

# RECYCLED REALITIES

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The exploration of source material in contemporary pictorial art

by

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'allegorical reference' - a term I coined to simplify a rather difficult terminological issue - form an integral part of the discussion. Allegorical reference in this context includes a number of related notions, such as appropriation, copying, borrowing, quoting and paraphrasing, to name but a few from a potentially extensive list.

The other form of reference deals with the activity involved in creating images (or signs) and the correspondences or similarities between the image and the object it refers to. This is a more generalised notion of the referential properties of images in art. Here, however, conventions also exert a powerful influence. In semiotic terms, reference pertains to iconic signs and the ways in which they come about. Both allegorical reference and iconic reference will be defined more extensively in the introduction.

The works of a number of South African (and to a lesser degree international artists) will be discussed to illustrate their artistic responses to 'reality' and the functioning of visual reference in the exploration of source material. At the same time, my own work will be discussed in relation to the approaches of selected artists.

Furthermore, the sociocultural significance of visual reference in the selected artworks will be examined. I will argue that contemporary pictorial art, through the often conscious and overt manipulation of referential functions, has acquired the capability to respond to the complex, fragmented and shifting character of present-day 'reality'. By means of various forms of visual reference, a large variety of perspectives may be reflected by different artists in their individual, and astoundingly diverse, aesthetic idiolects.

I will also suggest that the hybrids resulting from the marriage of diverse conventions constitute a viable artistic strategy to create exceptionally potent and meaningful images of 'reality' in a world which is already subjected to an overload of visual information.

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**DECLARATION**

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I declare that

*Recycled realities: the exploration of source material in contemporary pictorial art* is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Signature

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Date

(D du Plessis)

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## **SUMMARY**

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The use in pictorial art of visual reference to prototypes and conventions in encoding reality forms the crux of the theoretical research. The theoretical component complements the practical research, which focuses on the interplay between perceptions of 'reality' and visual conventions in landscape art. The existence of diverse realities, based on individual ideological and sociocultural perspectives, is acknowledged. In encoding these realities, artists may draw on a reservoir of stylistic, formal and conceptual prototypes. Visual reference constitutes an allegorical procedure because the artist refers to an antecedent text in the representation of a particular 'reality'. Pictorial signs also rely on conventions to convey meaning. Both the perception and the artistic recreation of different realities may thus be regarded as recycling processes. In a world saturated with visual information, reference to prototypes is a powerful procedure which assists contemporary pictorial artists in the creation of meaningful images of current realities.

## PREFACE

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The research for the MA(FA) degree comprises two complementary components, namely a theoretical dissertation and practical visual research. I regard the visual and theoretical research for the MA(FA) degree not as a self-indulgent exercise, but rather as a search for a clearer understanding of the relevance of my own art production in relation to contemporary practice, art conventions and art-theoretical discourse.

MOTIVATION FOR  
RESEARCH

A number of interests have been relatively constant in my practical work over the past few years. These preoccupations include a fascination with art conventions and prototypes; a predilection for rendering what I perceive as 'reality' by means of painstaking detail; and a belief that the artwork must communicate with a broad spectrum of people while still retaining its aesthetic integrity.

The theoretical questions sparked off by my practical work culminated in an investigation of the ways in which contemporary artists employ referential functions in their exploration of source material. Contemporary pictorial artworks often contain a complex network of perceptual and conceptual references, which are inevitably mediated by conventions. Umberto Eco (1976:256) gives an indication of the processes involved in a text (and he also considers pictorial artworks as texts) when he states that

texts are maze-like structures combining inventions, replicas, stylizations, ostentions and so on. Semiosis never rises *ex novo* and *ex nihilo*. No new culture can ever come into being except against the background of an old one. ... Man is continuously making and re-making codes, but only insofar as other codes already exist. In the semiotic world there are neither single protagonists nor charismatic prophets. Even prophets have to be socially *accepted* in order to be right; if not, they are wrong.

The dissertation title, 'Recycled realities', reflects a contemporary concern with the ways in which visual conventions may be utilised to represent diverse 'realities'. The plural also implies that perceptions of 'reality' are not fixed and that throughout history artists invented new modes to convey ideas about the surrounding world. Due to the importance of the notion of 'reality', it receives attention throughout the dissertation and particular scrutiny in the Introduction and Chapter 4. Although the singular form of the word 'reality' is mostly used, it must be emphasised that a non-unitary phenomenon is implied throughout. 'Reality' is perceived as including numerous phenomena - for example experiential and psychological factors - in addition to empirical 'reality'. The relationship between 'reality' and its relation to realism as an artistic construct form an important theme of the dissertation. Ways in which contemporary artists utilise various forms of visual reference to source material in their creative explorations of subject-matter, are also discussed. Source material may include art-historical prototypes, graphic reproductions, illustrations, texts, photographs as well as personal experience and observation. Often, a combination of sources and conventions may be used in creating a picture, leading to hybridised forms. But source material is also derived from observable 'reality', the outside world that lends itself to artistic interpretation.

**RELATION BETWEEN  
ART AND 'REALITY'**

Two aspects of visual reference will be investigated. The most important aspect, in terms of this dissertation, is reference to artistic prototypes. These prototypes embrace visual conventions, genres and modes, for instance the landscape tradition, *vanitas* still life painting, history painting, narrative and allegory.

**VISUAL REFERENCE TO  
PROTOTYPES**

Visual reference to prototypical source material as used by a number of contemporary artists, including myself, could be regarded as an allegorical mode of artistic production. For this reason, contemporary allegorical procedures, grouped under the umbrella concept of



## KEY TERMS

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**A**llegory; appropriation; conceptual art; contemporary pictorial art; copying; culture/nature; hybridisation; iconic signs; landscape painting; modernism; nature/culture; postmodernism; prototypes; realism; reality; representation; semiotics; visual conventions; visual reference.

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## INTRODUCTION

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### PREMISE OF RESEARCH

The use of visual reference to prototypes and conventions by contemporary pictorial artists in encoding their responses to reality forms the premise of the theoretical research. This is linked to my practical research, in which I have investigated the role of prototypes and conventions in my own interpretation of a particular aspect of reality - namely the mundane, non-scenic landscapes which form part of my immediate environment.

The paradigm I will refer to throughout the dissertation, is a Western one and terminology will generally imply a Western (European and American) perspective, unless specifically qualified.

Although I will not systematically apply specific theories in the discussions, an attempt will nonetheless be made to demonstrate the relevance of selected examples of pictorial art, as well as my own work, in terms of contemporary theoretical discourse. Two particular theoretical areas, namely allegorical reference and semiotics, will be defined in greater detail later in the Introduction since both have a bearing on the referential functions of pictorial art.

In support of my argument that the use of prototypes is a powerful instrument which assists contemporary pictorial artists in creating meaningful and complex images of current realities, I will address the following issues:

- The notion of reality as a non-monolithic construct, allowing for the existence of diverse realities and world-views, which are mediated by individual ideological and sociocultural perspectives.
- The use by artists of stylistic, formal and conceptual prototypes to encode reality. Thus both the perception and the artistic recreation of reality may be regarded as recycling processes.

- The investigation of visual reference as an allegorical procedure whereby the artist refers to an antecedent text in the representation of a specific reality.
- A semiotic interpretation of the ways in which pictorial or iconic signs refer to outside reality.

Chapter 1 contains general discussions on visual reference to prototypical source material as an allegorical procedure in contemporary pictorial art. Many contemporary artists use reference to the world outside and allegorical reference to artistic conventions simultaneously to reflect current realities. The *vanitas* still life tradition may, for instance, be employed to convey ideas about contemporary society. Thus source material may be derived from both the world outside and from visual conventions. Related notions such as borrowing, copying and appropriation will form part of the discussion. Furthermore, the link between allegorical reference and semiotic reference is examined. Some of the basic functions of reference as an allegorical procedure are clarified in relation to specific works of art.

In Chapter 2 different approaches to visual reference by a number of South African artists will be examined, with the emphasis on how visual reference affects the stylistic and formal qualities of the artworks and how these formal considerations relate to conceptual issues. The mediating role of conventions in the encoding of outside reality is closely examined. Among the South African artists I have selected for discussion are Penelope Siopis (b. 1953) and Braam Kruger (b. 1950), both of whom use art-historical prototypes extensively as source material. In the work of Robert Hodgins (b. 1920), stylistic and formal conventions play a major role. Margaret Vorster (b. 1953) has recourse to the tradition of symbols. Works by Cyprian Shilakoe (1946-1972), who derives his source material from experiential reality, will be discussed as a counterpoint to the somewhat more 'academic' approach of Siopis, Kruger, Hodgins and Vorster.

**OVERVIEW OF  
CHAPTER  
CONTENTS**

Although I will refer to examples of my own work in Chapters 1 and 2, Chapter 3 will focus more specifically on my personal visual research and the ways in which it ties up with my theoretical interests. The issues addressed in this chapter include the influence of landscape conventions on my own art, the nature/culture dichotomy and the role of photographs in encoding reality.

Chapter 4 is an evaluation of the use of referential functions, as defined in this context, as a viable artistic strategy to encode the complexities of current realities in a meaningful manner. I will consider the potential of visual reference to prototypes and conventions to generate new meanings within or in opposition to existing frameworks and evaluate the viability of this procedure for the visual arts in an age where numerous forms of visual information compete for attention.

**A WORLD  
OF  
MANY  
REALITIES**

‘Recycled realities’, the title of the dissertation, suggests a particular approach by certain contemporary pictorial artists to the rendering of ‘reality’ in art. What is involved, is a reassessment of the role played by conventions in pictorial art. Reassessment does not necessarily imply the rejection of conventions. Instead, as will emerge from the discussions, the reassessment of conventions may in many instances represent a positive adaptation of prototypes to suit changed circumstances.

The word ‘reality’, in a philosophical and an art-theoretical sense, engenders numerous complexities and will receive further scrutiny in the course of the discussion. (The quotation marks, used until now to denote the problematic nature of the concept, will hereafter be omitted.) Since reality constitutes an immense field of philosophical debate, I will attempt to clarify what I mean by reality in a particular context. For the sake of simplicity, the singular form, *reality*, is sometimes used instead of the plural, realities, but it should be kept in mind that in this dissertation the word does not denote a monolithic phenomenon or empirical reality only.

Similarly, the relation between art and what is perceived as reality, is a minefield of complexities<sup>1</sup>. In most of my current works, I deal with extremely mundane, non-picturesque landscapes which form part of the semi-urban environment. This environment constitutes one facet of contemporary reality. In its transformation into art, the mundane world acquires different qualities as a pictorial reality. These qualities, however, are also dependent on my interpretation and manipulation of visual conventions. Through meticulous rendering of detail, and the exploration of art materials, the mundane is accorded a value and a sense of being which may not correspond with casual perceptions of this environment. These ideas will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.

The link between art and reality manifests itself at various levels, including the conceptual, epistemological, ontological and philosophical level (Irwin 1986:15). The choice of the plural form 'realities' in the title is not only an acknowledgement of the existence of divergent world-views and ideological stances. 'Realities' in the context of this dissertation also embrace artists' responses to and interpretations of the world and the artistic constructs that result from this interaction. Obviously, aesthetic idiolect<sup>2</sup> or style is also a determining factor in encoding reality.

I view reality as both a personal and a sociocultural construct and endorse the opinion expressed by Northrop Frye that 'every human society sets up a distinctive form of culture with distinctive assumptions about itself and its relation to the world' (1986:2).

In their responses to reality, contemporary pictorial artists make use of source material that may include art conventions, aesthetic prototypes from the past and historical sources (Siopis and Kruger), stylistic and formal prototypes (Hodgins), conventional and personal symbolic imagery (Vorster) and the world of personal experience (Shilakoe).



These examples may also overlap, with various 'texts' being used simultaneously. John A. Walker (1983:82) comments in this regard that

the basic characteristic of art, inter-textuality, is heightened in post-modernism. 'Inter-textuality' is a term which indicates that every literary text or work of art relates to, alludes to, or comments upon (either implicitly or explicitly) various other texts or works.

The epithet 'recycled', used in the title of the dissertation, reflects a measure of ambivalence. In a negative sense, 'recycled' can be equated with an almost mechanical reuse or reprocessing of source material. It may obviously be associated with the postmodern exploration of historicism, which could either be viewed as a positive force or inappropriate borrowings from the past, depending on the viewer's ideological orientation<sup>3</sup>. From a positive perspective, recycling entails recovering a source to render it useful once again or to reconstitute it in a new form. In a general sense, recycling is increasingly understood as an effective means to save scarce and valuable resources.

As stated earlier, my visual research culminated in paintings dealing with the extremely mundane, non-picturesque landscapes that form part of my close environment. Empirical studies of these landscapes involved frequent visits to areas within close proximity of my home. During these outings I took photographs of veld scenes which later served as reference material.

In my landscape paintings, reference to art conventions and prototypes, as well as photographs, play an important role in the final appearance of the works. Within the wider framework of the landscape tradition, first-hand encounters with works from the oeuvre of Monet (1840-1926) formed a very important part of the visual investigations. Among these, the large water lily panels in the Orangerie, Paris, were the most prominent. Equally important, however, are references flowing from personal observations, sensory experience and

**RECYCLING:  
AN AMBIVALENT  
TERM**

**INFLUENCES ON  
PERSONAL WORK**

vivid mental and visual memories of the landscapes in my own physical environment which constitute a very prominent part of my subject-matter.

My own efforts to arrive at an understanding of my world by means of artmaking, show a rather distinct development in my exploration and manipulation of source material. Earlier works were based on the premise that the complexity of the world can be reflected only by image-laden works<sup>4</sup>. These earlier works entail a relatively 'conventional' allegorical approach, which featured the emphatic use of narrative content and figures. Various photographic images were reassembled as a type of photo montage. These formed the reference material for the artwork, to be reproduced and imaginatively reworked into a believable, almost anecdotal scenario.

Photographs, taken by me, still serve as one form of source material in current works, but the approach differs considerably. Whereas previously I used photographs to guide a mimetic rendering of subject-matter, there is now a greater degree of interaction between the photograph as source and the manner in which the photographic information is transformed by art materials.

As a mechanical means of representation with distinct optical behaviour, photography already mediates between the artist and reality. The use of photographic sources for artmaking can take on many forms, including copying, collage and deconstruction. My own use of photographic sources is highly ambiguous, entailing careful copying of optical data coupled to selective reinterpretation.

In a sense, the process synthesises different conventions of seeing and rendering reality, while at the same time accepting an underlying disequilibrium caused by utilising disparate conventions.

**AMBIGUOUS USE OF  
PHOTOGRAPHIC  
SOURCES**

Because my works are an amalgam of personal experience and reference to artistic conventions, the nature/convention dichotomy inherent to landscape as subject-matter also requires investigation. W.J.T. Mitchell (1986:76) defines nature 'as something biological, objective, and universal', while convention is considered 'as something social, cultural, and local or regional'. In my personal creative development, I have become increasingly aware of the impossibility of escaping the load of historical conventions. Stylistic, formal and conceptual prototypes form a vast reservoir of source material which contemporary artists have laid claim to as a legitimate field of exploration. The availability of these prototypes, however, presents formidable challenges in terms of practical artmaking, which, in contemporary art, seems indelibly linked to art theory and other branches of the humanities, including literature, psychology, history and philosophy.

Referring to conventions or prototypes, either directly or indirectly, has always formed part of the artistic tradition. In contemporary art, however, this practice has become far more pronounced and it is used as an artistic strategy to reinforce the meaning of a work. The approaches to the rendering of reality that I perceive in the examples of pictorial art selected for discussion, often involve an overt and adventurous manipulation of the referential functions of art. Artists who work in this manner, need a thorough understanding of or sensitivity to art conventions. This assertion is based on the fact that visual reference to art conventions tends to generate meaning by setting up a dialogue between present and past, and between convention and personal invention.

Visual reference, in the context of this dissertation, encompasses a complex web of referential possibilities. In the discussion, the main areas of investigation will be -

- Ways in which allegorical reference to source material functions;

**REFERENTIAL  
FUNCTIONS  
OF ART**

- ways in which images/iconic signs refer to objects in the physical world (general referential functions); and
- ways in which the above forms of reference contribute to the depiction of reality in art.

Before discussing the reasons why ‘allegorical reference’ is pertinent to a discussion of contemporary pictorial art, the use of the phrase in this dissertation needs clarification.

Terminology - as is so often the case in art-theoretical undertakings - has proven to be a vexatious issue in the research and formulation of this dissertation. Finding the exact terminology to describe a procedure in art tends to be a very complex matter. For this reason, I will use quotation marks where necessary to indicate a measure of caution with regard to terminology. A wide range of semantic choices presented themselves in the process of defining issues and delineating the research area. Although there may certainly be other suitable contenders, the term allegorical reference was chosen for the purposes of this dissertation as a rather wide-reaching collective term to encompass a number of notions that deal with the phenomenon of visual ‘quotation’ in art.

**A DEFINITION OF  
ALLEGORICAL  
REFERENCE**

‘Allegorical reference’ will be used in the sense of having recourse to some authority or source of information (COD 1990, s.v. ‘refer’) and is used for the sake of simplicity and not to the exclusion of other relevant terms. In addition, the term ‘reference’ brings into play a number of subsidiary terms and concepts - such as originality, copying, transformation and simulation, to name but a few. Reference also displays close affinities with such words as quotation, appropriation and hybridisation. Many of these terms, including quotation, are borrowed from other disciplines, for instance from the field of writing. With regard to the difficulties involved in finding appropriate terminology in this particular context, Leo Steinberg (1978:25) notes:

When Sir Joshua Reynolds discussed 'Imitation' in the sixth of his *Discourses*, he tossed out, as his context kept changing, the following terms: Borrowing; Gathering; Depredation; Appropriating; Assimilating ... . The varieties of artistic trespass or repercussion (or whatever you call it) are inexhaustible because there is as much unpredictable originality in quoting, imitating, transposing, and echoing, as there is in inventing.

Steinberg's statement testifies to the fact that the referential functions of art have been an ongoing concern in the history of art and that there is no suitable blanket term to denote the practice. In respect of terminology, I am of the opinion that allegory provides a useful encompassing term - it incorporates all the above-mentioned elements since allegory could be regarded as one text read through another.

Visual reference is a fairly common allegorical procedure that, in the second half of the twentieth century, and ever more so since Pop Art and the advent of the postmodern era, has acquired a specific significance and prominence due to its abundant use in art. The choice of subject-matter, which has always been an extremely complex field with numerous ramifications for both the execution and the interpretation of works, has become a quicksand of signification because of this free and easy reference to prototypes of the past. The practice has also brought into question the issues of originality and self-expression. The postmodern sensibility has been described as 'an esthetic climate characterized by suspicion of the notion of originality, by pointed borrowings, by art about art ...' (Nadelman 1985:188).

I prefer the phrase 'allegorical reference' to 'allegorical appropriation', a phrase which often appears in literature on allegory. Appropriation implies the almost complete 'annexation' of a prototype, as is evident in certain examples of more conceptually-oriented art. An extreme example is a life-size wooden sculpture by the American artist Jeff Koons, entitled *String of puppies* (1988)<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 1). As reported by Martha Buskirk (1992:37), Koons was

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CONCEPTS**

found guilty of violating copyright law because his work was so similar to the prototype, namely California photographer Art Rogers's greeting-card, entitled *Puppies* (1985) (Fig. 2).

This form of overt appropriation also occurs in pictorial art. However, in most of the South African art works selected for discussion in this dissertation, the prototype is either transformed or else referred to with varying degrees of subtlety. Thus, in the context of this dissertation, appropriation will be considered as a sub-category of 'allegorical reference' (henceforth to be used without quotation marks).

The main emphasis of the dissertation is on allegorical reference, which includes notions such as appropriation, quotation, borrowing and copying. This implies having recourse to a wide variety of source material. Source material may include artworks from the Western tradition, art conventions (of a formal, stylistic and conceptual nature), natural phenomena and any other source which may be regarded as an anterior 'text'.

In my work, landscape conventions, photographs, aspects of the oeuvre of Monet as well as certain modernist conventions are used as source material in my exploration of land-



*Fig. 1.*  
*Jeff Koons,*  
*String of puppies*  
*(1988). Life-size*  
*wooden sculpture.*



*Fig. 2.*  
*Art Rogers, Puppies (Copyright 1985 Art*  
*Rogers). Greeting-card photo.*

scape as subject-matter. Reference to these sources in my work is supplemented by personal observation and experiential factors. The different ways in which I, and the artists selected for discussion utilise sources, will be considered in detail throughout the dissertation.

A large part of the initial research was devoted to the phenomenon of allegory in art. In much of my earlier work, a relatively 'conventional' allegorical approach to subject-matter could be observed, as exemplified by the painting *Sins of the fathers* (1991)<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 3). Allegory, in this instance, could be understood, within the framework of a generalised conception, as a form of narrative that 'says one thing and means another'<sup>7</sup>.

**TRADITIONAL  
ALLEGORICAL  
APPROACHES**



**Fig. 4.**  
Eugène Delacroix, *The death of Sardanapalus* (1827). Oil on canvas,  
388,8 cm x 487,5 cm.



**Fig. 3.**  
Daniel du Plessis, *Sins of the fathers* (1991).  
Oil on acrylic on canvas,  
160 cm x 180 cm.

Allegory has been described as a 'protean device'<sup>8</sup> and is regarded by experts as an extremely complex and diversified field. From the initial investigation of allegory in contemporary South African and international pictorial art, it became evident that it is impossible to apply the term as an all-encompassing categorisation. Often, in contemporary works, categories tend to overlap and artists feel at liberty to cross stylistic and modal boundaries. In many instances, no such thing as a pure mode can be isolated<sup>9</sup>. Thus, in a single work, certain features may tend to be allegorical, others symbolical and yet others metaphorical.

Developments in my visual research led to a more particular perspective on allegorical procedures and recent works are not truly open to a clear-cut categorisation as 'allegory' in the traditional sense. This shift in emphasis was probably brought about by a greater exploration of landscape as subject-matter as opposed to narrative and symbolic interests, the latter being deemed essential elements for conventional allegory<sup>10</sup>. The increased interest in landscape was furthermore accompanied by a more pronounced manipulation of art materials, which in turn had implications for the appearance of the works<sup>11</sup>.

With allegory being understood as one text read through another<sup>12</sup>, it is evident that reference to a source - of whatever nature that source might be - is a crucial allegorical procedure. In traditional allegorical works, for instance *The death of Sardanapulus* (1827)<sup>13</sup> (Fig 4), by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), the source the artwork refers to is usually mythology or a written text. In contemporary works, the reference might be of a literary nature, but it could also be an aspect of the art tradition, of individual works, styles or a period<sup>14</sup>. Where the source material is easily identifiable, as in certain works by Penelope Siopis<sup>15</sup>, it would be evasive to disregard the implications inherent to the utilisation of that source. Furthermore, the use of stylistic or conceptual sources is often clearly intentional, and serves to enhance and extend the levels of meaning of a work.



Reference to prototypes and consumables as source material became an acceptable and overt device with the pop art of the sixties. However, a marked trend towards exploiting the potential of stylistic and conceptual prototypes emerged in many works from the 1980s and early 1990s, as testified by works of a number of leading local and international artists<sup>16</sup>. The permissive sensibility of postmodernism has allowed for, among other things, historical revivalism which lends itself to the exploration of aesthetic prototypes as source material<sup>17</sup>. This would have been anathema to mainstream modernist and particularly late modernist art dogma, which favoured formalism and shunned extraneous references. I hope to demonstrate that revitalised traditional modes, including allegorical procedures, have been adapted by contemporary artists to once again become relevant to current sociocultural exigencies<sup>18</sup>.

As stated earlier, the major emphasis in the dissertation is on allegorical reference to artistic (and by extension *visual*) conventions. Artistic conventions include stylistic, formal and conceptual prototypes. However, pictorial art also involves sign and code making which entails the use of conventions. In this regard semiotics, a discipline within the larger field of communication theories, provides useful explanations of the referential functions of the sign and of the processes involved in sign production. In iconic reference, as much as in allegorical reference, conventions play an important role. The relation of the iconic sign to conventions, is characterised as follows by Eco (1976:216):

Thus iconic signs are partially ruled by convention but are at the same time motivated; some of them refer to an established stylistic rule, while others appear to propose a new rule. In certain texts only large-scale coding is permitted, i.e. prudent *undercoding*. In other cases the constitution of similitude, although ruled by operational conventions, seems to be more firmly linked to the basic mechanisms of perception than to explicit cultural habits.

This statement by Eco underlines the role played by both personal perception and cultural convention in sign production. Both these issues have a profound impact on the way

**THE ROLE OF  
REFERENCE IN SIGN-  
MAKING**

art deals with the idea of reality. In the iconic signs (or images)<sup>19</sup> that are used to render reality, the interplay between conventions and personal invention exerts a continuous influence on the type of choices an artist makes. Conventions may either be affirmed or reappraised. Commenting on the variable nature of reference in contemporary art, D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels (1988:7) state that

the post-modern apprehension of the world emphasises the inherent instability of meaning, our ability to invert signs and symbols, to recycle them in a different context and thus transform their reference.

When exploring the referential potential of images, or 'iconic signs', as they are known in semiotics, artists must have a firm grasp of how the sign, in its reference to objects or source material, can generate a wide range of meanings. Eco (1976:207) defines the iconic sign as follows:

... the iconic sign may possess: (a) optic (visible), (b) ontological (supposed), and (c) conventionalized properties of the object. By conventionalized properties I mean those depending on an iconographic convention which has catachresized the previous creative rendering of an actual perceptual experience.

G. Fauconnier (1987:61) also provides a useful definition of the sign which highlights the importance of reference:

A *sign* (here not used in a comprehensive sense) sign-ifies, in other words, a sign refers to something, and the recipient has learned to connect certain signs with a specific state. The fact that the sign is superior to the signal is due to this relation to reference. The latter is learnt through experience and is indeed only perceived in organisms with the ability to learn.

In all representational art, the artist uses signs to refer to physical reality. Thus, in talking about the general referential functions of art, certain aspects of semiotic theory need to be discussed<sup>20</sup>.

The connection between my own work and the works of the artists discussed, may at first seem rather vague. There is, however, a clear link in the approach to subject-matter and in the use of allegorical reference. Reference, either in the form of a direct appropriation or as a reinterpretation of a prototype or source material, may be regarded as an allegorical procedure in contemporary art. In many cases, this form of allegorical procedure - which may differ considerably from traditional allegorical art which had strong affiliations with narrative - provides a means to reaffirm art as a relevant cultural force while simultaneously maintaining a high degree of aesthetic quality.

At the same time, artists succeed in linking their works, by means of visual reference, to a conventional framework which provides a key to the interpretation of the works. Visual reference to conventions allows a larger audience, who may not necessarily be up to date with the latest trends in the art world, to gain access to the artwork because of a recognisable factor. The artist is nonetheless in a position to manipulate these conventions in order to create an individualised vision or interpretation of existing themes.

Allegorical reference to source material provides a means for entering into a critical dialogue or discourse with reality. Reality, as I perceive it, is extremely complex, without clear boundaries between fact and fiction, present and past, the 'original' and the mediated. Through reference to source material, I confirm that my response to the world is a mediated one. Yet the final artistic product, despite its reliance on various sources, provides a synthesis of many of the complexities that contribute to my perception of reality. Although the artwork is subject to mediation, the time and labour involved in the process of artmaking invests the final product with a reality and autonomy of its own.

Many contemporary artists have felt the need to produce art that is 'relevant', and reference to historical prototypes may serve to intensify the content of a work, be it of a moral, didactic, sociopolitical or cultural nature. In their responses to a perceived reality, artists may have extensive recourse to source material. Since reference to a source has become such a prominent feature in contemporary South African art, the phenomenon calls for further examination.

## NOTES

1 Realism is an extremely problematic notion in a discussion of contemporary pictorial art. The term tends to be used as a rather open-ended concept, which may embrace 'realism', naturalism and other forms of mimetic representation. However, to ensure that it is not employed in an uncritical manner, the term realism always necessitates some form of qualification. The concept of realism may be viewed from many angles and in art history the term vacillates. With a capital R, it refers to a specific art movement, with Courbet (1819 - 77) being regarded as one of the main originators. This type of realism deals with the sociopolitical issues of the day. Realism with a small 'r' is part of the historical quest for pictorial means to render visual ideas. Clement Greenberg, for instance, maintains that 'from Giotto to Courbet, the painter's first task has been to hollow out an illusion of three-dimensional space of a flat surface' (Greenberg, as cited in Chipp 1968:580). Realism is often a matter of comparison: even in extremely 'realistic' works, it is acknowledged by the viewer that he is looking at art, which, by definition, is an artifice governed by sets of conventions. Outside reality may be the point of departure for many contemporary pictorial artists, but the subject-matter is transformed by materials and processes. The represented object cannot, strictly speaking, possess the same attributes as the object that

it refers to. Eco (1976:193) explains the problems surrounding the idea of 'similarity to objects' as follows:

At most, a theory of perception will tell me that there are previous expectations, or models, or codes, that rule both perceptual coordinations. The solution would then be to propose that iconic signs do not possess the 'same' physical properties as do their objects but they rely on the 'same' perceptual 'structure', or on the same system of relations (one could say that they possess the same perceptual sense but not the same perceptual physical support).

2 The term aesthetic 'idiolect' is used by Eco (1976:272) to denote a personal code or style:

Such a type of private code is usually called an 'idiolect'. The rule governing all deviations at work at every level of a work of art, the unique diagram which makes all deviations mutually functional, is the *aesthetic idiolect*. Insofar as it can be applied by the same author to many of his own works (although with slight variations), the idiolect becomes a general one governing the entire *corpus* of the author's work, i.e. his *personal style*.

In this respect it may be noted that personal style, which is linked by critics such as Buchloh to art as commodity, has acquired an overload of ideological baggage. Personal style is, for instance, sometimes viewed as nothing more than a marketable element that can be exploited by the art market.

3 Eco (1979:222) is of the opinion that ideology plays a major role in a person's construction of a world of reference:

Therefore even the world of reference has to be postulated and dealt with as a cultural construct. In fact, the features characterising possible worlds as cultural constructs can be adapted to a nonintuitive definition of the world of reference. A possible world is part of one's conceptual system and depends on conceptual schemes. According to Hintikka (1969a) possible worlds split into those that fit our propositional attitudes and those which do not. In this sense our commitment to a possible world is an 'ideological' rather than an ontological matter. ... I think that by 'ideological' we should understand something which depends on one's own encyclopedia.

4 Walker's description of certain tenets of postmodern architecture would also aptly summarise the most prominent features of my earlier work. Walker (1983:82) is of the opinion that

complexity and contradiction ... and ambiguity are values which replace simplicity, purity and rationality. Mixtures of high and low culture, fine art and commercial styles are encouraged as a way of producing buildings capable of yielding multi-layered readings appealing to audiences of different levels of sophistication and knowledge.

My own work from the late 1980s was influenced by post-modern currents that formed quite a marked trend in those years. Ironically, I return to a simpler compositional approach in my current work (for example *Field: Red, yellow, blue*, 1994, fig. 34), although elements within the composition may still be highly detailed.

5 The artwork and greeting-card in question are:

- Jeff Koons, *String of puppies* (1988). Life-size wooden sculpture.
- Art Rogers, *Puppies* (copyright 1985 Art Rogers). Greeting-card photo.

According to Martha Buskirk (1992:37), Koons argued that his use of the photograph was justified because it was a parody and a form of social criticism. Buskirk points out that appropriation may be regarded as a fundamental tenet of postmodern art:

The appropriation of imagery from mass media and other sources is, of course, a strategy central to postmodern art. Koons is only one of a number of artists who have responded to an increasingly image-saturated society by taking pictures directly from the media, advertising or elsewhere and repositioning them within their own work.

6 Daniel du Plessis, *Sins of the fathers* (1991). Oil on acrylic on canvas, 160 cm x 180 cm. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. P. C. Cronjé, Pietermaritzburg.

**Note:**

In this work both the landscape and the setting are used with allegorical intentions. On the one hand the work contains extremely structured imagery, serving as a sign of order, while other images denote decay and turmoil. Although the angel in the work may at first appear to be an instrument of retribution, she also introduces the idea of a more spiritual level of existence, in contrast with the

worldly aspirations of power and domination represented by the lion sculpture. The landscape in the work may be viewed as a timeless element in contrast to the remnants of human activities. The meaning of the work is built up by means of juxtapositions. A degree of interpretation is left open to the viewer since the symbols are not entirely conventional or self-explanatory.

7 Angus Fletcher (1965:2), one of the most respected authorities in the field of allegory, defines allegory as follows: 'In the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another'. He also observes that allegory can be regarded as an 'extended metaphor' (1965:4).

