

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

"The Mother of Harlots"

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

Joseph P. Liggett

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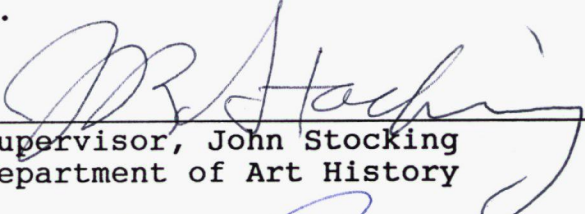
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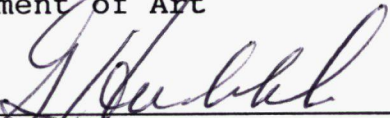
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The undersigned certify that they have viewed and read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, respectively, a Thesis Exhibition and supporting written paper entitled "The Mother of Harlots": An Accompaniment to the thesis Exhibition, submitted by Joseph P. Liggett in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
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## ABSTRACT

The two years of my visual work which is discussed within, is divided into three periods. The early period (1989) concerns itself with the influence that Francis Bacon and Mark Prent has had on my work. The second period (1990) explores in some detail the methodology behind my installation entitled "The Quick & the Dead". The writings of George Bataille, Roland Barthes views of semiology and violence, and Jan Mukarovsky's writings on Intention and Art will be used to evaluate the philosophical base of this installation. The third period (1990-1991) deals with my evolving ideas, and psychology of rendering images through comparison to the art of Joel-Peter-Witken and Francis Bacon. It attempts to come to terms with the mental and emotional processes by which, and through which, I have gone about creating these particular artifacts.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Approval Page	ii
2. Abstract	iii
Chapter One - Early Period (1989)	
1. Francis Bacon (an overview)	1
2. Concerning Photography and <u>Smile, God Loves You</u>	11
3. <u>The Image of a Pretty Child</u>	13
4. Concerning Christianity and Foucault	16
5. Concerning Temporality (The Work of Mark Prent and Francis Bacon)	18
Chapter Two - Middle Period (1990)	
1. Concerning Violence and Barthes with reference to <u>The Quick and the         Dead</u>	29
2. <u>The Quick and the Dead</u> (A physical examination of the installation)	36
3. Concerning the writings of Bataille and Mukarovsky	47
4. <u>Gentlemen, You Can Start Cutting         Anytime</u>	54
Chapter 3 - Late Period (1991)	
1. <u>Untitled #1</u> - an examination of the human condition	57
2. Anatomy according to Joel-Peter-Witken	62

3.	Four Drawings	72
4.	<u>Yellow Auto Eroticism</u>	78
5.	<u>Colonia Dignidad</u> and <u>The Mother of Harlots</u>	80
6.	Conclusion	91
7.	Endnotes	95
8.	Bibliography	99

## CHAPTER ONE - EARLY PERIOD (1989)

### 1. Francis Bacon (an overview)

In 1945 Francis Bacon exhibited his Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion, at the Lefevere Gallery in London. Bacon's approach to rendering the human anatomy could hardly be evaluated according to traditional Western assumptions still associated with the work of High Renaissance Masters. Although we can see parallels to Bacon's work in the Baroque period in Holland, "the strange dignity of Rembrandt's carcass"<sup>1</sup> suggests an affinity to Bacon's Crucifixion scene, in subject but not in style.

Bacon, "like Picasso, empties the theme of any religious significance, but does not appear to put the same emphasis on the pain, anguish and horror of the event."<sup>2</sup> The style strikes me, at once, as evocative of part of the Surrealist slant of the Twentieth Century. The work of Graham Sutherland, primarily "Crucifixion", from 1946, came close in handling of both space and atmosphere, "to contemporaneous works by Francis Bacon."<sup>3</sup> "His thistle like totems, frequently based quite literally on plant forms"<sup>4</sup>, were "transformed into menacing beasts or chimeras".<sup>5</sup>

When viewing the aforementioned painting, the overall structure and detailed notation suggested that the work was

charged with the kind of violent energy we naturally associate with crucifixion; but the violence, the horror, was completely internalized and incorporated within the figures. When I first saw this painting, the figures appeared to be perfect visual correlatives of the human condition -- half animal, half human, self-crucified from within by internal drives and forces of both life and death, and something beyond that, almost too dreadful to communicate.

As a painter, the way Bacon uses harsh-saturated colours, minimal background detail, and the aggressive manner in which he depicts the human figure, appealed immediately to my visual sensibilities. The way in which Bacon was able to deploy the human figure as an expressive vehicle, to convey extreme emotional and mental states, has left a profound mark on my whole approach, and particularly in dealing with the human form. Far from attempting a scholarly-critical interpretation, these conclusions are based on my subjective, personal, relationship to this painter and his work.

The well known critic, John Russel, believes that the figures Bacon has created in The Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion have, or disclose, "a mindless voracity, an automatic unregulated gluttony, a ravening undifferentiated capacity for hatred."<sup>6</sup> Which is to say, at least on the level of subjective expression, the crucified



have become the torturing aggressors both against themselves and against the hypothetical viewer -- against life and goodness itself. Which is to say that they are, in a certain sense, quite blatantly evil. But were they intended to be that way, and are they?

Bacon himself states that these figures derive from greek Mythology. He claims to have thought of them as the Eumenides who were, of course, female divinities -- the daughters of Gaea whose punishment was that of incestuous murder. Gaea is thus the facilitator of self-sacrifice. Bacon states that he "saw the whole Crucifixion in which these (Eumenides) would be there instead of the usual figures at the base of the cross."<sup>7</sup>

As an atheist, Bacon reinterprets and in an ironic sense resurrects the most profoundly tragic scene in Christianity. He borrows archetypal material from mythological sources (i.e. the Eumenides) and except for the title (i.e. Crucifixion), there are no other significant Christian references or associations.

Like Bacon, much of my work is conceptually framed through the objective correlative, or formal metaphor, of physical creatures of mental suffering who convey emotional, rather than overt physical violence. It is his dramatic strategy and concentration on the figurative aspect, and how

this is manipulated to such devastating ends, that is of interest to me, rather than his acclaimed style of brush notation. Indeed, there are aspects of Bacon's genius, mainly having to do with abbreviated mimetic values and painterly surface texture, that have had almost no influence on my style of draftsmanship or painting. Preference is given to the content and composition of each work. Therefore surface texture tends to play a secondary role in the processing of my imagery.

Bacon uses the figure as a vehicle for representing, or one should really say "delivering", the emotional concept of internal conflict rather than external violence. Anatomy is little more than the "middleman", or the "butler", ushering us through a visual threshold into the darker, more dreadful, depths of the universal human condition. From one perspective, Bacon's figures could be read as angst-ridden puppets, perhaps, evoking what many thinkers down the ages have identified as the hopelessness of the human condition; but such a melodramatic concentration, on what we might call "the big picture", seems unlikely and out of character for Bacon.

Instead, the focus is surely of a highly concrete, individualizing nature. The essence and spontaneity of stunted growth, of the rending of individualized human psyche

(of personal identity) within the void of physical decay and death -- this is where Bacon's expressive knife cuts deepest. Perhaps it will be easier to grasp what Bacon's art is "saying", and doing to us, if we review some of his own cryptic comments on the nature of the world at large.

"Who remembers or cares about a happy society"<sup>8</sup>, he once remarked in an interview with David Sylvester. "I suppose it's possible that a society may arise which is so perfect that it will be remembered for the perfection of its equality. But that hasn't yet arisen, and so far one remembers a society (merely) for what it has created."<sup>9</sup> Which is to say, Bacon tends to deny the reality of society as a functioning, organic entity with even a trace of moral ground made good; and when forced to come to terms with the past, he views it only in terms of isolated, surviving physical artifacts (i.e. materialistic *momento moire*), rather than for any humanistic or humanitarian value, the apparent absence of which he is most sharply aware. His view through the rear view mirror is little more than a grim, undertaker's review of cultural skeletons in the irreversible process of degeneration into dust, atoms, and energy.

In art, if not in science, we are at liberty to deal with our own subjective reactions to (in this case) one man's highly subjective view of the world, and, if we so choose, to

do so in rather generalized terms. Bacon consistently throws us down into the dark, shadow zone of this best of all possible voids; but, of course, his own subjective experience was, or at least appears to have been, effectively denied the light or even the middle tones of contentment, fulfilment and joy. It is admittedly an extremely narrow and biased psychic peep hole, through which Bacon views the universe, but to which (most regrettably) a considerable amount of unappetizing truth still clings.

My own line of reflection on the past, which has undoubtedly effected my art in many ways, is not dissimilar to what I see as the Bacon perspective. Instead of striving to approach a collective nirvana for humanity, it has often seemed to me, that the people and civilizations of the past have been content to synthesize an artistic fairy land of impossible order and grace -- the manufacture of an expedient if often stylish dream. They seek the idealized concept of the individual, populating an unlikely or impossible artistic dream land, and they do so in order to deflect attention away from an inexhaustible inventory of negative aspects inherent in everyone's personality. Rather than utopian, it has often seemed to me, the idealizing instincts of the past were merely escapist -- i.e. a nostalgia for narcosis rather than for some visionary "brave new world".

The artificial world of the ideal, exemplified perhaps most exhaustively by Classicism and Neoclassicism, could, in a certain sense, be compared with the sealed lid on a jar of rotting eggs, or the soldered lead casing of a coffin full of ripening human protein. On the surface, there is the illusion of serenity, harmony, goodness, truth, and beauty; yet underneath the fancy wrapping, in the subconscious shadow zone, we uncover a nauseating, chaotic, dung heap of rotting psychological flesh and feces. So much of Bacon's best work seems to tear off the lid, and peel back the lead casing of the coffin of the mind; his work exposes us most rudely to the inner corruption and turmoil of society, and, of course, of his own peculiar personality.

I believe that my work brings to the surface the same kind of submerged, or repressed, psychological turmoil and putrefaction that one feels in or through Bacon's figures. For a fairly blatant example, in my painting from 1984, Smile, God Loves You, the viewer is presented with four enlarged versions of diseased gums, the facial skin being pulled back at the four corners of the mouth of each face by dental retractors. I have shown the teeth clenched together, reflecting more of a grimace than a smile. Central to the painting is a cross in blue, which served to separate the image into two groups of pairs. Like Bacon's images which have inspired me in the past, the intention is not to present merely physical distress

and suffering, but to use disease and its treatment as a visual correlative for the figure's more subtle, mental and emotional anguish.

The figures in this painting are hardly in a position to acknowledge or deny anything, let alone smile; so that the question, whether God does love them or not, is left open for the viewer to either consider or ignore. From what I have told the viewer, the individuals in the painting could be ordinary or extraordinary, saints or sinners. I have deliberately avoided giving them a particular personality type.

In the process of rendering, the faces have acquired no particular personality type. Neutralized in individuality, and almost asexual in appearance, they are reduced to guinea pigs in God's laboratory, to be displayed, labelled, and inevitably destroyed.

The figures in Bacon's Three Studies . . . . are asexual, in what I feel to be a closely related manner. They are not defined by sex, skin colour, racial type or creed. They are hardly in a position to state their case; yet, nevertheless, a powerful emotional state, or force field, is projected through and beyond their mere physical properties. Using the physical to focus expression on the intangible qualities of

the human psyche, instead of merely defining the figures by means of their physicality, leads to a much deeper, if often distasteful, probing of the human condition.

This is what I believe Bacon does best, mainly through distortion and deconstruction of the body. Throughout his later life he was haunted by a revealing line from the Orestia: "The reek of human blood smiles out at me."<sup>10</sup> In life and in art the process of deconstruction goes on, everywhere, though most attempt to ignore it as best they can. As in art, "to change the object itself"<sup>11</sup>, is perhaps, "the mandate of postmodernist art. As the object is destructured, so is the subject (viewer) dislocated, and the modernist order of the arts decentered"<sup>12</sup>. The hidden potential properties of the living flesh, revealed by deconstructions of all kinds -- chemical as well as physical malleability -- is what interests me. Through distortion and exaggeration of the human anatomy, one is made painfully aware of the vulnerability of the human surface, forcing attention to seek and acknowledge that which lies beneath.

The focal point of the four figures in Smile, God Loves You, is of course the gaping oral cavity. Even though the gums are diseased, the colour and shape of the teeth fitting into the gums recall a particular sense of beauty. I gave special attention to rendering the structure and colour of

each tooth, trying to build the contrast between the pristine enamel and the disease ridden, deconstructing, tissue surrounding it.

