Yes – the primary image is a rape of a woman by two men; and yes, it references a Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock print I found in a book on erotic art. It is perhaps one of the works that pits materiality against representation most strongly. You can see something of what is going on, but the materiality disrupts the scene. In this work the materiality is quite beautiful, a physical deposit of emotion. Even the trees seem to be shedding their bark in the pull towards the main 'action'.

I am intrigued by Japanese prints of this period – especially how they portrayed sexuality in such crisp, clear linear form. To me their form seems highly conventionalised, and so contrary to the sexual violence they depict. They don't reveal process,

and look like elaborate diagrams of experience. They are strange to me and I can't stop looking at them. Because of this they offer me an affective and literal structure for painting, bare bones to give body to.

In drawing on Japanese prints or other historical sources, I am less concerned with history and specific pictorial traditions and more with how they resonate now, in our contemporary moment.



Still Waters

Photo courtesy of Penny Siopis and Michael Stevenson

Nuttall: In *Migrants* we can make out bird-like figures amidst a terrifying frenzy of movement. By giving the work this title, you tempt us towards a reading of human migrants as well as the animal versions, although of course we also understand that any one meaning must be a provisional one.

Siopis: This work was stimulated by a scene I witnessed from my veranda at dusk. Birds were consuming clouds of flying ants swarming from the ground after rain. I was mesmerised by the explosive energy of the moment. I initially created a field of intense visual activity on the canvas, and tentatively clarified certain forms to suggest the birds and their

prey. But the figuration is tenuous, and the feel elemental and associative. Things moving fast and furious, and then frozen. Yes, just as *Three Trees* is not about trees, *Migrants* is not about migrants other than through different kinds of association. Birds and ants do of course migrate, and there is a relation between the natural and the social here.

Nuttall: By choosing *Hundred Pieces* as the title of this work, you point us towards Bataille. What is the association you were making here?

Siopis: Here I have drawn on a photograph Bataille writes about in *The Tears of Eros*. The photograph is of a hideous Chinese torture purported to have happened around 1905 in which a criminal's body is cut off bit by bit. Bataille could not take his eyes off this image. The reason for this, he says, is that the photograph reveals the conjoining of two apparently opposite experiences – religious horror of sacrifice and the abyss of eroticism. These two apparently opposite experiences have something in common in how we read an 'image'. Both seem ecstatic.

I too was struck by this photograph, but there is scant evidence of it in my *Hundred Pieces*. The title gives a clue for those who know Bataille's text. There is also the very schematic shape of the body, red marks where eyes and nipples might be, and the form that resembles the pole onto which the criminal is tied. But it's the feel, the sensation of how Bataille's words and the image resonate for painting that concerns me here, more than anything literal. 'Ecstasy' figures in perhaps more obscure or open ways for me than the photograph suggests. In my work the figure melts downward, against an upward

movement. In terms of painting itself, the figure came from a single gesture. For me this was closer to capturing the sensation of what Bataille was talking about than the actual pictorial reference.



Three-trees

Photo courtesy of Penny Siopis and Michael Stevenson

Nuttall: In *Still Waters* the surface is made up of a mass of shapes vaguely suggesting a mix of jellyfish and water lilies. In the midst of these emerges a face, and the expression on this face is almost unreadable – it could be agony, bliss, near-death or raw survival.

Siopis: Yes, the forms veer in a vortex towards the head of a person who seems to be either swamped by the mass or emerging from it. It looks like the person might be coming up for breath. The image condenses three visions that came to me simultaneously as I was struck by seeing an infestation of jellyfish pulsating in the harbour in Thessaloniki. The three visions were Shakespeare's Ophelia, an imagined scene of a migrant drowning in the Aegean, and, fi-

nally, Monet's water lilies. The condensation of images was similar to what happens in a dream. Trauma mixes with other, quite different, sensations.

Nuttall: How did you make *Floating World*?