8 Allegory cannot be narrowly defined and it resists clear categorisation. Fletcher (1965:1) calls it a 'protean device' which has been present in Western culture from the earliest times right up to the modern era. It is not confined to specific genres and tends to deny aesthetic boundaries.

9 It should be kept in mind that allegory is seldom present as a pure modality. Fletcher (1965:312) remarks that

the characteristics (of allegory) ... are rarely introduced in absolute extremes ... there are only degrees of these characteristics.

He is also of the opinion that not even the main traditional criterion, the double meaning, can be applied throughout a work.

10 It is debatable whether allegory could in fact exist without some form of narrative and most authors view narrative, in which a degree of action occurs and a number of characters enact an event, as an essential element of the mode. M.H. Abrams (1981:4) states:

An allegory is a narrative in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well,

are contrived both to make coherent sense on the 'literal', or primary level of signification, and also to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts and events .

11 Many of my earlier works were characterised by a smoothly finished, illusionistic rendition of detail. Thin layers of translucent glazes, sometimes applied with soft sable hair brushes, were used to achieve the desired degree of similarity to the depicted objects. In comparison with these works, the paint application in my current works is much thicker, although glazes are still used over textured areas. The tactile qualities have thus become more pronounced. From close by, the works are less illusionistic and require a greater distance for the subject-matter to become optically synthesised. Isolated areas of paint application may even appear nonillusionistic or 'abstract' in nature.

12 Allegory characteristically refers to another source or text. Abrams (1981:4) isolates two main types of allegory:

- Historical and political allegory. Here the character and actions literally refer to historical personages or events.
- The allegory of ideas. Here the literal characters represent abstract concepts and communicate a doctrine or thesis.

13 Eugène Delacroix, *The death of Sardanapulus* (1827). Oil on canvas, 388,8 cm x 487,5 cm. The Louvre, Paris. (Hamilton, s.a.).

14 In the book *Allegories of modernism: Contemporary Drawing* Bernice Rose's central argument is that a large number of postmodern drawings, due to their indebtedness and relation to the modernist tradition, could be viewed as allegories of modernism (Rose 1992).

15 Works by Penelope Siopis are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

16 Works by the South African artists Penelope Siopis, Braam Kruger, Margaret Vorster, Robert Hodgins and Cyprian Shilakoe were selected for in-depth discussion in Chapter 2.

17 According to Walker (1983:82) historicism is one of the principal tenets of postmodernism:

History and tradition (including the history of modernism) became available again - hence, 'retro-style' via the use of 'quotations' and the technique of collage, involving recyclings, parodies and pastiches of old styles.

18 This observation formed the crux of an argument which I developed for a fourth year BA(FA) dissertation:

Du Plessis, D. 1991. The resurgence of literary elements in post-modern painting, with particular reference to narrative and allegorical aspects. BA(FA) dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria.

19 The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, quoted in Eco (1976:195), views the icon as a sign that 'may represent its object mainly by its similarity'.

Fauconnier is of the opinion that the prominence that signs have acquired in communication theories, could be ascribed to the influence exerted by linguistics, philosophy of language and semiology. He states that

signs are physical factors that refer to a physical reality in order to express it. In themselves, signs are meaningless, in other words they only have meaning for somebody. The relation signifier-signified is culturally determined and is the result of agreements. The term 'code' refers to the totality of the established agreements that make it possible to interpret signs (1987:69).

20 However, in this respect it could be noted that the application of semiotic theory to images is not without problems. Mitchell, who has serious misgivings about the appropriateness of the wholesale transposition of semiotic theory to art, points out that

as it happens, the sign-type that has proved most difficult to assimilate into semiotics has been the *icon*, the traditional contrary to the verbal sign. ... One reason the icon has proved so difficult for semiotics to define is that similarity is such a capacious relationship that almost anything can be assimilated into it (Mitchell 1986:56).

.....

## CHAPTER I

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### Reinvented conventions

The expression 'flogging a dead horse' and the word 'convention' tend to evoke similar mental images. Yet, as I will demonstrate in this and the following chapters, the use of visual conventions is not only inescapable, but may also be harnessed by contemporary pictorial artists to reflect current sociocultural exigencies in vital new configurations.

Although postmodernism has opened art up to any visual paradigm the artist might wish to use, I will deal more specifically with visual conventions as understood in a Western context. Thus, whenever terms such as art, conventions or prototypes appear, a Western paradigm is implied. It is also acknowledged that many terms are ideologically loaded and that it is normally impossible to provide simple definitions.

Visual artists making use of allegorical devices tend to re-invent conventions to suit contemporary circumstances. Many contemporary artists - working in both the easel tradition and in neo-conceptual modes - make use of conventions and visual prototypes<sup>1</sup> as source material with the aim of conveying and emphasising social, cultural or political ideas. I will endeavour to demonstrate that, if used judiciously, allegorical reference to source material constitutes a viable artistic means for sociopolitical as well as cultural and artistic commentary.

Chapter I will serve as a general background to the other chapters and will provide further elucidation of what is meant by 'allegorical reference' in the context of this dissertation. As indicated in the Introduction, the emphasis will be on allegorical reference in visual art, although it cannot, strictly speaking, be separated from iconic reference.

**LOOKING AT  
CONVENTIONS FROM  
A WESTERN  
PARADIGM**

**GENERAL  
BACKGROUND TO  
DISSERTATION**



Greatly simplified, it could be said that allegorical reference is linked to the reuse of

- visual devices or prototypes (of a stylistic, formal and conceptual nature);
- narrative and allegorical conventions; and
- genres, for instance landscape and still-life painting.

Reference to other works of art is certainly not a new phenomenon and neither is it unique to the postmodern idiom. The history of Western art provides numerous examples of reference. Steinberg (Lipman 1978:8-31), in his discussion of the phenomenon of 'art from art', provides a general overview and illustrates how artists, from the Renaissance<sup>2</sup> onwards, have used and adapted themes and formal devices from the vast reservoir of existing works. E.H. Gombrich (1977:20) talks about the 'tenacity of conventions' with regard to the role that stereotypes play in representational art. The artist may have recourse to prototypes in the form of other artworks, but also, at an even more fundamental level, to a basic visual vocabulary which is essential for objectifying empirical reality. As far as representational art is concerned, Gombrich (1977:76) argues that

**ART INTO ART**

everything points to the conclusion that the phrase 'the language of art' is more than a loose metaphor, that even to describe the visible world in images we need a developed system of schemata.

Convention, and the recourse to prototypes in both the practical execution of a work of art and its conceptualisation, is evidently an entrenched part of the art tradition. In the postmodern era, however, a particular set of cultural circumstances has given rise to a clearly detectable attitude with regard to visual reference, necessitating a fresh investigation of the phenomenon. In postmodernism there is a tendency to view all art as an open text which is available for reinterpretation and exploration. What Cosgrove and Daniels (1988:8) said with regard to landscape, applies equally well to much else in the postmodern era:

From [such] a post-modern perspective landscape seems less like a palimpsest whose 'real' or 'authentic' meanings can somehow be recovered with the correct techniques, theories or ideologies, than a flickering text displayed on the word-processor screen whose meaning can be created, extended, altered, elaborated and finally obliterated by the merest touch of a button.

Modernist dogma just about banished all forms of reference from art and certain critics regarded the revival of reference in postmodern art with suspicion<sup>3</sup>. The postmodern period saw an upsurge of revivalist art, with reference to Western art of the past approached in either a blatant or subtle manner. In a number of her works the South African artist Penny Siopis, for instance, makes use of subtle references to the seventeenth-century *vanitas*<sup>4</sup> tradition as well as to history painting. An artist like Braam Kruger exploits prototypes in a more obvious fashion. The titles of a number of Kruger's works reveal this thematic interest. Examples are *Barking up the Maya* (1990), *Venus with a vibrator* (1990) and *Kneedeep nymphs* (1990)<sup>5</sup>.

In contrast with modernist and late modernist dogma that favoured formalism, abstraction and symbolism, postmodernism embraces the return to extraneous references in art - that is, a revival of the use of elements that are not strictly concerned with the formal properties of art or the art medium as such. The notion that reference to the world outside the artwork was acceptable, stands in opposition to the Greenbergian modernist ideal of the 'purity' of art<sup>6</sup>. This particular perception of art commenced in the early modernism of the nineteenth century when increasing emphasis was placed on the importance of the inherent qualities of the language of visual art<sup>7</sup>.

Given the lack of a 'unifying' dogma (in comparison with, for instance, modernist dogma), or of any form of cohesion that could perhaps be categorised as a movement, artists in the postmodern era are left to find their own individual answers to the myriad of possibili-

**POST-PURITY:  
A RETURN  
TO  
OUTSIDE  
REFERENCES**

ties that exists within the open-ended sensibility which characterises postmodernism. Cosgrove and Daniels (1988:8) maintain that

the post-modern apprehension of the world emphasises the inherent instability of meaning, our ability to invert signs and symbols, to recycle them in a different context and thus transform their reference.

The alteration of original meaning, which is supplanted by something new and perhaps even entirely different, is a characteristic of allegorical reference/appropriation. In its reference, it supplants the original intention of the prototype. Terry Eagleton (1990:320), in discussing *Ulysses* of James Joyce, describes this arbitrariness of the allegorical symbol as follows:

For if a world of intricate symbolic correspondences is to be constructed, some kind of mechanism or switch-gear will be necessary by which any one element of reality can become a signifier of another; and there is clearly no natural stopping place to this play of allegorical signification, this endless metamorphosis in which anything can be alchemically converted into something else.

This phenomenon can be demonstrated by a brief analysis of the painting *Still life with watermelon and other things* (1986)<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 5) by Penelope Siopis. Siopis's painting is rich in reference to visual conventions. Yet, she always links visual conventions to contemporary realities. With the emphasis on an overabundance of perishable food, there is a clear reference to seventeenth-century *vanitas* still life painting, which dealt with the transience of life<sup>9</sup>. There are various objects in Siopis's work that refer to typical *vanitas* objects, for example empty sea shells and the carapaces of tortoises and crustaceans, candles, flowers and perishables such as fruit, cake and savouries. The following statement (Groseclose 1987:53) provides a summary of the type of symbols used most often in the *vanitas* tradition:

**THE TRANSFORMATION  
OF ORIGINAL  
MEANINGS**

... the *vanitas* picture in its most developed form involves three different classes of objects: symbols of earthly existence (books and other attributes of art, material possessions, things appealing to the senses); symbols of transience (skulls, timepieces [these could also be calls to moderation], candlesticks, and flowers); and references to an afterlife or resurrection (corn, ivy, walnuts, sometimes a glass of wine). ... many *vanitas* paintings were intentionally enigmatic in order that the spectator ponder their meaning.

In Siopis's still life, the themes of transience and futility are further emphasised by the formal and stylistic devices used by the artist: the table in the foreground is tilted towards the viewer in an almost confrontational manner to emphasise the subject-matter; numerous circular shapes, traditionally associated with futility, occur throughout the composition; the paint application is thick and luscious, pointing towards the materiality as well as the perishable quality of the food objects.

The above remarks point to the fact that allegorical reference is linked to iconic reference, because the way in which the sign is encoded contributes to the overall meaning of the work.

In this painting the principal *vanitas* theme of transience, and the possible religious connotations, seem

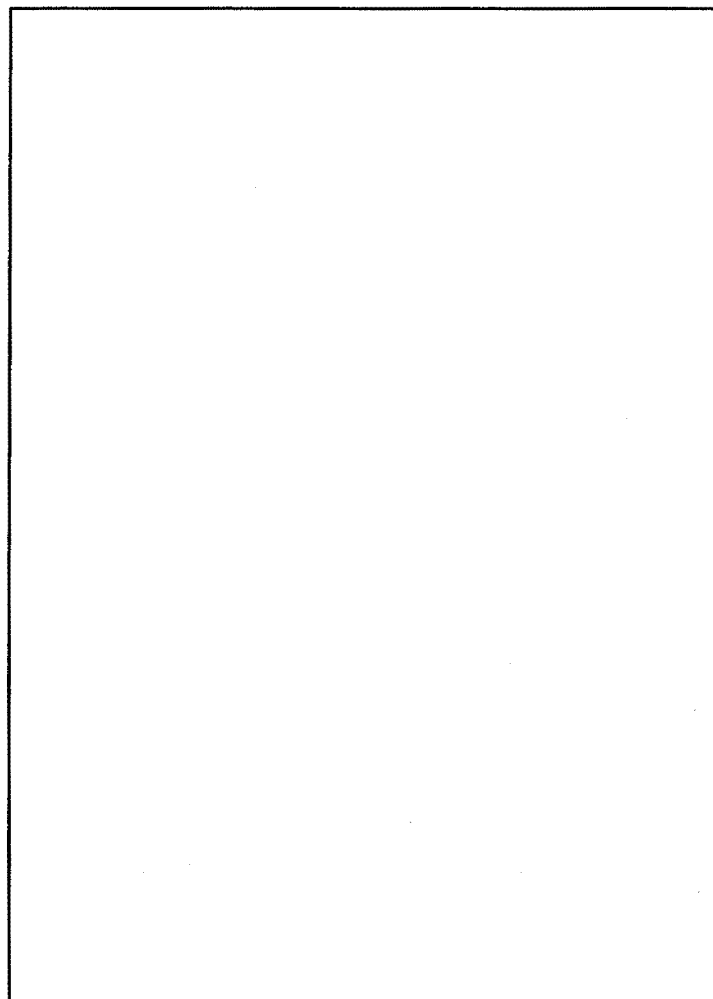


Fig. 5.  
*Penelope Siopis, Still life with watermelon and other things (1986).*  
*Oil on canvas, 242,5 cm x 180,5 cm.*

... the *vanitas* picture in its most developed form involves three different classes of objects: symbols of earthly existence (books and other attributes of art, material possessions, things appealing to the senses); symbols of transience (skulls, timepieces [these could also be calls to moderation], candlesticks, and flowers); and references to an afterlife or resurrection (corn, ivy, walnuts, sometimes a glass of wine). ... many *vanitas* paintings were intentionally enigmatic in order that the spectator ponder their meaning.

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Fig. 5.  
Penelope Siopis, *Still life with watermelon and other things* (1986).  
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to be supplanted by an implied critique - within the context of South Africa's recent political past and the social conditions it engendered - of overabundance. Unlike pop art - to which the painting may quite possibly also refer - the work does not deal predominantly with consumerist issues. It has a moralist character which constitutes a critique of the excesses within the privileged segment of South African society. The setting, with its empty spaces and covered chairs, gives a new slant to the *vanitas* theme of transience. It could be argued that although the artist used firmly established formal, stylistic and conceptual conventions, she has nonetheless arrived at a new type of work - she has revitalised an old tradition.

Siopis, like many other artists in the postmodern era, does not subscribe to the ideas of a particular 'school', but uses the entire art tradition as a source of inspiration. Within this vast field they find examples - formal, stylistic and conceptual - which are suited to their own temperaments and instincts. These examples may then be emulated, reinterpreted, exploited, reinvented or copied.

There is a realisation that the formal language of art (meaning pictorial art executed by means of traditional art materials) cannot be pushed any further by means of experimentation. Many artists seek to reevaluate the past and to incorporate traditional conventions into an individual vision. This reassessment of the past - the desire to preserve the past for the future - is a rather commonplace allegorical feature (Owens 1984:203).

I agree with the argument formulated by Craig Owens in his essay 'The Allegorical Impulse' (1984:203-235) in which he maintains that various postmodern strategies - including appropriation, site-specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity and hybridisation - not only serve to distinguish postmodernism from modernism, but also to characterise the entire postmodern era in terms of an 'allegorical impulse' (Owens 1984: 209):

**REINTERPRETATION  
OF SOURCE  
MATERIAL**

**ALLEGORY AS A  
POSTMODERN  
STRATEGY**

They also form a whole when seen in relation to allegory, suggesting that postmodernist art may in fact be identified by a single, coherent impulse, and that criticism will remain incapable of accounting for that impulse as long as it continues to think of allegory as aesthetic error.

The Western past - even the recent past, for instance modernism, as demonstrated by Bernice Rose in *Allegories of modernism: contemporary drawing*, published in 1992 - is mediated by a strong tendency towards individualised interpretations of past conventions, as opposed to 'originality'. Somehow one is, in many prominent instances, aware of past conventions which form a subtext to works of contemporary artists working in the Western aesthetic idiom. It is as if many contemporary artists are involved in a delicate balancing act between individual expression and reinterpretation of the past.

Thus, in the choice of subject-matter for a work of art (an activity which is so often considered a purely subjective exercise) there are various factors related to art conventions that transcend the purely personal and constitute equally important motivations in the selection process. Visual reference to prototypes, directly or indirectly, has an important bearing on my own work as well as the work of numerous contemporary artists. In my work *Ochre and blue Highveld winter* (1994)<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 6) the loose and painterly mark-making points to the later works of Monet, for instance *Setting sun* (1921-22)<sup>11</sup>. However, reference is not made to one specific work, but rather to Monet's painterly approach. A close comparison



Fig. 6.  
Daniel du Plessis, *Ochre and blue Highveld winter* (1994). Oil on board, 50,5 cm x 50 cm.

will reveal that my paint application and colour use differ considerably from that of Monet. The prototype is transformed by personal perception and experience. The subject-matter of my own painting is the harsh Highveld winter landscape, quite unlike the softer, North European and atmospheric qualities of Monet's work.

In this regard, Rose (1992:118 - 127) demonstrates that a number of artists<sup>12</sup> use modernism as a text through which their own works come into being. Their proper subject-matter is thus modernism and its conventions. These artworks refer to art *per se*, much more than they refer to the 'real' world outside the realm of art.

In the choice of subject-matter, and in the chosen way of dealing at a technical level with the rendering of the subject-matter in terms of art materials, the artist who received formal training cannot escape the weight of visual convention. Even so, a fair measure of choice still persists in the artist's manipulation of conventions and the extent to which the conventions are acknowledged or transformed. Interestingly, certain contemporary local artists who work in a neo-conceptual vein, labour under the presumption that they are producing avant-garde art when, in fact, they are merely regurgitating certain tenets of long-established Duchampian conventions. The trend may be illustrated by Kendell Geers's (b. 1964) work entitled *Installation: Refuse* (1992 - 93)<sup>13</sup> in which the use of black plastic refuse bags refers to the conventions of the readymades. The concept is so close to Duchampian prototypes that it constitutes a form of 'copying' and the work demonstrates that reference also occurs extensively in neo-conceptual art. According to Gillian Anstey (1994:5), Geers calls himself a 'con-artist and agent provocateur' and says about his work: 'This is not traditional art that you can put in your arms and take home like framed works. The concept in South Africa is brand new.' In fact, this type of work, which is rather cliched, merely reinforces the observation that the art tradition has become a very important source in selecting subject-matter for works of art. The confiscation of this type of concept, which is greatly in-

**WEIGHT OF  
CONVENTIONS IN  
CHOICE OF SUBJECT-  
MATTER**



debted to Duchamp's readymades, is another example of allegorical reference, which forms the theme of this dissertation.

In its reference to earlier conventions, the artistic mode of Kendell Geers's conceptual work does not differ much from artists working in traditional materials or in the tradition of easel painting. A number of the notions often ignored by artists working in a conceptual mode, are pinpointed by H. Gene Blocker (1980:235) in a discussion of Jasper John's flags and targets:

He could, like Duchamp, produce or display an ordinary object which does not ordinarily refer beyond itself. But to 'say' that is what it is doing, it must call attention to itself as art. Duchamp can no more say he is not saying anything than Descartes can think he is not thinking. If Duchamp really wanted a non-referring, ordinary object he should have left the bicycle wheel on the bicycle and the bicycle in the street - but then it wouldn't have made the 'point'. *As soon as it is removed and placed in an art context (e.g. shown in an art gallery or museum) it becomes a referring artwork, and this would seem to be a defining feature of an artwork (italics mine).*

A. Cook (1989:25) gives a good indication of the referential complexities (and the underlying theoretical considerations) involved in deciding on a particular type of subject-matter when he says that

the choices that an artist makes of a subject ... are ipso facto endowed with signification in the choice. And they are themselves full of prior signification before the choice has been made, both generally in social implication and specifically in the iconography of art.

The choice of subject-matter, particularly where the subject-matter is so closely related to historic stylistic and conceptual prototypes, is closely allied to the phenomenon of allegory in contemporary pictorial art. A marked trend towards exploiting the potential of stylistic and conceptual reference emerged in many works from the early 1980s and 1990s. The very names of groupings such as the German Neo-Expressionists and the Italian Trans-

avantgarde (Lucie-Smith 1990:7), whose works date from the early 1980s onwards, reveal a renewed interest in prototypes. The pluralist<sup>14</sup> sensibility of postmodernism has allowed for, among other things, historical revivalism which lends itself to the exploration of visual reference - or 'quotation' - as a device. At the same time pluralism allows artists to indulge in experimentation, for example multimedia and performance art, which falls outside the field of the so-called 'tradition'. The issue is further compounded by the fact that tradition cannot be defined very neatly. Andrew Benjamin (1991:133) points out that

it is still unclear what tradition is. That it is a unity that is repeated and whose function is to legitimize follows from the general argument. And yet it cannot be just the rules that exist at any one time, for this would preclude posing the preliminary question of how these rules came to exist. Furthermore it also fails to deal with the larger problem of what a tradition 'embodies'.

**'TRADITION' DEFIES  
EASY DEFINITIONS**

Eagleton (1991:134) argues that in the light of Jean-Francois Lyotard's description of the present as 'the interplay of interdependence between the unity of tradition, consensus and universality', postmodernism allows for a distinction

between artistic practices that aim at repeating that 'interplay of interdependence', and ones that via experimentation can no longer be accounted for within the terms set by tradition.

According to Eagleton (1991:135) the current multiplicity of artistic expression can 'only be understood and accounted for in terms of a theory of dissensus; one which recognizes the absence of a final resolution. In other words justice can only be done to dissensus within pluralism'.

In looking at some examples of South African art in which reference to a conventional prototype occurs, it becomes clear that tradition is not necessarily viewed as a monolithic history and that aspects of that tradition may be interpreted differently by different artists. The multiplicity and diversity are further highlighted by the various approaches art-

ists bring to the 'tradition'. Some quote blatantly. In a local context one could mention Braam Kruger's work, for instance *Venus with a Vibrator* (1990)<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 7). Kruger's approach is overt, in keeping with what Rose (1992:19) views as a dominant feature of art in the 1980s:

Appropriation and shifting referents, 'copying' the original and changing the context, thus changing its meaning while still alluding to the original and all that is known about it, are characteristic of the 1980s. This differs from 'being influenced' in that often there is little or no attempt to disguise or transform the original source, or else that source is left bare and transparent as the ground for the new.

In *Venus with a vibrator* the largest part of the painting is made up of a caricature of the *Venus of Urbino* (1538)<sup>16</sup> by Titian. A comparison of the original with Kruger's version reveals that it is not a particularly faithful copy, with a fair amount of licence being taken in the articulation of the figure. The weak handling by Kruger of foreshortening and the clumsy rendition of anatomical features - as seen in the torso and feet - would suggest that admiration for the originals is not necessarily the driving force in copying the original.



Fig. 7.  
Braam Kruger, *Venus with a vibrator* (1990). Charcoal on paper, 114,7 cm x 150,2 cm.

Copying has numerous implications because it represents a method or procedure that militates against ingrained cultural preconceptions. Brenda Schmahmann notes that Lichtenstein was criticised in the early 1960s for *transcribing* rather than *transforming* his sources. She maintains, however, that

Lichtenstein's works which appear to be transcriptions of his sources are critical and threatening precisely because they challenge the myth that worthwhile art should necessarily involve a transformation of elements found in the real world (1988:52).

Copying (be it of a stylistic, formal or even conceptual nature) is an intrinsic part of the entire tradition of representational art. The copying of works by established 'masters' has been standard practice in the history of Western art. Copying is integral to earlier European visual conventions, to conceptual art and to art referring very directly to a historical source. In certain forms, such as photo realism, copying may also imply an acceptance of the existence of an empirical reality outside the picture plane. With reference to works by photo realists, for example *Jeep* (1969) by Ralph Goings<sup>17</sup>, Linda Chase (1975:90) observes that

through the painstaking adherence to photographic detail, the Photo Realist painter is seeking to re-value things, and though it may appear that he is devaluing the traditions of art and the role of the artist in doing so, it should be clear that he is rather reevaluating these in terms of his particular historical position.

What certain critics consider unacceptable is blatant copying or replication which does not conceal the source. Yet concealment of the source, in the work of local artists such as Kendell Geers and Braam Kruger, will run contrary to the very effect these artists need to achieve. To be fully significant, many of the works by the above artists are dependent on art-historical discourse and on stylistic and conceptual prototypes<sup>18</sup>. In addition, these artworks are often aimed at viewers who have knowledge of the art-theoretical subtleties which

form part of the subject-matter of these artists. Some of their works are thus more closely related to what may be regarded as an esoteric, cultural domain than to ordinary outside reality. Often the viewer needs an understanding of certain cultural conventions, for instance the theoretical background pertaining to the interpretation of readymades, before the meanings of the works will become clear.

The aims underlying the use of reference by artists vary greatly. Two drawings by the American artist Sherrie Levine (b. 1947), which are based on works by Egon Schiele<sup>19</sup>, are traced from reproductions of the original picture, 'questioning yet affirming the life cycle of works of art in the mechanical age ...' (Rose 1992:78). In this case, the direct copying of the prototypes becomes the artist's subject-matter.

Owens, for whom allegory occupies a pivotal position in postmodernism, also emphasises the role of reference, whether in the form of appropriation or hybridisation (Owens 1980:209). He further clarifies the issue by stating that 'allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter' (Owens 1980:205).

In an era devoid of dominant art dogmas, freedom with regard to subject-matter presents the artist with a bewildering range of choices. It is a delicate balance between a number of factors, even though all the factors that come into play may not initially be evident to the artist in the process of art-making. The artist may very well view subject-matter as a question of personal preference and 'gut feeling'. Yet, for the artist working in the easel tradition of pictorial art, the choice of subject-matter, and the ways in which the subject-matter is given form in the artwork, are inevitably influenced by deeply ingrained cultural precedents. This does not imply that the artist is always consciously aware of these influences. Thus, in the context of cultural conditioning and the powerful influence of cultural conventions, it

**CULTURAL  
CONDITIONING VERSUS  
ORIGINALITY**

becomes difficult to determine the extent to which it is possible to impart a personal vision, let alone originality, to subject-matter.

Steven Madoff (1987:16) uses purgatory as a metaphor for this dilemma, stating that

the logical extension of the critique of originality has led to the conclusion that we do not even conceive of originals. In the culture of massive electronic deluge, the reproduction of images has blurred the orderly conception of linear history. ... Purgatory is where originality never existed, where the genesis of artistic inspiration is explained as eternal recurrence.

This is a particularly pessimistic conception, which perhaps places too much emphasis on the notion of originality<sup>20</sup> as a pivotal factor in art. It needs to be remembered that originality in art often tends to be equated with the ideas of novelty and progression that were such mainstays of modernism.

Currently neo-conceptual art - which also appropriates images from art history and could thus be seen as a form of allegory - is very popular among a number of South African artists, including Kendell Geers. This is underscored, for instance, by the prominence given to installations and works of an overtly conceptual nature at the *Africus*: Johannesburg Biennale (28 February - 30 April 1995).

Mary Jane Jacob (Jacob & Goldstein 1989:20), in referring to American conceptual artists of the 1980s, states that

the Dada readymade object gave the artist the right to bestow on anything the status of art; actual fabrication of the object was no longer necessary. Thus was dealt the first blow to the criteria of craftsmanship and originality that had previously defined a work of art. The success of the Pop Artists, and most importantly Andy Warhol, not only added images from the mass media to this repertory of readymades, but also created the possibility for the artist to be a living star.

I do not agree with the denigration of craftsmanship and believe that the act of aesthetic production is one of the elements which differentiate artworks from commodities<sup>21</sup>. It may also be argued that the Duchampian notion of readymades constitutes only a single branch of twentieth-century art and that the importance of 'fabricated' artworks, which probably make up the largest part of twentieth-century art, cannot simply be ignored. It needs to be acknowledged that the draw of cultural prototypes exerts an equally strong force on both 'conceptual' artists and on those artists who prefer to paint, draw, and sculpt, using traditional means. Even if one's point of departure is purely visual, with subject-matter chosen for its intrinsic qualities and appreciated from a personal perspective, it remains impossible to escape the historical baggage of cultural conventions.

Furthermore, artists have to come to terms with the issue of self-expression via subject-matter and the relevance of self-expression within the current sociocultural context. Bernice Rose (1992:11) observes in this regard that

at the critical centre of art there is now a skepticism about the validity of the authorial role and the relevance of the signatory gesture. ... Technology has invaded the Garden: in the face of the mass media and their techniques, and the intrusion of photography as an instrument for recording the artist's primary conception, the very means as well as the value of traditional art-making have been assaulted. Self-expression and the belief that we can control our own destinies have been cast into doubt as just "two more cultural myths", in the face of the conformity and paralysis of individual will induced by the media as they seek to manufacture consent and re-form us into unquestioning consumers.

The tension between self-expression and originality, and the relationship of current art-making to the past have been essential issues since the 1960s, with the stakes rising continually, as artists have addressed the fundamental premises of modernism: the need to constantly invent new pictorial languages and interrogate the very tenets of modernism itself.

What is at stake is not only the reassessment of certain modernist criteria, but also of many tenets of the Western art tradition. It is a reevaluation of numerous Western cultural conventions and their validity and relevance for contemporary art. Unlike modernism that tended to deny the past, postmodernism includes not only the past, but in fact any visual paradigm. The artist is free to incorporate whatever he or she chooses as part of an extended vocabulary. In the process, questions with regard to semiology as well as reception theory arise<sup>22</sup>. To what extent, for instance, can subject-matter that is conveyed in a representational manner, making use of conventional signs, be manipulated and how will these signs be received by the viewer in a particular cultural context? Erwin Panofsky (as cited in McEvelley 1982:56) stated that

... [the] experience of a work of art depends ... not only on the natural sensitivity and visual training of the spectator, but also on his cultural equipment. There is no such thing as an entirely 'naive' beholder.

The manipulation of visual conventions presents a challenge not only to the artist, who may wish to express new ideas within the constraints of a conventional framework, but also to the viewer, for whom the conventional framework provides a yardstick for the interpretation of artworks. Cook (1989:5), in paraphrasing Gombrich, maintains that 'we are caught in sets of conventional cues if we are viewers, of conventional techniques if we are painters ... '.

The complexities involved are brought into focus by Cook's statement that

in painting ... the image ... involves complex relations among not only signifier, signified, and referent, but also *being* and *seeming*, *emblem* and *expression*, *theme* and *motif* and their combinations into *discourse* and *figure* ... (Cook 1989:10).



The choice of and approach to subject-matter have an important influence on the nature of works, since both these factors affect the execution of the work and its final appearance. A simple example would be the choice of viewpoint - the difference between a panoramic scene and a close-up fragment of the same scene. Another factor is the process of selection - what the artist includes or omits - and how that choice influences the rendition of the subject-matter and its meaning. Furthermore, although the artist may not always consciously perceive it as a prime consideration in the choice of subject-matter, cultural prototypes inevitably exert an influence on both the formal and stylistic qualities of the work.

In my own art, to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, I attempt to find a compromise between art conventions, observation of nature and personal expression. Furthermore, it is impossible to ignore the South African sociopolitical and cultural context in which my works are produced.

The accommodation of diverse referential elements in my work can be demonstrated by a brief analysis of the painting entitled *Autumn field and spruit* (1994)<sup>23</sup> (Fig. 8a and Fig. 8b). In the close-up, frontal presentation of the subject-matter there are references, in both the technique and composition, to elements of works by Claude Monet. The encrusted surfaces in my own work are reminiscent of a work such as *Rouen cathedral* (1894)<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 9), which forms part of a series of paintings by Monet based on the cathedral. The frontality of the composition of my work contains echoes of, among others, the water lily series, for example *Water lilies* (c 1920)<sup>25</sup> (Fig.10). The fact that these elements, in the initial stages of exploring the current theme, were not consciously sought out or copied by me, only reinforces the argument that art conventions, through art education and mass media reproductions, have become all-pervasive and inescapable.