Bacon once commented that he was interested, "...by the movements of the mouth and the shape of the mouth and teeth. People say that these have all sorts of sexual implications, and I was always very obsessed by the actual appearance of the mouth and teeth."<sup>13</sup> He added that he liked, "the glitter and colour that comes from the mouth,"<sup>14</sup> with the hope that he could, in a sense, "...be able to paint the mouth like Monet painted a sunset."<sup>15</sup> Bacon's fascination with the mouth thus seems to begin with the sexual, but transcends it to the kind of purely aesthetic considerations we associate with Impressionism and sunsets.

I intended for Smile, God Loves You to go beyond ordinary sexual symbolism to evoke a certain asexual sensibility toward the appearance of the mouth. Each image represents a state of oral decay, but the painting was also intended to recognize the abstract beauty of polished enamel, and gum erosion, through the formal values of shape and coloration. In this way, the diseased mouth can become more than a sexually associated orifice, and more than a potential area of infection. It becomes just another element within an artistic reality where "...the reek of human blood smiles out at me,"



in an aesthetic if not in a social sense.

## 2. Concerning Photography and "Smile, God Loves You."

Already in 1984, the images I worked with were derived, technically, from photographic sources. The use of the photographic sources gave me maximum access to the required visual information, plus a certain objective immediacy. Both in cost for models' time, and my own time as a painter, I feel that a worthwhile economy of means was achieved by using the camera's eye as well as my own. By using my own personal photographs as primary source material for the paintings and drawings, the possibility of accessing a much broader range of visual material became instantly feasible.

And, of course, Bacon also acknowledges the impact photography has on his work; and, although he did not collect information as I have, by photographing his models, he believed that:

"one's sense of appearance is assaulted all the time by photography and by film. So that, when one looks at something, one's not only looking at it directly but also looking at it through the assault that has already been made on it by photography and film. And 99% of the time I find that photographs are very much more interesting than either abstract or figurative painting."<sup>16</sup>

Photography becomes, at once, a cultivator of objective fact, available for further processing, and a de facto

facilitator or even a purveyor of fiction. In some of his early works ("Two Figures" 1953), Francis Bacon used the imagery of photographers (specifically Edward Muybridge's animal and human locomotion series, Human Figure in Motion (1887)). It is revealing that Bacon tells us that, "...Michelangelo and Muybridge are mixed up in my mind together,"<sup>17</sup> adding that he "...perhaps could learn about positions from Muybridge and learn about the amplex, the grandeur of form from Michelangelo."<sup>18</sup> He concluded the observation on Michelangelo and photography by acknowledging that most of his figures "...are taken from the male, nude,"<sup>19</sup> and that he had been influenced by the fact that "Michelangelo made the most voluptuous male nudes in the plastic arts."<sup>20</sup>

Bacon's free wheeling fusion of classical and modern source materials works well on a theoretical level, but does not exactly manifest itself (in the way he suggests) in his practice. Perhaps we should assume that most of his comments were given with a sharp sardonic, or ironic twist, to start with, and can not be taken lightly at face value. His overstretched, twisted, amoebic forms are far from the classical anatomical renderings of a High Renaissance master like Michelangelo; but they call up, instead, the freakish collage of violently destructured accident victims, recombined with deft haste into one larger mutilated corpus.

My Smile, God Loves You, acknowledges the value of photography in gathering and implementing visual fact. It also echoes Bacon's attraction to the mouth in the sense of formal structure, and in the use of colour. The pictorial forms are articulated in an understated, plastic sense, more than in an expressive sense. The kind of extreme distortion that appears in Three Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion, and Bacon's hyper-painterly notation, does not, of course, carry over into my own technique. I have used photography in my work, primarily as a direct and convenient recorder and transmitter of concrete fact -- i.e. the informational platform on which, partly through compositional rearrangement, I build my new fictional vision of another kind of (admittedly calamitous) truth.

### 3. "The Image of A Pretty Child"

The second painting from this early period, which I believe would be useful to discuss, is The Image of a Pretty Child. As well as the canvas, an audio and video track accompanied and augmented this painting as it was originally exhibited. The image of an abused baby, displayed somewhat oddly off-centre in the composition, is the source of the title. A superimposed figure of a Catholic Pope, giving the official gesture of blessing over another man's face, is placed in the lower left hand corner, framed within a

rectangular box. In this particular statement, my intention was to create a multi-media environment within which different presentation technologies could be effectively amalgamated. Instead of inspecting a selection of individual paintings, in isolation, the audience would also be viewing a video monitor and listening to a particular audio input. The witness experience becomes multidimensional, multi-sensory, with two contemporary technologies intermingling with painting and drawing, in the same, more-or-less coordinated time-space.

In much the same way, Vera Frenkel created a multi-dimensional environment in "Listening to Video" (1979). "In place of the videotapes are four audio tape recorders,"<sup>21</sup> with one tape, "recording from the soundtrack of the video with the narrative".<sup>22</sup> The other tapes follow in a rather similar fashion emphasizing an auditory, rather than visual, experience. The accompanying work, Her Room in Paris 1979, does use video format within the environment, but it was Listening to Video that introduced "the viewer into fields of possibilities that suggest that truths hover between acknowledged ways of perceiving things."<sup>23</sup>

My artistic intention was for this visual and auditory surround-effect to attack the various senses, instead of soothing them (as so much "beautiful" art does), or leaving some (like hearing) unstressed. It was hoped that the

resultant visual-auditory barrage would shake the viewer out of a nominal art-gallery mood, of aesthetic complacency, into a state of alert or alarmed new openness. In the painted component of The Image of a Pretty Child, the Pope motif obviously represents the symbolic personification of the Catholic Church. The Church, through its dogmatic teachings, has attempted to stem the tide of physical/moral abuse of children for over a thousand years, give or take the side effects of a profound Christian somatophobia. But to what effect? Abuse appears to continue, almost unabated, in the face of moralizing dogmatism.

The intended meaning of this work is focused, in effect, on a certain kind of credibility gap which might be imagined as extending from the blessing-giving Pope, in one corner, to the simple fact of an abused child closer to the centre of the actual situation. Has the Church failed to keep pace in realistically adjusting to the climate of the times we really live in, or is it simply a matter of built-in human failure that accounts for the ongoing abuse of innocence, or both? Could that dogmatism which is officially aligned against these evils actually be seen as prolonging and promoting them, inadvertently, as a kind of ingrown anti-corporal reaction of the mind or spirit against the flesh? Does the official deterrent of "animal aggression" feed back, through some perverse mechanics, to become an active stimuli of a new level

of even stranger, more sophisticated, amoral violence? Even as helpless children, do we become the victims of the very social and individual conscience, or super-ego, which has theoretically evolved to protect us from "the beast" both within and without?

#### 4. "Concerning Christianity and Foucault"

In his The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche argues that:

"Christianity spelt, life loathing itself, and the loathing was simply disguised, tricked out, with notion of an 'other', and 'better' life. A hatred of the world, a curse to effective urges, a fear of beauty and sensuality, a transcendence rigged up to slander moral existence, a yearning for existential extrication, cession of all effort until the great 'Sabbath of Sabbaths'."<sup>24</sup>

Michel Foucault, in Madness and Civilization, postulates organized religious belief as setting up, or generating, "...a kind of landscape of images, an illusory milieu favorable to every hallucination and every delirium."<sup>25</sup> Foucault points out that doctors in insane asylums, "Were suspicious of the effects of too strict a devotion, too strong a belief"<sup>26</sup>, and that, "...too much moral rigor, too much anxiety about salvation and the life to come were often thought to bring on melancholia."<sup>27</sup> Consequently, at the hospital of Montélimor "...several women were reported suffering from mania and melancholia as a result of a mission being held in the city."<sup>28</sup>

Does society, in its striving for a "better life", actually deny and come to violate the actual life which truly exists in reality, the innocence of actual living in the here and now, which the child in my painting may well represent? Does moralizing man become little more than a chancellery of vindictive madness?

Foucault reminds us that, "Christ did not merely choose to be surrounded by lunatics; he himself chose to pass in their eyes for a madman, thus experiencing in his incarnation, all the suffering of human misfortune."<sup>29</sup> From this situation, "Christ agreed to take upon himself all the signs of the human condition and the very stigmata of fallen nature; from poverty to death, he followed the long road of the Passion, which was also the road of the passions, of wisdom forgotten, and of madness."<sup>30</sup> As Christ dies to redeem the sins of a world crucified, itself, on the cross, he still represents to the Christian a man who has become and still does experience "...all our infirmities and all our states of affliction."<sup>31</sup> He is within all who teach us to have compassion upon those who fall into sickness, death, and persecution; and, in that remote sense, the baby in my painting comes to represent Christ, dying again and again for our sin, suffering through all human misfortune and malintention.

In the 17th Century, "...the scandal of madness showed men how close animality their Fall could bring them; and, at the same time, how far divine mercy could extend when it consented to save man."<sup>32</sup>

5. Concerning Temporality (The Work of Mark Prent and Francis Bacon)

My Pope motif, in Pretty Child, represents functions of the middleman of divine intervention on earth, an ambassador of God who gives the penitent mercy through God. Yet, while religion could be seen as an instrument of forgiveness and sanctification, it is also hard to forget the possibility that, "...too much moral rigor, too much anxiety about salvation,"<sup>33</sup> can sometimes bring about grievous negative and self-destructive mental states. But, going along with Foucault's perspective, one has to examine these hospitalities as "...more of a critique than a positive analysis; the religious object or theme is suspected of arousing delirium and hallucination by the delirious and hallucinatory nature attributed to it."<sup>34</sup> Religion is at once, "...both spontaneity and constraint, and to this degree controls only the forces that can, in reason's eclipse, counterbalance the measureless violence of madness."<sup>35</sup>

The Pope, in my painting, with his hands extended towards



an individual soul in the audience (who faces us instead of the Pontiff), can be seen to act as a counterbalance between the realms of reason and total madness, as well as between the secular and religious planes of experience. "In the dialectic of insanity where reason hides without abolishing itself, religion constitutes the concrete form of what cannot go mad."<sup>36</sup>

If, on the other hand, we view the Three Studies ... as a devoted non-believer like Bacon might, formal Christian doctrines and associations drop away. We must see this torture as just another of many others, as a nearly infinite series of atrocities of ourselves against ourselves, of man against man. Within Bacon's artistic reality, primordial instincts and physical facts eclipse all moral codes and ethical doctrines.

Although, it is interesting to note, with regard to contemporary religious figures as a type, or category, Bacon does seem to feel "...that the Pope is unique."<sup>37</sup> He goes on to observe that, from his point of view, that the Pope is "...put in a unique position by being Pope, and therefore, like in certain great tragedies, he's as though raised onto a dais on which the grandeur of this image can be displayed to the world."<sup>38</sup> Just as Bacon sees history as a graveyard of monuments, he sees the Pope as little more than ornament; he

is a figurehead to be viewed from afar, but not necessarily understood. It is an image or sign, bound in tradition, which sells itself much quicker, and more easily, than any moral or spiritual platform it might conceivably propose.

It has often occurred to me that effective decentralization of the role of the Church occurs between the realm of secularized violence and the more passive violence of a religious hierarchy. From the viewpoint of my own artistic strategy, the way in which individuals may or may not react to Image of a Pretty Child, although essentially unpredictable, merely becomes a part of the juxtaposing of unlike images which the multi-media environment presents and project

The audio portion of this piece was intended to summon up the fact of a deteriorating physical and informational fabric, above and below and all sides of us. Beside the image of the baby there is a written script which tells us:

"Bruised lips, usually due to stepping across the mouth but sometimes due to ramming a feeding bottle into the mouth."

The audio portion of the work was meant not only to bring another technical element into the visual environment, but also to act as an information base or surround, feeding the experience of the viewer. Through the audio portion, although

cryptically and indirectly, I am relating the matter of de facto crucifixion to the event of the death of a close personal friend. The audio text was written and recorded specifically to accompany the exhibition of the painting:

"Remember when we met God at the seaside,  
He told us he was tired and needed a holiday,  
Remember he told the story,  
The ripping of the flesh,  
The puncture of the skin,  
Remember he told us we were dying everyday,  
Slipping, falling,  
The slender fingers wrapping quietly around the  
jugular ...  
Remember the white enamel smile in the half-light,  
Wondering where God was when the lungs filled with  
fluid.  
When we were children, we met God at the Seaside."

It was the persistent faith in things not seen, on the part of my friend, that had always bothered me. I could see the body being ravaged. I could only watch as decay set in and listen to my friend reaffirm the faith. It seemed that physical degeneration and eventual death could be linked to spiritual redemption. Theoretically, it was the body that had to expire before the soul could be released.