Siopis: Here the source is another Japanese print, *Awabi Fishergirl Ravished by Water-spirits* (c1788) by Utamaro. The splash in the painting is important as it both breaks up and gives shape to the girl who is splashed. It also draws attention to the forms and force of water. There is no splash in the original print. Here I did two things with water. First, I flung ink on to the surface where it left its residue. I then applied ink marks to give body to this residue. These marks resemble conventional depictions of water – the wavy lines which have become almost symbols of water. The girl who is splashed sits in an arrested pose and looks to the lower left part of the painting. Here, another, smaller girl is submerged, struggling sexually with two murky male creatures.

Nuttall: *Pine* was surely painted in Greece. The embrace of the couple is not entirely a gentle one, is it?

Siopis: Yes. At the time I was thinking about the expressive possibilities of the visual field in painting, how repetition of shapes and physicality of surface could trigger emotion. I began by dropping ink and glue randomly on to the surface. The resulting forms brought an image of a forest to mind. This might have been because I was living in a building swathed in a thicket of pine trees. Greece is the only place I've been where pine trees grow so near to the sea! But I was also reading about the Greek civil war and how forests were places of both terror and refuge at the

time. I then looked for a visual reference of the civil war and came upon a photograph of two comrades-in-arms. The couple reminded me of an old photo of my father and mother. I made a clearing in the forest, so to speak, and positioned them as if spot-lit in that clearing. Yes, they are locked in an ambiguous embrace; aggression or love? I then dripped hot coloured ink from the top of the canvas. The drips ran around the raised dollops of glue simulating pine cones and needles, animating and binding the surface and the whole visual field.

Nuttall: *Ambush* is included in this catalogue because it prefigures many of the works in the exhibition.

Siopis: This work was the first large piece I made with ink and glue and in which chance really mattered. The source is Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai's woodblock print *The Dream of a Fisherman's Wife* (1820). It shows a huge octopus performing oral sex on a reclining woman. A smaller octopus kisses her lips, with one tentacle around her nipple. The woman seems relaxed – in another world. Another world is, of course, where she is – octopus sex is a fantasy. The powerful way Hokusai works with this fantasy makes this print so erotic. There is also a kind of wild informality in the octopus; it can change shape radically, disturbing any sense of equilibrium or stability.

The liquidity of the ink and viscosity of the glue curdle into forms reminiscent of Hokusai's image. But the forms are bloody, liquid, energetic. They congeal on the edge of formlessness in an unsettling organic process of becoming.

Apparently westerners have interpreted Hokusai's

image as a rape scene. Others have seen the octopus as a kind of Zeus who disguised himself as an animal to ravish unsuspecting young women.

As a clever, sexual creature the octopus has stimulated many sexual fantasies. Some are hinted at in the text that structures the 'ground' of the image, what would otherwise have been the white of the canvas. The text strings myriad expressions of sexual transgression together. These are culled from high literature, poetry, technical documents, psychosexual narratives, pornography; from Bataille, Freud, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Antonin Artaud, Anaïs Nin, Angela Carter and Jeffrey Eugenides. Some are anonymous, demotic texts from much trashier sources. While these words replace the original text in the Hokusai image, I have also included a translation of this text (as silly as it actually is). Strung together these texts tie up (loosely) to create another story. It is hard to read every line, not least because you need to tilt your head in an unnatural and uncomfortable position to do so.

Nuttall: In what sense, if at all, are these South African paintings?

Siopis: The times seem to have made me hypersensitive to all sorts of imagery, especially that which marks ambivalence and the imponderable. In South Africa now we are confronted with the estrangement and dislocation that come with deep uncertainty about the stability of what we might call the social contract. At the same time, this instability can be an occasion for exhilarating change. It's a time of flux; a time which can congeal into sheer horror or open up to sheer ecstasy.

This interview was first published in "Penny Siopis: Paintings". Cape Town: Michael Stevenson catalogue 42. 2009.

<http://www.michaelstevenson.com/contemporary/exhibitions/siopis/index2009.htm>