However, the work is not, in comparison with works by certain American artists such as Brice Marden (b. 1938), so closely identifiable with the prototype that it becomes almost

#### REFERENCES TO MONET

*Fig. 8a.*  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*Autumn field and spruit*  
*(1994). Oil on canvas,*  
*91,5 cm x 95,5 cm.*



*Fig. 8b.*  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*Autumn field and*  
*spruit (1994). Oil on*  
*canvas, 91,5 cm x 95,5*  
*cm. (Detail.)*

*Below:*  
*Fig. 9.*  
*Claude Monet, Rouen cathedral (1894).*  
*Approx. 99 cm x 66 cm.*



*Below:*  
*Fig. 10.*  
*Claude Monet,*  
*Water lilies*  
*(c. 1920). 100 cm x 300 cm.*  
*(Detail.)*



indistinguishable from it. It is clear that certain examples of Marden's work, such as *Drawing for conjunctions* (1988-89)<sup>26</sup> (Fig. 11), are closely allied to Jackson Pollock's gestural mark-making, and by extension to Abstract Expressionism. Rose (1992:43) points out that Marden is, in fact, preoccupied with visual culture and that Pollock is an acknowledged source of reference. In respect of my work entitled *Autumn field and spruit*, visual culture is not the predominant subject matter of the work, since the painting is clearly based on the observation of a scene which is recognisable as Highveld savanna. Since the emphasis on observation is pervasive, it removes the work from the sphere of the purely formal or aesthetic.

The above-mentioned work is an example of the complex interplay between various referential functions. Since the work refers to elements of Monet's oeuvre, which could be considered as an antecedent text, *Autumn field and spruit* displays characteristics of allegorical reference. For the viewer who is familiar with Monet's work, the links with the prototype would be relatively clear and may trigger a number of associations. This knowledge, however, is not essential for an understanding of the work.

Photographs, which are used as source material, form part of the visual research and the observation process. As I pointed out earlier, my use of photographic sources is rather ambiguous. Even though these landscapes are mediated by photographs taken by me, I do not regard photographs as the sole source of subject-

*Fig. 11.*  
*Brice Marden,*  
*Drawing for*  
*conjunctions,*  
*(1988-89). Ink and*  
*gouache on paper, 40,6*  
*cm x 29, 8 cm.*



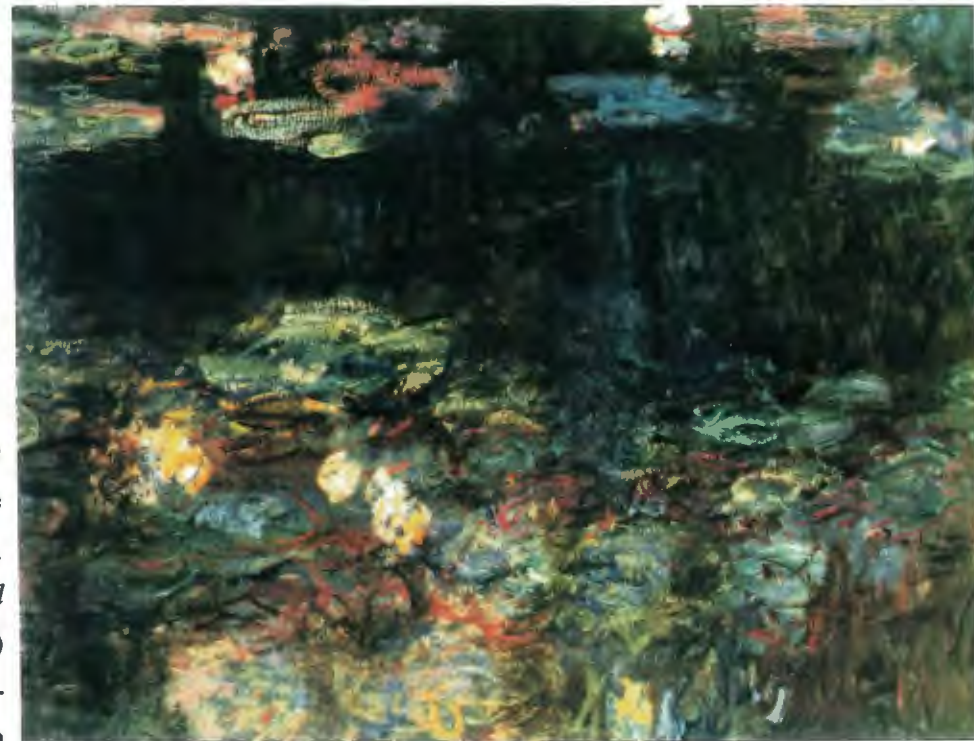
material. Only a part of the content of the work is related to the photographic form which serves as a source of reference. However, for me photographs also act as *aides-memoire*, a means whereby I can recall the experiential qualities of a particular scene. My use of photographs will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Returning to the references made to Monet's work, it could be pointed out that *Autumn field and spruit* shares, among other things, frontality as a compositional device with certain works by Monet. Frontality, when it was used by Monet as a compositional device, already referred to cultural precedents and the device could even at that time have been regarded as an historically entrenched artistic convention<sup>27</sup>.

The choice of viewpoint (i.e. frontality) leads to a condensation of space. Through the use of close-ups, the surrounding space is cropped out of the picture so that a fragment of the scene is focused upon and acquires a particular emphasis. In my own work these fragments are informed by the photographic techniques of cropping and zooming in.

Apart from these formal devices, the execution of the works differs in many important respects. Monet's work, as demonstrated by the painting *Green reflections*, c. 1917-21<sup>28</sup> (Fig. 12), often refers to the outside world by means of suggestion. In contrast, many of my own works, including *Autumn field and spruit* (1994) (Fig. 8), *Autumn field* (1994) (Fig. 36) and *Harvested field* (1994/95) (Fig. 25), show a synthesis between suggestion and meticulous detail. In

Fig. 12.  
Claude Monet, *Green reflections*  
(c. 1917 - 21). Diptych; total  
dimensions: 200 cm x 850 cm.



choosing frontality as a compositional device, certain elements are deliberately excluded from the subject-matter. Here it may be mentioned that a number of Monet's earlier works contain images related to the beginning of the industrial era, such as factory chimneys and railway stations<sup>29</sup>. In the view of certain commentators<sup>30</sup>, this type of imagery is more relevant to the socioeconomic realities of his era than the subject-matter of his later works, such as the water lily panels. As pointed out by John House (1986:15), the author Emile Zola praised Monet's 'actuality' - that is, the way in which the artist dealt with modernity. However, House (1986:18) maintains that

Monet's paintings of the mid-1870s suggest that he was feeling the rival claims between two different types of painting - whether to concentrate on modernity of subject-matter, or on translating into paint fleeting effects of natural light. In these years there was a gradual change in the way he treated his subjects. ... The result of the change is to play down the specificity of their social observation.

The influence of Japanese prints on his approach to composition is well documented (House 1986:56-57). There were also precedents for his use of frontal schemes - Corot, Daubigny and Pissarro had chosen similar points of view:

Daubigny's open river scenes of the Seine and Oise are often comparable to Monet's in their simple frontality. ... Corot had been a pioneer of the anti-picturesque landscape ... . By 1890 the meaning of the countryside for Monet was primarily optical rather than social ... he was fascinated by the cycles of days and seasons, but for Monet the fascination lay in the 'weather, atmosphere and ambience' that he was struggling to paint (House 1986:28).

The optical or retinal aspects - light, colour and texture - became the main themes in his work, as illustrated by the painting *Water lilies* (c. 1920) (Fig. 10). In his later paintings the pictorial qualities of the works are consequently the overriding concern - these pictures allude to reality and nature, with the emphasis on composition, colour and texture. Although

works such as the vast water lily panels are fragments of a bigger scene, they create the impression of being limitless, without beginning or end. The poetic qualities are reinforced by the loose, painterly quality of the execution. The viewer becomes immersed, in a sensuous manner, in the work.

By using frontality as a formal device in the painting *Autumn field and spruit*, I also remove the subject-matter from a wider, obvious social context. However, in the process of art-making I give value to the ordinary by investing the subject-matter, which comes from my everyday life and surroundings, with careful, painstaking detail and time.

As observed with regard to certain works by Monet, the selection of a fragment of a bigger scene tends to deny the social context in which the works are produced. There are no overt cues for the viewer to construct the social context of these works. On the other hand, by zooming in on a section of a wider scene, the opportunity is created to explore the pictorial possibilities provided by the subject-matter. In my case, the potential of exploring my own perceptions of a multifaceted reality within an extremely simplified compositional framework constitutes an important interest, while many of my works nonetheless refer to the suggestive qualities of light, colour and atmosphere which are also inherent to Monet's painterly approach. It will be demonstrated in Chapter 3 that despite the allegorical reference to Monet's oeuvre, my work differs substantially from the prototype.

Eventually, the subject-matter, the pictorial approach to the subject-matter, reference to a prototype and iconic reference form a symbiotic relationship. It is possible, with regard to works by Monet and me, to say that art and visual conventions are as much the subject-matter of these works as the outside world that they refer to. Yet the role of personal preferences, perceptions and ideological orientation is equally important because these factors contribute to a recognisable aesthetic idiolect.

**PERSONAL  
TRANSFORMATION OF  
PROTOTYPES**

However, because the conventions and prototypes are transformed in terms of my personal aesthetic idiolect to conform to my own experience of reality, I would maintain that I have in fact reinvented the conventions which provide the referential framework for my artworks. This is in line with what John Deely (1990:70) observes with regard to the semiotic idea of reality:

We move from the idea of reality as an order of existence independent of the observer to a semiotic idea of "reality" as including also the observer in all that is dependent on the observer, along with whatever in experience reveals itself as a part of something ... . We move ... to the postmodern idea of reality as the text of specifically human experience.

The approaches to conventions favoured by a number of contemporary South African artists in encoding their perceptions of reality, form the basis of the next chapter.

## NOTES

1 Prototypes would also include conventions from the more recent Western past, for instance Duchampian readymades and modernism, and should thus not be interpreted as pertaining exclusively to the remote past.

2 The Renaissance, in turn, adapted Classical Greek devices and modes.

3 B H D Bucloh's essay, 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression', in Wallis:1984, is a very eloquent example.

4 The *vanitas* still life is a seventeenth-century allegorical convention functioning along symbolic principles. Edward Lucie-Smith (1986:18) states that the *vanitas* still life not only draws the spectator's attention to his own mortality; it teaches a lesson about the transience of human life.

5 *Barking up the Maya* (1990). Oil on paper, 152,3 cm x 203,2 cm. Signed bottom right. Collection: the artist.

*Venus with a vibrator* (1990). Charcoal on paper, 114,7 cm x 150,2 cm.

*Knee-deep nymphs* (1990). Pastel on paper, 152,4 cm x 182,2 cm. Signed bottom right. Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery. (Vita Art Now 1990: 14-15)

6 The name Clement Greenberg has become almost synonymous with the theory of modernism. Many critics, however, consider his theories inadequate. Peter Halley (1981:12) delineates the problem as follows:

... what is today thought of as modernism is not really outdated but badly formulated in the first place. Critics today universally equate modernism with the formalist ideas first developed by Clement Greenberg in the 1950s. But Greenberg's definition has never been adequate to define the full range of twentieth-century art.

7 Maurice Denis in 'Definition of Neotraditionism', originally published in *Art et critique*, Paris, August 1890, cited by Chipp (1968:94), reflected this preoccupation with the formal elements of art in the much cited words:

It is well to remember that a picture - before being a battle horse, a nude woman or some anecdote - is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.

Charles Harrison (1983:6) underscores this point:

Development in art is explained by Modernists in terms of an increasing concentration upon the technical problems exclusive to art itself and upon the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the aesthetic experience .

8 Penelope Siopis, *Still life with watermelon and other things* (1986). Oil on canvas, 242,5 cm x 180,5 cm. Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation. (Alexander & Cohen 1990:168).

9 In this respect the observations of Donna Gustafson (1986:91) with regard to pop art provide an alternative insight:

Pop images of food return to the materialism of the seventeenth century's Dutch still-life painting and the theme of vanitas as a viable twentieth-century subject-matter, but without resurrecting the religious or emotional content of the seventeenth century's still-life paintings. The Pop paintings do not reflect but instead refract the moral content of the Dutch still life. Modern foodstuffs, because of their processed and preserved character, are immune to the effects of natural decay .

10 Daniel du Plessis, *Ochre and blue Highveld winter* (1994). Oil on board, 50,5 cm x 50 cm. Collection: the artist.

11 Claude Monet, *Setting sun* (1921 - 22). Galerie de l'Orangerie, Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Stuckey 1988:103).

12 Rose (1992) refers to the following contemporary artists (among others) in this regard: Brice Marden, Georg Baselitz, Jean Michel Basquiat, Jonathan Borofsky, Francesco Clemente, Keith Haring, Sherrie Levine, Sol

LeWitt, Robert Longo, David Salle and Julian Schnabel.

13 Kendell Geers, *Installation: Refuse* (1992 - 1993). Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Collection: the artist. (Vita Art Now 1993:16).

14 Pluralism is more than mere freedom of choice. Terry Eagleton (1991:138) points out that

pluralism ... is not the confused and contradictory claim that asserts the impossibility of judgment and is therefore committed to the equal acceptability and viability of all ethical, political and aesthetic positions. Pluralism involves the recognition that judgment has to take place despite the absence of universal criteria for judgment .

He also maintains that

pluralism ... involves the recognition that justice concerns the relationship between the irreconcilable. It demands therefore, a reconciliation to the irreconcilable (Eagleton 1991:139).

15 Braam Kruger, *Venus with a vibrator* (1990).

16 Titian, *Venus of Urbino* (1538). 122 cm x 168 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. (Gardner 1980:573).

17 Ralph Goings, *Jeep* (1969). Oil on canvas, approx. 104 cm x 156 cm. Photograph courtesy O.K. Harris Gallery, New York. Collection: Galerie des 4 Mouvements, Paris. (Chase 1975:90).

18 Kruger's work will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

19 Two works may be mentioned in this context:

• Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (after Egon Schiele)* (1984). Pencil on paper, 18.4 cm x 13 cm. Collection: the artist. (Rose 1992:79).

• Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (after Egon Schiele)* (1984). Pencil on paper, 20.3 cm x 16.5 cm. Collection: the artist. (Rose 1992:79).

20 C. Wright Mills (1963:405) demonstrates that people live in second-hand, mediated worlds and that very little



of all human activity can be considered original and true to the self.

21 Although it may share a number of features with marketable commodities, I am of the opinion that an artwork also differs sufficiently to remove it from the realm of the ordinary consumable commodity. Unlike the luxury consumer item or the purely decorative *objet d'art*, an artwork cannot merely be regarded as a manufactured item. Art engages in a metaphorical discourse with reality: it has links with the material world as well as with mental constructs. I am in agreement with Robert Plant Armstrong who, for the discussion of Western art products as well as non-Western cultural objects, uses the term 'affecting presence'. His definition of the art object is clearly removed from the idea of commodity, since, as he points out,

these objects and happenings in any given culture are accepted by those native to that culture as being purposely concerned with potency, emotions, values, and states of being or experience - all, in a clear sense, powers (Armstrong 1971:4).

22 Robert C. Holub (xii-xiii) defines reception theory as follows:

... "reception theory" refers ... to a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader. ... In the largest sense it is a reaction to social, intellectual, and literary developments in West Germany during the late 1960s.

23 Daniel du Plessis, *Autumn field and spruce* (1994). Oil on canvas. 91,5 cm x 95,5 cm. Collection: the artist.

24 Claude Monet, *Rouen cathedral* (1894). Approx. 99 cm x 66 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Theodore M. Davis Collection, bequest of Theodore M. Davis, 1915.) (Gardner 1980:777).

25 Claude Monet, *Water lilies* (c 1920). 100 cm x 300 cm. Musée Marmottan, Paris. (Stuckey 1988: 57-59).

26 Brice Marden, *Drawing for conjunctions* (1988 - 89). Ink and gouache on paper, 40.6 cm x 29.8 cm. Private collection, New York. (Rose 1992:37).

27 Rosalind Krauss (1986:133) notes that after 1860 landscape was transformed

into a flattened and compressed experience of space spreading laterally across the surface. ... It began with the insistent voiding of perspective, as landscape painting counteracted perspectival recession with a variety of devices, among them sharp value contrast, which had the effect of converting the orthogonal penetration of depth - effected, for example, by a lane of trees - into a diagonal ordering of the surface.

28 Claude Monet, *Green reflections* (c 1917 - 21). Diptych; total dimensions: 200 cm x 850 cm. Galerie de l'Orangerie, Paris. Photograph: Musées Nationaux, Paris. (Stuckey 1988: 89-91).

29 *Impression: Sunrise* (1972), *Gare St-Lazare* (1877) or *The Rue Montorgueil decked with flags* (1878) may serve as examples of works containing relatively overt references to the socioeconomic background of the artworks' production.

30 C.F. Stuckey (1993:41) notes in a review of *Claude Monet: life and work*, by Virginia Spate, that

like Wildenstein, who counters sociopolitical readings of Monet by reminding readers that Monet tended less and less to include smoke in his riverscapes at the same time that steamshipping became more and more prevalent, Spate concludes that in general Monet's art was unaffected by the political debates of the 1870s.

.....

## **Reconsidered and revised histories**

In Chapter 1 a broad, theoretical overview of various issues related to visual reference was provided. A number of artworks were briefly analysed to exemplify arguments concerning visual reference. The arguments focused on allegorical reference<sup>1</sup>, while the general referential functions of iconic signs were considered to a lesser extent.

In contrast with this more generalised discussion, Chapter 2 will be devoted to detailed analyses of works by local artists, with the role of reference in the exploration of source material in pictorial art<sup>2</sup> forming the basis of the discussion. Since my own works, which consist of paintings and drawings, fall within the category of pictorial art, the focus of the discussion will be on this form of art. To a certain extent, this chapter provides an introduction to the detailed discussion of my own work in Chapter 3 by presenting a more comprehensive background to pertinent issues.

The choice of artists is aimed at demonstrating the diversity of approaches to visual reference and to identify possible links with my own usage of visual reference. Because different approaches to visual reference affect the stylistic and formal qualities of the artworks and have an impact on conceptual issues, works by individual artists who use visual reference may differ considerably. The differences between my own works and those of artists discussed here may thus, in certain cases, be more pertinent than the similarities. Yet, whatever the final appearance of the artworks, the basic principle, namely the allegorical appropriation of source material through visual reference, remains the same.

In the discussion of a number of works by Penelope Siopis, I will demonstrate that the material qualities of the medium - particularly oil paint - function in tandem with a variety

**EXAMPLES OF VISUAL  
REFERENCE IN LOCAL  
ART**

of visual conventions in the construction of meaning. This observation also applies to the interaction between the medium and visual conventions in my own work, an issue which will be dealt with extensively in Chapter 3. Siopis often visually refers to the conventions of the *vanitas* still life tradition and history painting, while my own works are concerned with landscape conventions. In Siopis's works, as in my own, visual references operate as subtly-manipulated sub-texts which very seldom acquire an overriding presence.

In contrast, many of Braam Kruger's works represent a very overt utilisation of visual reference to prototypes from Western art history. This type of approach may become problematic because the use of prototypes, if not suitably reinvested with new meanings, often gives rise to artworks dominated by the presence of a conspicuously facile formula. On the other hand, it may be argued that visual reference in works by Margaret Vorster is often not clear enough and perhaps too esoteric. Cyprian Shilakoe is included as a counterpoint because his works reflect an approach in which reference to experiential factors outweighs reference to 'Western' visual conventions as seen in the works of the other artists discussed in the dissertation. Visual reference to conventions in works by Robert Hodgins is fairly overt, but reinterpreted to such an extent that new meanings emerge from the historical material. In their use of conventions, most of the artists discussed here glance back at Western art history - and in many instances the historic prototype is revised and revitalised.

The analyses of the artworks selected for discussion reveal that visual reference is never a simple process. At one level, there are the intricacies inherent to the act of artistic representation. This would include the semiotic notion of the iconic sign, which comes about when the artist encodes elements of the surrounding world in order to give substance to his or her perception or vision of reality.

The other aspect of visual reference to be considered in the context of the dissertation involves allegorical reference, which concerns visual 'quotation' from sources, including

**SEMIOTIC AND  
ALLEGORICAL VISUAL  
REFERENCE**

earlier art conventions, styles and genres. When I state that Siopis visually refers to history and conventions, and Shilakoe to experiential reality, these categories merely serve to isolate dominant aspects of visual reference in certain works by them. Referential functions overlap; there are no clear distinctions and these simplifications are therefore somewhat arbitrary.

A number of works by Penelope Siopis - in which referential factors play a pivotal role - will form the starting point of the discussion. Visual reference in her work is normally of a very subtle and intellectually refined nature, revealing a thorough understanding of art-historical issues and how these could be deployed to reflect aspects of contemporary sociopolitical and cultural debate - factors that will be discussed in relation to selected works.

There is a development in her work from a style dominated by the exploration of the intrinsic qualities of the objects and the medium - as exemplified by the works *Doughnut and truffle* (1982)<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 13) and *Cream horn* (1982)<sup>4</sup> - to later works where extra-pictorial references start playing an increasingly important role<sup>5</sup>.

In their responses to reality, artists encode their particular perceptions of the world around them in terms of artistic form and personal idiolect. Later works by Siopis reveal that in her case the encoding process becomes increasingly complex. In these works objects are encoded to reflect her perceptions of reality, but they also fulfil an additional referential role with regard to certain visual conventions, for instance the *vanitas* still life tradition and history painting. *Still life with watermelon and other things* (1986) (Fig. 5) illustrates the diversification of visual reference in her work. For example, the carapaces of sea creatures are represented in a recognisable way and can thus, through empirical observation, be identified with objects from the real world. However, in the context of the painting, these objects are also encoded to refer to the *vanitas* still life tradition. In this sense, the objects become

**VISUAL REFERENCE IN  
WORKS BY PENELOPE  
SIOPIS**

**VANITAS AND HISTORY  
PAINTING**



Above:  
*Fig. 13. Penelope Siopis, Doughnut and truffle (c. 1982). Oil on canvas, 121,5 cm x 152,5 cm.*



Above:  
*Fig. 14. Penelope Siopis, Historia (1990). Oil on canvas, 225 cm x 123 cm.*

Left:  
*Fig. 15. Penelope Siopis, Exhibit: Ex Africa (1990). Collage, oil paint, screen print, perspex and found object, 126,2 cm x 124,5 cm.*

allegorical symbols of the futility of earthly life, that is, only shells remain of what had once been living creatures. Referential functions thus become diversified to create an extremely complex text which interacts with 'reality' at a number of different levels.

Visual reference in many of Siopis's works seems to be a conscious, rational process. The painterliness of her style, however, tends to obscure the 'intentionality' of the visual reference. In a number of my earlier works, which are discussed in Chapter 3, a similar form of intentional manipulation of referential possibilities may also be observed. Intentionality, when linked to an allegorical and narrative approach, tends to control the viewer's interpretation and gives rise to a more 'closed' than 'open' text. The following observations by Eco (1979:51) provide a pertinent example of the interpretative restrictions encountered in an allegorical work of art:

The reader of the [allegorical] text knows that every sentence and every trope is 'open' to a multiplicity of meanings which he must hunt for and find. ... in this type of operation, 'openness' is far removed from meaning 'indefiniteness' of communication, 'infinite' possibilities of form, and complete freedom of reception. What in fact is made available is a range of rigidly preestablished and ordained interpretative solutions, and these never allow the reader to move outside the strict control of the author.

Although I would hesitate to view Siopis's work in these restrictive terms, her manipulation of conventions and fixed referential frameworks demand particular interpretations. This is exemplified by the painting *Historia* (1990) (Fig. 14)<sup>6</sup>, which tends to be prescriptive with regard to interpretation. This factor will be discussed in detail at a later stage. This does not imply that the 'controlled' work is not rich in meaning, but rather that the viewer is more carefully guided towards specific interpretations.

Siopis's works show a distinct development towards a reference-laden, allegorical approach. In the two earlier works mentioned here, namely *Doughnut and truffle* and *Cream*

'OPEN' AND 'CLOSED'  
TEXTS

*horn*, the compositional devices tend to focus the attention on the pastries and consequently reinforce their objecthood. Large, relatively flat, 'quiet areas' of a subdued colour range serve as a backdrop to the brightly coloured, much smaller areas of thickly painted forms that make up the true subject-matter. The artist delights in the painterly presentation of these delectable foodstuffs. The art materials serve as a metaphor for the scrumptiousness and sensuous appeal of the pastries.

There are no clues that the objects may have double meanings or that they stand for something else. It even seems unlikely that they could be read as an implied comment on or a critique of consumerism, as certain food paintings of Pop Artists such as Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) or even Andy Warhol (1928 - 1987) might have been. In this regard, Donna Gustafson (1986:90 - 93) illustrated that as 'a theme in Pop Art, *vanitas* aimed a pointed criticism at the materialism of American life which the Pop Artists had celebrated with a disguised irony'. In contrast to this notion, I perceive Siopis's earlier works as being open-ended and non-prescriptive in respect of interpretation.

In later works, however, the technical, stylistic and formal qualities fulfil a different function: at first glance they appear to underline the 'material' qualities of the work - there is a very pronounced manipulation of the medium in all her works. Yet on closer investigation it becomes clear that the manipulation of the medium stands, to a very large extent, in service of conceptual considerations and is also intended to load images with additional meanings. Siopis (1989:6) observes in this regard :

Things are not quite what they seem. Neither is oil paint simply a means of illusionistic depiction. Built up almost three-dimensionally in areas, it not only increases the objecthood of the things represented, but evokes associations with other organic matter - flesh, in particular - changing as it does, in time, congealing, forming skins, and losing its juices. ... Irony is intended.

CONCEPTUAL  
CONSIDERATIONS AND  
THE 'MATERIAL'  
QUALITIES OF THE  
MEDIUM

The work *Historia* (1990) is a good example of this type of approach where all the elements of the painting - composition, concept and medium - are consciously manipulated to convey a number of meanings. Siopis says of the work:

Like many South Africans I have been much affected by the way local history has been depicted - its distortions, its visual conventions. My recent work is a sort of ironical history painting (Vita Art Now 1990:10).

In this statement she clearly delineates her aims and explicitly names history painting as a frame of reference<sup>7</sup>. The title of the painting can either allude to history<sup>8</sup> - presumably local history and the conventions of history painting inherited by this country as a former colony - or to History with a capital H, which would then be a personification of history as a concept and thus an allegorical figure.

Through its sheer scale (225 cm x 123 cm) the painting already refers to the 'grand' and 'heroic' qualities of traditional Western history painting. The pose is grandiose, the background dramatically darkened to highlight the presence of the figure - all devices that would traditionally have been used to magnify the presence of a very important person or a person of aristocratic or regal descent.

However, the picture does not fall into the category of portraiture. The features of the woman are almost obscured by darkness - a formal cue that the picture does not aim at providing psychological insights into the sitter's personality. Instead, it is a generalised figure which tends to recede into the background and almost becomes a mere clothes-horse for the dress, which emerges as the more important carrier of ideas. The decorations on the dress - which engross the spectator and overwhelm the rest of the painting by the sheer force of their artistic manipulation and insistence on detail - leave no doubt that the history referred to is South Africa's colonial past.



In this adaptation of history painting, the artist refers to a cultural precedent and gives it new meaning by changing the original context. This appropriation of imagery is entirely in keeping with the nature of allegory. According to Owens (1984:205), the artist uses what is culturally significant and poses as its interpreter<sup>9</sup>. Here the ostensibly 'historical' painting expresses the artist's own perspective and ideas concerning the interpretation of local history.

The work also refers to the traditional use of *kosmos*, or allegorical ornament<sup>10</sup>. (Allegorical ornament is used to identify a figure, for instance Christ's crown of thorns.) Here the ornamentation is not traditional. Instead, the figure is dressed in a 'historical costume' which seems to be burdened down by the weight of 'colonial' ornamentation. The ornamentation turns the woman, quite literally, into a carrier of history. Although the placement of each item on the dress may seem haphazard, the choice of objects shows a coherence of thought and rational intent. The artist wants us to interpret the work in a specific way. In contrast with the postmodern notion of 'openness', this type of approach seems more prescriptive. It would seem impossible to convey strong moral messages, as Siopis's works tend to do, in a free-for-all interpretational framework, mainly because moral messages need to be rather straightforward and didactic to achieve their goal.

At the same time, however, there are ironic twists in the painting which undermine the rationality of the references and make the artist's moralistic intentions less obvious. It is ironic, for instance, that the represented figure should become a symbol of an oppressed people by wearing the emblems of the oppressor. The ornamentation serves the function of ironic reversal, since these are not the symbols which would normally identify a black woman. They achieve their meaning through being inappropriate.

The painting is not only an ironic comment on South African history, but also a comment on the role of art in South Africa. By using the prototype of history painting, which is

firmly rooted in the Western tradition, the artist could be questioning the relevance of the Western tradition in a South African context.

Didactic and moral intent is a prominent feature of allegory (Barney 1979:49) and an implied meaning of the painting might be that a colonial, male-dominated culture was forced upon the black woman, to the extent that her own culture and role became obliterated. It is interesting that much of the ornamentation is of a military nature, such as medals and insignia. This may point to domination by force, and the moral questions raised by such a form of domination.

Siopis made the following observation (Friedman 1990:4) with regard to her personal perceptions of history:

I've always been interested in art history and the way 'ordinary' history has been presented. ... Art history doesn't claim to represent the truth, but in the past - particularly through the genre of history painting - it was often accepted as representing reality. History claims to present historical truth, but in fact it represents a selected reality, using pictorial conventions and images of popular culture to validate its claims to truth.

Reference in works by Siopis involves a large measure of appropriation, but it is evident from a work such as *Historia* that the prototype is finally acknowledged only in hybridised and assimilated forms.

In another work by Siopis, *Exhibit: Ex Africa* (1990)<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 15), reference, influenced by the technique of collage and the use of mixed media, is of a different nature. From a distance the work appears to be akin to either an abstract or abstract expressionist (action field) painting. On closer inspection, the marks are revealed as densely pasted and manipulated images from a variety of sources.

Many of the images are appropriated from historical sources and are used in a relatively untransformed manner - it is as if this subject-matter serves as the building blocks for

**COLLAGED  
APPROPRIATIONS**

the composition, which basically consists of a square background format with what appears like an item of clothing attached to it. Appropriation is a prominent feature of allegory (Owens 1984:205) and meaning in the work operates by means of the accumulation and repetition of a number of images from South Africa's colonial past and a specific individual from that past, namely Saartjie Bartman, a Khoi-khoi woman who was paraded in England and France in the nineteenth century<sup>12</sup>.

The story of Saartjie Bartman would also explain the choice of the title - *Exhibit: Ex Africa* - and the encasement of the work in a glass box which is reminiscent of a museum exhibit. This reference to history brings about numerous associations and enriches the levels of meaning in the work. Because this woman was paraded nude in the 'civilized' world, the item of clothing may, for example, be viewed as a metaphor which pertains to the Victorian idea of the removal of dignity through the removal of clothing. This meaning is emphasized by the juxtaposition of the images of the black woman with images of fashionably dressed Victorian males. It brings into question the issue of the male spectator/voyeur and the female object of contemplation, which raises an aspect of feminist ideology with regard to art-historical interpretation<sup>13</sup>. Questions may also arise concerning the degree to which Siopis may be exploiting the tragic figure of Saartjie Bartman for her own purposes<sup>14</sup>.

The work does not only contain references to 'extra-pictorial' historical factors. At a formal level, it is indebted to a long twentieth-century tradition of collage/montage, which, as Benjamin Buchloh (1982:43) points out, makes extensive use of the 'allegorical methods of confiscation, superimposition and fragmentation', all of which are obvious features of this work by Siopis.

With the theoretical history of montage dating back to 1910, it would mean that contemporary artists using montage techniques do actually employ historical models to express current ideas. Buchloh (1982:44) describes the procedure as follows:

The procedure of montage is one in which all allegorical procedures are executed: appropriation and depletion of meaning, fragmentation and dialectical juxtaposition of fragments, and separation of signifier and signified. In fact, the following statement from Benjamin's Baudelaire fragments reads like an exact description of the montage/collage procedures: "The allegorical mind arbitrarily selects from the vast and disordered material that its knowledge has to offer. It tries to match one piece with another to figure out whether they can be combined. This meaning with that image, or that image with this meaning. The result is never predictable since there is no organic mediation between the two".

This is also applicable to Siopis's *Exhibit: Ex Africa*. The work underscores one aspect of visual reference, namely that it could be used in the sense of having 'recourse to some authority or source of information'. However, by means of the montage technique, allegory serves to undermine the nature or validity of the source referred to. In the case of this artwork, the 'official', predominantly 'white' version of South African history is supplanted by the artist's interpretation of history.

Although there is a large degree of 'intentionality' in the work, the montage technique and the use of found objects allow for a greater measure of ambiguity and the montage tends to be more open-ended than, for example, the painting *Historia*.