The video component of this multi-media piece relates more to the aspect of child abuse rather than the reflection of the personal experience just cited as the content of the audio tape. In the sixty minute video I filmed only a close up of my face for thirty minutes, as expressions passed over

it, and another individual's face for the duration of the tape. The audio track on the video is as follows:

"When the bloating of flesh was transparent blue  
When the twist of the backbone was all that we knew  
Yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves  
me,  
The dying told me so."

Unlike the painting, Image of a Pretty Child, with its contrast between an impotent moral authority and violation of innocence, an indirect affirmation of faith is embodied in the audio track of the video, even though, or perhaps because death seems imminent.

Bacon manipulates his imagery within an ideological field of dedicated disbelief, or non-belief particularly as far as established religion is concerned. On the expressive level, his paintings seem to draw the viewer into a slow, agonizing, precursor of death. His figures appear to cling to the last faint echoes of life, unwillingly, as their physical frames are drawn inevitably into an all too familial sequence of atrophy and ongoing decomposition. They are, quite literally, being deconstructed by forces of death which were planted deep within the living, growing seed, from the very beginning.

In a closely related way, the sculptor Mark Prent handles the kind of issues Bacon has dealt with so forcefully; but, of

course, Prent is working in a three dimension media format. Within the artistic world of Prent, "We come face to face with visualizations of our most primal terrors; the realization that our own body is beyond our control, the knowledge that disease and other forces can mutilate and destroy our physical being, the fact that death and decay are inevitable."<sup>39</sup>

In Prent's sculpture, Operating Room (1973), a woman's figure (with the head of a pig) lies outstretched on an operating table, its side peeled open to reveal the inner organs. In the same sense as "The reek of human blood smiles out at me," I cannot help but feel that it is a primordial kind of beauty for which Prent strives. When correlating the abstract concept of beauty with his art. Prent observes, "I am thinking of the textural richness, the colours, the volumes and formal relationship that lend powerful presence to my larger pieces."<sup>40</sup> On the issue of content, this sculptor believed that it is important to stress, "...the underlying merriment in most of the works."<sup>41</sup> What he writes about is that "humor is not merely an incident in my sculpture, it is, together with beauty, the driving mechanism of the whole thing."<sup>42</sup>

Although others might not identify easily with my own, subjective, sense of beauty, Image of a Pretty Child registers variations and interpretations of that beauty, in the festive

graphic colour scheme, and in the minimalist use of background (leaving the white ground of the prepared canvas to both bind the images together and keep them separate). The reductive nature of negating excessive, potentially decorative detail, concentrates attention not only on the subject matter, or psychological content, but is also intended to focus the viewer's awareness on a certain kind of subjective vision of colour composition. Beauty, under these conditions, may well be more in the visual imagination of the artist than in the stylistically conditioned mind of the viewer; but, with respect to the more primal kind of beauty which I sense, deep beneath the surface of pleasure and pain, good and evil, the bruises on the baby's face become much more than painful, aching bruises. They become one with a colourful cosmic notation, transcending flesh, articulated with a "jewel like intimacy."<sup>43</sup> From deep beneath and beyond the veil of social judgment, the reek of human blood shines out at me, and at us all.

On the raw edge of survival, I suppose, that's all that sometimes remains. As Prent explains, "My figures are about that mad, crazy fight to stay alive and prevail in an impossible situation."<sup>44</sup> Much like Prent's three dimensional figures, certain elements of Bacon's persona remain alive in spite of an "impossible" context, if barely and in a sense that transcends choice. In their confined rectangular cells

(Head VI, 1949), the embodiment of decomposition, in the shape of a human cranium, screams out in what appears to be intractable torment.

With his routinely acrid sense of personal irony in what is probably a scathing kind of redirected understatement, Bacon explains that most of his pictures involve characters who evoke a state of uneasiness and "that as this man was very neurotic and almost hysterical, (Head VI) this may possibly come across in the paintings."<sup>45</sup> As Francis Bacon himself, more than any hypothetical external model, should probably be identified as an essential subject of all his paintings, the quote is most certainly a revealing one.

The Image of a Pretty Child is most assuredly within my own mind, an image of a child who has been beaten to death. The dualistic surface of social/moral realities, and/or illusions, is brought abruptly into play. The figure of the child is not intended to vacillate within an ambiguous fringe area, between life and death, as in many of Prent's and Bacon's works. It stands as a solid, unvacillating, evidence of a very real moral compromise which is too close to all of us for comfort. "We become both victim and voyeur -- we fear ourselves and are, at the same time repelled by the deformities and handicaps of others."<sup>46</sup> We vacillate between the polarized field of socialized conscience, on the one hand,

and the magnetic attraction of a fascinating world of primordial truth and beauty which seems to exist beyond words, or perhaps, beyond thought itself.

If my early paintings carry a didactic intention, it is perhaps, to gain a better understanding of aspects of society that are running amok. We must become more internally acquainted with those individuals who suffer, on an individual level, with the same madness that drives religious groups, ethnic groups, and nation states into states of neurosis or out and out insanity in the collective sense. Perhaps, like the archetypal Christ, we must mingle among the so-called imbeciles and madmen of the world, in order to become more adequately familiarized with the dark side of the human condition.

The paintings Smile, God Loves You and Image of a Pretty Child, and others which I have not discussed from the same time period, were meant to stand as generalized signposts, in a certain admittedly cryptic sense, on the edge of the shadow zone of ultimate dread and horror -- on the boundary between normality and shock therapy, between a pleasant day in the country and the confines of Auschwitz. The intent was not to formulate a set of precisely quantified value judgments about individuals, nor to analyze what might be right or wrong with a given social system. The works stand by themselves, and,



without the aid of explanatory verbiage, they were intended to serve as food for thought -- or, perhaps even as visual laxatives or purgatives for constipated minds and hearts.

As Bacon once said, "I've always hoped to put over things as directly and rawly as is possible, and perhaps if a thing comes across directly, people feel that it is horrific".<sup>47</sup> Although worked out through a distinctly different kind of technical strategy which is still in the process of development, I have striven to achieve a similar or identical end. Why should people like it? Why be surprised or disappointed if they don't? Bacon explains that if one's art takes the raw truth directly to the public "...they're sometimes offended, although it is a fact...",<sup>48</sup> and, consequently, "...people tended to be offended by facts, or what used to be called the truth."<sup>49</sup>

The immediacy of aesthetic fact could, potentially, be delivered with directness by the technology of mass media; but there is a tremendous difference between experiencing aesthetic fact (in Bacon's sense) and merely taking in more information. Through newspapers and magazines, radio, film, and television we are glutted, indeed force-fed like French Geese, with the passing information of the day. Yet, if we shift the context of some of this information to the art gallery, and the interpretive framework of particular works of

art in that special environment, the situation can shift drastically.

In my own experience, certain information taken out of its media environment and placed within a fine art context can actually come across as being more rather than less shocking, and thus offensive. It then exists outside of where the public has been conditioned to find it, and is in a sense severed from its point of origin in the so-called "real world." Examples of this are the slaughterhouse videos in The Quick and the Dead. Instead of being "reported" it is being expressed and exhibited for its own sake. As art, information can become "fact", and thus a form of truth. As such it audaciously demands to be experienced, rather than merely registered or understood as signifying a negativity we have already decided we can not realistically effect, let alone control or elevate.

## CHAPTER TWO - MIDDLE PERIOD (1990)

1. Concerning Violence and Barthes with reference to  
The Quick and the Dead

The contents of the Anglican Prayer Book were fascinating to me as a child. The phrases which were repeated over and over again at church services continue to echo back and forth within my mind. At the center of this fascination was the "Apostle's Creed", most notably the passage:

"He suffered and was buried, and the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into Heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And He shall come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead: whose kingdom shall have no end."<sup>50</sup>

My multi-media work from 1990, combined in The Quick and the Dead, might appear at first to be diverse in meaning and nature, but the various components have in common a particular strategy of examination of the human condition. Like much of Mark Prent's sculpture, these paintings "convey an ongoing concern with death, with the signs and causes of death, with death as a possibility and death as a probability."<sup>51</sup> While the concept of death is a key concern of this work, the whole spectrum of violence is another factor of great importance in relation to the collective unity of, The Quick and the Dead.

Violence can apparently be experienced or perpetrated,

observed and evaluated, on almost every level of existence; thus its definition becomes problematic and multi-faceted. Roland Barthes postulated three major difficulties in interpreting the word "violence". Firstly, of or within a semantic, intellectual order, the "...word lends itself to dissection, because it is already firmly embedded in the vast paperwork of the judicial system. Mass culture itself has provided us with all sorts of ways of looking at this word."<sup>52</sup> The second difficulty is best described within an existential format, i.e. "... violence threatens our bodies; therefore, we usually react to it with rejection, refusal, but there are perhaps beings who accept and assume violence, even finding a kind of exaltation in it."<sup>53</sup>

And finally, the third difficulty Barthes postulates, opening the Pandora's box of individual and collective ethics and morality: "It is a word that poses problems of conduct on the level of states, organizations, groups, individuals. And here we feel at quite a loss. It's a problem as old as the world itself; how do we control violence except with more violence?"<sup>54</sup>

Within the context Barthes has outlined, how should an artist assimilate the experienced fact of violence within his own expression? How can paintings address and assimilate the various levels of meaning, vis-a-vis actual incidents which

life thrusts upon us? Of direct reference to my thinking and work on The Quick and the Dead, take for example a specific incident that took place about a year ago in Calgary.

When a woman was physically attacked on the street, at a busy intersection in broad daylight, the media suggested various scenarios to explain the incident. From my subjective creative perspective, the most provocative media version depicted the passing motorists yelling out comments, much like spectators at a professional wrestling match, instead of becoming involved in assisting the victimized woman. Whether or not it is exactly what happened, in the objective sense of journalistic fact, the concept of this spectacle was what probably initiated the mental processes that eventually led to The Quick and the Dead. I certainly intended to mull over it, from the beginning, much in the terms of Barthes writing; i.e. that nature and society have provided a number of remarkably variant ways of defining, and thus confronting and reacting to, the immediate presence and/or out-of-context experience of violence.

Imagine the motorists passing by with their minds partly on their driving, but nevertheless shouting out comments instead of intervening, almost like emotional kibitzers at a chess match. For them, the phenomenon of violence was unfolding, perhaps, more like a dramatic production at the

theatre or on television a comic-tragic media melodrama in effect, enacted on the street instead of on the stage or screen. Perhaps they automatically reacted to the brutal attack in the same context, or from the same set of conditioned assumptions, with which they were already considering the morning news or talk show on the car stereo.

Being removed from the action, the voyeur should sit back and watch, secure in the knowledge that he or she will not have to become, should not become, directly involved. Why would involvement be necessary, how could it be appropriate, as long as the violence we observe is identified with the artifice of media reality, of distanced information for its own sake, of entertainment from the very beginning?

Within the framework of Barthes' second level of difficulty in defining the nature of "violence", although distanced psychologically, the voyeur cannot help but feel physically threatened. The witness naturally feels bodily fear as a biological reaction, and this fear reinforces the inclination to remain a witness and not participate. We may not be strong enough. We may waste our time, be late for work, be sued or arrested, or even be injured or killed. In denying the participatory aspect, or open invitation of violence we are accessing a built-in safety valve for our own individual protection and survival, if not for that of the

larger collective good. The more I considered the situation, from the point of view of a painter, the more problematic it seemed to become within my mind. As Barthes reminds us, on the third level of definition, how are we to control violence without adding more violence of our own to an already violent world? If everyone maintained a more distanced, spectator attitude of non-participation to start with, how much actual violence would remain? Or, should we subscribe to a natural law which seems to mandate a prudent degree of apathy to the sufferings of other animals, including human beings, in the interests of individual well-being and survival. In terms of the "survival of the fittest," must being 'fit' mean being cold-hearted or completely heartless?

These were the kind of questions I was asking myself as I conceived and executed The Quick and the Dead. Within the context of this violent scenario, as I visualized it, the motorists were obviously maintaining a voyeuristic position in relation to the attack -- i.e. it is wrong for the spectator to participate in someone else's game or play; and, because they were physically threatened, the need to maintain a voyeuristic perspective could easily be reinforced, and justified, in terms of individualistic well being and survival of the motorist in terms of his body, his economic interests, and those of his immediate family.