In its use of montage, which is a twentieth-century art convention, *Exhibit: Ex Africa* could open up a number of divergent interpretational possibilities with regard to the nature of montage in contemporary art practice and its relation to the original practice and intentions of montage. Buchloh (1982:3) is of the opinion that

the dialectical potential of the montage technique ... found its historical fulfillment in the contradiction that is exemplified on the one hand by the increasing psychological interiorization and estheticization of collage and montage techniques in Surrealism (and their subsequent, still continuing exploitation in advertising and product propaganda), and on the other hand by the historically simultaneous development of revolutionary montage and agitprop practices in the work of El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko, and Heartfield, and the almost complete disappearance of these practices' social function from history, except for the isolated pursuits of the contemporary avant-garde.

Buchloh's opposition to montage/collage in painting and the view that aestheticisation of the practice has neutered its effectiveness (Buchloh 1982:43-56) <sup>15</sup>, seem at odds with what Siopis achieves in this work. Although the various appropriated images are to a certain extent synthesised, it is hard to determine whether the oppositions could be considered entirely reconciled and thus rendered powerless. In comparison to some of Siopis's other works, *Exhibit: Ex Africa* may be less pleasing from an aesthetic viewpoint. There remains a certain jarring quality to the juxtaposition of the various appropriations and the use of mixed media which could trigger a dialectical response and point to the work's function as sociopolitical critique.

In his exploration of visual reference, Braam Kruger arrives at an artistic destination that differs considerably from that of Siopis. Both explore artistic conventions, but in Kruger's case the reference, particularly in the appropriation of art-historical imagery, is far more overt. Kruger (*Vita Art Now* 1990:14) has said of his own work:

Considering my thematic interest, it is impossible to exclude any of my predecessors, and it would be irresponsible of me not to be thoroughly informed about their efforts, but sure enough, I feel the weight of some more than others. Velasquez, Titian, Rubens, Goya, Gericault, Picasso and of course my contemporaries. ... I don't work in any particular way, in fact I always approach each work in another way, according to the demands of the work, not mine.

**BRAAM KRUGER: OVERT  
REFERENCES TO  
PROTOTYPES**

Kruger, in this statement, situates himself within the context of historicist revivalism which has been such a prominent feature in postmodern painting. The form of criticism which is so often levelled at this type of painting, also needs to be addressed in relation to Kruger's work. With reference to artists working in the postmodern idiom, Thomas Lawson (1984:156) states:

These young painters ingratiate themselves by pretending to be in awe of history. Their enterprise is distinguished by an homage to the past... . But what they give us is a pastiche of historical consciousness, an exercise in bad faith. ... For by decontextualising their sources and refusing to provide a new, suitably critical frame for them, they dismiss the particularities of history in favor of a generalizing mythology, and thus succumb to sentimentality.

Criticism of this type of art normally centres on the fact that conventions of the past are yoked into service by postmodern artists without taking into consideration the historical circumstances that gave rise to these conventions. Yet, in the same essay, in referring to the work of the American artist David Salle (b. 1952), Lawson (1984:160) also furnishes the counter argument, namely that this approach could be used as 'a strategy of infiltration and sabotage, using established conventions against themselves in the hope of exposing cultural repression'.

Since Kruger reveals his historical preferences in the statement cited earlier, analyses of a number of his works may prove fruitful in determining his intentions with regard to historical reference.

The monumentality of the painting *Flying Dutchman* (1988) (Fig. 16)<sup>16</sup> situates this work within the large-scale format of painting favoured by some of his stated historical sources. In its narrative quality and its reference to an anterior text - the legend of a Dutch captain doomed to sail his ship forever<sup>17</sup> - the painting already shows allegorical attributes. It is,



*Right:*  
**Fig. 16. Braam Kruger,**  
**Flying Dutchman (1988).**  
*Oil on wood, 200 cm x 300 cm.*

*Left:*  
**Fig. 17. Carlo Maria Mariani,**  
**April (1988).**  
*Oil on canvas, 230 cm x 190 cm.*



however, the prominent use of appropriation (Owens 1984:205) that makes the work predominantly allegorical in nature. The appropriation of historical imagery and styles, as well as the synthesis of various styles and the crossing of stylistic and aesthetic boundaries (Owens 1984:209), places the work firmly within an allegorical framework.

It could be argued that the way in which Kruger appropriates divergent styles and presents them as a unified narrative within the picture frame, represents a synthesis and a reconciliation of opposites. The blue background serves to further unite the disparate elements into a single visual entity. Alexander and Cohen (1990:163) refer to the work's 'disjunctive composition' and 'disregard for pictorial composition'. These observations are only partially valid, since the work achieves - notwithstanding the somewhat experimental juxtaposition - a cohesiveness due to the use of conventional compositional devices. Despite spatial ambiguities, the work's composition can nonetheless be divided into a fore, middle and background. There is, moreover, a fair measure of overlapping which establishes a sense of distance. The picture plane is simultaneously affirmed and denied through the juxtaposition of two-dimensional and rounded objects. After the initial impact caused by the disparate stylistic devices, the eye quickly becomes accustomed to the arrangement and tends to disregard the variances in favour of a conventional reading. Broken down into geometrical forms, the composition is quite stable since it is basically a large oval with a circle at its centre.

In the end the viewer may be left with the impression that the work is a narrative with strong allegorical leanings; a well-known story is told by means of a potpourri of styles. In its manipulation of art conventions it becomes, in comparison with, for instance, Siopis's *Exhibit: Ex Africa*, an exercise in cultural polemics and not a work with clear sociopolitical implications. Obviously, works do not need to be sociopolitical in orientation to be success-



ful. Yet, in the South Africa of 1988, well before the democratisation of the country, it may be fair to question the relevance of this work, even at a cultural level, in terms of the *Zeitgeist*. It is, nonetheless, relatively effective in terms of cultural agitation, because it proposes an alternative mode of representation and a break with a modernist past. Whether it becomes a 'critical subversion' of 'empty formalism', as Lawson (1984:160) suggests with regard to his interpretation of works by David Salle, is an arguable point.

It is generally accepted that the appropriation of imagery - either from the mass media or other sources - is one of the most dominant features of postmodern art. In contemporary art, appropriation is viewed as

a method that uses recontextualization as a critical strategy. In theory, when an artist places a familiar image in a new context, the maneuver forces the viewer to reconsider how different contexts affect meaning and to understand that all meaning is socially constructed (Buskirk 1992:37).

Given what could be considered Kruger's stated admiration for his prototypes, it becomes difficult to grasp why he would 'criticise' these works by means of crude renderings. It is equally hard to determine what the subject-matter, in its new context, is aimed at. In effect, and perhaps despite the artist's intentions, the work constitutes a critique of the 'Renaissance' tradition which had dominated the Western art world for centuries before the advent of modernism finally rejected and abandoned the conventional visual formulae.

His works differ, for instance, from that of an Italian contemporary, Carlo Maria Mariani (b. 1931), who works in a similar idiom. In Mariani's *April* (1988)<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 17) the revival of the 'Renaissance' style would constitute a critique of certain modernist notions like the flatness of the picture plane and the purity of the medium<sup>19</sup>. Kruger's work, on the other hand, seems to be a critique of both modernist and the Renaissance conventions. Through the inclusion of extra-pictorial references, the work distances itself from the modernist no-

tion of the autonomy of the artwork. The background of the original painting is replaced by an indeterminate city/landscape, a conglomeration of semi-descriptive and calligraphic marks that do not create a distinct environment. To compound matters, it is impossible to say whether some of the features of Kruger's work could not be attributed to arbitrary painting. It is also possible that his work may parody amateurish painting and kitsch.

It is thus not clear what the position of the artist is in relation to his subject-matter, but this ambiguity may, within a postmodern sensibility, in fact *be* the artist's chosen position. Andreas Huyssen (1986:217), states that in the postmodern sensibility, various conventions tend to coexist:

... postmodernism ... operates in a field of tension between tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first; a field of tension which can no longer be grasped in categories such as progress vs. reaction, left vs. right, present vs. past, modernism vs. realism, abstraction vs. representation, avantgarde vs. Kitsch.

This would seem to provide an explanation of the parameters within which Kruger's work operates. Yet, when examining other examples of his work, including *Barking up the Maya* (1990) and *Knee-deep nymphs* (1990), it cannot be denied that this very strategy, by being repeated over and over again, runs the risk of becoming formulaic, a mannerism which could lose its power to engage in a meaningful debate with the issues it raises. The accumulation of diverse styles and conventions gives rise to a type of picture where the standpoint of the artist cannot be determined - everything is of equal importance, neither fish nor flesh.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, ideas such as personal signature, individual style and originality are viewed in certain quarters as no longer relevant to contemporary art. It would,

COEXISTENCE OF  
DISPARATE  
CONVENTIONS

from this vantage point, be completely acceptable to work in a manner that denies these attributes. This, to a certain extent, is what happens in the works of Braam Kruger discussed above. The critics, mostly Marxist in orientation<sup>20</sup>, who view personalised style and originality as part of the artwork-as-commodity culture, are also those who take a vehement stand against the revival of art-historical sources. They are usually the staunchest opponents of art as craft and could perhaps be termed, in Eagleton's words, the 'negative avant garde' (1990:372), who resist integration with the late capitalist system by a complete denial of the artefact.

For those who do not subscribe to Eagleton's vision of art, the very attributes criticised - namely personalised style, art as craft, individual vision, a belief that art still has intrinsic value - represent the factors that need to be subjected to evaluation when analysing artworks utilising historicist imagery. It will entail approaching such works from a perspective which will bring more conventional values and criteria - for instance formal, stylistic and aesthetic qualities - to bear on the work of art, while at the same time considering the work's sociopolitical and cultural relevance, but not necessarily from an 'avant-garde' viewpoint.

An often-heard criticism levelled at works that use art-historical themes and images as subject-matter is that it is a facile device which, ultimately, proves to be unsatisfactory because it denies, to a large extent, the artist's personal vision and powers of observation to dominate the work. With regard to Kruger's work, it is necessary to ask whether he, in the light of the above reservations about the role of irony and depth of interpretation, really comes to terms with art history as subject-matter and whether he does, in fact, challenge or revitalise old conventions to a meaningful extent.

Another local artist, Margaret Vorster, makes extensive use of reference to a wide variety of sources in her work. Alexander and Cohen (1990:169) point out that

Vorster's decorative idiom is fed by her interest in Persian miniatures and carpets and Chinese symbols, while historical and literary references are part of the language of her painted content, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for instance, has played a significant inspirational role in her work.

As can be deduced from the above, Vorster's visual reference tends to be, to the uninitiated, rather obscure, highly idiosyncratic and intensely personalised. Reference, in fact, is not one of the obvious things that comes to mind when viewing her work. At first glance, her work *Painted love* (1984)<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 18), for example, appears to be highly decorative, colouristic and patterned surfaces which may be appreciated from a purely formal and aesthetic perspective. In this particular work the eye tends to become mesmerised by the brilliant and brightly contrasted colours; by the rhythmic pattern and the very 'beauty' of the painting. It is almost as if these elements veil a direct encounter with the subject-matter, which, in any event, provides no immediate sense of iconographic clarity. The sources of the references are unclear and the viewer may find it quite difficult to interpret the work. Kin Bentley (1989:4) pointed out with regard to another painting by Vorster, *Trial in the forest*<sup>22</sup>, that

... [it] is again peopled by cartoon-like images. No doubt to the artist the work is packed with symbolism, but to the ordinary viewer it is simply boring.

This is not an isolated instance where the lack of clarity in her work is regarded as a hindrance to interpretation. In a review of another exhibition, Kendell Geers (1990:4) notes: 'The sooner she stops trying to illustrate the latest cultural or theoretical trend, the sooner her work will be allowed to flourish, and through the ensuing clarity and honesty become truly subversive'.



Right:  
Fig. 18. Margaret Vorster,  
*Painted love* (c. 1984). Oil on  
canvas, 122 cm x 303,7 cm.



Left:  
Fig. 19. Margaret Vorster,  
*The guardian* (c. 1985).  
Oil on canvas, 120,5 cm x  
200,5 cm.

It needs to be pointed out, in counter argument, that this initial lack of clarity is a feature of a certain type of allegory. Fletcher (1967:310) states that allegory teems with cases where the meaning of the work is not immediately clear, where abstract ideas are veiled by 'dimly understandable imagery'. This leads to a mystical, enigmatic type of art that 'arouses the [viewer's] curiosity'. By using this procedure, the artist relinquishes a large degree of control over the way in which the work is interpreted and opens the text up to numerous interpretational possibilities.

Vorster (1984:1) expressed a well-reasoned argument for the opacity of her work, noting that

the meaning of art is almost always mysterious. Even the most straightforward content has the mystery of its being in art, and when the content is deliberately ambiguous or formally abstract, that mystery is heightened.

Using the title as compass, an attempt could be made at deciphering a 'mysterious' work such as *Painted love*. Since the artist provides very few direct clues to aid interpretation, and since the work is offered for public interaction, it could be surmised that the artist had intended not to delimit the viewer's interpretation. It was pointed out in Chapter 1 that in contemporary allegorical works a situation could arise where anything could, in fact, stand for practically anything else.

What I see in the painting - which could be read either as a landscape, still life or interior - included a shape resembling a garment (or perhaps a doily), vessel-like objects, a portal, floral patterns, triangular shapes, a desk and a tree. Since this provided no clear interpretation, a source (Alexander & Cohen 1990:169) was consulted in which the authors pointed out that

...[the triangles are] forms symbolic of the female gender and the mythology of the earth goddesses. ... At the heart of the imagery of the plant kingdom is the tree, which is for Vorster symbolic of 'the human experience of being' and of creating through art.

The viewer would have to be fairly erudite to fathom the exact connotations of the imagery, particularly in view of the fact that the title is rather enigmatic. In conventional allegory, the title of a work would, albeit not in all cases, provide at least a number of clear clues as to the interpretation and the source of reference. Delacroix's *The death of Sardanapulus* (Fig. 4), where the narrative furnishes further information to facilitate interpretation<sup>23</sup>, may once again serve as an example. In Vorster's work, visual reference tends to compound meaning, and due to the elusive nature of the symbolism, it also obscures interpretation.

A decorative, colouristic approach is again evident in the painting *The guardian* (1985)<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 19), as is the usage of personalised symbols from the plant kingdom. The tree reappears, but it seems to be an unstable symbol, since it is difficult to determine how it could be linked to the interpretation cited above where the tree was identified as being 'symbolic of "the human experience of being" and of creating through art'. It could be surmised that she makes use of archetypal symbols, but her highly personalised interpretation of these symbols presents an obstacle to interpretation, with the result that the decorative qualities sometimes dominate to the detriment of other readings.

Although postmodernism opened painting up to reference and layered texts, one of the tenets of postmodernism is also to reestablish a link or a participative relationship between the viewer and the work, so that communication could be enhanced. Despite the use of images and visual reference, it would be difficult to maintain that Vorster's work 'communicates' in the general sense of the word. Her works tend to remain self-contained, almost

**'OPEN' BUT  
INACCESSIBLE**

'autonomous' and self-referential as a modernist work might have been, and somewhat inaccessible to the ordinary viewer. Although art uses a specialised 'language', there is a danger that it may become so specialised that only the informed viewer would be able to decode it. The form of reference encountered in works by Vorster depends to a very large degree on her personal interests as opposed to reference which might be used as a tool to open up communication<sup>25</sup> with a broader audience.

Vorster (1984:86) has observed with regard to her working process that

... [my] concern, in the manipulation of materials and generation of symbolic images, is with the production of autonomous structures. That is, transformation into an autonomous structure is not simply transposition into another world, but, inasmuch as the work is a structure, it has, so to speak, found its measure in itself and measures itself by nothing outside it. It is autonomous. It no longer permits any comparison with reality and it cannot be measured as a copy of reality.

Because she views the artwork as an autonomous entity, she effectively armours herself against all forms of criticism that would view reference to outside 'reality' as an essential component of, in particular, art that is relevant to the *Zeitgeist*. In doing so, however, she also opens herself up to the danger inherent in all esoteric work: due to its inaccessibility, the viewers may become alienated because of a lack of links with the world of general experience. This may lead to a situation where the work is viewed from a predominantly formal angle<sup>26</sup> and the content remains unexplored territory.

Unlike Vorster's titles, which do not necessarily provide keys to open an interpretative procedure, the titles used by Robert Hodgins are very specific. Marilyn Martin (Beeld 1987:2) notes that his titles provide direction and unlock the imagination. She quotes Hodgins as saying that for him the title is indispensable and a source of great joy since it can be serious, frivolous, funny and can also change.

**ROBERT HODGINS: A  
RICH VOCABULARY**



In a review (*Die Burger* 1986:10) of the exhibition entitled *Robert Hodgins: Images 1953-1986*<sup>27</sup>, held in the SA National Art Gallery, Cape Town, Deon Liebenberg states that Robert Hodgins may be described as postmodernistic in his use of reference to the styles and imagery of several well-known art-historical figures, among others Picasso, George Grosz and Michelangelo. According to Liebenberg, these references convey meanings in much the same way as linguistic signs would. To function effectively, the linguistic sign must possess a conventional form. Thus, if images are to be used in a similar fashion, they need to be sufficiently conventional. The same would apply to styles and techniques which are used as signs. For Liebenberg, the danger of this process lies in the fact that images could become so conventionalised that they would no longer contain much visual impact.

Hodgins, however, invests his references - and there are examples of a stylistic, formal and conceptual nature - with such a degree of personal reinterpretation and visual substance that the danger of extreme adherence to conventions disappears. Yet, the reference or allusion to the convention remains clear enough to trigger distinct interpretative associations.

It may be argued that of the local artists discussed in this chapter, it is Hodgins's work which at all levels (i.e. at the stylistic, formal and conceptual levels), confirms the use of reference to artistic conventions as a viable technique in the most forceful and articulate manner.

The handling of formal properties in a work such as *The lineaments of gratified desire* (1985)<sup>28</sup> (Fig. 20), reflects a remarkable skill in consolidating various aspects of visual reference. There are obvious instances of visual reference to the formal manipulations which have become almost synonymous with Picasso, but these references are subsumed by the content of the painting proper - as such, the device is used to express a deeply-felt sentiment regarding human interaction.

**CONSOLIDATION OF  
VARIOUS FORMS OF  
VISUAL REFERENCE**

*Left:*  
Fig. 21. Robert Hodgins, *Ubu - The official portrait* (1981).  
Tempera and oil on pressed board, 25 cm x 35,7 cm.

*Below:*  
Fig. 20. Robert Hodgins, *The lineaments of gratified desire*  
(1985). Acrylic and oil on canvas, 116 cm x 76 cm.



Marion Arnold (1986) notes in this regard:

An injustice is done to all but the most rigorously conceptual artworks if the role played by the physical nature of the work is under-estimated. Hodgins' iconography is dense with allusions, but is not just form ordered and structured to convey content; it is form *made* with substance; it is form which is the product of process.

As Arnold (1986) points out, Hodgins uses formalism in the original sense of a 'vocabulary' and not as an 'aesthetic', which it became in late modernism. In *The lineaments of gratified desire*, formal devices are used with great economy to support an almost narrative *mise en scène* which emphasises the ultimate impossibility of truly making contact with another human being. In the fluency of the line-work evident in the execution of the female figure, there are allusions to Matisse, but the serenity of Matisse's figures is absent, and it is thus to Picasso that one needs to turn as a source for the distortions of the female figure. In the tension between the female figure and the white ground, there is more than a hint of Francis Bacon (1909 - 1992), an idea that is supported by the sense of loneliness conveyed by the two figures who were, within the implied narrative sequence, united. The content as well as the formal devices used by the artist emphasise the work's existentialist undertones<sup>29</sup>, clearly linking it to aspects of Bacon's oeuvre.

*The lineaments of gratified desire* looks like a stage (suggested by the draped curtains at the top of the work) on which a very intimate human experience has been played out, but through the visual distortions it becomes 'theatre of the absurd'. The male figure is located in the wings of the theatrical setting, isolated from the female's space by the use of a blue background which is sharply separated from the white backdrop on which the female figure appears. While the fleshy reds used to depict the male figure points to carnality, the colours may simply be used as compositional devices without any psychological intentions.

Yet the distortions, which describe human alienation very forcibly, seem to reinforce the idea that colour contributes at a psychological level to the central theme.

Hodgins, as quoted by Ivor Powell (1986), is fully aware of the potential inherent in the synthesis of a number of stylistic prototypes:

I've been accused of not having a personal style. You know, you've got to have a style so that you can be labelled. ... This, of course, makes it very handy for the galleries. One way out of that terrible meat grinder thing is to say: "Alright, I don't have a style. But a conglomeration of reference to styles, if you make it meaningful, is as interesting as having one particular style. One's own style become's that agglomeration of styles".

Through his extra-pictorial references, notably to the Ubu character, he also brings a richness of content to his work which, in tandem with stylistic and formal references, allows for the creation of highly complex, yet accessible works. An example is *Ubu: The official portrait* (1981) (Fig. 21)<sup>30</sup>. By means of his reference to Ubu, he succeeds in producing relevant 'political' art without becoming too propagandistic. Hodgins stated that

Ubu is himself not only ignoble, he is a familiar historical figure: the clown in power, the clown who seems so funny that it's easy to forget that he is evil. ... Such figures as, variously, Nero, Goering, Idi Amin have seemed so comic that their essential evil has somehow escaped history's attention. In making a series of paintings based on this play (*Ubu Roi*), what was then available was a sense that Ubu could be taken out of his place in Jarry's work and shown as anything from viciously triumphant to merely foolish (Powell 1986).

Without wishing to reiterate all the tenets that have earlier (in the discussion of works by Siopis, Kruger and Vorster) been identified as allegorical procedures, it should be clear that Hodgins's work, by his extensive use of reference as defined in this dissertation, belongs to a category of local and international art which attempts to reassess and revitalise historical prototypes in the service of contemporary sociopolitical and cultural issues.

The way in which reference to reality functions in the work of Cyprian Shilakoe (1946-1972)<sup>31</sup>, stands in clear contrast to the more academic approach of the artists mentioned earlier. Although it could be argued that Shilakoe works within the parameters of Western pictorial conventions, his works nonetheless stem from a different cultural perspective in which the manipulation of visual conventions is of minor importance. I locate the discussion of his work after that of Vorster and Hodgins for the following reasons: his work, in its experiential reference to social and economic realities, stands in sharp contrast with Vorster's esotericism. Although it is close to many of Hodgins's works because of political and socio-economic content, it is nonetheless removed from Hodgins's because Shilakoe's idiolect is not so dependent on the manipulation of art conventions.

Allegorical reference to art conventions and prototypes is clearly not a notion that is of great importance to his work, since his focus is on everyday reality and a subjective response to that reality. In a sense, all artworks are a recycling of the artistic forms through which reality is encoded. All representational artworks rely on iconic conventions to encode reality. But Shilakoe does not rely extensively on previously encoded art conventions. When compared with Hodgins, it becomes obvious that he does not manipulate established formal prototypes to the same extent.

Compared with Vorster, it becomes apparent that his subject-matter is based on ordinary, everyday reality - the specific reality of life as experienced by black people during the period in which he produced art. Talking about the adverse effects of the migrant labour system on family structures, Karel Nel (1990:8) indicates the circumstances that provided the context of Shilakoe's work:

It is against this background that Shilakoe's work must be seen: the fractured homes, the sense of loneliness, the longing and the hope that people will return safely from the big bad cities. Shilakoe poignantly depicts the homecoming, the parting and the waiting ... .

The etching *The gate is closed* (1969)<sup>32</sup> (Fig. 22) is fairly representative of Shilakoe's artistic response to experiential reality. Because he refers to the world of experience, which is a psychological reality, the figures in this work are very schematic without too much empirical differentiation. The figures, as well as the gate in front of them, serve as iconic signs which become a metaphor for lived experience.

Yet the work is encoded in such a way that the interpretation remains open to the viewer. Nel (1990:15) regards the recurrent image of the gate in Shilakoe's work as 'the symbolic divide between the rural and the urban'. My own interpretation finds a link with a line from a poem by Ingrid Jonker (1933-1965) who, in an almost prophetic vision of black liberation, referred to the black townships as 'the locations of the encircled heart' (translation mine)<sup>33</sup>. I think it is quite justified to link his work to poetry, because his entire approach speaks of a poetic evocation of reality. It is almost as if the gate stands between the figures and the possibility of a more fulfilling life. Yet the gate has a double function - it also holds out the promise of giving access to another world.

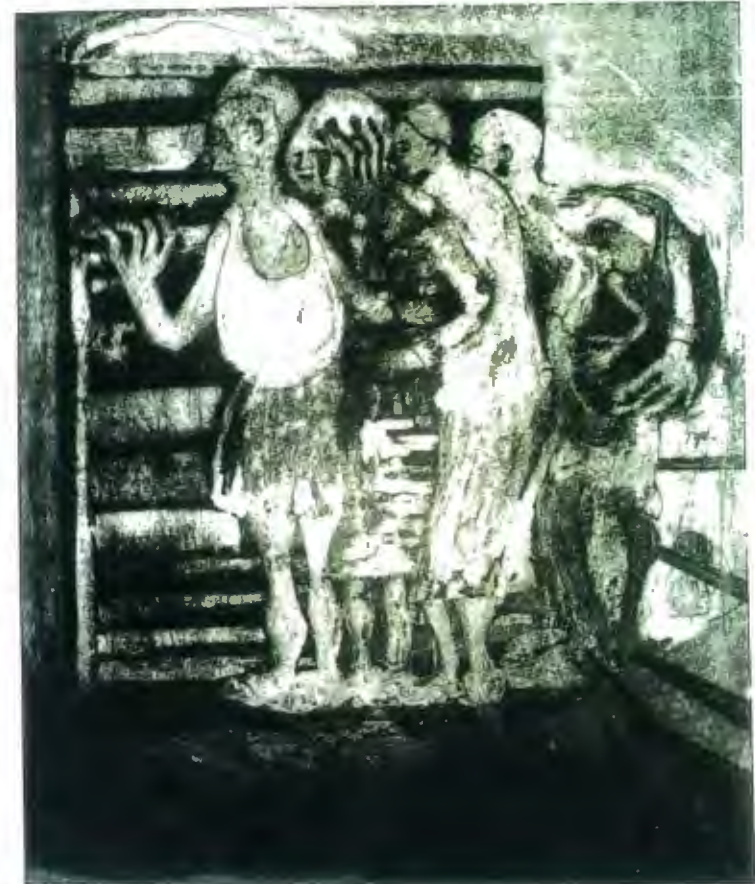


Fig. 22.  
Cyprian Shilakoe, *The gate is closed* (1969).  
Etching, 33 cm x 28 cm.

Ansie Kamffer (Beeld 1991:3) is of the opinion that although his art reflects the circumstances of his people, it cannot be viewed as cliched protest art. The social circumstances are interpreted in terms of universal truths. *The gate is closed* may certainly be considered as an extremely meaningful 'text', but it is not consciously and rationally manipulated in order to refer to various levels of experience or to other aesthetic 'texts'. Thus it could be said that the role of mediating conventions is not as pertinent in his works as in works by the artists discussed earlier.

Shilakoe's works provide a glimpse into a particular aspect of the history of South Africa's black people. Unlike Siopis, who uses the prototype of history painting to encode her views of South African history, he does not employ Western visual conventions to establish a referential framework as a subtext for his works. The distinct approach used by Shilakoe thus also serves to define the theme of this chapter, namely 'Reconsidered and revised histories', more clearly. Apart from Siopis, who comments on history in a broader sense, the other artists' use of visual conventions represent a reconsideration and revision of what is available within the framework of Western art history.

The works of Siopis, Kruger, Vorster and Hodgins show a large degree of diversity, although they all use established Western visual conventions to encode their perceptions of reality. Reality cannot be apprehended or encoded without recourse to conventions - and in this sense all realities are recycled. In their exploration of historical conventions as part of their source material, the artists construct highly diverse 'realities'. Yet, their adaptations of conventions are coloured by individual artists' ideological and artistic orientation and preferences. As such, history and convention acquire a very different meaning for each artist.

Apart from personal preoccupations which lead to a great degree of diversity, art also reflects a more general consensus of the nature of reality as proposed by science and contem-

**ACCOMMODATING  
DIVERSITY**

porary culture (Eco 1979:57). And from a general, contemporary perspective reality tends to be viewed as a non-unitary phenomenon. In this respect Eco maintains the following:

What is at stake is a convergence of new canons and requirements which the forms of art reflect by what we could call *structural homologies*. ... Thus the concepts of 'openness' and dynamism may recall the terminology of quantum physics: indeterminacy and discontinuity. But at the same time they also exemplify a number of situations in Einsteinian physics. ... Here are no privileged points of view, and all available perspectives are equally valid and rich in potential (Eco 1979:61).

It is a cultural atmosphere which allows for diversity and for numerous different interpretations of the historical Western visual paradigm. This diversity is also reflected in the preceding discussions on the works of local artists. In my own work, as will become clear in Chapter 3, a number of visual conventions are of major importance and play a mediating role in my experience and perception of reality. The interplay between the observation of outside reality, the use of pictorial and photographic conventions as well as the role of personal experiential factors all contribute to my particular world vision.

Conventions form underlying subtexts in my work, but due to the synthesising effect of personal idiolect, these subtexts become intrinsic parts of an autonomous work of art. Although my works are ostensibly extremely simple, with non-picturesque grass fields often forming the subject-matter, they nonetheless contain complex references to numerous historical conventions and prototypes. I do not prescribe the interpretation of the works - leaving the works open to a number of interpretational possibilities. These works may also simply be seen as easily recognisable images which, on the level of a commonly shared reality, could communicate with the non-erudite viewer.

I share with Siopis and Hodgins a desire for clarity of communication while still incorporating the richness of meaning made possible by the allegorical reference to historical conventions as subtexts to artworks. Although my landscape paintings deal with the

**COMPLEXITY  
UNDERLYING  
CLARITY**



contemporary reality of semi-urban landscapes, they also reflect aspects of the Western history of landscape conventions in my visual references to prototypes. These prototypes are revised, and in forming subtexts to my works, they provide a fuller perspective of the visual language used to remake reality into art.

## NOTES

1 The artist William Kentridge (b. 1955) has described the mainstream of contemporary South African art as a 'tyranny of allegories' (Martin 1991:25). In an era dominated by representational works, this type of claim might be somewhat inflated, yet it cannot be denied that during the 1980s and early 1990s numerous South African artists have employed allegorical strategies, as I will demonstrate in the discussions. With allegory being recognised as a truly 'protean device' (Fletcher 1965:1), which appears in all genres and tends to cross aesthetic boundaries, a general, comprehensive investigation of allegory within the South African context would have been too extensive an undertaking. For the purposes of this dissertation, the scope of the research has thus been narrowed down to allegorical reference to stylistic, formal and conceptual prototypes.

2 It is nonetheless evident, as discussed in Chapter 1, that visual reference to art conventions, as well as to conceptual prototypes, does not only pertain to pictorial art but is also prevalent in neo-conceptual art.

3 Penelope Siopis, *Doughnut and truffle* (1982\*). Oil on canvas, 121,5 cm x 152,5 cm. Collection: Not stated in source. (Cape Town Triennial 1982, Plate 54). \* Source does not state date of completion. The date used here is the date of exhibition.

4 Penelope Siopis, *Cream horn* (1982\*). Oil on canvas, 150 cm x 120 cm. Collection: Not stated in source. (Cape

Town Triennial 1982, Plate 55). \* Date of completion not indicated in source. Date provided here is the date of exhibition.

5 These would include *Still life with watermelon and other things* (1986) (Fig. 5), where the environment in which the elaborate feast is depicted, as well as the choice and painterly execution of objects, suggests a secondary meaning (also see the analysis of this work on p. 23).

6 Penelope Siopis, *Historia* (1990). Oil on canvas, 225 cm x 123 cm. Signed bottom left. Collection: Sir Robert Loder, UK. (Vita Art Now 1990:10).

7 One could deduce from this statement that, within a more generalised allegorical framework, the work is an 'allegory of ideas'. It is an example of how a literal character represents abstract concepts and communicates some kind of doctrine or thesis (Abrams 1987:4).

8 Given her academic background, I would assume that Siopis is fully aware that 'history' is a loaded term and that all 'histories' are open to distortion. However, in respect of local history, there had certainly been a particular perspective - that of the white minority - which had been advanced as the prevalent view of history before the democratisation of the country after the April 1994 elections.

9 In the context of Siopis's work, the Western aesthetic conventions by means of which perceptions of reality are

encoded, could be viewed as 'culturally significant' elements. However, the meaning of the term culture also encompasses 'the customs, civilization, and achievements of a particular time or people' (COD: s.v. 'culture'). Given the political engagement which forms such an obvious part of Siopis's work, the extended meaning of culture is also pertinent to her interpretation of the 'culturally significant'.

10 With reference to Peter Blume's *Elemosina* (1933), a sketch for *The Eternal City* (1937), Fletcher (1965:372) states:

This set of pictures emphasizes the use of kosmos. [They show] the Christ with his identifying crown of thorns and crucifix; but the painter takes kosmos further and drapes the suffering Christ with various emblems: rings, watches, opera glasses, swords and hearts. These and another common feature of military decoration, the epaulet, are used to make an ornamental enclosure around the seated figure. These kosmoi encapsulate what vain man believes to be his power.

11 Penelope Siopis, *Exhibit: Ex Africa* (1990). Collage, oil paint, screenprint, perspex and found object. 126,2 cm x 124,5 cm. Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery. (Vita Art Now 1990:11).

12 Friedman (1990:4), perhaps not entirely correctly, states that the reasons for taking Saartjie Bartman to England were as follows:

[She] ... was bought by a Victorian 'gentleman' and displayed as the central 19th century icon for the sexual differences between whites and blacks. She was also exploited as a reinforcement of the myth that black people occupy an antithetical and inferior position to whites on the scale of humanity. ... Her exaggerated buttocks in particular, were caricatured as a sign of aberrant female sexuality. After her death her geni-

tal 'parts' were turned into scientific exhibits.

13 Siopis acknowledges (Friedman 1990:4) that she had been criticised from a feminist viewpoint with regard to her depiction of women.

14 Siopis may, for example, be exploiting the figure of Saartjie Bartman to underscore the moral and political authority of Siopis the artist; or to appeal to a particular segment of the South African art market that would support the political 'correctness' of the artist's stance.

15 It should be pointed out that Buchloh is writing about, among others, artists such as Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, Dara Birnbaum, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine and Martha Rosler, who generally work in what could perhaps be called a 'conceptual' mode. He is highly critical of the use, in easel painting, of the very same allegorical procedures employed by the above artists in 'conceptual' works. Using examples such as Frank Stella's 'corporate brooches' and Julian Schnabel's 'art-historical gingerbread', he describes painting as an outmoded production method used exclusively for the production of marketable commodities within established distribution systems, a form of production in which the dialectic possibilities of montage are denied (Buchloh 1982: 43 - 56). While he is obviously writing from an American perspective, his examples of the practitioners of allegorical painting are very selective. In contemporary South African art it would not at all be so easy to relegate painting to mere commodity status, given the general involvement and preoccupation of local artists with wide-ranging, contemporary issues.

16 Braam Kruger, *Flying Dutchman* (1988). Oil on wood, 200 cm x 300 cm. Private collection. (Alexander & Cohen 1990:163).

17 According to Alexander and Cohen (1990:163) the legend concerns

a Dutch captain whose vow to round the Cape of Good Hope, even if it took the rest of his days, was overheard by the Devil. Doomed to sail his

phantom ship forever unless he wins a faithful woman's love ...

18 Carlo Maria Mariani, *April* (1988). Oil on canvas, 230 cm x 190 cm. Courtesy Studio d'Arte Cannaviello, Milan. (Edward Lucie-Smith 1990:114).

19 Edward Lucie-Smith (1990:109) points out with regard to Mariani's work:

... Mariani's work is rooted in three things - in the later work of Giorgio de Chirico ... in the Conceptual Art movement ... and in the neo-classicism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

20 The writings of Benjamin Buchloh and Terry Eagleton, among others, could serve as appropriate examples of this type of approach. Please consult the bibliography for details of publications by authors cited in this text.

21 Margaret Vorster, *Painted love* (c. 1984). Oil on canvas, 122 cm x 303,7 cm. Private collection. (Alexander & Cohen 1990:169).

22 The painting *Trtal in a forest* was included in an exhibition of works of art by Margaret Vorster at Lorimer Hall, King George VI Art Gallery. (Bentley 1989:4).

23 According to Hamilton (S.a.:59) it tells the story of the Assyrian king Sardanapulus who summoned his slaves and concubines and ordered his treasures to be heaped around his bed. All had to be destroyed by fire rather than fall to the invaders at the palace gates. Eugène Delacroix based many of his paintings on subjects which had already been dealt with in literature by figures such as Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe and Byron (Osborne 1975:307). Baudelaire (1979:10) remarked about his work:

It goes without saying that he was an avid reader ... he inherited from the great republican and

imperial school a love of poets and a kind of fierce spirit of competition with the written word.

This type of allegorical painting would thus not obscure its sources but would rather form a synthesis with the original text.

24 Margaret Vorster, *The guardian* (1985\*). Oil on canvas, 120,5 cm x 200,5 cm. Collection: Not indicated in source. (Cape Town Triennial 1985. Plate 95). \* Date of work not stated in source. The date used is the exhibition date.

25 What Fauconnier (1987:55) observes with regard to the general theory of communication, is also apposite in this respect. With reference to a model by M. van Schoor, he points out that communication is dependent on the

triptych *communicator, medium, recipient*. The communicator wishes to express a message intended for the recipient, and for this he uses a medium (an 'institutionalised combination of codes and signs' such as language, sounds and images). The recipient is an active participant in the communication process, not only because he decodes and interprets, but also because he is the 'turning point' (as opposed to the terminal point); he activates and actualises the potential value of the message.

26 If one considers the following assessment by Vorster of *Painted love*, this observation could be considered quite justified. She states (Vorster 1984:83): 'Thus *Painted love* is an image of the self where the condition of being is subject to the intricacies of self-perpetuation through continual regeneration of self-expression, and reflection'.

27 The exhibition opened at the 1820 Settlers' Monument, Grahamstown on 27 June 1986 and closed there on 5 July 1986. Thereafter, over the next 12 months, it was shown at a number of major venues, including the SA

National Gallery, Cape Town. (Hodgins 1986)

28 Robert Hodgins, *The lineaments of gratified desire* (1985). Acrylic and oil on canvas, 116 cm x 76 cm. S & d (rev.) R.G. Hodgins 1985. Collection: the artist. (Hodgins 1986: Plate C14).

29 Baconesque qualities appear repeatedly in areas of his paintings, for instance the manipulation of plastic qualities in the face of the sitter in *Ubu - The official portrait* (1981), and the type of figural distortion and pose evident in the central section of *Oh oh oh she cried with a cracked voice* (1983-1984).

Empirical data:

Robert Hodgins, *Ubu - The official portrait* (1981). Tempera and oil on pressed board, 25 cm x 35,7 cm. S & d (rev.) Hodgins '81. Johannesburg Art Gallery. (Hodgins 1986. Plate B1.)

Robert Hodgins, *Oh oh oh she cried with a cracked voice* (1983 - 1984). Oil on canvas, 91,5 cm x 214 cm. S & d (rev of both canvases) Hodgins '83/84. Collection: Ms. Rayda Becker. (Hodgins 1986. Plate C10).

30 See endnote 29 for empirical data.

31 I am aware of the fact that during the sixties and seventies, the period in which Shilakoe worked,

postmodernism and intertextuality were still not such commonplace trends in South African art. Furthermore, artists like Siopis, Kruger and Vorster gained prominence during the 1980s only, when postmodern ideas became more firmly entrenched. I am nonetheless of the opinion that a comparison of his works with those of white artists is justified because he represents a relatively general approach to reality that can be discerned among many black artists. This approach, which may be linked to socio-economic and educational inequalities between black and white artists, is linked to direct reference to reality, without the mediation of sophisticated theories or over-consciousness of conventions. In my view, works by prominent black artists reflect experienced reality in metaphorical terms which would be directly accessible to most viewers.

32 Cyprian Shilakoe, *The gate is closed* (1969). Etching, 33 cm x 28 cm. (Nel & Givon 1990:14).

33 The poem 'Die kind' (De Vries 1983:74) is about the opposition of black people to the apartheid system. The line in the original Afrikaans reads 'in die lokasies van die omsingelde hart'.

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## Revisited landscapes

Ordinary, non-picturesque<sup>1</sup> Highveld scenes form the subject-matter of my latest works and the title of this chapter acknowledges an indebtedness to predecessors and conventions. But the adjective 'revisited' also implies personal interaction with my surroundings<sup>2</sup> and points to the presence of fairly strong experiential qualities. Furthermore, aesthetic idiolect interacts with conventions in the encoding process and consequently conventions are simultaneously affirmed and deconstructed in my quest for visual equivalents that will give substance to my perceptions of a particular reality. Thus my works relate very closely to Cook's statement that the pictorial image consists of intricate links between 'signifier, signified, and referent, but also *being* and *seeming*, *emblem* and *expression*, *theme* and *motif* and their combinations into *discourse* and *figure ...*' (Cook 1989:10).

Most of the works from mid-1994 to 1995 depict almost nondescript snatches of semi-urban landscapes which are typical of certain areas of the Highveld. The works *Trees and field* (1995)<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 23) and *High summer field*<sup>4</sup> (1994-95) (Fig. 24) are representative of the rather plain scenes that form part of my subject-matter. These fragments are not in any overt sense industrialised landscapes and neither do they qualify as scenic, unspoilt wilderness. Many of the later works may, however, be regarded as relics of once unspoilt veld and in this respect they are suggestive of both pristine 'nature' and the ravages of industrialisation. Others, such as *Harvested field* (1995) (Fig. 25)<sup>5</sup>, show fields changed by man in the process of agricultural production.

The interests outlined above are indicative of the fundamental position that landscape occupies in my current creative endeavours. Contemporary discourse on landscape tends to emphasise the fact that landscape painting is merely one aspect of 'landscape' as a

THROUGH MY OWN  
AND OTHER EYES

LANDSCAPE:  
A DRIFTSAND OF  
DEFINITIONS

*Fig. 24.*  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*High summer field (1994-95).*  
*Oil on canvas,*  
*51,5 cm x 159 cm.*



*Below:*  
*Fig. 23. Daniel du Plessis, Trees and field (1995).*  
*Oil on acrylic on canvas, 121 cm x 180 cm.*



*Fig. 25.*  
*Daniel du Plessis, Harvested field (1994-95).*  
*Oil on acrylic on canvas, 121 cm x 180 cm.*

multidisciplinary field which embraces science, architecture, planning, geography and history. Donald Meinig (1979:1), in expounding the difficulties involved in trying to define landscape, calls it 'an attractive, important, and ambiguous term'. He identifies (1979:33-48) ten possible versions of the same scene, namely landscape as nature, as habitat, as artifact, as system, as problem, as wealth, as ideology, as history, as place and as aesthetic.

Artworks often incorporate more than one of these possibilities simultaneously and a number of the complex notions surrounding landscape will be addressed in later discussions. My own works do not deal exclusively with the objectifiable, empirical reality of semi-urban landscape scenes. The mediating role of landscape and other aesthetic conventions in encoding my perceptions of reality forms a very strong subtext. In the work *Harvested field*, for example, nature is encoded by means of empirical observation, the use of conventions such as aerial and linear perspective, as well as a painterly approach which is reminiscent of certain aspects of Monet's work. Aspects of Monet's oeuvre are important prototypes and these influences will be discussed in detail. In addition, my meticulous rendering of very commonplace landscapes suggests a reevaluation and defamiliarisation of the mundane through the painstaking attention lavished on it.

Although landscape is central to my current artworks, numerous pertinent factors emerged in the course of the visual research and the following discussions will basically reflect the sequence in which the works were made. Firstly, the nature of allegorical reference in my work will be investigated. For this purpose, I will briefly discuss earlier works to demonstrate how an interest in allegory eventually led to the use of a specific allegorical procedure, namely allegorical reference to prototypical conventions. In Western art, notions such as nature, landscape and various associated genres may all be considered as conventions. Photography is both an artistic and an optical convention. Since I make extensive use

**ELEMENTS OF  
ALLEGORICAL  
REFERENCE IN MY  
OWN WORK**

of photographs as a source of reference in the production of my paintings, photography in this context will also form part of the discussion on allegorical reference.

However, my works are not entirely dominated by allegorical reference to visual conventions. Therefore various other issues which are equally important to an understanding of my work, require further clarification. These include iconic reference and the role of conventions in this regard. Iconic reference encompasses matters such as the artistic encoding of reality and personal idiolect.

Before commencing the discussion of my own work in terms of allegorical and iconic reference, as defined earlier in this dissertation, a short overview of my artistic pursuits between 1992<sup>6</sup> and early 1995 will be provided. The aim is to show why the visual research developed in a particular direction, which may superficially seem like an abrupt departure from earlier interests.

In works made before 1992, I often consciously explored meaning within an allegorical framework. Allegory, in this context, should be understood in the most general sense of one text referring to another 'text' or source. Coupled to this, I made use of figures engaged in acting out some type of narrative. Thus allegorical and narrative elements were deliberately manipulated to bestow meaning and relevance to the artworks. A typical example of this type of work is *The new emperor's clothes* (1991)<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 26), in which the reference is fairly straightforward, being based on the well-known fable.

However, because the work is also a self-portrait, situated in a rather familiar South African context, an element of ambiguity and doubt is introduced. Standing on the ruins of the Union Buildings, the artist crowns himself - an allusion to, among other things, the 'political' impotence of the artist in the face of the conditions of the time; the crowning signifying a hollow gesture.

**USE OF ALLEGORICAL  
AND NARRATIVE  
PROCEDURES**



*Fig. 27.  
Daniel du Plessis,  
Small Pretoria painting (1992).  
Oil on canvas, 54 cm x 55 cm.*



*Fig. 28a.  
Daniel du Plessis, Untitled (1991).  
Oil on paper, 40 cm x 70 cm.*



*Above:  
Fig. 28b.  
Daniel du Plessis, Untitled (1991).  
Oil on paper, 45 cm x 70 cm. (Detail.)*



*Fig. 26.  
Daniel du Plessis,  
The new emperor's clothes (1991).  
Oil on canvas, 187 cm x 96 cm.*

This work points to the following two elements that have been integral to my creative interests:

- \* The use of the immediate environment<sup>8</sup> as a source for expressing ideas about current concerns<sup>9</sup>, and

- \* a desire to invest the work of art with ‘meaning’ of an extra-pictorial nature (i.e. meaning that is not linked to the properties of the medium or the process as such).

These interests can be accommodated by an allegorical approach to subject-matter. Allegory, whether in art or literature, is closely allied to the world of ideas (Fletcher 1965:323) and the entire work is thus subjugated to a central theme or idea. The idea would then be cloaked in visual imagery and executed in a style which can be suitably manipulated to convey this concept. These earlier works comply in many important respects to a number of allegorical features. They contain strong narrative elements, figures are involved in a scenario, and in certain respects they refer to other pictures, visual conventions from Western art history and even to literary themes.

Obviously, allegory in a contemporary context cannot be equated to allegory in the traditional sense. What the American artist Audrey Flack (b. 1931) - a self-admitted ‘allegorist’ - had to say about her painting *World War II (Vanitas)*<sup>10</sup>, is pertinent to the type of approach evident in these earlier paintings. She maintains (1981:78) that in visually expressing her allegorical story, she used rich colours and attractive objects to lure the viewer into the painting. Once the viewer is engaged in this fashion, it would hopefully compel him/her to read the symbolism in the work. Many of the symbols would be used in service of the allegorical intention and their meanings are often conventional; the clock, flickering candle, fruit and rose all denote mortality.

**CONVENTIONAL AND  
PERSONAL SYMBOLS**

It is in much the same way that allegory in *The new emperor's clothes* is deployed. Ruins, for instance, are a symbol of the passage of time and are also considered a basic allegorical symbol<sup>11</sup>. Ruins would, in the context of this painting, point to the passing of a certain order and the uncertainties involved in the emergence of a new one. Among the fragments of ruins is a frieze depicting a lion, a symbol of European domination and colonialism which is frequently encountered in heraldry. A dove is included in the ruins as an ironical reference to the fragility of peace. It may be deduced, quite correctly, that the entire approach is very reasoned<sup>12</sup>.

Allegory often exerts a high degree of control over the way in which the recipient should approach the work (Fletcher 1967:304). At the same time it should also be kept in mind that in the works of certain contemporary artists, this high degree of control is undermined, which leads to iconographic uncertainty on the part of the viewer - as is evidenced in the works of Margaret Vorster. In her work *Painted love*, for instance, there is no immediate sense of iconographic clarity. As mentioned in Chapter 2 in relation to the allegorical approach of Penelope Siopis, other artists prefer to guide the viewer more specifically towards the desired interpretation. This also applies to my own painting *The new emperor's clothes*.

Works produced at the beginning of 1992, such as *Small Pretoria painting* (1992)<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 27), still contain many obvious and deliberate allegorical and narrative features. With regard to the allegorical imagery in this work, the statue of a lion - based on the statues at Lion Bridge, Church Street, Pretoria - may serve as an example. In their normal setting, the four Lion Bridge statues serve a decorative purpose. However, I appropriated the image and turned it into a personal symbol. The image is open to a number of interpretations, including power, order, domination and colonialism. It may also be seen as an icon of a particular culture. In this case, the statues are relics of the Eurocentric, colonial culture which is part

**CONTROL OVER  
RECIPIENT'S  
APPROACH**

of the 'white' South African heritage. According to Angus Fletcher (1965:378), allegory often makes use of ideal monuments, the status symbols of a culture. In allegorical works the artist may then act as an interpreter of culturally significant issues.

As far as narrative in *Small Pretoria painting* is concerned, it follows the general trend of narrative in postmodern art, with narrative no longer being open to a conventional linear interpretation (Nairne 1987:144-147). As Donald Kuspit points out (1986:25-26), 'narrative is in a state of flux, with no fixed conventions'. In contemporary art, the interpretation of works containing narrative elements is inferential - there is often no clear story-line. In this painting the architectural elements, the surrounding landscape and the statue of a lion form a recognisable setting, locating the action in Pretoria. However, certain images, such as the angels and the demon, introduce a fanciful or even absurd element into a scenario that may - despite the painterly handling - have passed as 'real'. All the elements required for a narrative reading of some kind are present, such as a setting, characters involved in certain actions and an implied, if somewhat unusual, sequence of events.

This discussion pinpoints a number of features which appear in my earlier works - in particular the use of a narrative structure, coupled to preconceived ideas in the guise of allegory, to convey certain meanings. Although it could be argued that many contemporary artists, including Penelope Siopis, make use of preconceived ideas, this approach still appears to be anathema, with allegory being viewed exclusively in historical terms. But, as Owens (1984:209) points out, 'postmodernist art may in fact be identified by a single, coherent impulse, and ... criticism will remain incapable of accounting for that impulse as long as it views allegory as aesthetic error'.

A number of works produced before 1992, such as *Untitled* (1991)<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 28a and Fig. 28b), were executed in a looser, more painterly and less smoothly finished style. In a sense, these works provided a means to explore the properties of the medium while still

**NARRATIVES WITHOUT  
CLEAR STORY-LINES**

**RESOLVING A STYLISTIC  
DICHOTOMY**

expressing certain ideas within an allegorical context. As far as the visual research for the Master's degree was concerned, I perceived the resolution of this stylistic dichotomy as a primary motivation. What started to emerge pronouncedly in works such as *Untitled* and *Small Pretoria painting*, is an emphasis on painterly qualities as an intrinsic part of encoding the subject-matter. This has led to a merging of other types of imagery with the landscape imagery. Gradually the landscape started to play a far more prominent role, although it had always been present in my work as a background element.

In comparison with these recent works, earlier works represent a very conscious attempt at creating structured, 'intertextual' pictures. Images were selected for what they could convey within a certain narrative and referential framework, and not so much for their own visual qualities or the challenges they presented in terms of artistic expression and manipulation of the chosen media. It was, generally speaking, a more cerebral approach to art. Although an 'intellectual' approach has its own merits, it could not fulfil a personal and intuitive need to explore the qualities of my favoured media to a greater extent. At the same time, I developed a need to establish a more emphatic relationship with the material/subject-matter. As an academically-trained artist, however, it is impossible to view my own work or subject-matter outside the framework of the Western art tradition and art-historical discourse.

Reference to this tradition - to paintings, styles and ideas - is inevitable. In many instances, subject-matter has acquired fixed meanings and it is impossible to escape the historical load that accompanies it. In certain respects my current works provide a tacit or veiled acknowledgement of historical prototypes as a source of reference in the search for a personal angle on the nature of the outside world. Linked to this acknowledgement is an awareness that personal observation, however acute, accurate or appropriate, will always be mediated because trained artists inevitably see the world through the eyes of their artistic

**A QUEST FOR  
INTERTEXTUALITY**

predecessors. At the same time, the observation of the outside world is influenced by the artist's personal predilections and ideological orientation. In this respect, Ann Bermingham (1990:97) points out that much of the literature on the English landscape painter John Constable (1776-1837), in using the artist's own correspondence as a barometer, unquestioningly accepts the artist's own ideological discourse. The following passage by Bermingham illuminates many of the issues referred to above:

... Constable, in his paintings and his writings, continually implies two opposing yet mutually supportive claims for his naturalism: the constative 'it is' and the performative 'I feel it to be thus.' ... Within such a system, which proposes both a transparent relationship between nature and art and between art and emotion, questions of cultural mediation are awkward. The influence of Gainsborough and Reynolds, for instance, becomes problematic for Constable, to be acknowledged only as a confirmation of his own ideas while simultaneously suppressed and made secondary to his own experience of nature. Similarly, the role of landscape painting as mediating the experience of nature must both be allowed and disallowed (Bermingham 1990:116).

My own ideological orientation in respect of art discourse, formed in an entirely different cultural atmosphere to that prevalent in Constable's time, would tend to extol the possibilities of a fusion of observation, mediation and personal experience as a means of arriving at a fuller picture of reality as composed of a multiplicity of diverse and not necessarily reconcilable elements.

The role that mediation (viz. reference to conventions), observation and personal emotional or experiential factors play in determining the appearance of a work, cannot be easily separated or substantiated. Compared with my earlier, more obscurely 'allegorical' works, the later works are less esoteric, flowing from closer observation and increased manipulation of art media. This approach gained new impetus with the opportunity to view works by Monet (1840 - 1926) and Lucian Freud (b. 1922) at close range<sup>15</sup>. In works by both these

**THE POWER OF THE  
MEDIUM**

artists, the inherent qualities of the paint are not subjugated entirely in service of representation - rather, both aspects seem to acquire equal significance. The local artist Penelope Siopis, among others, attains a similar degree of amalgamation between medium and subject-matter. In her case, however, an awareness of a subtext to the painting may be rather pronounced, while in works by Monet and Freud the meaning emerges more clearly from the way in which the subject-matter is treated in terms of paint. There is not a preconceived intention - or so it would seem - to manipulate the appearance of the subject-matter to arrive at clearly defined, predetermined forms which will quite closely reflect the artist's intended 'message'. It also seems that Siopis's intention is to create paintings that will *say* something, while the paintings of an artist like Freud tend to *be* something<sup>16</sup>. Thus, in the case of Siopis, the personality and ideology of the artist are very prominently reflected in her works.

The first-hand encounter with the works of Monet and Freud reaffirmed the power of the artistic medium and served as a confirmation of the symbiotic relation that is possible between the medium and the image. With the emphasis on content during the postmodern period, the value of the medium, which was a mainstay of modernism, had been undermined. By emptying art of all that was not intrinsic to the medium, modernist painting could concentrate on its own inherent properties, which led to the full exploration of its formal and material qualities. As will emerge later, many of my works create a fusion between modernist and postmodernist tenets.

**A FUSION OF  
MODERNIST AND  
POSTMODERNIST  
NOTIONS**

Charles Harrison (1994:209) expresses the opinion that modernism could possibly be viewed as a form of escape from reality. According to him

some significant body of critical opinion decided that what was actually entailed in Modernism's self-critical project - at least as Greenberg represented it - was a form of damaging reduction in the power of painting to represent the world for and to a broad constituency; a concentration upon the autonomy of art at the expense of any consideration of the conditions of its reception; an abnegation, in fact, of the requirement of effectiveness or, worse, a masking of modern painting's effectiveness on behalf of a small minority.

Kuspit (1986:23) states that by isolating art from non-formal sources of imagery and meaning, such as literature and life in general, this desire for 'purity' narrowed down the scope of art. In becoming remote from ordinary subject-matter, art lost a large part of its audience, since the uninitiated found it increasingly difficult to understand modern works<sup>17</sup>.

In my view the triumph of form over content in modernism, and the reverse of that - namely the triumph of content over form in many postmodern trends, such as performance, land art and conceptual art - constitute a lose-lose situation on both accounts. An extreme example of the triumph of content over form, would be the type of work produced by Art and Language, the collective name of a group of 'conceptual' Anglo-American artists. John Walker (1975:56) remarks that

the open-endedness of their search [for tools of thought] has led them into a no-man's-land outside existing subject fields, and now it has ceased to have any connection with established forms of art, although their writings are still marketed in an art context. They continue to muse on the nature of their musing, and obsessively map and index their discourse in an attempt to uncover a structure or to discover a goal<sup>18</sup>.

The issue of maintaining the aesthetic integrity of the artwork, while at the same time relating my works to the world outside, has been an ongoing concern. Allegory and narrative are procedures that provide a means to draw on numerous sources, or texts, related to the outside world. Yet, the disaffection I eventually experienced with regard to my own utilisation of allegorical/narrative procedures, lies precisely in the intentionality of allegory as a somewhat contrived method of forcing extrinsic meanings upon the work. This is opposed to a method which would allow for the visual exploration of subject-matter so that meanings may emerge through the manipulation of the formal and 'material' qualities inherent to art. In a way, it is an almost modernist approach, but with an awareness of the pitfalls of taking the notion of autonomy to extremes and, at the same time, a wariness of overloading the work

**INTENTIONALITY OF  
ALLEGORY**



of art with ‘meanings’ at the cost of art’s own special properties. It would, as such, be quite feasible to describe my latest works as a compromise between certain tenets of both postmodernism and modernism.

Compared with my earlier works, my latest works have more obvious links with outside reality, but allegory has not altogether disappeared. It is still present in visual reference to stylistic, formal and conceptual prototypes. It has remained in the form of reference to an anterior text - the text being source material belonging to the field of the Western art tradition. As discussed in Chapter 1, allegorical reference implies recourse to a source of information, and in having recourse to that source, the source is appropriated, even if the appropriation takes on an extremely subtle form.

In four works dating to 1992, it can be observed how the conscious narrative and allegorical intentions slowly started to recede, allowing the landscape to emerge as the predominant subject-matter. The insistence on stylistic experimentation which caused many of my earlier works to look quite unlike works by the same hand, still exerts a marked presence in these works. The four works referred to above are:

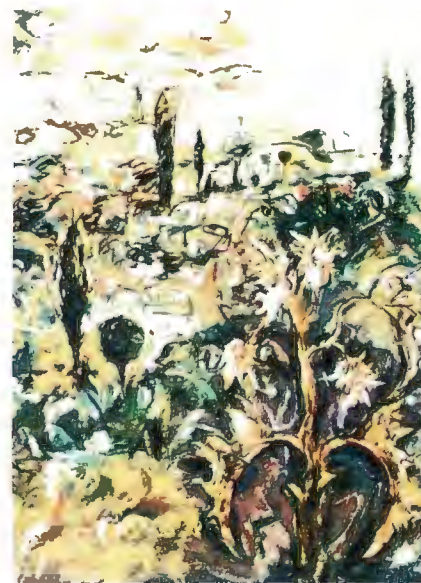
**ZOOMING IN ON  
LANDSCAPE**

- *A new dawn* (1992)<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 29);
- *Once there was...* (1992)<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 30);
- *A season ends* (1992)<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 31); and
- *A view from Arcadia* (1992)<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 32).

A comparison of these four works will reveal how many previously used symbols (for instance cypress trees and fragments of ruins) start to become less obvious.

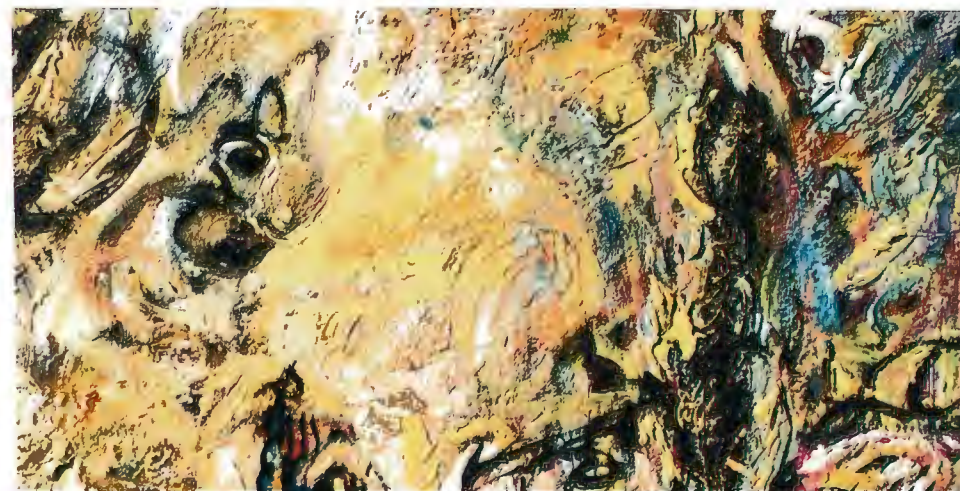
In the work *A new dawn*, a statue of a lion, previously a much-used symbol, is trans-

*Below:*  
*Fig. 30a and Fig. 30b (detail).*  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*Once there was... (1992).*  
*Oil on canvas, 72,5 cm x 87,5 cm.*



*Left:*  
*Fig. 31.*  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*A season ends (1992).*  
*Oil on canvas,*  
*69 cm x 54 cm.*

*Below:*  
*Fig. 29a and Fig. 29b (detail).*  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*A new dawn (1992).*  
*Oil on canvas,*  
*38 cm x 75,5 cm.*



formed to such an extent that it can no longer function as a recognisable allegorical symbol. In *A view from Arcadia*, the Union Buildings, which in earlier works such as *The new emperor's clothes* played a prominent role in locating the narrative in Pretoria, can be read very vaguely as a suggested form on the horizon. Quite prominent still, are the round, clipped trees which characteristically line the gardens of the Union Buildings, a site viewed by many as the symbol *par excellence* of white domination in South Africa. These trees contribute to the Neo-Renaissance character of the buildings and the gardens. Their links with European garden and architectural layout, along with other symbols, were exploited as an ironic comment on colonialism in my earlier works. In this painting, however, the meaning of the work is already so closely tied to the manipulation of oil paint as a medium that images can no longer be viewed in isolation. The sense of 'wilderness' which prevails in the painting may still be seen as an allegorical means to denote the decay of the old established order (also note that Arcadia is a suburb which adjoins the Union Buildings). However, this meaning is not so intentionally constructed as the meaning in, for instance, *The new emperor's clothes*. It is as if the symbolic intentions have been subsumed in the fabric of the painting. The suggestive qualities had thus overtaken the illustrative ones.

I have always valued recognisable representations of subject-matter. Although the degree of recognisability might have varied, it has never been totally ab-



Fig. 32.  
Daniel du Plessis,  
*A view from Arcadia* (1992).  
Oil on canvas, 55 cm x 55 cm.

sent from my work. A degree of mimesis, together with the use of recognisable subject-matter, is essential to establish a link with the viewer<sup>23</sup>.

One of the challenges with regard to the visual research, was to find a means to combine recognisable representation with a fuller exploration of my chosen art media, namely oils and charcoal. Allegorical reference to prototypes offers the opportunity to synthesise divergent stylistic and formal interests, since allegory disregards stylistic and aesthetic boundaries (Owens 1984:209). Useful examples of stylistic and formal crossover may be found in the oeuvre of Kitaj. His *If not, not* (1975 - 1976)<sup>24</sup>, for instance, is a combination of reference to a literary source - *The waste land* by T.S. Eliot (Ashbery 1982:131) - as well as to representational and modernist formal conventions. All of these enrich both the form and the content of the work. As pointed out in Chapter 2, much the same applies to numerous works by the local artist Robert Hodgins.

A greater awareness of the potential for stylistic crossover, coupled to the need to resolve or synthesise the stylistic dichotomy which characterised my earlier works, guided the visual research in a new direction. This new direction satisfied a desire to deal with observation and representation of my own perceptions of reality without sacrificing the inherent formal qualities of art. Reality, of course, is an extremely complex notion and will be dealt with more extensively in Chapter 4.

Earlier in my career as painter I did in fact subscribe to the idea that a fixed style is irrelevant and hampers an adventurous approach to artmaking. This notion, in practical terms, led to a surfeit of stylistic experimentation in my work. However, through my recent visual research, I gradually came to appreciate style, or aesthetic idiolect, as something far more complex than merely a personal signature and marketable commodity. There some-

AESTHETIC IDIOLECT

times tends to be an overemphasis on style (or idiolect) as marketable commodity. This negates other possible functions of style, such as being a vehicle for meaning, in the sense of 'the message is the medium'. Here, once again, works by Freud and Monet, as well as Siopis and Hodgins, may serve as examples of the link between medium, aesthetic idiolect and meaning.