These were the kind of mental and emotional reflections on my part, which preceded and accompanied the painted component of The Quick and the Dead -- i.e. the execution of thirteen portraits of witnesses which I entitled Games for Spectators. A single face fills each composition completely, although the individual persona have all been given different facial expressions, ranging from glassy indifference to aroused bemusement. In the installation of The Quick and the Dead, these large paintings were arranged against one wall in order to give the impression, or at least imply, that the figures were all viewing the same external event outside the illusory field of the representation on canvas.

The thirteen faces were painted large in order to increase impact through scale. By grouping them together as spectators, I was working to heighten the tension between the gallery visitor and the two dimensional illusion. Within my mind, iconological connection between Games for Spectators and the "Apostle's Creed", is twofold. In becoming judge-like witnesses or detached commentators on violence, the spectators have in a sense played God. Within my own field of belief, the thirteen spectators' imperious attitude toward humanity (symbolized by the woman under attack) will inevitably be judged by a much higher authority. What the "quick" could perhaps justify for themselves within a secularized moral arena, will in fact condemn them at the time of their own



death, if we accept the formulation of The Creed at face value.

The last connection to mention, which concerned me as an artist, extends into the academic domain of religious history. Barthes observed that, "... there is not one of the world's great religions, in the East or the West, that has not dealt with the problem of violence within a general metaphysical connection, either by assimilating violence into evil, or by assimilating it on the contrary into the force of right, in certain more archaic religions."<sup>55</sup> He goes on to note that, "...This problem therefore implies conversion in order to deal with violence on the particular terms of each religion. If one wishes to discuss it in secular terms, then another key must be found."<sup>56</sup>

The installation that I called The Quick and the Dead was presented as a kind of admittedly cryptic, audio-visual, multi-media, discourse on violence and death, realized in secular terms but also seen -- in final analysis -- with something of the kind of religious perspective that The Creed appears, to me, to propose. "It is obviously this particular violence that commands our attention at the present, in our streets ... the violence of criminals, anarchy, even war."<sup>57</sup> How should an artist respond?

2. "The Quick and the Dead" (A physical examination of the installation.)

Before beginning a full explanation of The Quick and the Dead, a complete objective physical description of the whole installation will be presented. Thus the reader will hypothetically be able to interrelate the format of all components within the installation. The illustration of the Art Department Gallery has been divided into four parts, (a to d), each letter of the alphabet representing one of four walls in the gallery.

Part (A) consists of one video and four paintings which are part of the Games for Spectators. They are illuminated by the light from the two slide projectors situated in front of them. The projectors face wall (C). Part (B) consists of the rest of the nine portraits of Games for Spectators. Part (C) consists of the two slide projections. The first is a drawing of the written text defining the word "pretty". Above that is a projection of an individual with a history of abuse. The next projection is a slide photographed from a drawing. The actual drawing used to photograph the slide from was placed on the wall, and the slide of the same drawing was projected (offset) larger on the original. A video was placed beside the projections. Beside the video monitor are four drawings of a woman's uterus placed below a painting of a baby. Part

(D) consists of four drawings of abortion instruments and at the end is the last video monitor. Each video monitor is playing the same video, running continuously along with the projectors. Each component is meant to be viewed in half-light, as if the public is walking into a dream already in progress. Walls (A) and (B) consist of all 13 portraits for Games for Spectators. Originally, they were all to be arranged on one wall facing the three video monitors but space considerations gave way to an alternative mode of presentation. The portraits occur at the viewer's eye level and above, and in doing this assume an omnipresence within the room. The Spectators in the paintings become the viewers of the gallery visitors instead of vice versa. Their over life size features assume a certain dominance over the people viewing them. The individuals in the paintings become voyeurs, the public becomes bodies being watched and evaluated. There are three portraits within the group which have actual text written on the surface of the canvas. The first portrait has an altered version of a children's nursery rhyme superimposed over it. It reads:

"Jack be nimble, Jack be Quick  
Jack's impaled on a candlestick."

To the left of this canvas is another of the same size. Next to it the text of "Jack Be Nimble" is written in reverse beside a smaller portrait (with "Meet Jack" scrawled over the

top of it). It is the word "quick" appearing in the nursery rhyme that is of central importance. Jack, in the religious connotation of the Apostles Creed is quick or alive, and he like all the others is judged according to his own works. But in the case of the rhyme, Jack may be physically "quick" to try to escape his own death, which according to the rhyme is already predetermined. Jack is part of Games for Spectators, but his role has changed. He no longer becomes a spectator playing a game, a voyeur watching the victim, but himself becomes the victim. Just as the text is reversed in the portrait beside the normal text, Jack's role has been reversed. He has to act quickly or else assume that death will be his eventual outcome. The portraits which have the text written on them are not of Jack himself, but of anonymous people. It is in the tiny portrait with the text "Meet Jack", that we find our victim. He smiles at the public like a celebrity greeting the paparazzi. He is still the spectator, the detached gamester, and it is in the text that we read of his role reversal. The spectator can at anytime become the victim, it all depends on fate, or "when your number comes up". "Jack", a possible metaphor for man, stops at accident scenes, strains his neck to see car crashes on the highway, and tries to do a quick body count. He becomes a spectator playing an almost fanciful game-role, sometimes not realizing the full impact of the situation.

By taking a seemingly innocent version of a children's nursery rhyme, and by altering the semantics of it, we can remake it to a different frame of reference.

This format does not explore, "various sign systems other than language systems differing essentially in that their sign substance is no longer articulated sound."<sup>58</sup> Barthes states, "when you reach society as complex as ours, however, especially a mass society this notion of the 'object' or the 'signifying material', becomes rather problematical, for the simple reason that these objects are used largely to exchange marginal information."<sup>59</sup> It is through "Meet Jack", "that communication through objects presents a certain richness only if it is reinforced by language: objects must be supported by this kind of discourse."<sup>60</sup> In this case the object is Jack and the rhyme is the discourse presented as a statement of his fate.

These two semiotic functions in art according to Jan Mukarovsky are that of autonomous and informational. "Meet Jack", represents the latter, functioning, "not only as a work of art but also simultaneously, as an 'utterance' expressing a state of mind an idea, an emotion, etc."<sup>61</sup> According to Mukarovsky, "the representational arts, the arts with a subject (= theme, content)"<sup>62</sup> have an informational function.

Wall C consists of two projections. Under the first projection is the definition of the word "pretty". In relation to the context of the environment in which it appears this word and subsequent definition would perhaps seem out of place. But "pretty", as a defining term could mean many things to many people, above and beyond the dictionary meaning. If we look to the historical roots of the word itself it is Anglo Saxon taking the form of "praettig", or cunning which is derived from praett, which means trick.

How then do we evaluate this word? Do we prescribe to its roots or its modern day meaning? And where exactly does it fit in with The Quick and the Dead. Like the latter we can evaluate this term according to religious connotations that those who are alive and those who are dead (their spirits) will be evaluated according to their deeds and either damned or redeemed. We can also view 'quick', as simply being a state of existence, of being alive and no more, and death being the final statement of this existence, with no hope for renewal. We can evaluate the word 'pretty' according to its historical roots, that it is derived from 'cunning', from a trick. Or it can become something pleasing to the senses, and each definition could have validity to many people.

Projected above this is a picture of a screaming youth with a history of abuse, and beside this a collage of murder

and suicide victims. Some have been beaten to death, others strangled, their hope of redemption being far away. Each picture is coloured using saturated hues, the colour and form become almost pretty, much like Bacon wanted to paint the inside of the mouth like Monet painted a sunrise. The corpse, in all its stages, retains a certain beauty through an aggressive colour scheme. The colour makes the image of the corpse become less a symbol of death and more a celebration of it. Once we get beyond the colour we realize that the form is really human, that these people are victims of man's inhumanity against man.

These people are victims of unseen perpetrators. Their suffering is a memory, and like Bacon's figures they evoke the hopelessness of the global perspective. Taken from media and forensic journals, these people are examples of what happens when the "human condition" turns on itself.

In order to access Wall B the viewer had to cut through the projection beams from the projectors. In effect the beams of light set up a barrier so that people would walk around the projectors if they wanted to see the images on Wall C. In this way a distance can be established between the spectators on the wall and the spectators on the ground. The video monitor is placed beside the drawings. To the right of the video monitor is a painting of an abused baby created from the

point of view of a larger individual looking down on it. The image of the baby is blurred in form, its physical properties abbreviated and muted against the red backdrop. In the lower left hand corner within a rectangular shape is the image of the same baby rendered in a more realistic, clear cut manner. The bruises and abrasions are more self evident in the smaller version, and again the viewer must come right up to the picture to actually see the scars on the body. The figure becomes more real, more direct, more unappealing up close than from a distance. Below this picture is the repeated image of the side view of a woman's uterus. These tiny images were framed in blue and arranged at systematic intervals below the painting. Both wall C and D are interconnected for they deal in child abuse and abortion.

The four pictures on wall D are images of abortion instruments and at the end of this is an audio component reciting a text. The text is as follows, from the creed of St. Anthanasuis:

"He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty: from whence he shall come to judge both the quick and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies and shall come to judge both the quick and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies and shall give account for their own works."<sup>63</sup>

followed by:



"The usual order of decomposition is:

1. Intestines stomach, liver blood, heart blood and circulation, heart muscle.
2. Air passages, lungs, liver.
3. Brain and cord.
4. Kidneys and bladder.
5. Voluntary muscles.
6. Uterus, prostrate.

Love God, Love God, Love God, Love God."

The end of the audio track relates to four drawings of abortion instruments:

"Among unskilled women using an instrument upon themselves the most common was the Higginson syringe. The use of the knitting needles, skewers, scent spray nozzles, and similar probing instruments -- nails, pencils, and cut lengths of 'slippery elm bark' (this also sometimes being left to swell and act as a tent within the cervix) - was more or less restricted to self-induced interference."

"Thank you."

My voice was recorded tape to tape on a normal stereo system and then its speed altered on a 8-track. My voice reached in turn different tonal levels and speeds, adding to the overall ambience of tension in the environment.

Each abortion instrument was drawn in the center of a piece of blue paper. Rendered as accurately as possible (their dimensions being over life size) they could have been any kind of instrument to the untrained eye. It was the audio track that fully defined what the drawings were. Enough visual information was given to describe the object but it was

left up to the text to define the function of each instrument. To adhere the drawings to the wall nails were used to pierce through the four corners of each work. The nails were more effective than traditional framing devices, for they connected the drawings even more symbolically to the text. The nail was an instrument that women used to commit abortions on themselves, and in carrying this motif from the text the metal nails helped to integrate it three dimensionally with the drawing.

Each person represented in The Quick and the Dead is in effect a victim because of their own indifference to the crimes against humanity. They wait to be judged according to the creed, their indifference perhaps being the cause of their downfall. The people who have been murdered, beaten, or burned to death are indeed victims; as are abused children and the unborn. Each and every one becomes part of the creed. They become both "The Quick" and "The Dead".

The last component to be discussed is the video format which appeared on walls A, C, and D. The video which runs two hours in length is concerned with two prime areas in the slaughterhouse, those being the killing floor and the cold-storage rooms. The video records in explicit detail the dismemberment of cattle. The cattle becomes a metaphor for humanity. Like the rest of the victimized people represented

in the exhibition, the cattle become an extension of this sacrifice. Like Bacon's Three Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion, man is represented as half animal, half human.

In Bacon's Head VI, from 1949, the figure is confined within a clear rectangular box. Bacon's attempts at confining a figure which seems to be experiencing some kind of mental breakdown is purely compositional. We know that "this method of spatial projection was adopted enthusiastically by a wide front of Bacon's English imitators from Reg Butler to Roland Piche -- and it has finally come to Broadway in the guise of Donald Pleasance in The Man in the Glass Box".<sup>64</sup> We see in boxes their inherent effectiveness for they, "become symbolic of the cages - neurotic, political, sexual, what have you - which the individual sets up around himself or which society imposes like so many Skinner Boxes in behavioural rat studies."<sup>65</sup> We know from Foucault that, "confinement did not seek to suppress madness, to eliminate from the social order a figure which did not find its place within it."<sup>66</sup> The singularity of madness, "is immediately perceived as difference: whence the forms of spontaneous and collective judgement sought, not from physicians, but from a man of good sense, to determine the confinement of a madman; and on the other hand, confinement cannot have any other goal than a correction (that is, the suppression of the difference or the fulfilment of this nothingness in death)."<sup>67</sup>

Bacon's figures are one step away from death, simply existing in minimal environments. Their madness is beyond correction, but their confinement within their space and canvas makes them virtually unreachable except through psychological interpretation. Bacon's figures exist as separate entities, apart from the social order, and therefore their suffering becomes even more acute.