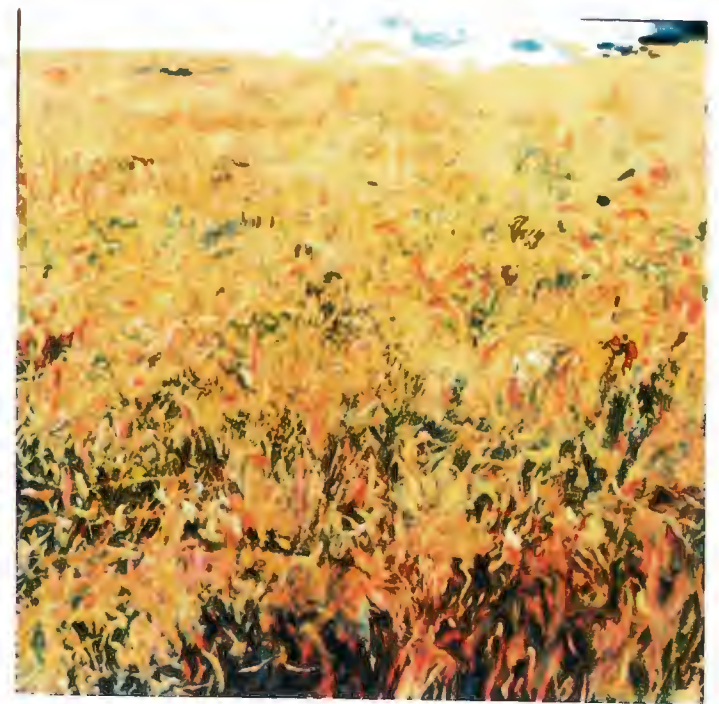
The process of discarding stylistic experimentation in favour of a more unitary and personalised style culminated in the painting *Ode to summer* (1993)<sup>25</sup> (Fig. 33), a large painting which took a long time to finalise but which eventually represented a turning point. The physicality and painterly quality of this work stand in striking contrast to earlier works such as *The new emperor's clothes*. It is, in relation to earlier work, a seminal work, since through a struggle with materials and subject-matter, I managed to arrive at a clarification of various issues that are intimately related to the process of artmaking. Among these issues are the relevance of style, the interaction between stylistic expression and meaning, the signifying potential of the medium itself, as well as the approach most 'suited' to personal interests.

In *Ode to summer*, the medium was allowed to take control over the subject-matter and in this way intentional symbolic images became either embedded or lost in the fabric of the painting. The picture is built up of many overlapping layers of paint which result in a textured surface. Swirling line-work, which is sometimes superimposed on thickly encrusted areas of paint, gives the work an 'agitated' appearance. The initial intention was to do a work in which diverse, individually articulated symbols would point to the glories of summer. These would, at the same time, have accented certain juxtapositions that would have pointed to an allegorical reading of the work as *vanitas* - namely the oppositions between growth and decay, light and darkness, life and death.



*Above:*  
**Fig. 33.**  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*Ode to summer (1993).*  
*Oil on canvas,*  
*160 cm x 180 cm.*

**Fig. 34.**  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*Summer field (1994).*  
*Oil on canvas,*  
*73,5 cm x 73,5 cm.*



The seasons contain conventionally sanctioned meanings, for instance the passing of time and the cyclical nature of life, to name only two. These meanings were to be expressed in the painting by means of symbols that would, within the unifying context of the landscape, have communicated the notions in question. Somehow, despite the disappearance of the preconceived symbols from the painting, the work still speaks of these issues. This points to the ability of the medium to become a vehicle of meaning in its own right, and also reaffirmed to me that the basic, visual, technical and formal qualities of art can speak as eloquently as 'extrinsic' content or imagery.

Through this working method, my involvement with the artmaking process was heightened. This led to a resolution of certain stylistic concerns via practical exploration and allowed me to arrive at a clearer, more recognisable manifestation of my own vision. However, in the encrusted surfaces, references to certain aspects of Monet's oeuvre can be detected, while the swirling lines hint at Van Gogh. Since these correspondences emerged through the working process and were not 'intentionally' sought out, it may be regarded as just one more example of how cultural prototypes become internalised through the study of art and how these sources can almost instinctively be drawn on. The correspondences also point to the fact that reference need not necessarily be intentional, but could also surface in an almost subconscious fashion.

The painting *Ode to summer*, which itself may be regarded as a field of painterly activity, was the key to the series of paintings of fields (veld) which form the largest component of the Master's exhibition. The painting *Summer field* (1994)<sup>26</sup> (Fig. 34) forms a bridge between *Ode to summer* and the later body of work. In this work a resolved aesthetic idiolect begins to emerge. It would appear that through *Ode to summer* I had finally satisfied my desire for stylistic experimentation and arrived at what could be regarded, in personal terms, as a resolved aesthetic idiolect.

**NEW APPROACH TO  
SUBJECT-MATTER**

The transition which occurred, entailed not only rejecting the continuous exploration of a multiplicity of stylistic possibilities in favour of a somewhat more characteristic aesthetic idiolect, but also a different approach to the choice of subject-matter. Where before images were intentionally chosen for their potential to be manipulated as conveyors of socio-political and cultural ideas, subject-matter is now viewed in terms of visual properties and potential for artmaking. This could, in a sense, be viewed as a return to a more basic, representational approach to art.

In the working process, an attempt is made to create an interrelationship between what is depicted and how it is depicted. And yet, though the works are based far more on observation and empathy with the subject-matter, there is an awareness that reference to visual conventions forms an underlying facet of the subject-matter which cannot simply be brushed aside. The fact that these references were initially not *intentionally* pursued, but have made their presence felt because they are deeply inculcated cultural prototypes, is perhaps all the more reason why they deserve closer investigation. In later works, references are explored far more consciously, although in most cases the reference to prototypical source material is not blatant or overt.

In respect of my working method, certain stylistic, formal and conceptual influences have become integrated to such an extent that they have been transformed into a personalised artistic vocabulary. It has become almost impossible to distinguish between reference to convention and aesthetic idiolect. Aesthetic idiolect may, in addition, be regarded as being based on various conventional prototypes. The interaction between convention and personal idiolect will be demonstrated by a discussion of reference to certain aspects of Monet's oeuvre as well as to certain aspects of modernism.

**EMPATHY WITH  
SUBJECT-MATTER**



A comparison of one of my works with a work by local artist Gail Behrmann may shed light on some of the issues involved in my visual reference to Monet. The comparison will also reveal how reference to the same source, in this case elements from Monet's oeuvre, can result in works of a distinctly different nature. In Behrmann's *Mediterraneo* (1993)<sup>27</sup> (Fig. 35), which formed part of an exhibition held at the Goodman Gallery (29 August - 24 September 1993), the artist used the experience and memory of a recent trip to the Mediterranean as subject-matter for the painting<sup>28</sup>. Although the subject-matter does not directly refer to Monet, the artist concedes that there is in fact reference in the work to Monet at a technical and stylistic level, specifically in the layering of paint and the tactile qualities of the work. She regards Monet's water lily paintings as extraordinary examples of nature painting and a general point of reference in her work. Behrmann points out that she does not copy his style consciously, but that the influence exerts itself in a more subtle way.

Behrmann, who has had no academic art training, has never viewed Monet's work in person and as such the influences are mediated by photographs of the works. She has a predi-

Fig. 35.  
Gail Behrmann,  
*Mediterraneo* (1994).  
Oil on canvas,  
94 cm x 130 cm.



lection for the 'lusciousness' of oil paint and uses the medium in a spontaneous way. Her interpretation, based on photographic reproductions, of Monet's layering process, results in works that are in fact quite removed, as far as paint application and the effect of layering is concerned, from the original source of reference. Her paint has a glossy and fluid appearance, while Monet's paint, in many instances, tends to be applied as layers over previously dried layers, often resulting in a dry and matt appearance. The luminosity of his water lily paintings, for instance, do not emanate from the glossiness of the paint only, but is linked to an almost illusionistic manipulation of the reflective qualities of colour and light. His water lily paintings frequently seem to be built up of numerous translucent layers of paint on a textured ground, which, in turn, is made up of dried layers of paint. Behrmann states that her interest in his work is not so much in his use of colour or light, but rather in the layering process. In this regard it may be pointed out that Monet's later works are often cited as an influence on the American abstract expressionists and also on the colour field painters (Meyer 1986:147).

In comparing Behrmann's *Mediterraneo* with my own painting *Autumn field* (1994)<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 36), the pronounced differences in the works raise various questions concerning the nature of allegorical reference to prototypes. Firstly, a technical similarity should be pointed out between the work by Behrmann and another work by me, namely *Ode to summer*. In *Ode to summer*, there is a combination of glossy and

Fig. 36.  
Daniel du Plessis,  
*Autumn field* (1994).  
Oil over acrylic and  
sand on canvas,  
95 cm x 180 cm.



matt areas and since it was completed in 1993 before I had an opportunity to view Monet's work in person, one could surmise that photographs of Monet's work in glossy publications may also have played a role in this technical preference.

If the appearance of *Ode to summer* is compared with *Autumn field*, the application of paint in the latter is noticeably less 'wet' and glossy. In addition, the grass field which forms the subject-matter, is articulated by means of translucent layers of paint over earlier painted surfaces. The subject-matter is also rooted in outside reality and carefully observed, whereas *Ode to summer* still contains more instances of calligraphic mark-making which are not necessarily related to any observed object. Monet's work, even the later, more abstracted works, are always linked to the observation of nature and the marks can be regarded as a short-hand rendering of nature. In Behrmann's work, abstraction and painterliness are employed in the service of rendering sensations and a sensuous response to the subject-matter. Unlike Behrmann's work, which follows Monet's later device of removing all spatial indicators such as horizon lines, *Autumn field* demarcates spatial planes by using a definite horizon line.

Monet's career, if not necessarily his later works, many of which were meticulously finished in his studio, was characterised by the impressionist notion of capturing the fleeting moment by the rapid rendering of particular light effects. In this manner the painting process was linked to the passage of time, as Monet's serial paintings, particularly the *Haystacks* and *Cathedrals*, attest to.

Superficially, some aspects of my work may appear almost impressionistic - but the surface correspondences are deceptive and the works are rooted in entirely different motivations. In a typically allegorical fashion, the prototype has been appropriated and in the process of visual reference, transformed and replaced by something new.

**PERSONAL  
TRANSFORMATION OF  
PROTOTYPES**

In a sense, Monet's technical means are used to arrive at a different conclusion. As in many cases of allegory - particularly appropriation - an ambiguous and uncomfortable relationship is established with the prototype. In my own work, the use of illuminatory devices, which superficially resemble an impressionistic approach, is not so much aimed at capturing an impression or a specific time of day, but is exploited with the aim of representing an atmosphere and recreating the feeling of a particular place. Furthermore I use light as a form of illumination - it is a mixture between reflected light and an almost illogical source of light which animates the landscape. This effect of illumination is employed to find an equivalent for the sensory apperception of intense, glowing and almost overwhelming African heat and light - which sometimes tends to obliterate objects rather than bring them into focus. *Harvested field* (Fig. 25) is a good example of this procedure. The yellow sky in this work is similar to the sky in *Autumn field*. The colour decision was not based on visual observation alone, but reflects sensory experience and personal interpretation. In my reference to prototypes, I proceed from the point of view that no historical example can be transposed to new circumstances without changing its nature. The prototype, as a source of reference, is transformed to such an extent that it becomes relevant to a different set of circumstances. This transformation has been discussed in detail in Chapter 2 with relation to Penny Siopis's treatment of *vanitas* and history painting.

In *Autumn field*, as well as in several other paintings from 1994 and 1995, including for example *Autumn field and spruit* (Fig. 8a) and *Burnt veld* (Fig. 39)<sup>30</sup>, the layered and 'dry' application of paint allude not only to time, but also to my perception of the South African, and in particular the Highveld, landscape. The working process whereby layer upon layer of paint is carefully, and over a period of time, applied to conceal/reveal aspects of the subject-matter, serves to elevate the simple, non-scenic landscape into something that, through the effort, detail, attention and time invested in it, acquires a new value. It is thus

ELEVATING THE  
MUNDANE THROUGH  
TIME AND EFFORT

only very remotely related to the impressionist notion of capturing the fleeting moment. In my work there is no conscious attempt to deny the amount of time involved in the creation of the work - in fact, the investment in time contributes to the meaning by elevating the mundane subject-matter.

Monet, in his later work, very consciously attempted to hide the labour and time involved in the creation of the work. As Rosalind Krauss (1986:167) points out, Monet's 'spontaneity' is in fact achieved through the codification of his subject-matter in an almost formulaic manner:

... as recent studies of Monet's impressionism have made explicit, the sketchlike mark, which functioned as the *sign* of spontaneity, had to be prepared for through the utmost calculation, and in this sense spontaneity was the most fakable of signifieds. Through layers of underpainting ... Monet patiently laid the mesh of rough encrustation and directional swathes that would signify speed of execution, and from this speed, mark both the singularity of the perceptual moment and uniqueness of the empirical array.

As pointed out in Chapter 1 in the discussion of the painting *Autumn field with spruit*, I attempt to find a compromise between various art conventions, observation of nature and personal expression - a motivation that removes my works from the impressionist sphere.

In the above discussion, I have touched on issues such as 'visual conventions', 'nature' and 'landscape', which may all be regarded as terms that carry a heavy load of historical and ideological baggage. These terms also require further clarification in respect of allegorical reference to conventions and prototypes in my own works.

'Convention' points to artifice and culture. In the context of Western pictorial art, convention is a rather expansive term which embraces a number of loosely related matters. Genres such as still life, landscape and figure painting may all be regarded as conventions. Although conventions change in the course of time, a specific convention will display set

**RELATION BETWEEN  
'LANDSCAPE' AND  
'NATURE'**

characteristics in a specific period. In the discussion of the use of history painting and *vanitas* by Penelope Siopis in Chapter 2 (pp. 47 - 56), I demonstrated that conventions may be 'reinvented' to suit new circumstances. Also, my own earlier works may be considered as an adaptation of traditional allegorical conventions.

The relation between landscape and nature is very complex and also represents conventional frameworks of thought. Meinig maintains that

landscape is related to, but not identical with, *nature*. Nature is a part of every landscape, but is no more than a part of landscape which has felt the impact of man. In this view landscape is always inclusive of man and nature, rather than a way of distinguishing, or at least emphasizing, nature, as is still not uncommon in some fields, such as art and earth science (Meinig 1979:2).

In a discussion of landscape as an artistic convention, it may be argued that landscape painting is one aspect of humankind's ever-evolving relationship with nature. Konstantin Bazarov (1981:10) states that

the history of landscape painting reflects man's changing attitude to nature. In the European tradition the appreciation of nature as scenery to be contemplated with awe or delight, and along with it the rise of a true school of naturalistic landscape painting, was a surprisingly late development that began only with the Renaissance.

The above notion about the emergence of a greater degree of naturalism is an indication of the role played by aesthetic factors in landscape art. In this regard, Meinig (1979:3) states that ' [in] landscape art, the study of landscape is necessarily reflective in some degree of philosophies and taste and subject to shifts in style and emphasis, but the landscape is ever with us and we are ever involved in its creation'.

A rather concise overview of the 'conventional' aspect of landscape painting is provided by Cosgrove and Daniels (1988:1) in the following statement:

A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings. ... And of course, every study of a landscape further transforms its meaning, depositing yet another layer of cultural representation. In human geography the interpretation of landscape and culture has a tendency to reify landscape as an object of empiricist investigation, but often its practitioners do gesture towards landscape as a cultural symbol or image, notably when likening landscape to a text and its interpretation to a 'reading'.

My landscape paintings maintain a tension between what could be regarded as subtly manipulated references to texts or sources (with various subtexts which allow for an intertextual interpretation), empirical observation and personal perceptions.

#### LANDSCAPES WITH SUBTEXTS

Mostly, the subtexts are related to visual conventions from the field of Western art history. Since I make use of conventions as well as empirical observation, the question arises as to what, in my art, constitutes the boundaries between nature and art (culture). This issue has been at the core of a long-standing debate in respect of landscape painting. Ann Bermingham (1990:104) points out that

... the negative criterion that Constable used to evaluate seventeenth-century art is mediation. The less mediated the art was, either by past styles or by literary narrative devices, the better. Landscape, originating as it did in the direct experience of nature and the naturalistic *plein-air étude*, was therefore not only distinct from history painting but, for Constable, superior to it. ... Constable rejected the traditional Academic favouring of idealistic modes of representation over realistic ones ... in order to reserve the superiority of the one term over the other.

Bermingham's assessment clearly demonstrates the opposition between convention and personal observation, between realism and idealism, and between direct experience of nature and mediated experience. All of these oppositions do in fact have a bearing on my works, since my works often involve a balancing of opposites.

Despite the above observation, and the presence of a number of subtexts in many of my paintings, the works may also be viewed as meticulously observed fragments of a particular landscape, even if the observation is mediated, and interpreted in terms of personal perception and preferences. The works may be appreciated at that level only, should the viewer not be acquainted with art history or visual conventions. This is a typical allegorical trait, as Fletcher (1965:330) points out, '... though allegory may be intended to reveal, it does so only after veiling a delayed message which it would rather keep from any ready or facile interpretation'.

Most of my works from 1994 are, due to veiled reference to visual conventions, also a comment on the perceived interrelationship and opposition between nature and culture. Ideas concerning the relationship between nature and culture constitute a much debated field. Ironically, both nature and culture may be viewed as cultural constructs. In a critique on the structuralist interpretation of nature and culture, Carol MacCormack (1980:6) makes the following observations:

... although Lévi-Strauss has attempted to cast the nature-culture contrast in a timeless, value-free model concerned with the working of the human mind, ideas about nature and culture are not value free. The 'myth' of nature is a system of arbitrary signs which relies on a social consensus for meaning. Neither the concept of nature nor that of culture is 'given', and they cannot be free from the biases of the culture in which the concepts were constructed. Our European ideas about nature and culture are fundamentally about our origins and evolution. The 'natural' is that which is innate in our primary heritage and the 'cultural' is that which is arbitrary and artificial.

Marilyn Strathern (1980:177) points out that it is not feasible to maintain an opposition between nature and culture and that attempting to isolate the two notions may prove to be an illusive exercise. She argues that

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CULTURE**



there is no such thing as nature or culture. Each is a highly relativized concept whose ultimate signification must be derived from its place within a specific metaphysics. No single meaning can in fact be given to nature or culture in western thought; there is no consistent dichotomy, only a matrix of contrasts.

These issues form a subtext to the painting *Field:Red, yellow, blue* (1994)<sup>31</sup> (Fig. 37). In selecting the subject-matter for the painting, I was immediately struck by the linear, grid-like qualities of the scene (photographed next to a highway). There are a number of obvious references to source material in this work, including to, for instance -

- the colour divisions of Piet Mondrian;
- perhaps also the compositional approach of a colour-fielder such as Mark Rothko, for example *Four darks on red* (1958)<sup>32</sup> (Fig. 38), or
- a formalist, for instance Ellsworth Kelly's *Red, blue, green* (1963)<sup>33</sup>.

Within the ambit of modernist dogma the overtly representational character of the work would, however, have been unacceptable. Extrinsic reference (that is to things that do not belong to the properties of the medium *per se*) was ruled out by Greenberg's modernist theories regarding 'flatness' in pictorial art. As far as the use of a grid as a 'modernist' device is concerned, Krauss is of the opinion that it is, in fact, a firmly established convention in Western art:

... behind [the grid], logically prior to it, are all those visual texts through which the bounded plane was collectively organized as a pictorial field. The grid summarizes all these texts: the gridded overlays on cartoons, for example, used for the mechanical transfer from drawing to fresco; or the perspective lattice meant to contain the perceptual transfer from three dimensions to two; or the matrix on which to chart harmonic relationships, like proportion; or the millions of acts of enframing by which the picture was reaffirmed as a

regular quadrilateral. All of these are the texts which the “original” ground plane of a Mondrian, for example, repeats - and, by repeating, represents (Krauss 1986:161).

By referring to the world outside, while pursuing a modernist formal construction, I call into question dogmatic theoretical prescriptions and at the same time modernism’s predilection to deny the role played by predecessors. On the other hand, postmodernism tends to glance back at the past, often ignoring modernism as an intermediary between itself and that past. Thus the painting *Field: Red, yellow, blue* may be viewed as a synthesis between these two positions and a confirmation of the positive role that all conventions could play in establishing meaning in a work of art<sup>34</sup>. Fletcher (1965:332)



*Above:*

*Fig. 37.*

*Daniel du Plessis, Field: Red, yellow, blue (1994). Oil on canvas, 71,5 cm x 96,5 cm.*

*Fig. 38.*

*Mark Rothko, Four darks on red (1958). 257 cm x 295 cm.*

notes in this respect that 'allegory is the instrument of accommodation and compromise ... from the compromise between two world views ... there may arise a new and truly unified sensibility and method'. Yet, it is also clear that the painting deals with an aspect of contemporary South African landscape, which is dissected into fragments by road networks. An uneasy equilibrium is established between what might be viewed as artistic convention and what might be considered a 'real', empirical landscape. It is, in the context of my own interests, an example of the complexities involved in coming to terms with the notion of 'reality', since I believe that perception of reality is, in fact, an entirely mediated experience.

My use of conventions in the exploration of source material is wide-ranging and not limited to the oeuvre of one specific artist or one particular convention. Furthermore, the use of conventions in my works is always linked to the encoding of reality and the establishment of meaning. In the painting *Harvested field* (Fig. 25), for example, reference is made to the conventions of perspective, which is one of the dominant means of representing reality in Western art. Linear perspective mathematically determines the relationship between visual space and the two-dimensional surface. It also implies a measurable and 'exact' pictorial interpretation of empirically observed reality. In *Harvested field* the lines formed by the furrows seem to mimic the converging lines of the single-point perspectival grid, but the logicity of the spatial organisation is undermined by the deviation in the lines towards the top of the work, as well as by the 'painterly' handling of the medium. A sense of ambiguity arises between the 'real' lines of the ploughed field and the anticipated logicity of the perspectival system, which is normally utilised to represent three-dimensional reality truthfully on a two-dimensional format. The contemporaneous affirmation and denial of the role of convention could be seen as a subtext which is tied to the interpretation of the subject-matter. Although the painting acknowledges the visual conventions used to depict space, it also subverts the notion of the mathematical measurability of reality. It furthermore points

**EXPLORATION OF  
NUMEROUS  
CONVENTIONS**

to the fact that the observation of even the simplest fragment of 'ordinary' reality is mediated by conventions and trained responses. In this context, the use of the word 'harvest' in the title of the painting ironically alludes to more than just an agricultural reality. At a figurative level it may be linked to the utilisation of the artistic conventions which are at the disposal of the contemporary artist. In contrast with most of the veld paintings, which show relatively 'unspoilt' relics or fragments of nature, this is a man-made field. In the context of the visual research, it underlines the idea of nature intervened by man, because the veld paintings also represent relics of what was once wilderness.

The same observations apply to the charcoal drawing *Ploughed field* (1995)<sup>35</sup> (Fig. 41). My use of charcoal could almost be described as 'painterly' and the looseness of application, compared to the underlying grid of linear perspective, creates a sense of tension. The work simultaneously reflects personal aesthetic idiolect, empirical observation and the use of convention.

In *High summer field* (Fig. 24) the narrow, horizontal format compresses the scene and prevents a full-scale perspectival exploration of space or a panoramic interpretation of the scene. In doing so, horizontal orientation as a landscape convention is emphasised and exaggerated. But whereas a panoramic view would have highlighted the expansiveness and awe-inspiring vastness of space, the cropping of this particular scene tends to focus the attention on the grass field, which is just one aspect of the topography and of the larger scene. The small strip of sky above the field serves to identify the picture as a landscape, but it also heightens the importance of the grass field, imparting an extraordinary value to a very commonplace scene. Anna Chave (1989:128 - 130), in justifying her interpretation of the images of Mark Rothko in terms of portraiture as opposed to landscape<sup>36</sup>, maintains that

in the Western world, landscapes are conventionally presented in a horizontal format, which yields a lateral sweep, whereas Rothko strongly favored a vertical format. The would-be horizon lines in Rothko's paintings almost never extend fully from side to side of the canvas, as they would in a conventional landscape ...

The format also points to the fragmentary way in which landscape, in an urban context, tends to be observed. Landscape is often seen from the windows of a vehicle, as fragments framed by windows or dissected by structures such as bridges and roads. Despite the use of a sweeping, horizontal format, the panoramic convention is subverted to reveal a scene which is almost entirely banal and non-picturesque. Thus a convention normally used to portray expansive landscapes, is used to reflect landscape as a fragmentary and compressed space. In this regard Chave (1989:123) points out that

... in order to convey particular meanings or specific information to viewers, painters must avail themselves of known pictorial codes and conventions; the more closely those codes are followed, the more transparent the artist's meaning will be. ... Viewers tend to respond to received codes and accustomed forms in an habitual or reflexive, and thus often unthinking and unfeeling, way. Unfamiliar forms may help to engage and prolong the viewer's attention and so to revivify the experience of perception itself ...

These observations are very close to my own intentions in this work. Although I wish to establish communication with the viewer by using an image which may be viewed as commonly shared reality, I also endeavour to 'revivify' the ordinary image so that it may acquire a new resonance. In the process of encoding reality, the adaptation and manipulation of conventions play an important role in augmenting the scope of my creative investigations. Thus mediation, in my view, makes a major contribution to the creative process and to the construction of meaning.

Many of my works, including *Autumn field* (Fig. 36), *Burnt veld* (Fig. 39) and *Harvested field* (Fig. 25), are based on empirical observation. Ultimately, however, observation tends to be a very subjective exercise which is constantly influenced by the forces of conven-

**THE CONVENTION OF  
EMPIRICAL  
OBSERVATION**

tions and personal perceptions. The work *Burnt veld*, for example, is clearly identifiable as a Highveld scene. Yet, the way in which the empirical data is encoded, reveals the idiosyncrasies of personal aesthetic preferences as well as a personalised interpretation of prototypical technical devices, such as the 'broken' mark used in impressionism as a sign of spontaneity.

The empirical observation of landscape could also be regarded as a well-established convention in the Western art tradition. The extent to which the observation of empirical data can be objective and unmediated, is debatable, as a superficial review of landscape conventions will demonstrate. In the Middle Ages, for example, nature was reflected in art as allegorical landscape<sup>37</sup> and often contained religious symbolism. By the fourteenth century, however, certain landscape backgrounds no longer contained overt religious symbolism or the empty backgrounds, sometimes covered in gold, that characterised many late medieval works. *Lamentation (c.1304 - 13)*<sup>38</sup>, a work by Giotto di Bondone (c.1267 - 1337), shows a very rudimentary landscape which forms a backdrop to the more important religious subject-matter enacted by the foreground figures. On the other hand, the Limbourg Brothers' detailed illuminations dating from the fifteenth century, for example *September (1413 - 16)*<sup>39</sup>, contain meticulously observed, detailed landscapes, but the spatial manipulation is not 'scientific' in the Renaissance sense.

In the early Renaissance work *Virgin and Child with St. Anne (1500 - 1510)*<sup>40</sup> by Leonardo da Vinci (1452 - 1519), the landscape is based on empirical observation, as the details of the rocky ledge in the foreground shows. The use of *sfumato*, a technique which blends colour, shade and light, creates a convincing illusion of atmospheric perspective. The geometry of the composition and the selective manipulation of details, however, also introduce the notion of idealism, which is an adaptation of empirical observation.

In the development of landscape painting since the Renaissance, various conventions arose. In each of these conventions 'observation' was mediated by the dominant cultural and scientific trends of the epoch and of specific countries. Honour and Fleming (1982:426) state, for example, that in the seventeenth century in Europe, an 'experimental and inductive approach to the physical sciences', as proposed by Francis Bacon (1561-1626), gained acceptance. In addition, the theory of knowledge formulated by René Descartes (1596-1650), which centred on the proposition 'I think therefore I am', profoundly influenced the visual arts. These factors contributed to the rise of a secular art, for example small, saleable landscape paintings as opposed to altar pieces, particularly in the Netherlands. Bazarov (1981) distinguishes between Northern and Southern landscape in the Renaissance; naturalistic Dutch landscapes in the seventeenth century are contrasted with the ideal and romantic picturesque landscapes of Southern Europe, while the 'northern tradition of expressionist landscape' (Bazarov 1981:105) is viewed as a separate category. Yet, they are all rooted in the observation of nature.

Ann Jensen Adams (1994:35) points out that it is generally accepted that the 'so-called naturalistic landscape first emerged in Holland in the seventeenth century'. Yet, as she convincingly demonstrates, recognisability is often combined with or transformed by imaginary elements. Thus, only aspects of these works could be considered as naturalistic. In landscape art, as in all other art, it is usually impossible to categorise without qualification. Mostly, the dominant trend in a work, for example the empirical observation of nature, may be mediated by various other factors.

The extent to which the numerous conventions and prototypes from Western art history find their way into the works of contemporary artists depends on the artist's own ideological orientation, with ideology being understood here in the broadest sense of the word. The mediation of my experience of nature (and the role of convention in the codification of

nature into landscape painting) is of considerable importance. In my paintings and drawings, I make use of various conventions and in some cases these conventions are simultaneously confirmed and denied. Mostly, the picturesque notion of landscape is denied. The subject-matter in, for example, *Burnt veld* (Fig. 39) is not necessarily pleasing to the eye as a picturesque scene might have been. Far from being 'singular', the subject-matter is normally mundane; scenes which may, from a general viewpoint, be regarded as insignificant. Unlike many works by, for instance, John Constable (1776-1837), such as *The vale at Dedham* (1814-15)<sup>41</sup>, my current works are not really concerned with topography. Instead, often only one aspect, namely the veld, provides a representative image of the topography of the Highveld. What is more difficult to demonstrate or demarcate, is the exact extent to which conventions exert an influence on artworks. I have, for instance, isolated certain aspects of the oeuvre of Monet as a major reference in my exploration of source material. Yet, visual reference probably operates at a far more insidious level and it is impossible to accurately pinpoint the full extent of reference to conventions in artworks.

In the context of my own paintings, photography is a primary means for the empirical observation of nature (as well as other subject-matter). Thus 'nature' is also mediated by photography, which itself is a visual convention with a number of set characteristics. Richard Kalina (1993:92) makes the following observations with regard to the use of photographic sources by painters:

It is not merely a matter of convenience; the photograph is not just another variety of plein-air sketch. We understand the visual world firsthand, through direct experience, but we also understand it through the filter of photography (and accept, virtually unconsidered, photography's optical distortions). Both understandings operate simultaneously, and it seems natural that realist painters should try to combine these two ways of seeing.

Painting from a photograph differs in many respects from direct observation of a scene. Direct observation involves a more immediate type of interaction with the scene, while pho-

PHOTOGRAPHIC  
MEDIATION



tography reduces the scene to more 'manageable' proportions and provides a fixed reference point as well as data that are not susceptible to the changes brought about by the elements. In addition, the extent to which artists who make use of photographs or rely on this form of source material, varies greatly and gives rise to different types of work. My own approach, for example, would differ considerably from that of a photo-realist such as John Kramer (b. 1946), whose work *Wearwell Shoe Repairs, Observatory (1985)*<sup>42</sup> deals with the mundane in perhaps a more neutral way than I do. There is also a distinct contrast between the sharp focus in his work and the softer, more dispersed focuses of my works. Whereas a photo-realist may be more interested in an exact portrayal of the photographic process, I tend to manipulate photographic information and to use it very selectively. In addition, I do not make use of mechanical means, for example an epidiascope or other forms of mechanical projection, to enlarge the photographic scene.

John Berger (1982:96) states that photographs 'supply information without having a language of their own. ... Photographs do not translate from appearance. They quote from them'. Since photographs do not have a language, the information they provide is very amenable to transformation by the artist in accordance with his or her personal aesthetic idiolect or preferences. Kalina (1993:94 - 95) demonstrates how Eric Fischl and Robert Bechtle, two contemporary American artists who make use of photographs, transform their source material in terms of their own vision without departing too much from ordinary reality. Kalina (1993:118) states that

realist painting has had a long and troubled relationship with photography. ... Despite its popular appeal, realist painting, and particularly photographically based realism, has seemed peripheral to the main discourse of contemporary art. And yet by its built-in contradictions and distortions, by the slowness and deliberation of its process, it is able to hold us and take us into a world that we would otherwise tend to overlook.

Photographs themselves have allegorical value and therefore the extensive use of photographs by any artist is significant. As Owens (1984:205) points out, the allegorist confiscates existing images instead of inventing new ones, but in the process the original meaning is supplemented.