In the video, man is the animal, the victim, to be destroyed and consumed. Man and animal are one and the same. Man is killed like an animal up for slaughter, waiting in assembly-line fashion to be eradicated at will. The slaughter of the animals and the slaughter of the victims are one and the same, the only difference being that the animals are killed in a more humane manner.

If we compare the video to Mark Prent's And Is There Anything Else You'd Like Madam (1971) we see similarities in the approach to content.

In this work, Prent has carefully reconstructed a meat counter, but upon closer inspection we see that, "instead of dill pickles we are confronted with pickled penises, instead of slices of liver we see darkened slices of female breasts at \$8.85 a pound to say nothing of slices of the soles of feet that look like slices of chicken."<sup>68</sup> It is the very fact of

viewing portions of the human anatomy, cut up and served for general consumption that, "stirs some of our deepest fears: mutilation or having to eat one another for survival."<sup>69</sup> But more importantly it also forces us to reconsider, "the act of slaying animals for consumption and our perhaps necessary but nonetheless actual endorsement of the act."<sup>70</sup> More than anything else, The Quick and the Dead, (especially the video components) establish no moralistic tone and offer no solution.

### 3. Concerning the writings of Bataille and Mukarovsky

It was through reading a text on Bacon that an author by the name of George Bataille was first drawn into my thought processes. In 1929-30, Bataille co-founded and became the director of Documents, a review in which his articles often exposed elements of the 'ignoble', which had supposedly been repressed by centuries of reassuring idealization. "Documents was the refuge of several disaffected Surrealist writers and painters, including Michel Leiris, a long standing friend of Bacon's who had also written on him and whose portrait Bacon painted."<sup>71</sup> For Bataille, the idea of sacrifice and slaughter were connected. He stated that, "the slaughterhouse rises out of religion in the sense that the temple of distant epochs served a double function, being used at the same time for supplication and for killings."<sup>72</sup> Man, for Bataille, is a

hypocritical creature for he tries to block out that which he finds distasteful. "The 'quarantine' that hides abattoirs from our sight is a sign of our inability, in Bataille's view, to tolerate our own ugliness."<sup>73</sup>

For Bacon, the Crucifixion and the slaughterhouse are both inextricably linked. Both are concerned with pain, suffering, and death. Bacon does not draw a distinction between animals and man because he sees both as being one and the same. Commenting on photographs about slaughterhouses he says, "we don't know of course, but it appears by these photographs that they're (the animals) so aware of what is going to happen to them, that they do everything to attempt escape,"<sup>74</sup> much as man would. Commenting on his 1962 triptych, Crucifixion, he admits that, "these pictures were very much based on that kind of thing, which to me is very, very near this whole thing of Crucifixion."<sup>75</sup> Bacon shares with Bataille man's intolerance to view his own ugliness:

"When you go into a butchers shop and see how beautiful meat can be and then you think about it, you can think of the whole horror of life, of one living off another. It's like those stupid things that are said about bull fighting. Because people will eat meat and then ... complain about bullfighting covered with furs and with birds in their hair."<sup>76</sup>

When video's were introduced in my work they were playing

on three separate screens. Each screen faced a particular set of portraits. This time man faced the ugliness, not with horror, but with a general compliance. Bataille sees man as a hypocritical creature, blocking out what he finds distasteful. But sometimes man can view what would normally be deemed distasteful with apparent ease.

An example from The New York Times consolidates this fact:

"For more than half an hour 38 law abiding citizens...watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks."

The New York Times, May 27, 1964, p. 1

Man reacts to the ugliness much like a spectator viewing a game or the action in the slaughterhouse. He distances himself from the action but inevitably becomes part of it. His superficial label is "law abiding", while he watches passively as the law is broken. He is part of the law abiding system but when the situation becomes malignant, he becomes a hypocrite rather than an enforcer of the system.

Barthes did not see, "the present world society opting for a general resolution of the problem of violence".<sup>77</sup> He stated that, "a world without violence seems a utopia, and imagining such a world is no longer even pleasant, so to speak, since the distance between this utopia and reality is so overwhelming".<sup>78</sup> During wartime man sets up his own

system of law and order, and follows the "law of the jungle" rather than the law of society. Survival can depend on the type of system instituted. Sometimes it can also lead to a total breakdown of morality, on the part of the system and its followers, as evidenced in the following quote:

"A memoir published today quoted Adolf Eichmann having said before he was apprehended that he had no regrets for his role in the mass killings of European Jews."

The New York Times, November 30, 1960, p. 9.

By rationalizing and essentially re-affirming his actions, Eichmann tries to move himself far from the deed even though he is still part of it. Eichmann becomes the man Bataille talked about, a hypocritical creature who robotically blocks out that which he finds distasteful, or damning to his person. Eichmann states:

"I was only receiving and carrying out orders ... where there is no responsibility there can be no guilt."

Eichmann, quoted in Weiner et. of., 1977.

In order to cover up his guilt, Eichmann lays the blame on the state. It was the political order that made him kill the Jews. Perhaps this is so, but one cannot absolve himself of a crime by making the state assume responsibility. Since such atrocities were committed during wartime they fall within



the system of law, order, and morals set down by the state, and Eichmann is consciously following this manipulation by the government. Now that such crimes are examined nearly 40 years later, he tries to make the world believe that he was just someone who took orders without thinking, aided in trying to eliminate the Jewish race. Much like the law abiding citizens who saw the woman being stabbed in New York, the German leaders could also not hold themselves responsible for such a situation. As a business man evaluates a deal, it would be bad business to risk a valuable asset (themselves) in order to gamble on the outcome of an exchange in which lesser values might be at risk. Perhaps the woman would die anyway, perhaps they would be killed or injured attempting to save someone who wasn't worth saving in the first place. By merely removing their moral responsibility, within their own minds, they could reason that they were not guilty.

Perhaps we should begin to evaluate the actual "intention" in art, if indeed there is one. Mukarovsky brings into question an example in which, "a work of art and an implement are intention".<sup>79</sup> The question then asked is, "Why is the work of art orientated towards nothing but itself?"<sup>80</sup> If we follow this statement then, "what difference does it make who has produced the hammer or who understands what this instrument is for and who uses it. In the case of a painting or a statue, on the contrary, the question of use does not

arise at all, and attention is necessarily directed toward man".<sup>81</sup> Perhaps this is true, but there are theoreticians who, "claim that the work is simply an expression of a personality, and therefore that it is necessary to man".<sup>82</sup>

Personality evidenced in my work and especially, The Quick and the Dead, is a necessary component for the establishment of my style. For me, one cannot divorce the individual from the work of art, they are both integrated into the process of creating art. Mukarovsky believes that, "if the work of art were exclusively or even only predominantly to be an expression of its originator's personality"<sup>83</sup> what significance if any would it have upon the people viewing it. What the public understands or does not is of little consequence to me. In short, The Quick and the Dead reached out to what seemed to me (by and large) to be a silent, opinionless audience, which had to be prodded into making some kind of commitment.

Over sixty years ago, the writer George Bataille drew an interesting parallel between sacrifice and slaughter. That the slaughterhouse rises out of religion. Thousands of years ago religion was used for supplication and killing. With regards to my work, religion (Apostle's Creed) and slaughter (abattoir) can be connected historically but it is more Bataille's view as man being a hypocritical creature, trying to block out that which he finds distasteful, much like the

audience who viewed my work seemed to feel.

Like Francis Bacon, I saw animal and man as being one and the same. Man expresses emotion and Bacon expresses this through pain and suffering (internalized). If we view Three Figures At The Base Of A Crucifixion, without reading an accompanying text explaining their mythological origins, we would be left to our own conclusions. Even when we are aware of this information, the Three Figures are still ambiguous. Why they are in a state of torment, why are they asexual in nature? Bacon only gives some clues, but never the entire picture. Who can effectively explain the workings of the human condition? No one can, and so we are left to finish the puzzle.

Bacon's work shows us that an artist can produce emotional states effectively in the character he creates. Like his paintings of screaming popes locked within glass rectangular boxes, we can acknowledge the mental deterioration involved, but not why it is happening, how it is happening, or where it is happening. Like Bacon's painting, my work can be understood to a point but the full meaning will never be realized unless it is put down step by step in print by the person who created it. If everything must be explained down to the last detail for viewer satisfaction we might as well write down all our ideas and not paint them, for the visual

process seems one more step to understanding of the initial concepts. It is the art that we should be looking at, reacting to first, and then if we desire more information to go to this source, the artist, if we are so concerned with details.

#### 4. Gentlemen, You Can Start Cutting Anytime.

The last painting which will be discussed in this chapter is, Gentlemen, You Can Start Cutting Anytime. It is a diptych, with the right side being the face of a screaming female, repeated twice, one on top of the other. An elongated body occupies the left side of the picture. The depiction of the body is based on the image of my own and the anatomical distortions were introduced deliberately. Slides were taken of my body a few months before beginning the initial work. At the time the photographs were taken, I had broken out in a severe case of chicken pox, and my skin was covered in rashes that were painful but retained a certain beauty. The colour of the swellings became yellow-green in hue, and these were in turn reproduced on canvas. These colours were used instead of normal flesh tones. Sickness and disease (even treatable) can substantially alter the proper functioning of the body, breakdown the system, and eventually bring on death. It is the Christian belief that views the physical frame as temporal.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, remember O man that dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return"<sup>84</sup>

During the sacrament of Anglican communion, when the priest breaks the bread and blesses the wine, the congregation takes part of both. So the priest symbolically reenacts the last supper between Christ and his disciples before he was crucified. The bread and the wine become symbols that remind the Christian that Christ died for the sins of the world, and the sacrament of communion reinforces this belief. According to Catholicism, the process of transubstantiation (the appearance of the physical presence of Christ), occurs just before Communion. The crucifixion of Christ reaffirms our faith that he died to cleanse the world of sin. The physical suffering of Christ has become a metaphor for salvation. In Gentlemen, You Can Start Cutting Anytime, the body is prepared for some form of sacrifice; it is superficially dissected by red lines in much the same way as sides of beef are diagrammed. There are no signs of blood, but the discoloration of the skin makes the physical become more evident. For Bacon, the body is a metaphor for mental suffering. For me, the body is like a piece of rotting fruit, ready to be thrown out, its usefulness extinct. It is Francis Bacon who portrays "the absurdities of unredeemable human existence in this modern age - loneliness, anxiety, despair".<sup>85</sup> It is George Bataille who reminds us through his

writings that man is a creature of hypocrisy, screening and assimilating what he does and does not want to view, not according to right or wrong, bad or good, but according to his own biases.

## CHAPTER THREE - LATE PERIOD (1991)

1. Untitled #1 - (an examination of the human condition)

After the completion of The Quick and the Dead, my work returned to a more traditional painting/drawing format. The multi-media approach, which I used in the last installation, helped me to expand my information based work to other areas of visual exploration. This, in turn, led me to explore audio tracks, and to integrate this format with two dimensional work explained earlier. This blending of technology and more traditional modes of representation led to perhaps the initial drawback of The Quick and the Dead, and that was information overload in a confined area. The overload had been consciously planned from the start, much like the verbal and visual assault one receives when you turn on the television. The same sort of assault was planned but in a more intensifies, formalized, and systematic manner.

It would take place within a room or gallery and it would have a step by step structure. This is not to say that television programming mass media machines do not have a structure, but working within an actual gallery environment, the variables had to be manipulated at will according to space and height. The work was not limited to the television screen or the painted page, to get my message across.

In terms of square feet the gallery was too small for the amount of work that appeared in it. The environment that I created needed a room three times the size that it originally was conceived for but at the time the inclusion of this large body of work added a "nice" claustrophobic nature to the environment. To remove a selection of works for space considerations would have corrupted the integrity of the series, for all the work was made to be viewed as a whole and not in sections. For my ideal version the information overload occurring in a larger room would take place in component parts, so that the viewer, because of space of the room could wander casually and be drawn into various parts of the installation by an unseen hook and then be released to other key areas.

Because The Quick and the Dead appeared in such a compacted space, the overload occurred almost instantaneously, with a direct force, so that the viewer is left in the middle of the room being drawn into all areas at once. Looking back on this scenario, the size of the room may have been a drawback. Certainly, it gave the installation yet another expressive angle. Viewed in the context of a larger space, the emotional edge would have been more sporadic, less intense, and perhaps would have given the viewers a few minutes to collect their thoughts. Either that, or the hypothetically large area that The Quick and the Dead should



have appeared in, might have heightened its impact in a different way; for the thread of imagery would become intermittent, like the recurrence of a bad memory, constantly being suppressed yet always surfacing at times when we least want it. In any case, this work exhausted the capabilities of multi-media integration for that period in time. Expression of information overload would now be deployed exclusively on a two-dimensional surface.

The format of this work would focus on the horizontal instead of the vertical dimension. In this way concentration would be given to the narrative aspect of the piece, and would be read much like an ancient frieze. Size would become of paramount importance, the composition designed for 9' x 25'. For me, mural paintings already relegated their visual authority in a very forceful manner. The sheer virtue of their size made them almost inescapable. Like Games for Spectators, the individuals that I created were to analyze the public more than the public analyzes them.

By placing the paintings above the viewers eye level and making the composition over life size, the images assumed an almost immediate hierarchical importance. Upon looking back, I recognize a need to expand the visual power of my work. In doing so, the paintings of this period became much larger and the compositions more elaborate. The key painting which will

be discussed in this chapter is, Untitled #1. Originally in my studio there were six similar panels which were all about the same size. Each panel had been designed and started at the same time, and there was a continuity in the visual information put down on canvas, but each was treated as a separate entity. These were being produced over the period of, The Quick and the Dead. The panels were put together in different sequences. The continuity of the imagery suggested a narrative arrangement, and thus each canvas seemed to work better together.

For me, the work of Francis Bacon has always suggested that the human anatomy could become a reflection of the human condition, and thus an objective correlative of how most individuals must simply exist. When questioned if Bacon had a feeling of mortality about his paintings, he replied that he had a feeling of it all the time. "If life excites you its opposite, like a shadow, death, must excite you. Perhaps not excite you, but you are more aware of it in the same way as you are aware of life, you're aware of it like the turn of a coin between life and death".<sup>86</sup>

Bacon believes that one is "never exorcised, because people say you forget about death, but you don't. And you don't stop thinking about them; time doesn't heal".<sup>87</sup> Bacon's rendering of the anatomy was sometimes distorted to

the point of being unrecognizable, of being just a collection of colours which seemingly dematerialize form. Bacon concentrates, "on something which was an obsession, what you would have put into your obsession with the physical act you put into your work".<sup>88</sup>

The textures and rhythms set down in his compositions abstract the figure, making it less a part of reality and more a purveyor of nightmare. There was a need to increase the size of my imagery, yet to eradicate any attempt for a reduction in form. Anatomy could be altered but not to the extent that the viewer would find it difficult to ascertain what the form was. In technical rendering my work became even more divorced from Bacon's, nevertheless retaining only the aspects of his philosophy within my own paintings. Bacon believed that a society might arise which would be perfect, but as he already stated before we only remember, "a society for what it has created".

It was through this reflection on this idea that my work would be expanded to explore facets of humanity which society and culture have helped to create. Untitled #1, is simply a small particle of reality, examples of what is happening around us daily. In the first panel there are two life-size figures staring incoherently into space. The figure to the left has an elaborate mask wrapped around his face, secured in

place by strips of metal which extend around his torso. The figure to the right is bound around the wrist by a restraining device which also encircles his genital area. The upper torso of each figure is rendered without distorting in an anatomical sense, and it is only when we go below the waist level of each figure that their legs become smaller and much thinner in relation to their upper body. When arranging the figure on the canvas I would take various body sections from photographs of different people, finally putting together the pieces to form a new body.

There are overtones of bondage in this panel, but the sexual theme is down played, for the characters are fully clothed, and seem passive one toward the other. As in sadomasochistic role-playing, the body becomes depersonalised, a piece of flesh to be manipulated at will. Bodies become a device for gaining power and exercising pain. The body becomes generic, its characteristics negated, overshadowed by a sexual will of intent. Hence from the point of view of the passive characters I created, their bodies are not their own but a collection of all others. They have been reduced to objects waiting for an eventual end.

## 2. Anatomy according to Joel-Peter-Witken

Photographer, Joel-Peter-Witken treats and describes the

human anatomy in similar ways. He described the genesis of this artwork through a short story.

"IT HAPPENED ON A SUNDAY, MY MOTHER WAS ESCORTING MY BROTHER AND MYSELF DOWN THE STAIRS OF THE TENEMENT WHERE WE LIVED. WE WERE GOING TO CHURCH. WALKING THROUGH THE HALLWAY TO THE ENTRANCE OF THE BUILDING, WE HEARD AN INCREDIBLE CRASH MIXED WITH SCREAMS AND CRIES FOR HELP. THE ACCIDENT INVOLVED THREE CARS, ALL WITH FAMILIES IN THEM, SOMEHOW IN THE CONFUSION, I WAS NO LONGER HOLDING MY MOTHER'S HAND. I COULD SEE SOMETHING ROLLING FROM ONE OF THE OVERTURNED CARS. IT STOPPED AT THE CURB WHERE I STOOD. IT WAS THE HEAD OF A LITTLE GIRL. I REACH DOWN TO TOUCH THE FACE. TO ASK IT - BUT BEFORE I DID - SOMEONE CARRIED ME AWAY."<sup>89</sup>

Out of this experience grew Witken's, "use of severed heads and masks, concerns with violence, pain and death; of things extravagant, emotional and deserving adoration".<sup>90</sup> Although passing through different channels of emotional experience, both my work and Witken's have arrived at similar destinations. The concerns are both the convergent, but the rendering of material becomes quite distinct. Looking at Witken's Testicle Stretch, the body (now deceased) has been carefully manipulated by the artist to assume a rather unorthodox position. Like an inanimate object, Witken depersonalizes the body, using it as little more than a piece of decaying meat.

Writer Max Kozloff relates war experience to Witken's work. On the subject of war he sees it as, "sanctioned and

escalated crime - historical enough - but in still photography, the carnage of it recedes".<sup>91</sup> But it is not quite the same in Witken's work where, "you can ask, How can he come to that? - the kind of attitude that leads to bodies, the production of dead bodies".<sup>92</sup> One must look at the differences between the medium that he has used as opposed to mine. Kozloff believes that if Witken would have, "painted any of these subjects they would have been more or less sensational invented icons, here he does much worse and bears witness to them".<sup>93</sup> Witken does not redefine his characters as I normally do in my work. Untitled #1 takes characters from real life, but in some cases appropriates characteristics or devices (the restraints in the 1st panel) that are not part of that individual's personality or taste. Witken does not create his characters (they are, in a sense, "really made").

As visual storytellers, these figures are devoid of ambiguity, set up in a very matter-of-fact manner. His morbidity is frivolous, but "possesses a lively sense of the ignoble and the most profane instincts, which have a critical value as well as a comic aura".<sup>94</sup> In the second panel of Untitled #1, the sense of the ignoble comes across to a greater degree. The left hand area is occupied by two figures which are standing together arm in arm, with the same image repeated in the background. Their features are defined by subsequent cast shadows serving to illuminate their almost

theatrical leers. As in the first panel, the upper torso and the head of the figure are normal and the lower half is distorted in some way. This time the concentration of body weight on the oriental figure occurs around the hip area, making his upper body look hideously out of place. The length of his arm extends far below his kneecaps, his hand being about four times its original size. Beside these characters is one large figure who takes up the rest of the image area. His face is rendered over life size and is in direct proportion to his shoulders. Once you get past the lower pectorals the figure becomes distorted. The area under the upper pectorals and above the waist has been eradicated, and like an accordion, the body has been condensed into the proportion of a circus freak. The waistline now occurs just below the upper abdominal area of the stomach, so it appears that the man has absolutely no waist. The body is made up primarily of two enormous legs, his arms reduced to stubs which are disproportionate to his body size. The sadomasochistic bondage has been removed, and in its place there is only radical distortion of the body parts.

These people are not so much a product of society, but a product of nature. Society determines what is regarded as freaks. From the point of view of a painter exploring human nature, it has seemed to me that many individuals today want to classify, label, and put people away in categories. These

characters will probably be recognized not for their human qualities but for their disproportions in structure.

Witken goes about recruiting his subject. He does this by advertising a written statement of what he is looking for to produce his art.

Witken writes:

A partial listing OF MY INTERESTS: "PHYSICAL PRODIGIES OF ALL KINDS, PINHEADS, DWARFS, GIANTS, HUNCHBACKS, PRE-OP TRANSSEXUALS, BEARDED WOMEN, ACTIVE OR RETRIED SIDE SHOW PERFORMERS, CONTORTIONISTS (EROTIC), WOMEN WITH ONE BREAST (CENTRE) PEOPLE WHO LIVE AS COMIC BOOK HEROES, SATYRS, TWINS JOINED AT THE FOREHEADS, ANYONE WITH A PARASITIC TWIN, TWINS SHARING THE SAME ARE OR LEGE, LIVING CYCLOPES, PEOPLE WITH TAILS, HORNS, WINGS, FINS, CLAWS, REVERSED FEET OR HANDS, ELEPHANTINE LIMBS, ETC."<sup>95</sup>

Here, classification exists to an extreme degree. Abnormalities of nature have been advertised for, set up and marketed. His work has, "an outrageousness which is burlesque, a bad taste which is humorous in the end".<sup>96</sup> Witken, "can call a picture of a man with an amputated arm and many kinds of artificial limbs - Deviated,"<sup>97</sup> but, "this is the humor of insiders who are the only ones allowed to get away with the put downs of the outsiders".<sup>98</sup>

The third panel of my painting consists of two figures in somewhat correct proportion to their size. The larger figure of the two establishes the vertical axis of the composition



and stares directly at the viewer. His thumbs are placed over the eyes of the second figure, who is lying down in a foreshortened position. The first figure by virtue of displacement in the composition is physically threatening because of the way he leans over the smaller horizontal figure. The viewer is not quite sure of the circumstances involved, whether something dreadful has happened, or is going to happen. It is in this panel that the first foreshadowing of a violent act takes place. The larger figure's focus seems to have been disrupted, (caught in the act more or less), for his thumbs rest over the eyes of the figure which is lying down, as if he is ready to poke them out. His expression is one of agitation mixed with a grim determination to complete whatever job he has to do.

In this panel, the characters portrayed have all been imbued with a personality which is not their own. Like Witken's characters, they have 'posed' for the image. But, unlike his work, their personalities have been altered to fit a fictitious pre-arranged scenario. Their physical frame is duplicated but not their exact mental characteristics.

The fourth panel consists of two full length male figures set against a shallow background. Both the figures are wearing ventilation masks which are attached to their faces. They are both locked in some sort of struggle with the larger

male trying to rip the mask off the smaller one. In doing so, he glances furtively out at the viewer as if caught off guard, while the victim submits in the scuffle.

As Bacon admits, "I could not do people I did not know very well. I would not want to. It would not interest me to try and do them unless I had seen a lot of them, watched their contours, watched the way they behaved".<sup>99</sup> In the early fifties, Bacon began to paint images of figures coupled in what seems to be an intense struggle (Two Figures, 1953). In some cases (Triptych-Studies for The Human Body - 1970) Bacon wanted to portray the two figures, "either to be copulating or bugging".<sup>100</sup> Taking this series as a catalyst for my own work, the figures in the panel become asexual instead of sexually motivated beings. Instead of horizontal, they are placed on a vertical format. Instead of their anatomy being blurred and distorted, they are rendered in a somewhat representational manner.

Occurring just below middle area of the canvas, the image of a hand and wrist has been placed in the center. The hand materializes and dematerializes in the colour field that surrounds it. In between each finger is a strategically placed razor blade. Imitating an old slight of hand routine that used coins, this trick (when done with blades) could only be performed by severely cutting up the flesh. Physical pain

is implied but blood is never drawn.

Again, this is another aspect that divides my work from Witken's. Situations are constructed but as the viewer we never know the whole story. The razors could have implications of a suicidal nature, or of some kind of bloodletting ritual. It could be a game, a rite of initiation, or just a trick to the senses. The hand itself has not even been injured in a superficial way, although the distended veins and purplish tinge of the skin colour make it look more corpse-like than alive.

Witken's Mexican Pin-Up is self absorbed in the pleasure/pain syndrome of the S&M enthusiast. "The whole universe of S&M revolves around a kind of charade, an elaborate counterfeit, in which the mental gratification far outweighs the physical one, and yet eggs on the pleasure of the body."<sup>101</sup> In my work, pain is not an end in itself, not rendered in black or white. Pain is used only as an indicator of what might happen. The razors could be painted ripping the flesh but this would only take away from the subversive quality of the original image. It is the psychological tension before the act that is of interest to me, rather than the actual bloodletting ceremony.

The fifth panel is a selection of portrait studies.