With regard to my own work, a number of photographic conventions are explored and adapted to suit my specific investigations. On the one hand, photographs are used as a convenient means to capture empirical data<sup>43</sup>. They provide useful, static information that is not susceptible to practical difficulties such as inclement weather. Often, photographic images provide more detail than the naked eye can observe; detail that can be used selectively by the artist to express certain meanings. The information contained in a photograph may be regarded as a 'text' which the artist can manipulate extensively.

John Berger (1982:93), who regards photographs as a trace or quotation of reality, explains the difference between a photograph and an artwork as follows:

It may clarify what we mean by a *trace* if we ask how a drawing differs from a photograph. A drawing is a translation. That is to say each mark on the paper is consciously related, not only to the real or imagined "model", but also to every mark and space already set out on the paper. Thus a drawn or painted image is woven together by the energy (or the lassitude, when the drawing is weak) of countless judgements. Everytime a figuration is evoked in a drawing, everything about it has been mediated by consciousness, either intuitively or systematically.



*Fig. 39.*  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*Burnt veld (1994).*  
*Oil on canvas,*  
*79 cm x 91 cm.*

Apart from the empirical data provided by the photograph, I also employ certain photographic devices in structuring my works. For example, I would very seldom copy the entire format of a photograph. Instead, the image is cropped to contain only those sections that I consider to be meaningful. This could also be seen as a form of zooming in on the subject-matter, focusing on a specific area and excluding others. In addition, the notion of objects that are in or out of focus, is employed to selectively highlight certain elements. In the work *Harvested field* (Fig. 25), all the above factors influence its visual appearance. From close by, areas of the painting appear out of focus and require some distance to form a coherent image. Nonetheless, the work definitely reflects a feeling of recognisable, empirically observed data. In a sense, the painterly and photographic conventions become enmeshed to give a particular aesthetic structure to the work.

Although photographic conventions form an important part of the devices I use to encode reality, personal intervention and interpretation lead to a subversion or deconstruction of photographic conventions. In my work this subversion is most clearly demonstrated in the way that the idea of 'photographic time' is both confirmed and denied. Berger (1982:95) maintains that

a drawing contains the time of its own making, and this means that it possesses its own time, independent of the living time of what it portrays. The photograph, by contrast, receives almost instantaneously - usually today at a speed which cannot be perceived by the human eye. The only time contained in a photograph is the isolated instant of what it shows. ... There is another important difference within the times contained by the two kinds of images. The time which exists in a drawing is not uniform. ... Time in a drawing accrues according to human value. In a photograph time is uniform: every part of the image has been subjected to a chemical process of uniform duration. In the process of revelation all parts were equal.

**SUBVERSION OF  
'PHOTOGRAPHIC TIME'**

In most of my works the 'accrual' of time is an important factor in the construction of meaning. This observation is particularly relevant with regard to works such as *Harvested field*, *Autumn field and spruit* (Fig. 8a) and *Burnt veld* (Fig. 39). There is, in fact, a juxtaposition between the ordinariness of the chosen scenes and the way in which the meticulous and time-consuming rendering of the scene imbues the work with 'timeless' qualities. Time invests the ordinary with special properties, allowing me to present this aspect of empirical reality as something which is worthy of attention or even contemplation. In addition, there is a tension between the split-second of the shutter speed that the camera needs to 'capture' time and the fact that this split-second is stretched out over weeks in the painting process.

Another important deviation from the 'snapshot' convention of photography is the scale of my works. The character of the final work differs dramatically from a photograph - if the photograph serving as source material were to be enlarged to exactly the same size as the final art work, the differences would become apparent. In my work the enlargement of the empirical data provided by the photograph takes place in an almost intuitive, explorative fashion, as the work *Harvested field* demonstrates. I do not reproduce the photographed scene mechanically and thus distortions between the source and the 'copy' occur. In addition, the selective use of detail, layering, tactile qualities and transformation of the empirical information supplied by the photograph all contribute the creation of a new image. The latter phenomenon is evident in the work *Gardenscape* (1994-95)<sup>44</sup> (Fig. 40) where the creative interplay between the source and the medium produces a work that is markedly removed from the appear-

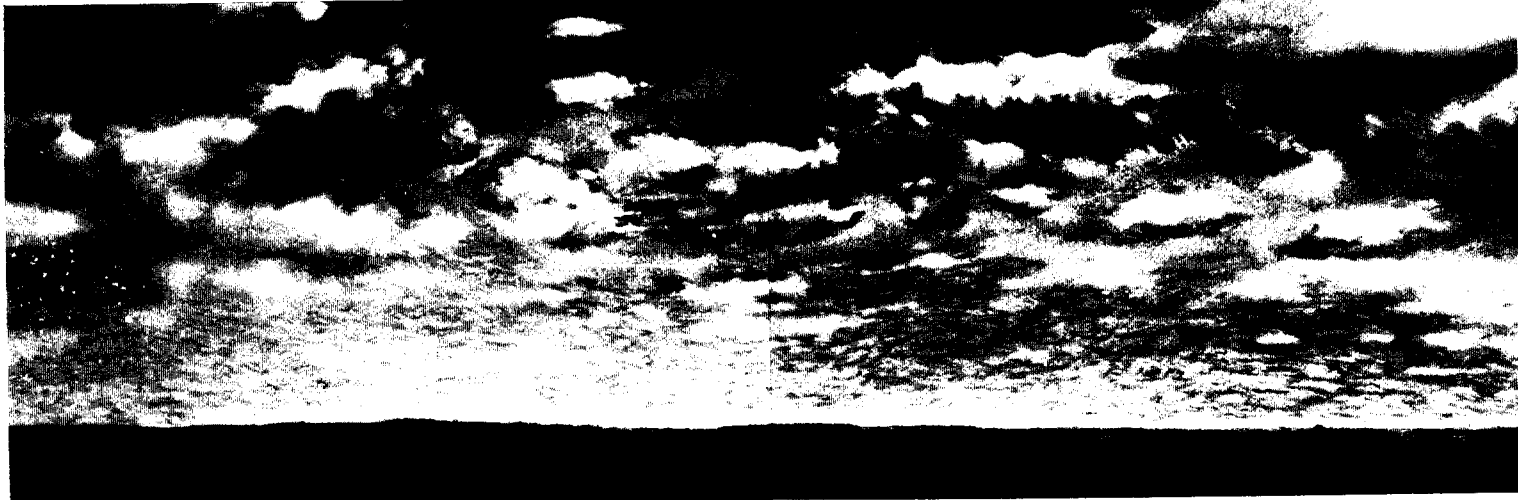
Fig. 39.  
Daniel du Plessis,  
*Gardenscape* (1994-95).  
Oil on canvas,  
60 cm x 66 cm.



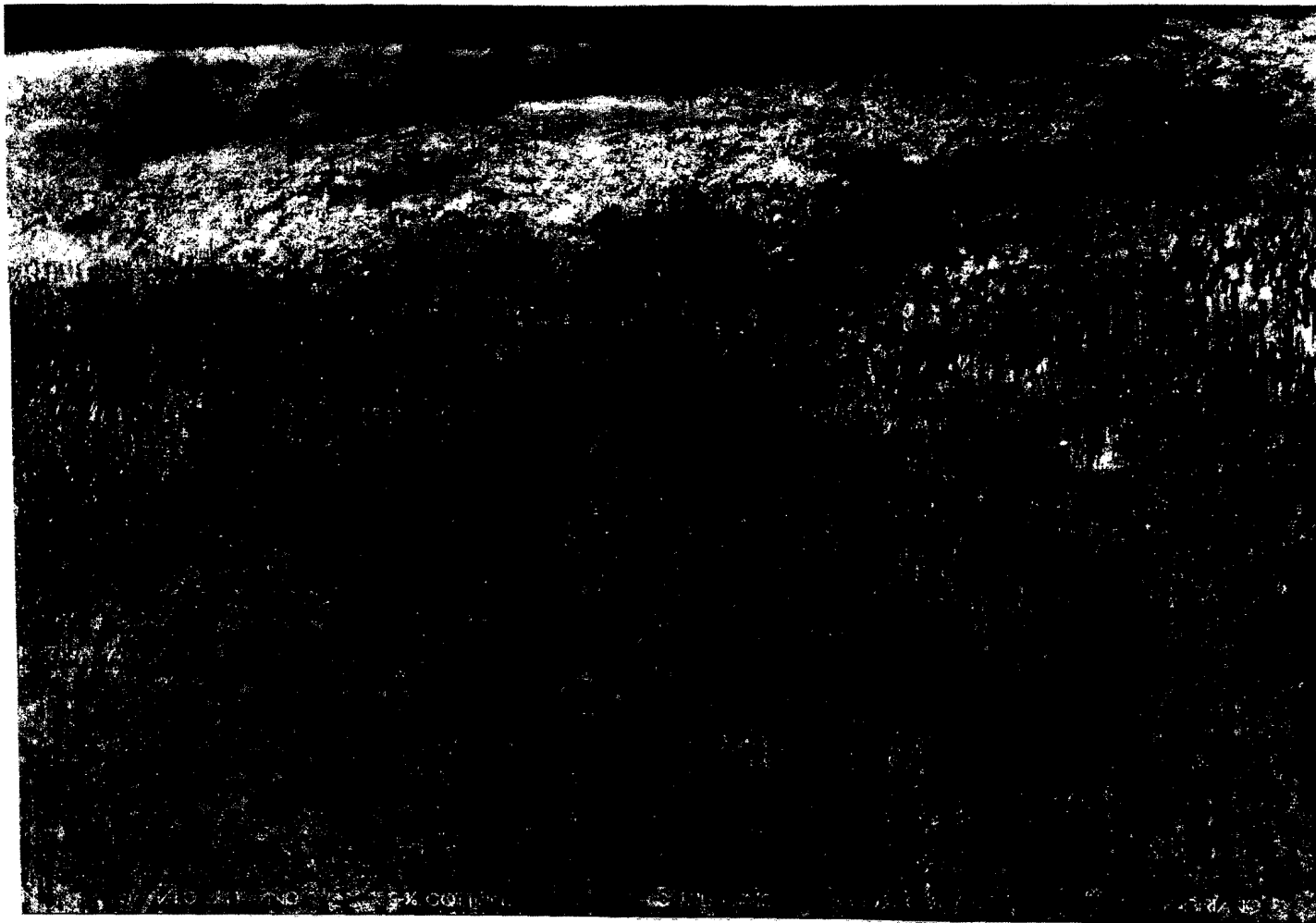
ance of a typical photographic image. Although photographs are used as departure points, the paintings themselves acquire an autonomy in which the photographic reality is only one point of reference and constitutes a single mediating convention among many others. As pointed out earlier, other visual conventions as well as personal experiential factors also contribute to the final character of the work.

The transformation of the original photographic source material may be demonstrated by a discussion of the charcoal drawings *Field and clouds* (1994)<sup>45</sup> (Fig. 41), *Ploughed field* (Fig. 42) and *Nocturnal field* (1994)<sup>46</sup> (Fig. 43). In contrast with *High summer field* (Fig. 24), 'conventional' elements such as atmosphere, light, tactile qualities, and an almost Romantic sense of drama, are very much in evidence in these drawings - even when the

**TRANSFORMATION OF  
PHOTOGRAPHIC  
SOURCES**

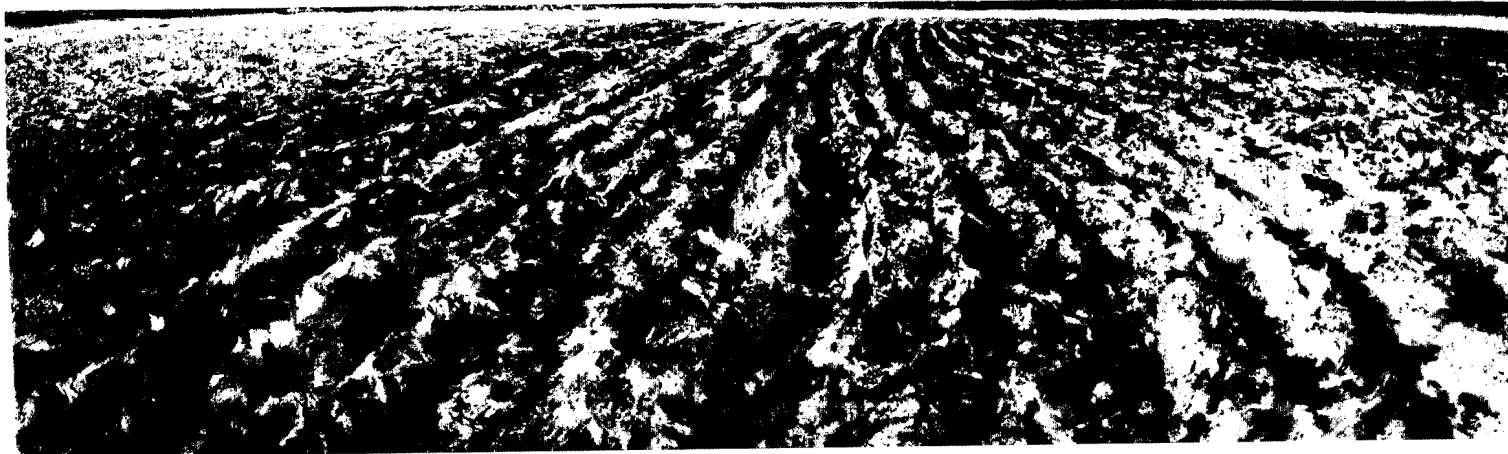


*Fig. 41. Daniel du Plessis, Field and clouds (1994). Charcoal on paper, 67 cm x 200 cm.*



*Left:*  
*Fig. 43.*  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*Nocturnal field (1994).*  
*Charcoal on paper,*  
*67 cm x 100 cm.*

*Below: Fig. 42. Daniel du Plessis, Ploughed field (1995). Charcoal on paper, 43 cm x 139 cm.*



original photographic source is entirely prosaic. The empirical data provided by the photographs have been amplified and emphasised. These qualities are nonetheless contained within a framework of the 'ordinary' landscape. My current works have very few, if any, overt links with the notion of the grand, scenic landscape that has to be consciously sought out. In *Field and clouds* the exaggerated expansion of the conventional horizontal format reflects a number of personal perceptions about the Highveld landscape. The device corresponds to the wideness of the Highveld landscape and the idea of open space is further intensified by the unbroken horizontal lines in the work and the sparing use of imagery. This points to the personalised transformation of picturesque and panoramic landscape devices, while paradoxically retaining a sense of expansiveness and infinite space. In fact, the illusion of space is enhanced by the denial of picturesque or scenic details and the use of a minimalistic composition. In the charcoal drawings the scale helps to elevate a very ordinary landscape into something that would hopefully refocus attention on the value of the everyday visual experience of ordinary, semi-urban landscapes.

Of course, by using a scale associated with the 'heroic', traditional landscape (excluding small landscapes as practised in the Dutch tradition), these landscapes also provide ironic comment with regard to the local tradition of scenic, picturesque landscapes<sup>47</sup>. The large scale underscores the importance I accord to the non-scenic, commonplace landscape. It is implied that this 'humble' type of landscape is as important as the 'grand' landscapes that would normally include a fair measure of topographical data, such as different forms of vegetation and geographical formations. The plainness also hints at the legacy of modernist compositional devices, such as the minimalist horizontal division of the picture format.

The full impact of diverse conventions on my work is impossible to determine. In the above discussion, certain aspects of the oeuvre of Monet, facets of modernism and

postmodernism, photography, as well as certain formal and stylistic conventions were isolated as points of reference in my exploration of source material. Since references involve both the confirmation and denial of conventions, they have a profound effect on the content of my work. In a broad sense, the synthesis of juxtapositions implies that no single paradigm is favoured and that the artwork may accommodate divergent possibilities. This potential allows for a type of artwork which will reflect a fuller picture of the diversities and inconsistencies in my own perceptions of reality. My notions of reality are not fixed and in the working and referential process, new configurations may arise. In the use of a representational mode to depict landscape, artists make use of iconic signs to refer to the object. In this respect conventions play an equally important role. Eco (1976:204) states that 'similarity is also a matter of cultural convention'. Certain features of my work, including the celebration of non-scenic nature, are directly linked to the way in which I encode my own experience of nature/reality to become painted landscape. Kalina (1993:93) points out that

realist painting in the second half of this century has shied away from the spectacular. There is a feeling that the picturesque speaks for itself, and it is the ordinary, the quotidian, that requires the intervention of art. We need a reminder that what we think is not necessarily what we see; that daily life is unpredictable, strange and illuminating.

This observation is in tune with my efforts to explore the ordinary in a meaningful way and to exploit conventions to reaffirm the value of everyday experience. My interpretation of the ordinary influences the ways in which I choose to encode reality, leading to certain selections and certain omissions. So far, the impact of man and industry on the landscape is only suggested in my works. The inclusion of, for instance, a section of highway or a road sign, may radically change the nature of the works. These are options that may provide new challenges for my future explorations of the urban landscape.



Although the emphasis of the discussion so far has been on various aspects of visual reference, and the practical and conceptual implications of visual reference in terms of my own artworks, there are certain other qualities in the works that have not been accounted for. The expression 'spirit of place'<sup>48</sup> could, to a large degree, apply to my latest work, particularly with regard to the ways in which images are encoded to reflect the atmosphere, light, tactile qualities and colour of the Highveld. These observations apply to works such as *Burnt veld*, *Autumn field* and *Autumn field and spruit*, where not only the chosen scene, but many other elements such as the manipulation of the medium, the colours and the selective use of detail reflect the character of a particular place.

Another aspect that comes into play in the encoding of nature, is the symbolic potential of landscape as subject-matter. The theoretical research into allegory has led to an increased awareness of the symbolism implicit in landscape imagery. Certain very obvious aspects, such as the seasons, have become conventional symbols of the cyclical nature of human existence in Western art. By simply referring to a particular season in a work, certain ideas are already alluded to regarding this human cycle (e.g. spring/youth, winter/old age etc.), because the meaning is embedded in the imagery through cultural convention. Certain potential 'symbolic' meanings and interpretations underpin nature and landscape as subject-matter - meanings such as growth and decay, darkness and light, turmoil and calm, chaos and order, the permanent and the ephemeral and the cyclical course of nature.

Obviously, the context in which a specific natural phenomenon is used, forms part of the conventional usage of 'nature' imagery. Fletcher (1965:374) points out, for instance, that *sublime* landscapes, as defined by eighteenth-century theorists, symbolise extreme cosmic power. Edward Lucie-Smith (1972:15) maintains that the storm in the *Tempesta*<sup>49</sup> of Giorgione (c.1477/8 - 1510) alludes to the vicissitudes of fortune. In a similar vein, Lucie-Smith (1972:28) argues that

#### SYMBOLIC POTENTIAL OF LANDSCAPE

[Caspar David] Friedrich's landscape paintings symbolize subjective experience. *The Cross in the Mountains*, painted in 1808, exemplifies a certain tension in Friedrich's work between the desire to represent and embody the undisturbed harmony of nature, and the contrary desire to impose upon it a human meaning.

Through visual reference to prototypes of the past, the artist may exploit these meanings and bring something new to the conventionalised rendering. Possibilities provided by a prototype are explored in a consciously allegorical manner in certain of my works such as *A new dawn* (Fig. 29), *A season ends* (Fig. 31) and *Ode to summer* (Fig. 33). Because these works refer to local circumstances, the traditional mode is transformed to convey contemporary issues. *A season ends*, for example, refers in an oblique way to the political changes that took place in South Africa and the landscape elements are all used to convey a sense of turmoil and change. In later works, for instance *Burnt veldt* (1994), or *Ochre and blue Highveld winter* (Fig. 6), the encoding of the empirical data leaves an interpretational choice to the recipient and allows for the works to function in a more open-ended fashion. It remains uncertain, in the current cultural climate, to what degree certain elements need to be encoded or contextualised to ensure a specific reading. Will the recipient make an instantaneous distinction between the signifying possibilities of a *winter* as opposed to a *summer* landscape, or is a narrative structure required to elicit these meanings? In addition, it is not even certain whether the meanings intended by the artist and the interpretation given by the recipient will necessarily coincide.

**CONVENTIONS  
RENEWED**

In concluding this chapter, it is necessary to return to the notion of mediation. In my works the mediating role of conventions is acknowledged as a strategy to enhance and expand meaning. In broad terms, art can encompass divergent conceptions of reality. Many of my works - despite apparent simplicity - constitute an attempt to make sense of a complex world characterised by disjointed and contradictory experiential inputs. Although the pic-

**MEDIATION AS A VISUAL  
STRATEGY**

tures normally form an intelligible, coherent whole and a believable interpretation of outside reality, many disparate formal and conceptual elements are contained in a single work, for instance allegorical reference to earlier conventions in addition to empirical observation and personalised interpretation.

The pictures ostensibly deal with a specific type of urban landscape, namely fragments of nature as seen from roads and highways, yet they are also fields for exploring diverse interests, such as the interplay between 'abstract' and representational elements in the depiction of the subject-matter, a loose painterly approach as opposed to a certain sense of order and finish and almost expressionistic mark-making in contrast to an approach based on more conventional aesthetic motivations.

In addition to the paradoxical use of conventions, the formal and stylistic challenges provided by the subject-matter form a principal interest. At the same time, the meanings inherent to the subject material are explored, with acknowledgement of the mediating role of conventions, and the way allegorical reference to conventions tends to insinuate itself even into the most personalised vision.

With regard to reference to source material, such as prototypes from the past and photography, it should have become clear from the preceding analyses that my works refer to various 'texts'. Yet the reference to prototypes is transmuted by personal perception and observation. Through the working process, and the encoding of reality in artistic terms, the painting eventually takes on a reality of its own. The moment where rational control starts or ends, or for that matter where subconscious processes operate, can seldom be determined. Roland Fischer (1981:21) encapsulates this condition when he states that

in the natural history of the living human *being* (ontology) and *knowing* (epistemology), cannot be separated. Self-reflection and observation coalesce in

the identity of knowing and being, which is *self-observation*. Hence to be conscious of one's own being is not absolutely logical but due to our partially pre-programmed nature only ana-logical.

Thus I view my own works as an amalgamation of influences and references, personal predilections, emotional and rational responses, personal creation and the exploitation of conventions. All of these eventually form a complex synthesis of correspondences and juxtapositions. Anna Chave (1989:128), in a discussion on Rothko, states that his pictures function 'polysemically':

... [his pictures] are inscribed or coded in a residual but elemental way ... the codes in question effectively overlap, forming almost a palimpsest of traces, each of which modifies, mediates and enlarges the significance of the others.

This notion dovetails with much that I have said in respect of my own work. Unlike Rothko's work, my own is not abstract. Yet, the complex encoding of reality into a work of art through aesthetic means and intricate references, is similar. These procedures will, hopefully, defamiliarise the mundane landscape and turn it into something which may captivate the viewer through the power of its aesthetic presence.

**A SYNTHESIS OF  
CORRESPONDENCES  
AND  
JUXTAPOSITIONS**

## NOTES

1 The *picturesque* is a late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century notion of landscape which, having become much overused in the course of time, may in today's terms perhaps be equated with picture postcard or chocolate box pictures. In my opinion, it still forms the basis of what many people would consider the proper subject-matter for landscapes - a factor exploited by artists producing works in a 'popular' mode. Rosalind Krauss (1986:163)

quotes the following definitions of the term *picturesque* from the 1801 Supplement to Johnson's Dictionary:

According to the Dictionary the picturesque is: 1) what pleases the eye; 2) remarkable for singularity; 3) striking the imagination with the force of paintings; 4) to be expressed in paintings; 5) affording a good subject for a landscape; 6) proper to take a landscape from.

2 In my use of subject-matter from my immediate environment, my works may to an extent be viewed as 'regional'. However, through the mediation of wide-ranging visual conventions, these works are also related to a much broader field of visual and philosophical enquiry.

3 Daniel du Plessis, *Trees and field* (1995). Oil on acrylic on canvas, 121 cm x 180 cm. Collection: the artist.

4 Daniel du Plessis, *High summer field* (1994-95). Oil on canvas, 51,5 cm x 159 cm. Collection: the artist.

5 Daniel du Plessis, *Harvested field* (1994-95). Oil on acrylic on canvas, 121 cm x 180 cm. Collection: the artist.

6 I registered for MA(FA) in 1992. Many of my pre-1992 works are markedly different from works produced towards the end of my visual research for the degree and a clear development can thus be observed.

7 Daniel du Plessis, *The new emperor's clothes* (1991). Oil on canvas, 187 cm x 96 cm. Collection: the artist.

8 Environment is used here as an encompassing term which includes the material, sociocultural and political conditions that affect people's lives.

9 The preoccupation with the environment as a source of subject-matter and point of departure was already evident in my first-year BA(FA) works produced in 1987 and which dealt with polluted harbour scenes in Durban.

10 Audrey Flack, *World War II (Vanitas)* (1976-1977). Oil over acrylic on canvas, 240 cm x 240 cm. Collection: the artist. (Flack 1981:87).

11 The following statement by Owens (1984:206) underscores the role of the ruin in allegory:

Allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete - an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin, which Benjamin identified as the allegorical emblem par excellence.

12 In this respect, it should also be mentioned that ever since the Romantic period there has been a notion that, because of the fact that allegory is consciously worked out, it is inferior to the symbol which is supposed to be a general truth which comes into being unconsciously (Fletcher 1965:17). The presumed superiority of the symbol is a Romantic idea, one that has remained prevalent in the field of art history. The entire debate surrounding allegory, and even the notion that a distinction could be made between allegory and symbolism, remain unresolved.

13 Daniel du Plessis, *Small Pretoria painting* (1992). Oil on canvas, 54 cm x 55 cm. Collection: Ms. W. Mitchell, Pretoria.

14 Daniel du Plessis, *Untitled* (1991). Oil on paper, 45 cm x 70 cm. Collection: Ms. V. Bester.

15 Please note that there is no suggestion that these two artists' work should be interpreted from an allegorical perspective.

16 This does not represent a value judgement, since both approaches have something different to offer.

17 The same argument will also apply to many 'postmodernist' works that are equally removed from the realm of ordinary, shared experience. The works of Margaret Vorster, in a local context, may serve as an example.

18 An example of the group's work is *Poster statement* from the Series 'Them and Us' (1973). Poster, 55.8 cm x 45.7 cm. Collection of Paul Maentz, Cologne. (Walker 1975. Plate 63).

19 Daniel du Plessis, *A new dawn* (1992). Oil on canvas, 38 cm x 75,5 cm. Collection: the artist.

20 Daniel du Plessis, *Once there was...* (1992). Oil on canvas, 72,5 cm x 87,5 cm. Collection: the artist.

- 21 Daniel du Plessis, *A season ends* (1992). Oil on canvas, 69 cm x 54 cm. Collection: the artist.
- 22 Daniel du Plessis, *A view from Arcadia* (1992). Oil on canvas, 55 cm x 55 cm. Collection: the artist.
- 23 This is in sharp contrast to Margaret Vorster, for instance, who seems to value the mystery of the artwork above all else.
- 24 R.B. Kitaj, *If not, not* (1975-1976). Oil on canvas, 152,4 cm x 152,4 cm. (Kitaj 1984.).
- 25 Daniel du Plessis, *Ode to summer* (1993). Oil on canvas, 160 cm x 180 cm. Collection: the artist.
- 26 Daniel du Plessis, *Summer field* (1994). Oil on canvas, 73,5 cm x 73,5 cm. Collection: the artist.
- 27 Gail Behrmann, *Mediterraneo* (1993). Oil on canvas, 94 cm x 130 cm.
- 28 Information provided by the artist in a conversation with me on 1994-09-10.
- 29 Daniel du Plessis, *Autumn field* (1994). Oil over acrylic and sand on canvas, 95 cm x 180 cm. Collection: Telkom.
- 30 Daniel du Plessis, *Burnt veld* (1994-95). Oil on canvas, 79 cm x 91 cm. Collection: the artist.
- 31 Daniel du Plessis, *Field: Red, yellow, blue* (1994). Oil on canvas, 71,5 cm x 96,5 cm. Collection: the artist.
- 32 Mark Rothko, *Four darks on red* (1958). Approx. 257 cm x 295 cm. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. (Gardner 1980:862).
- 33 Ellsworth Kelly, *Red, blue, green* (1963). Approx. 213 cm x 320 cm. Courtesy of Sidney Janis Gallery, New York. (Gardner 1980:864).
- 34 Apart from reference to artistic conventions, meaning in this work also involves the way in which industrialised society, with its networks of tarred roads, impose a certain character on the landscape. The picture shows the type of perspective one may well experience when travelling on one of these roads.
- 35 Daniel du Plessis, *Ploughed field* (1995). Charcoal on paper, 43 cm x 139 cm. Collection: the artist.
- 36 Chave (1989:128 - 129) argues that Robert Rosenblum's interpretation of Rothko's work, linking it to the tradition of 'Northern Romantic painting', flounders because there is no real indication that the artist ever intended his images to be read as landscape. Rothko, as quoted by Chave, has replied to a question whether his work was derived from landscape: 'Absolutely not: There is no landscape in my work'.
- 37 Bazarov (1981:23) makes the following observation in this regard:
- [The] allegorical interpretation of nature was a matter of attaching specific meanings to natural objects which they would not otherwise have possessed, for example making the lily a symbol of purity associated particularly with the Virgin Mary.
- 38 Giotto di Bondone, *Lamentation (c. 1304 - 13)*. Detail of fresco decoration. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua. (Honour & Fleming 1982:309).
- 39 The Limbourg Brothers, *September*, page from the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry (1413 - 16)*. Illumination, approx. 21.6 cm x 14 cm. Musée Condé, Chantilly.
- 40 Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (1500 - 1510). Oil on panel, 168 cm x 130 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.
- 41 John Constable, *The vale at Dedham* (1814 - 15). Oil on canvas, 55.3 cm x 78.1 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (Honour and Fleming 1982:491).
- 42 John Kramer, *Wearwell Shoe Repairs, Observatory* (1985). Acrylic on canvas, 76,3 cm x 103,4 cm. King George VI Art Gallery. (Alexander & Cohen 1990:154).

43 There are numerous motivations for my use of photographs as reference material. Since I am not a full-time artist, time constraints have an influence on my working methods. My use of photographs are linked to practical considerations, for instance the availability of daylight time and also security considerations. But I also regard photographs as a practical means of capturing information that may later be manipulated at will. In this sense, my use of photographs clearly constitutes allegorical reference to a prior source or text.

44 Daniel du Plessis, *Gardenscape* (1994-95). Oil on canvas, 60 cm x 66 cm. Collection: the artist.

45 Daniel du Plessis, *Field and clouds* (1994). Charcoal on paper, 67 cm x 200 cm. Collection: the artist.

46 Daniel du Plessis, *Nocturnal field* (1994). Charcoal on paper, 67 cm x 100 cm. Collection: the artist.

47 The oeuvres of Jan Ernst Abraham Volschenk (1853-1936) and J.H. Pierneef (1886-1957), both 'popular' painters, immediately come to mind.

48 The term is used here with due acknowledgement of the title given to a catalogue and exhibition of works by Walter Battiss.

(Skawran, K.M., Huntley, M. & Arnold, M. 1989. *Battiss and the spirit of place*. Pretoria: University of South Africa. Catalogue for an exhibition held at the Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria, 18 May - 24 June 1989.)

49 Giorgione, *Tempesta* (s.a.). Oil on canvas, 39 cm x 29 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. (Lucie-Smith 1972:211).

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## Mediated realities

The preceding chapters focused mainly on ways in which contemporary artists, including myself, employ visual reference to encode diverse realities. Two forms of visual reference, namely allegorical and iconic reference, have been highlighted as means used to encode 'reality'. The emphasis will now shift to the mediating role of conventions in the perception of reality and the value of visual reference as a strategy in contemporary art.

Since 'reality' is central to the discussion, the complexities engendered by the term require further elucidation at this stage. It was stated in the Introduction that the word reality, in a philosophical and art-theoretical sense, is an extremely complex notion. As suggested by the title of the dissertation, it would perhaps be more feasible to speak of a multitude of different 'realities'. With regard to reality as a mental construct, Fischer (1981:34) points out that

the word 'real' was coined in the XIIIth century to signify 'having Properties,' whereas a 'model' refers to an analogical representation the structure of which should correspond to the structure or properties of that which it represents. For Scudder the mind is a system of models and each mind develops different models. We all have a different reality in mind and so we live each in a slightly different world.

The above does not imply that objects do not have empirically verifiable properties, but rather that the observation and *recreation* of reality are influenced by subjective factors. McEvelley (1982:52) remarks with regard to the interplay between conceptions of reality and art that

Marxist critics have insisted that any act (including the art act) is saturated with political meaning. Philosophers have argued similarly that any act is saturated with philosophical meaning. Each act is grounded in a subtext about

A DIFFERENT REALITY  
FOR EACH PERSON



the nature of reality. The experiencing of a work of art, then, is not merely a matter of esthetic taste; it is also a matter of reacting to a proposition about the nature of reality that is implicitly or explicitly shadowed forth in the work. As Wilson remarks, 'That hypothesis - that a work of art is a proposal about what is real - might help to explain why art that people don't like make them so angry'.