Those represented have had a history of drug abuse. In the two larger portraits I was interested in seeing the way light broke up form, and how harsh cast shadows could define form in a graphic manner. Following the same format of the fourth panel, a horizontal strip of the same width was placed off-center to the composition. Inside this strip is the repeated portrait of another individual. It reads much like a selected choice of mug shots (although there is an absence of a strict frontal view). These portraits seem as removed from everyday life as much as they are part of it. Size and shape are enlarged beyond normal proportions with facets of each personality traced in their expression. They are consumers of pain and death, of discomfort and conscience. On an individual level they become indicators of social structure and destructure, of the human condition, and its effects on us all.

The sixth and last panel was a later addition to the final piece. Existing as a separate work, it was originally to be titled, Let The Children Come Out To Play, but was altered to suite the emerging new series. A full length figure forms the central axis of the composition. Blindfolded and dressed in a long coat, he holds an apple core in one hand, while a whole apple rests on top of his head. While we are almost sure that he cannot see behind or through the blindfold, the smile on his face has more of a deceptive

quality than a trustworthy one. He has either seen something, is reviewing it over in his mind, or perhaps he is waiting in anticipation for someone. The allusion to fruit goes back to early Dutch art. The exchange of fruit means the exchange of sexual pleasure. The whole apple and the apple core perhaps represents a before and after situation. The blindfold serves to accentuate the character's other senses most notably that of touch and taste. His ability of perception is merely channelled in other areas of sensual experience. The bottom right hand corner of the work is blocked off into a rectangular format. Within this box, there are two figures, one male, the other female. The perspective is manipulated in such a way as to facilitate a worm's eye view, so that we are looking up at the figures instead of straight ahead. This was done to simulate a small child's view from the ground as two adult figures approach him/her.

Untitled #1 relates to Witken' work because it deals with the vagaries of the human condition. Witken's work invites irreducible shock. Whether we are viewing, "the vertically split head of an old man so that it appears to kiss itself on velvet"<sup>102</sup> or "the profile of an opened OD'd young woman close up"<sup>103</sup> the value of sensationalism is firmly solidified. Once we get past the initial image there is nothing more to read into. The artist has given us all clues to the puzzle. Instead of psychological interpretation of the

visual properties, we are left with an interesting after-image.

Untitled #1 explores many areas of humanity, and it does so in terms of rendering forms in a semi-realistic manner. It does not rely on a sensationalist attitude to convey ideas or meaning but rather, leaves large gaps in the consciousness of the figures so that we are left with an elaborate puzzle to solve. Throughout the MFA Program my work has gone through a process of refinement so that it becomes descriptive in a realistic sense but does not become hyper-realistic in a plastic sense. Hyper-realism does not interest me. As far as my artistic goals are concerned, it seems no more than a technical exercise to reproduce what a camera can already do with accuracy. Untitled #1 partially achieved these ends, but more needed to be done to integrate semi-realistic form, description (in terms of content), and an extensive colour scheme to make these two areas work.

### 3. Four Drawings

After the execution of the mural my artistic considerations turned to drawing on a smaller format. I decided to return to drawing for most of the work had been executed on a large scale for over a year, and it was time to view/construct pictorial composition in a different way. By

not having to concentrate on covering such a large area, the drawings enabled me to retain the descriptive force of the content of each work to a greater degree. In doing so, this also helped to extend and refine my technical abilities. Colour became more aggressive, and form became better realized in space. Instead of dealing with a continuous narrative whereby all components would fit together compositionally, separate narratives would be created in a smaller format. Each picture would be exhibited one after the other even though there was a line of consistency in the subject matter. The colour would still be acidic, the form beginning to exist with greater coherency. This was possible because I took more time to collect the secondary information that would make up the background scenes to these drawings. Before beginning the drawings, extensive photographic material was taken from select locations in southern Ontario.

The first location was a large sewage water treatment plant that serves the Hamilton-Wentworth region. The interiors of which were still mechanically operable. The exteriors reminded me of the great sacrificial temples of the Mayan or Toltecs, with their elaborate brickwork, imposing facades, and sweeping stairways. Inside, the elongated hallways were even more pronounced by the high ceilings and elaborate light fixtures made out of wrought iron that shone down on the polished floor. Everywhere there was a feeling of

vacancy with only the hum of machines to break the silence. Since most of the buildings were operable under a centralized nerve center manned by only a few people, the vast interiors were left mostly deserted. The interior seemed to almost have a life of its own, the machinery keeping the heartbeat of the building alive. It was imposing because of its architectural solidity, and menacing because of its large barren spaces. The first drawing was of the interior of the central treatment plant. It was the hallway creating a deep perspective scheme which helped to establish the exploration of space with regards to figure placement. Within the interior is the figure of a small girl in the middle ground with a mask of Mickey Mouse covering her face. In the immediate foreground there is a man with the same mask on but he has turned his face away from the viewer, looking instead off to his right hand side.

Witken has said that he consecrated his life, "to changing matter into spirit with the hope of someday seeing it all. Seeing its total form, while wearing the mask, from the distance of death".<sup>104</sup> Max Kozloff points out what Oscar Wilde said, that, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth".<sup>105</sup> It is, "the truth of their fantasies" that exposes Witken's creatures. My figures hide behind the truth, furtively inhabiting their environment.



Wanting their physical features to remain anonymous, the mask conveys some form of visual attachment between the figures of children and the adult. These figures are then placed within foreign environments; their personalities hidden or altered, they become detached from reality, removed from the commonplace. Colour becomes aggressive, jarring, and discordant in its relationship to both the figures and the environment which they have been placed.

The second drawing shows an exterior view of the same building, concentrating on the main staircase and entrance way. In front of the building are two male figures, standing almost back to back. One wears a skeleton mask. The other is actually the same figure, taken from the first drawing with Mickey Mouse masks. They are surrounded and equally framed by large areas of black and two horizontal strips of colour at the bottom and top of the composition. The figures again seem quite indifferent to their surroundings. They function much as machines function within the buildings, on a preprogrammable basis. The environment created, and the people who manifest their being in such areas, becoming one in the same. The characters begin to simply exist, depersonalized yet retaining their anonymity.

The third drawing is the image of one small male child standing in the foreground. He stands outside in a large

field, with electrical generators receding into the background. The depersonalization of the figure is augmented again in the form of a skeleton mask. It seems that a great distance has been put between the figure and his surroundings. The strong saturated colours serve to highlight the artificiality of the posed stance and the simulated fierceness of the mask.

The fourth and final drawing consists of two figures, one standing behind the other, in a washroom with a urinal to their right. Their anatomy has been determined by the frame of reference of the image. The urinal is facing toward the public as the figures are. By doing so, the space that exists in the two dimensions of the drawing is bonded to the viewing space of the spectator. We are not sure if we are being watched from another viewpoint or if we are the watchers. If we view the space as existing just within the drawing then we must try and assimilate it from another angle. Perhaps these figures are watching something that is happening within the washroom, or are waiting for something to happen.

The figure in front wears white surgical gloves, while the figure's hands behind him are hidden. Each facet of the drawing sets up a host of associations which are left to the viewer to ponder, question, and formulate theories. By eradicating forms of overt physical horror the viewer can

concentrate on the interrelationships of the figures portrayed. The violence in these drawings has been internalized within the characters. Propagators of mental violence, they are social voyeurs who instigate tension, but never alleviate it. They are no one in particular and yet they are everybody.

In effect, they represent the quality of representation which I have been after. A picture which acts as a form of cryptic narrative, portraying characters who are in a psychological/emotional state of flux. These factors are not overdeveloped. Instead, they are simply hinted at. Fragile figures set in vast, architectural spaces wandering around with seemingly nowhere to go. Wearing face masks, they become part of a disjointed carnival procession lingering in and around elaborate mechanized environments.

Technically, I wanted to refine my drawing capabilities as much as possible. Working from the figure has helped me toward this end. In a colorific sense, my palette has extended its range to act as a juxtaposing force against the images I create. Although the subject, itself, might be dark in content, the colour adds a festively morbid touch to the surroundings. Violence is no longer displayed (as in The Quick and the Dead videos), but suggested in composition. Personality is no longer expressed forthright (as in Games for

Spectators), but implied through masks. The format of the work has also become smaller, not taking away from its intensity, but serving to make it somewhat more intimate. We have to work our way into the picture instead of the image forcing itself on the viewer. The surface quality of these drawings retains a much stronger separate life of its own. In light of this, the integration of pencil crayon on the surface of my oil paintings has given an added textural and colour range to the work.

#### 4. . Yellow Auto Eroticism

My continuing exploration of the human form has led me to the medium of sculpture, primarily casting in plaster from Geltrate moulds. Arranged on the wall in a linear fashion, 40 casts were taken from a male model. Of these, four were made of polyester resin, which act as a relief from the solidity of the plaster.

A dowel was inserted in the model's mouth and then cast along with his other features. This dowel retained a certain phallic like structure when the image was completed. Entitled, Yellow Auto Eroticism, the phallus proceeds out of the mouth, instead of going in to incite oral pleasure. Since the phallus is not connected to another body we must then assume it has been castrated, or is the property of the face

on the wall. In turn, the model gives pleasure to himself (auto-erotic activity) which is then multiplied 40 times.

Homo-erotic activity has now been subordinated to the level of the individual. The colour of the phallus could be designated as meaning a host of other things besides urine, because the material and the presentation has been sufficiently indirect to propose other areas of definition. Witken's portrayal of sexual inversion is decidedly blatant in, Androgyny Breastfeeding a Fetus (1981). The subject of sexual inversion dealt with in Yellow Auto Eroticism, hints at the universe of S & M but never confirms it. The audio track that accompanies this piece is a backmastered version of James Robinson's Edmonton Crusade. This relates back to the model, as it was his property. At the time the work was created, the model was suffering from a personal catharsis of faith, coupled with changing attitudes towards morality and religion in general.

By backmasking the tape, an attempt was made not only to address a sexual inversion but a religious one as well. The convoluted text relates back to the splintering of the model's character. It is not necessary to raise the public's awareness of the personal motivations behind the work, but rather that the subject of sexual inversion is addressed in a depersonalized manner. Witken's subjects, "are so inherently

abused in the flesh that he has to serve them up with an allegorical gravy in order to make them palatable. Such titles as Expulsion from Paradise of Adam and Eve, The Capitulation of France, or Pygmalion & Galatea, to take only a few to indicate his pretensions".<sup>106</sup>

Far from this mind set, Yellow Auto Eroticism, does not resort to historical or moral posturing. Instead it relies on the essence of the image to carry the message on a direct or indirect level.

##### 5. Colonia Dignidad and The Mother of Harlots

The last work to be discussed is Colonia Dignidad, or Dignity Colony. The title is given to one drawing which represents the symbol of the swastika. It is 13' x 13' and serves to consolidate the presentational format of the remaining 43 drawings. It becomes a focal point and sets to frame these smaller works which make up the Mother of Harlots. In collecting the visual information for Colonia Dignidad I relied on a number of sources. The first was a collection of photographs from various Nazi death camps (primarily Auschwitz) before and after the Holocaust. These images consist of some of the three million Jews that fell victim to the final solution.

The second source of information used were propaganda

stills of some of the principal leaders of the Third Reich. Drawings were also taken from stills of the Nurenberg trials (1945 - 1946) where the primary leaders of the Reich were found guilty of mass genocide and sentenced to death. The third source of information was derived from a mysterious colony "that operated for 30 years behind an electrified barbed wire fence 320 kilometres south of Santiago".<sup>107</sup> The colony was founded by Paul Schaefer, leader of the Baptist Sect in Germany. Supposedly coming to Chile to free postwar religious oppression, "it soon became know that Schaefer was also fleeing German efforts to prosecute him on charges of child molestation and sodomy in a youth home he ran in Sieburg, near Bonn".<sup>108</sup> It was discovered that, "through the 1960's and 1970's other escapees told similar stories of beatings - sexual abuse, brainwashing, electric shock treatment and administration of mind control drugs".<sup>109</sup> It was also confirmed that "prominent Nazi War Criminals including Klaus Barbie, Josef Mengele, and Martin Bormann have spent time in Colonia Dignidad".<sup>110</sup> Amnesty International "reported the Chilean Dictator, General Augusto Pinochet, used the colony to imprison and torture supporters of Socialist President Salvador Allende after his violent overthrow in 1973".<sup>111</sup> Stills of Pinochet, Bormann, and especially Adolf Eichmann (chief of the Gestapo's Jewish section) are repeated over and over again in the drawings that make up Colonia Dignidad.

Principle focus is placed on Eichmann for he was partially responsible for consolidating Hitler's master race. Eichmann confessed to a friend during the Nuremberg trials that, "if he were ever forced to commit suicide, he would leap laughing into his grave because the feeling that he had five million people on his conscience would be for him a source of extraordinary satisfaction."<sup>112</sup> The hate against one specific member of the human race becomes difficult to define in writing and even harder to define in verbal terms. The malignancy of the German political machine advocated the existence of 1,000 year reich but instead it only lasted 12 years. Weaker tangents from this 12 year reign did indeed proliferate and helped to establish in this particular instance the framework of Colonia Dignidad. Past and present social/political sources have been intermixed within the piece but the focus remains on the renewal of Nazi values. These values have been carefully cultivated from the ashes of a destroyed post-war Germany and have helped to establish the infrastructure of this once obscure colony.

Barthes states that, "the violence of the state may be answered by bloody insurrection. And thus a kind of unending system is set up; it is the nature of violence to be perpetual, it is self-engendering".<sup>113</sup>

Colonia Dignidad tells us we cannot escape from the



perpetual cycle of violence inbred by a totalitarian regime. Nazi Germany (its values and precepts) thought to be extinguished in 1945 live on in small quantities in 1991. Violence of this kind regenerates with a tendency to proliferate. As propagator of this malignancy toward humanitarian values, Adolph Hitler showed his rabid anti-Semitism in a letter to a military officer in 1919:

"Antisemitism based on purely emotional grounds will always find its ultimate expression in the form of pogroms. A rational antisemitism, however must lead to a systematic legal fight against and the elimination of the prerogatives of the Jew which he alone possesses in contradistinction to all other aliens living among us...it's ultimate goal, however, must unalterably be the elimination of the Jews altogether."<sup>114</sup>

This theoretical value judgement against a member of the human race led to what is now referred to as the Holocaust. In the death camps instituted by the Nazis, the Jewish inmates, "were subjected to medical experiments that were cruel and exceedingly painful".<sup>115</sup> Some of those experiments, "included the testing of the effects of high altitude by putting prisoners in pressure chambers, submersion in freezing water to see how long humans could survive, and sterilization of men and women by x-rays and other methods".<sup>116</sup> Some inmates "were shot with poisonous bullets to study the consequences and injected with viruses to test new drugs".<sup>117</sup> Rudolph Hess, commandant of Auschwitz-Birkenau described the killing process at the aforementioned death camp.

"It took from 3 to 15 minutes to kill people in the death chamber depending upon climatic conditions. We knew when the people were dead because their screaming stopped. We usually waited about one-half hour before we opened the doors and removed the bodies. After the bodies were removed our special commandos took off the rings and extracted the gold from the teeth of the corpses."<sup>118</sup>

When the critic John Russel described Francis Bacon's Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion (1945), he saw, "a mindless undifferentiated capacity for hatred".<sup>119</sup> Perhaps Bacon's mutilated, abbreviated, and distorted versions of the human anatomy were derived from living through war, to record in some abstract way a set of emotional sensibilities formed by the events that shaped the second world war. As stated before, his figures express a sense of victimization, of man's inhumanity to man; yet how can anyone ever hope to recreate with any emotional accuracy the horrible events of the Holocaust? They cannot.

Bacon's figures give us a glimpse into the underbelly of psychological delirium and states of acute psychosis. They represent to some degree the darker side of the human condition, but their effectiveness is somewhat subdued when compared to the media stills after the Holocaust in the primary Nazi death camps. Here the effects of the human condition are too thorough in their effectiveness to convey the reality of man's baser and primal instincts.

Sculptor Mark Prent can recreate the horror of death and disease in his work but it at once becomes an insular activity, one man's individualized conception of the human psyche, and therefore its impact becomes limited. It becomes a combination of fantasy and reality playing off the imagination of the spectator more than anything else.

Joel-Peter Witken portrays the idiosyncratic freaks of the 20th century with remarkable candour in his photographs. But we realize that the people he portrays are not victims of any external source, but more victims of themselves. Their acute enthusiasm for S & M practices make them little more than a fading novelty, a manufactured freak for publication. Colonia Dignidad attempts to dispense with the bridge between fantasy and reality. It attempts to portray the human psyche in a very real way and indirectly chronicle an event in history which, "was fundamentally demonical, based on nothing less than constant repetition of man's inhumanity to man".<sup>120</sup> Colonia Dignidad represents a visual historical reference point, an indicator of the circumstances and players surrounding the formation and continuation of the precepts of Nazism. After the war in July of 1946, "it was found that Professors at Erlngen University in Bavaria were denigrating democracy, criticising the Jews, and discussing the virtues of Nazism. In one lecture, Auschwitz extermination camp was described as "paradise compared to future plans."<sup>121</sup>

Perhaps Bacon's view of the absence of a perfect society is not so erroneous in intent. We do remember a society only for what it has created, not for the perfection of its equality. Maybe the real madness of Nazi Germany has disclosed a very real secret of animality in humanity which in some way becomes reabsorbed into other substructures such as Colonia Dignidad.

The title for this exhibition, The Mother of Harlots, is taken from the book of Revelations (Chapter 17 - verse 5).

"And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY BABYLON, THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH."<sup>122</sup>

In biblical terms Babylon probably denotes Rome, the great antagonist of Messiah's kingdom; or, possibly, apostate Jerusalem. The mystical use of this name is quite in accordance with Jewish custom but for this exhibition it acts as a metaphor of Nazi Germany. The fall of Nazi Germany indirectly correlates with the fall of Babylon:

"And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird."<sup>123</sup>

The carnage of the Jews by the Germans is best described by Saint John when he was shown Babylon and its abomination

established throughout the earth.

"And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration."<sup>124</sup>

The woman (the mother of Harlots) acts (as stated before) as a metaphor for Nazism and all that it stood for. One particular drawing that will become a secondary focal point in the exhibition is based on a photograph taken after the fall of the Third Reich. It portrays an American lieutenant wearing the crown and insignia of the Holy Roman Emperor in Germany. The image is ironical for the fall of Babylon (or Rome) in Revelations has come to bear 1,000's of years later, only this time in the form of an American soldier staging a mock parody of the event. The remaining 42 drawings are primarily mono-chromatic studies taken from official state portraits of the Nazi elite during World War II. Much like Bacon's portrait studies (Studies of George Dryer and Isabel Rawsthorne) there is a certain amount of physical distortion that occurs. Within these vague patterns of metamorphosis there are traces of a recognizable being, a faint throwback to the formality of the state portrait.

Bacon "may destroy one set of more or less precise marks with another -- not blurring or smudging but painting against, as though to destroy a likeness perhaps of a photographic kind."<sup>125</sup>

The Mother of Harlots prescribes to this pictorial view but not to the degree of abstraction that Bacon forces upon his figures.

To complete the format of this exhibition I have recorded my voice on an audio track quoting again from "The Book of Revelations":

"And I saw a new Heaven and new Earth: for the first Heaven and the first earth had passed away; and there was no more sea."<sup>126</sup>

The recording continues with a compilation of criminal acts committed in 1991 in Canada. The frequency of these crimes have been condensed into a smaller time frame to highlight their consistency:

A sexual assault is committed every three hours  
You may be next

Relax  
Smile

A murder is committed every three days  
You may be next

Relax  
Smile

Every time you think of existence are you one step closer to death?

The audio track ends at this point with a 10 second interval following. At the end of this silence the text

continues from the beginning. The quote from "Revelations" describes the destruction and eventual end of the world, and the beginning of a new one. At that time (so the prophecy tells use) both The Quick And The Dead will be judged according to their merits.

As St. John tells us:

"And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them; and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death."<sup>127</sup>

For the believer in Christian dogma this would perhaps be seen as a comparative sign of hope. That the modern Babylon will be destroyed by divine intervention and a global resurrection of the faithful will occur. Of course this manifestation has not yet happened and those who place faith in things not seen wait patiently for a second coming. What we do know and have seen is a consistent regeneration of evil. From the rise of the malignant political machinery of Nazism to its apparent fall, pockets of Neo-Nazism still exist subsisting in economic sub-structures. "In the waning years of World War II, as the Third Reich was tottering and finally crumbling"<sup>128</sup> Martin Bormann (Hitler's principle aid), "set up 750 corporations scattered among those nations that had

remained neutral. Those corporations received the fleeing wealth of Germany and became the power base that enabled Germany to climb back to economic and political strength".<sup>129</sup> The financial empire which fuelled the reich would now rebuild a war torn nation with the help of a former Nazi. Bormann also bankrolled "the Organization de ehemaligen SS-Angehörigen - Organization of former SS members and this became known as ODESSA".<sup>130</sup> "The prime purpose of this corporation was to move SS men out of Germany to South America, or to the Middle East if they preferred it that way."<sup>131</sup> The regeneration of Nazism now plays a role in the economic marketplace its appearance felt but not seen. Places such as "Colonia Dignidad" break the silence of a system devoted to Nazi principles and help to confirm that hate, racism, and intolerance breed and fester below us.

For most of us, we read this information in the paper, in books, or we hear it on the radio. We become almost acclimatized to the consistent flow of statistics that tell us of wars, disease, murder and rape. If we are not directly involved on a personal level we tend to read the statistics as numbers on a page, as events of the day that meld into the next. We learn to "relax" and "smile" to accept events for what they are. The common citizen (with some exceptions) conditions himself/herself to believe that they cannot alter events, so they must go with the flow so to speak. Like the



people in New York City who watched a killer stalk and stab a women in three separate attempts, they disregarded their conscience but not their curiosity for watching deathsport. They were not the victim that day, just the viewers. If they were able to watch and follow murder in action, they would be able to "relax' and "smile" again conscience free, until their number comes up, if indeed it does.

But we must have, or cultivate a belief in something whether it is God, money, politics, or nothingness. From this we make a set of conscious decisions to follow that belief. The Mother of Harlots does not structure itself in predetermining a specific set of values or beliefs. The philosopher Santayana once said, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat."<sup>132</sup> The past helps to reveal or present fears and imaginings, for history has acquired a habit of repeating itself. Like a spasmodic, our collective subconscious brings to the present an array of "Memories", upon which we base our movements in the present.

#### CONCLUSION

There have been many social and political altercations and upheavals that have helped to form the 20th century. Effecting successive generations up to the present, people have had to shape their lives according to these altercations.

Whether on a large or a small scale the influence of historical cause and effect eludes no member of the human race.

A prime example of this occurred during World War II in the Warsaw ghetto under Nazi occupation. In order to save their patients' lives, doctors who worked in the ghetto smuggled food past Nazi soldiers to the Jews inside. The Jewish doctors (who were dying of starvation themselves) survived and adapted as best they could. Under these conditions however the clinical status of starvation victims in the ghetto was less than positive:

"Constant thirst and persistent increase in urinary output"<sup>133</sup>.

"As surplus fat disappears, the skin becomes darker, dry, and wrinkled. Pubic and axillary hair fall out. Women miss their menstrual periods, and are sterile, men are impotent. Any children born die within a few weeks."<sup>134</sup>

During this process of adaptation, of trying to survive under almost impossible circumstances millions lost their lives, leaving behind a legacy of death and sadness fuelled by the manic progenitors of National Socialism. As stated before Barthes sees violence as threatening, "our bodies; therefore we usually react to it with rejection, refusal, but there are perhaps beings who accept and assume violence, even finding a kind of exaltation in it."<sup>135</sup>

Hitler certainly believed that the eradication of the Jewish race and the establishment of an Aryan hierarchy was an exercise in exaltation itself, a mission to purify his race by any means.

The work of Francis Bacon, Joel-Peter-Witken, and Mark Prent have been discussed in reference to their views on death and how they choose to represent their individual philosophies visually. They analyze violence (external and internal) and its properties through colour and composition, through form and illusion. The work of Jeffrey Dahmer (the multiple murderer from Milwaukee) seems extremely derivative. In many ways he echoes the visual sensibilities of Mark Prent, except of course, that he kills real people, and stores real anatomical parts in his freezer. The fibreglass and polyester casts by Mark Prent of the human anatomy have now given way to real flesh and blood, to real severed heads in the kitchen fridge.

My work deals primarily with representing and probing the human condition which inevitably concerns itself with fundamental precepts, life, death, belief (or denial of belief). These variables are presented but not formulated into an explicit moral code to be followed. The Mother of Harlots, The Quick and the Dead, Untitled #1, and the various minor works discussed do not resort to moral posturing or prescribe to the visual consumer a remedy, or a list of what

is right or wrong with directions to follow. Instead, this work stands as a recorder of fact, an indicator of what shapes our society and what helps to destroy it. It is an amalgamation of many messages with which the viewer must find their own according to individual belief.

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