Although my latest works superficially appear extremely simple, they do, in fact, represent a multifaceted reality. This is so because they contain imagery based on the empirical observation of semi-urban, non-scenic landscapes; mediated by personal perceptions of reality<sup>1</sup>, certain conventions linked to the Western art tradition and certain aspects of photographic conventions. All of these comprise the source material referred to in the dissertation's subtitle. It has been pointed out that conventions are, in fact, indelibly linked to my notions of what constitutes reality. Furthermore, it seems impossible to arrive at an unmediated vision of the world. In this respect the mediating role of conventions, as manifested in allegorical and iconic reference, was examined since both these forms of reference are linked to the encoding of reality into artistic form.

The acknowledgement of the importance of mediating conventions does not negate the validity of an individual vision of reality. Instead, the utilisation of conventions allows individual vision to become accessible to others. Although the notion of 'originality' could be regarded as a fiction (Krauss 1985:161), the uniqueness of personal perception, and the creation of singular personal realities, cannot be denied. Fischer (1981:19-20) points out that

the magic process of *observation* or interaction between observer and observed is the *creation of reality* - on all levels from the subatomic realm to the visible world. No reality can be attributed to the external world but only to our (interactional) observation of it ... . What possible sense would it make otherwise to speak of 'the universe' unless there was someone around to be aware of it. The architecture of *knowing* is such that only through self-reflection and observation does the universe have a way to come into *being*.

In a critical evaluation of the role of conventions, which form part of both allegorical and iconic reference in the construction of artistic 'models' of reality, the notion of 'realism' in art needs to be addressed. Gregory Battcock (1975:xix) notes that

throughout the development of art the issue of realism has appeared countless times. New developments in art frequently were justified in that they contributed to the meaning of realism, yet that very notion often differed markedly from one time to another, from one type of art to another. Sometimes the styles were completely contradictory.

Issues such as reality and realism are pertinent to the discussion of the practical research, particularly because my landscape paintings are representational images. Pictorial conventions form a subtext to these recognisable landscapes. Reference to conventions in representational pictorial art constitutes an effective strategy for encoding current 'realities' and entering into a meaningful dialogue with a range of contemporary social, cultural and political issues. But encoding reality into artistic form is never a simple task. Bazarov (1981:187) maintains that in the twentieth century

science itself has come to be seen as a matter of imagination, just as art is. The only difference is that the imaginative leaps of an Einstein are promptly tested for their truth in nature. In our own century science has opened up to our imagination the astounding new worlds of the very small and the very large: the quantum world of the planetary atom and the relativistic world of vast galaxies ... . Out of the chaos of our present uncertainty a new and more complex view of nature is struggling to be born.

In my attempts to deal with present uncertainties, reference to conventions and prototypes serves as a substructure to the representational image. Through visual reference, the complexities of the world are acknowledged. Conventions are either confirmed or denied in the process of encoding my perceptions of reality. Consequently certain correspondences and juxtapositions arise that form a very important part of the content. Although my works

are based on empirical observation, mediated by the use of photographs, they nonetheless represent a tacit acceptance of the impossibility of achieving empirical objectivity. Empirical observation is affected by, among other things, personal perceptions which are linked to the individual's sociocultural background. The mundane landscapes that appeal to myself, may very well be disregarded by another observer who does not share the same interests. In this regard Fischer (1981:21) notes that

in the natural history of the living human: *being* (ontology) and *knowing* (epistemology), cannot be separated. Self-reflection and observation coalesce in the identity of knowing and being, which is *self-observation*. ... Thus 'being-knowing' is primordial model-making and what we commonly call 'reality' is but a web of models.

The diverse realities constructed by individual artists therefore vary considerably and this is one of the reasons why value-judgements are unacceptable in art criticism. In my own works, the devices used to encode my perceptions of reality demonstrate that formal conventions can be manipulated to a great extent while still retaining their referential capabilities. Details from two of my works will be used to illustrate the above observation. In *Detail: Burnt veld* (1994) (Fig. 44), the mark-making is relatively representational and from a distance optical mixing allows the subject-matter to emerge more clearly. Optical mixing is also required in *Detail: Ochre and blue Highveld winter* (1994) (Fig. 45), but here the mark-making appears far less representational. What appears like abstraction, particularly in Fig. 45, is based on empirical observation. Yet, in the encoding process, some of the marks used to encode empirical data into iconic signs, tend to acquire a calligraphic character and it therefore becomes difficult to distinguish between calligraphic and representational mark-making.

In this respect the works deal with 'seeing' and encoding the observed data into aesthetic form. Although the empirical observation is based on photographic sources, the aesthetic 'reality' of the painting differs greatly from the empirical data captured by the cam-



*Fig. 44.*  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*Detail: Burnt veld (1994).*



*Fig. 45.*  
*Daniel du Plessis,*  
*Detail: Ochre and blue*  
*Highveld winter (1994).*

era. Aesthetic idiolect, which in any event originates from numerous cultural and 'received' factors, subverts the photographic conventions and allows for creative interaction with the source material. Because of the potential for the transformation of just about any form of source material, the artwork can be enriched by reference to visual conventions and prototypes while still retaining its own aesthetic identity. Gombrich (1977:201) remarks in this regard that

there is a limit to the information language can convey without introducing such devices as quotation marks that differentiate between what logicians call 'language' and 'meta-language'. There is a limit to what pictures can represent without differentiating between what belongs to the picture and what belongs to the intended reality.

To an extent, my use of conventions is an avowal of these limits, but as Figs. 44 and 45 show, the limits are both confirmed and denied in the creative exploration of 'sign' and 'signified'. The presence of conventions in my works - as well as the creative manipulation of these conventions - also provides a key to a number of different interpretational possibilities. The simultaneous coexistence of various conventions/subtexts in one work demands that the interplay between these conventions should be weighed up in the interpretation. A work such as *Nocturnal field* (Fig. 46) is open to a number of potential interpretations. Because of its representational features, the work may appear to deal exclusively with the depiction of a natural phenomenon, namely veld. But the objectivity of the empirical observation is undermined at various levels. The work is actually intensely personal, both in the choice of the subject-matter and in the choices made in the encoding process.

In addition, the nature/culture dichotomy cannot be ignored in looking at the work. There is a very clear tension between reference to conventions and empirically observed nature. Interestingly, the 'broken' mark-making tends to mimic the impressionistic device used to denote spontaneity. It could thus be regarded as a painterly convention transposed to

drawing. My drawings do, in fact, contain many elements which may perhaps be more closely associated with painting. This is very evident in the denial of the 'linear' qualities of drawing in favour of a gestural manipulation of charcoal as medium.

*Nocturnal field* once again demonstrates the use of a minimalistic compositional sub-structure in contrast to the detailed rendering of the subject-matter. It is a reconciliation of certain modernist and postmodernist tenets. The contrast between the compositional starkness and the detailed pictorial rendering of the subject-matter tends to create an underlying disequilibrium which is aimed at destabilising the viewer's perceptions of the ordinary. The work is not 'loud' or overtly confrontational and thus needs to make use of other devices, such as the interplay between the medium and empirical data, to make its presence felt.

In this work, as in all my other works, the use of a photographic source forms an important subtext. Photography has, of course, become a dominant way of perceiving the world around us. Thomas Lawson (1984:163) notes in this regard that

the most obvious procedure ... would be to make use of the photographic media themselves, isolating pieces of information, repeating them, changing their scale, altering or highlighting color, and in doing so revealing the hidden structures of desire that persuade our thoughts. ... More compelling, because more perverse, is the idea of tackling the problem with what appears to be the least suitable vehicle available, painting. It is a perfect camouflage ... a device of misrepresentation, a deconstruction tool designed to undermine the certainty of appearances.

The statement reflects one of the conclusions that my exploration of photographic sources has led to. The work *Nocturnal field*, which is based on a photographic source, constitutes a deconstruction of that source. Through deconstruction, the notion of photography as the ultimate mode of perceiving the world is undermined.

In respect of landscape as subject-matter, visual reference to prototypes from Western art history, as well as visual conventions, provides an inexhaustible source of subtexts which may be used to support a conventionalised reading, or, alternatively, subvert a conventionalised reading because the original text's meaning is depleted and substituted with a new meaning. As a strategy, the use of conventions establishes communication with a broad audience who may detect in the familiar a means for the interpretation of the artwork. Yet, paradoxically, familiar conventions may be used to 'defamiliarise' the recipients' perceptions of particular signs.

The above statement can be further elucidated by an examination of my visual reference to aspects of the oeuvre of Monet. Works such as *Autumn field* (Fig. 36) and *Autumn field with spruit* (Fig. 8a) demonstrate my exploration of these prototypes as one form of source material. The reference is sometimes conscious and at other times almost intuitive. The contemporary pictorial artist, working in the easel tradition, is to a large extent obliged to use conventionalised pictorial codes. Pictorial art has long ago reached the stage of formal and technical saturation - there is little room, when using traditional materials, for further experimentation or innovation<sup>2</sup>. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, the broken mark, as used for example by Monet, has become a pictorial code to denote 'instantaneous' observation (Krauss 1985:167). Although the broken mark is a prominent feature of my own work, it is not used to render 'fleeting' impressions, but to provide a pictorial equivalent for flickering, intense African sunlight. It is quite possible that a viewer may initially regard the use of broken marks in my work in terms of spontaneity, but closer investigation will reveal a layered form of paint application that denotes a time and labour intensive process. The original meaning of the broken mark is thus replaced by a new significance which is the opposite of spontaneity; although it may resemble the original convention quite closely. Eagleton (1990:327) observes in this regard that

**VISUAL SUBTEXTS AND  
PERMUTATIONS**

... [allegory] releases a fresh polyvalence of meaning, as the allegorist grubs among the ruins of once integral meanings to permute them in startling new ways. Once purged of all mystifying immanence, the allegorical referent can be redeemed into a multiplicity of uses, read against the grain and scandalously reinterpreted in the manner of Kabbala.

It is a viewpoint that corresponds with my notions of the fragmentary nature of current realities. This non-monolithic model may be reflected by means of allegorical reference, which allows my ostensibly simple pictures to be underwritten with numerous subtexts. In doing so a paradox is revealed: Although my current works appear extremely simple, they do, in fact, provide rather complex examples of intertextuality.

Like the broken marks of the impressionists, the swirling lines and 'expressionistic' colours of Van Gogh (1853 - 1890) have become a conventionalised code to denote not only environmental, but also psychological turmoil. These devices were used as subtexts in my work *Ode to summer* (Fig. 33). In this painting the prototypical mark is ironically juxtaposed with the predominantly joyous quality of the work, as reflected by the title. It thus adds a cautionary element, reminiscent of *vanitas* morality, to a celebratory work. In a sense, the meanings generally associated with Van Gogh's techniques have been altered. Obviously, conventionalised codes are not always reused intentionally by contemporary artists. Neither can they always be regarded as an exact equation or even an approximation of the prototype. Thus there remains, within the framework of this codified pictorial language, much room for personal manipulation of codes so that 'new' meanings or individualised visions may be established. As the above discussion shows, conventions can be revitalised to bring a different angle or perspective to an artwork.

It was observed with regard to works by Monet how certain devices - such as frontality of composition and pictorial cropping of the empirical scene - can lead to a very specific approach which would emphasise certain meanings and veil others. The exclusion of *la vie*



*moderne* (viz. chimney stacks, factories, fashionably dressed people) in favour of 'natural' scenery - distances Monet's later works from the realm of obvious and overt social comment and leads to a more lyrical evocation of the outside world. This does not mean that other issues associated with 'nature', such as land tenure, are entirely eroded because they are not overtly present in Monet's landscapes. After all, Monet owned the land that provided the inspiration for his pictures and could, in contrast to say an ordinary labourer or a struggling artist, 'afford' the luxury of creating lyrical paintings.

In my painting *Harvested field* (Fig. 25), in which the manipulation of certain aesthetic and visual conventions form an important part of the content, a question nonetheless arises regarding the extent to which this type of subject-matter can be depicted without bringing into play the issue of land. Although these fields are not peopled and are therefore ostensibly neutral, they inevitably refer to agricultural production and land ownership, even if only by the omission of direct reference to these issues. And, of course, as a white person, my own background implies a relation to land which, historically, excluded fellow South Africans. Nonetheless, by focusing on the aesthetic manipulation of these commonplace landscapes, an attempt was made to emphasise the empirical qualities of the scene and their potential in terms of iconic encoding. The attention accorded to these ordinary scenes may, hopefully, contribute to the defamiliarisation of the ordinary so that it may be 'seen' again. In my reference to Monet's work, it was essential to take cognisance of the above-mentioned conventions which may have become such an entrenched part of the Western art tradition that they need to be reinvested with new meaning to be significant. It is, of course, the contemporary artist's prerogative to deconstruct or reconstruct conventionalised meanings into new and meaningful configurations.

As demonstrated in relation to selected works of South African and international artists, the use of conventions provides a means to reaffirm art as a relevant cultural force while allowing for a high degree of aesthetic quality. For me aesthetic relevance is tied to the power of a cultural phenomenon (such as visual art) to exert a profound influence on the way people experience their life-world. The discussion therefore encompasses issues such as the reasons for the utilisation of reference to conventions, its value, relevance, aesthetic implications and drawbacks. The value of these procedures has, to an extent, already been addressed in the previous chapters, since it is impossible to isolate form and aesthetic idiolect from the other values, such as meaning, which they engender.

Allegorical and iconic reference, and the conventions inherent to these procedures, allow the artist to manipulate content through established means while at the same time allowing for the idiosyncrasies of personal vision. This leads to extremely rich, intertextual works. Conventions are intimately linked to the formal and stylistic articulation, as well as the aesthetic realisation of a work. The work of Penelope Siopis may again serve as an example of how visual reference relates to various other elements in works of art. As discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 50), formal and stylistic considerations and the properties of the medium are integral to the meaning of her works. Siopis's paint application cannot be divorced from the meanings of her works and reference to artistic prototypes are all symbiotically linked to the expression of meaning. The same observations apply to the work of Robert Hodgins. As stated earlier, allegorical reference to prototypes can only be separated arbitrarily from iconic reference, which is a means of giving artistic form to outside reality.

In my own works, I tend to both affirm and undermine the meanings linked to these established codes, because numerous and even conflicting codes could coexist in one work. Postmodernism may be regarded as a paradigm that allows for the coexistence of several

divergent texts because of its inclusive nature. Allegory, in addition, allows for a synthesis of disparate formal, aesthetic and contextual interests. The coexistence of various codes and new configurations of established codes, contribute to the creation of a relatively complex pictorial reality in my work. My own exploration of pictorial codes as a form of intertextuality may be demonstrated in relation to the painting *Burnt veld* (Fig. 39). In this work there is a constant testing of the limits to which the calligraphic mark may be pushed within a representational framework. To what extent, for instance, do some of the marks *denote* and to what extent are they visual elements that contribute to the formal cohesion of the image?

The functions fulfilled by the mark-making tend to become extremely diversified: some are used to encode outside reality, others refer to the broken mark as a sign of spontaneity and immediacy of observation, still others come about through the reworking of the surface, resulting in a layering which speaks of an investment in time, the very opposite of spontaneity. Thus a large number of sometimes contradictory visual codes coexist, reflecting the complexity of vision and the struggle involved in encoding physical reality into artistic form. These codes operate in a type of equilibrium brought about by a process that involves both construction and deconstruction. Conventions are thus used and questioned at the same time.

The above discussion may serve to indicate how complex reference to prototypes and conventions in pictorial art tends to be. In the context of postmodern theorising regarding the nature of reference to historical prototypes, the complexities are compounded. Although I will focus predominantly on certain tenets of postmodernism in the following discussion on the role of prototypes in contemporary art, the intention is not to uphold postmodernism as the ultimate paradigm for artistic production. I will consider, instead, certain postmodern trends which provide strategies which artists may explore in vying for a place in the over-

**POSTMODERNIST  
NOTIONS OF VISUAL  
REFERENCE**

crowded world of visual information. One of these trends is the renewed appreciation of the possibilities afforded in terms of subject-matter by the exploration of earlier prototypes and conventions. Because this trend represents such a pronounced break with Greenberg's modernist dogmas, it necessitates an examination of some of the more obvious differences between modernism and postmodernism.

As I have pointed out earlier (p. 108), examples of my own work, including the painting *Field: Red, yellow, blue* (Fig. 37), constitute a synthesis between tenets of modernism and postmodernism. Instead of rejecting all aspects of mainstream modernism<sup>3</sup>, allegorical reference provides a means of drawing modernist conventions into a postmodern framework. Allegory presents a possibility of compromise instead of outright rejection. Owens (1984:203) views the entire postmodern sensibility in terms of allegory and regards it as a means to rescue or 'redeem' the past for the present. In contradiction of much that has been said about the postmodernist rejection of mainstream modernism, postmodernism could, in fact, through allegory, also salvage the formalist aspect of the modernist past. This type of inclusive position is the opposite of Greenberg's rigid and unaccommodating modernist dogmas and links up with postmodern ideas concerning 'pluralism'. As pointed out by Eagleton (1991:135), the true coexistence of dissenting viewpoints can only be accommodated within pluralism.

Irving Sandler (1980:345) states that the central form of modernism has come to be considered the minimalist grid. The reductive approach which leads to the use of the grid as a model, is the opposite of pluralist notions as discussed above. Sandler is, obviously, referring to later, dogmatic modernism and not to early modernism or the figurative stream of twentieth-century art sidestepped by mainstream modernist theorising. In the sixties reductive purism and abstraction were regarded as modernist and avant-garde by the critics. The

work of Ad Reinhardt, for instance, represents the nonobjective styles that are often identified as modernism.

Purism - which in a formalist context aimed to rid art of all that was not intrinsic to the form and the medium - was regarded as an identifying feature of modernism during the 1960s. Unlike modernist formalism, postmodernism does not oppose extra-aesthetic references. After 1970 the attacks on purist styles and the modernist notion of the avant-garde intensified. The aesthetic standards that Greenberg as guru of modernism proposed, revolved almost exclusively around the formal qualities of art. It was the function of the modernist artist to isolate the unique characteristics of each art form. Walker (1975:5) maintains that

according to this theory the unique features of painting were flatness, shape of support, and the properties of the pigment... Greenberg maintained that, by discarding the pictorial, painting achieved purity, established its separateness and guaranteed its standards of quality. Unlike the illusionist art of the past, Modernist painting did not disguise its true nature by artifice; on the contrary, it made a positive virtue of its inherent constraints.

Postmodernism, in its revolt against the narcissistic, self-referential, esoteric nature of mainstream modernist ideology - which aimed to purge art of all extra-aesthetic reference - embraced representation and reference to earlier art conventions. Audrey Flack's *World War II (Vanitas)*, with its density of overt and symbolic content, abundant imagery, and references to recent European history as well as to the *vanitas* still life tradition of the seventeenth century - is far removed from the formalist purism of for instance Ad Reinhardt (1913 - 67) or Frank Stella (b. 1936). She admits that she refers to conventional images in an effort to communicate with the public - an idea that would have been foreign to elitist modernism. Flack is of the opinion that the modernists had a fear of content; while she openly approves of sentiment, nostalgia and emotion - 'three heretical words for modernism' (Flack 1980:77). It is ironic that in accordance with postmodernism's inclusivity, Flack can actually use mod-

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REFERENCES

modernism

ernist conventions in resolving formal issues in her work. In my work *Ploughed field* (Fig. 42) compositional devices that are almost minimalist are used to contain the 'agitated' and textured surfaces representing the ploughed field. Also, the very overt reference to linear perspective, which is a device used to provide an illusionistic pictorial structuring of space, is intensified within the parameters of the minimalistic compositional grid. All of these disparate conventions interact to elevate this ordinary scene into an aesthetic reality that demands visual attention.

Although overt intertextuality is often seen as a primary characteristic of postmodernism, modernism itself may also be said to very prominently feature reference to other texts. Chave (1989:128) quotes Peter Wollen as follows in this respect:

One of the main characteristics of modernism, once the priority of immediate reference to the real world had been disputed, was the play of allusion within and between texts. Quotation, for instance, plays a crucial role in the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and, indeed, in *The Large Glass* ... . The effect is to break up the homogeneity of the work, to open up spaces between different texts and types of discourses.

The difference between modernism and postmodernism in respect of reference, may thus be located in 'immediate reference to the real world'. In this sense my own works, and those of contemporaries such as Siopis, are postmodernist in orientation, because of the very definite preoccupation with the 'world outside'. Like Siopis, with her references to *vanitas* and history painting, I acknowledge the past and the richness of meaning encapsulated in prototypical artistic conventions. Although I employ modernist conventions, my inclusive and non-purist approach is also an ironic subversion of one aspect of modernist ideology, namely purism. The inclusivity of postmodernism (Sandler 1980:346) reopens mainstream art to the outside world, including to prototypes of the past that have been excluded by modernism.

POSTMODERNISM'S  
INCLUSIVITY

Visual reference, as seen in works by artists such as Siopis and Hodgins, enriches the work of art with a multitude of meanings. Siopis, in her history paintings, manages to incorporate a wide range of meanings that tends to engage the viewer at an intellectual level and thus increases the accessibility of the work, while at the same time exploring the formal and stylistic qualities of her chosen subject-matter. Kendell Geers (1990:15), in a review of her exhibition entitled 'history paintings', held at the Goodman Gallery in December 1990, observes that

she has successfully exploded a number of myths about the objective nature of history, as well as the nature of the work of art. The brilliance of this exhibition is Siopis's ability to engage her viewers on every level of their visual art development, from the purely formal and tactile to the conceptual and allegorical.

In her reference to history painting (and to *vanitas* in other examples of her work) she manipulates conventions in service of her own ideological orientation. Although her works are representational and therefore very accessible, she certainly enters into an intellectual discourse with her subject-matter. From the perspective of her own ideological paradigm, her work may be regarded as socially relevant and 'politically correct'<sup>4</sup>.

It may perhaps also be a just observation to regard the intellectual orientation of her work, as well as my own, as 'academic', particularly in its reference to and exploration of art-historical prototypes. The preoccupation with formal conventions, for example, requires the insights of an educated eye for an informed interpretation. This intellectualism, however, is normally counterbalanced by the painterliness of the works which creates a sense of spontaneity. In defence of the perceived intellectualism in my own work and that of Siopis, it needs to be stated that in 'reinventing' past conventions, they are made relevant to local conditions, while the historical subtext seldom acquires an overbearing presence. Also, the

type of hybridisation that occurs, leads to a form of expression which is a powerful synthesis of divergent stylistic and conceptual influences.

The intertextual richness that is brought about by Siopis's specific approach to reference, makes her work entirely different to that of Braam Kruger, who also explores prototypes. It was pointed out in Chapter 1 that appropriation through reference is sometimes not distinguishable from invention. This is evidently what happens in Siopis's work. In works by Kruger, who makes use of parody, invention should quite possibly not be regarded as a criterion since he presents an entirely different model of reality.

Some critics are, perhaps justifiably, harsh in their condemnation of the indiscriminate use of art-historical reference and it is a factor that artists who consciously make use of prototypes need to consider. Foster (1982:13) states that

art that is made popular by clichés *exploits* the collapse of art into the mass-media. This is the way art-historical reference in work such as Julian Schnabel's functions. As clichés, they render the work historical to the naive (and campy to the hip). Which is to say that the cliché is used to codify response.

But since rigid criteria of art dogma, as formulated for example in the context of mainstream modernism, are no longer relevant, it becomes difficult to judge a work according to a narrow set of standards. Sandler (1980:346) notes that in postmodernism the tendency in art criticism has been to introduce new approaches, which may focus on non-aesthetics such as the social, psychological, autobiographical and iconographic aspects related to the artwork.

The danger exists that the use of past conventions may become an uncritical activity - which is unacceptable to those, including myself, who view art as a critical visual and philosophical discourse with subject material through which the artist will hopefully bring

**UNCRITICAL  
REFERENCE TO  
PROTOTYPES**



new insights to a world already saturated by images. For example: The use of a superficially ironic approach in the exploration of prototypes is problematic because it implies that the artist does not engage sufficiently with the cultural issues he or she chooses to explore. Lawson (1984:164) aptly pinpoints the problem with this type of ironic approach when he says that

a vaguely ironic, slightly sarcastic response to the world has now become a cliched, unthinking one. From being a method that could shatter conventional ideas, it has become a convention for establishing complicity. From being a way to come to terms with lack of faith, it has become a screen for bad faith ... irony is no longer easily identified as a liberating mode, but is at times a repressive one, and in art one that is too often synonymous with camp.

As a visually-trained or innately perceptive person, it could be presumed that the artist should be aware of how the current media and image explosion leads to a situation where 'information overload can obscure meaning and stymie expression as effectively as a limited or truncated vocabulary' (Spiegel 1988:3). In this context the exploitation of the past, without adding something new, may be viewed as a form of superficial revivalism.

Aesthetic 'relevance' or 'justifiability' is another issue that needs to be addressed in works where allegorical reference to prototypes occurs. It needs to be stressed that the entire notion of relevance is rather intangible since it is linked to subjective criteria and particular paradigms. In this respect Deborah L. Madsen (1991:15), in a discussion on the tendency in postmodernist allegory to allow the coexistence of divergent views of reality, notes that

all ideological systems are too embroiled in the politics of cultural experience to offer anything more than a way to limit and make experience manageable by imposing upon it a finite set of cultural meanings, and denying all significances that do not surrender to the tyranny of the ideologically determined signified.

**AESTHETIC  
'RELEVANCE'**

The notion of relevance has a number of implications with regard to my own works. Whereas contemporary sociopolitical and moral issues, expressed by means of relatively overt allegorical symbols, form the crux of my earlier work, these notions are now only present by implication. In a sense my current works - close-ups of non-picturesque, ordinary landscapes - can almost be viewed as a reaction against the recent exhortations in favour of overt content and concepts - as opposed to form - which seem to be the new dogmas for artmaking. In certain contemporary artworks, the insistence on content and anecdotal detail becomes, in my view, too overbearing, creating an almost Victorian sense of eclecticism. From a personal perspective, I have come to prefer a synthesis of these factors, a balance of possibilities and a more holistic vision in which concept is not favoured to the detriment of form or *vice versa*.

Sociopolitical and cultural issues are alluded to in a very indirect fashion in my latest work. At the level of cultural politics my renewed appreciation of the value of the medium, the activity of painting and the insistence upon the validity of easel painting could possibly fly in the face of alternative conceptions of what would constitute the 'proper' form art should currently be taking.

The following statement (Brunson 1987:5) is quoted at length since it encompasses many of the issues that need to be addressed in a critical evaluation of reference:

The justifiability of appropriating themes and imagery from prior (art) historical sources continues to be a serious issue in contemporary art, as a matter of both esthetics and ethics. Bowed under the staggering weight of centuries of artistic information, we have to wonder, When [sic] does appropriation constitute a respectful and informed homage which furthers a tradition of philosophical inquiry in an area with established visual and technical boundaries? Conversely, When [sic] does it become imitation, a meaningless pastiche of borrowed riffs and lifted passages bereft of fresh meaning or revelation, relying on the codification of history to lend it substance? Are there any concrete

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REFERENTIAL  
PROCEDURES**

guidelines by which we can evaluate contemporary work which appears to have some strong connection with an existing tradition, and if so, what are the criteria which distinguish mannered borrowing from sincere exploration.

Some of these issues have already been touched on in the discussions of particular artworks in Chapter 2. Clearly, the establishment of 'concrete' criteria is tricky, since subjectivity and personal predilections tend to play a major role. Nonetheless, I am in agreement with the criteria indicated in the following statement by Steinberg (1978:25):

The ways in which artists relate their works to their antecedents - and their reasons for doing so - are as open to innovation as art itself ... . There are instances by the score where the artist invests the work he takes from with renewed relevance; he bestows on it a viability hitherto unsuspected; he actualizes its potentialities ... . He can clear cobwebs away and impart freshness to things that were moldering in neglect or, what is worse, had grown banal through false familiarity. By altering their environment, *a latter-day artist can lend moribund images a new lease on life* (italics mine).

The latter is in fact what artists like Siopis and Hodgins excel at. There is always a danger that the use of prototypes could become a formulaic and purely high-culture exercise, where the entire endeavour is remote from the 'real world' and directed only at an elite audience. In such a scenario artists would concentrate almost exclusively on a high-art cultural reality or on the 'autonomy' of the artwork, issues which are, in many cases, irrelevant to a local cultural reality.

The above should not be interpreted as an argument in favour of a simplistic art that speaks down at its audience, or a plea for the production of art with mass-media appeal. Yet, from a South African sociocultural perspective - where educational equality is only very gradually starting to emerge - one needs to question the relevance of and the justification for sophisticated allegories, arising from an academic or a high culture paradigm, which comment almost exclusively on the nature of art. Instead, a form of allegory related to ordinary

life experience and outside reality, may be more appropriate in current South African circumstances. Fletcher (1965:342) notes that 'naïve allegory flourishes where pioneer, or highly competitive, social conditions pertain, and these are conditions where sheer survival is at stake, and there is no place for dialectical subtleties'.

Shilakoe's works may, in a sense, be regarded as allegories. The reading of his works as allegory may be justified by the recurrent use of certain themes within a narrative framework. Karel Nel (1990:25) notes that his works

are strangely narrative in their own way, without being clearly structured as the narratives of [Azaria] Mbatha are. ... Shilakoe deals with social issues in a highly personalised way without being overtly political or bombastic. ... He is affected by his experiences of the injustices within the social order around him, and collectively his works stand as a chronicle of his life.

Although I would hesitate to call his works 'naïve', they certainly do not fall under the category of sophisticated, academic allegories, where the scales are often loaded quite heavily in favour of intellectual, 'art-world' issues. The disadvantage of works that become too intellectual in orientation is a lack of contact points with the world outside - a factor which, in certain instances, may lead to an impoverishment of art's communicative potential.

The problem of an oversophisticated allegorical approach is one that I had to address in respect of my own work as well. Many of my earlier works, such as *The new emperor's clothes* (Fig. 26) are rather straightforward allegories with discernible and even overt moral or sociopolitical content. It is ironic that although my earlier works may superficially appear more ephemeral and enigmatic than my later ones, they are quite specifically encoded, as a work such as *The new emperor's clothes* (Fig. 26) clearly demonstrates. In later works, such as *Ochre and blue Highveld winter* (1994) (Fig. 6), the encoding of the material and the non-declamatory reference to conventions do not allow for a restrictively prescriptive inter-

pretation. This is not only due to the lack of narrative or anecdotal subject-matter, but also to the greater exploration of the interplay between the medium and the visual properties presented by the subject-matter.

In later works, allegory takes the form of allegorical reference to conventions. But these works also operate at a different level - as plain landscapes dealing with everyday reality - even in those works where relatively overt references to late modernist formal and stylistic devices occur (and they therefore deal with an 'academic' element).

The conscious use of reference to conventions may also be justified because it is an effective means of encoding reality. Gerrit Henry (1994:86) observes with regard to the work of the American painter Catherine Murphy<sup>5</sup> that she integrates a minimalist compositional structure with convincing figuration. He quotes Murphy as saying that '... minimalism and figuration share something that most people haven't thought about very much, which is a conviction, or a passion, about making *an art outside of yourself* (italics mine).

The latter is a notion I would endorse, while admitting, at the same time, that it is impossible to reflect outside reality in a purely objective or unmediated way. I would also argue that my own art deals to a large extent with the complexities involved in observing and encoding reality. Both seeing and encoding are activities mediated by conventions - and as such the observation of reality can only be a mediated experience. This does not mean, however, that the observed object does not have a reality of its own which might be quite distinct from the artistic interpretation. But the artist's personality and ideological orientation are always determining factors, leading to divergent interpretations of exactly the same empirical data. Works with a distinct ideological orientation, or in which the artist's personality is paramount, will tend to exclude alternative readings, leading to a relatively 'closed' work.

This is in contrast to the more open-ended type of postmodernist allegory which tends to allow for the coexistence of divergent views of reality. Deborah Madsen (1991:15) remarks in this regard that

... [in postmodernist allegory] the empirically 'real' is reconstructed as a tissue of competing cultural discourses: those metaphoric descriptions that can parade as reality itself. In this sense postmodernist allegory is a subversive form, exposing the systematic repression that is an effect of orthodoxy.

The nature of seeing, and of encoding what is observed, is another aspect that contributes to the appropriateness of visual reference to conventions in a particular context. Max Kozloff, in an article entitled 'Antonio López, painter of Madrid', discusses the ways in which López (b. 1936) approaches mundane subject-matter. These observations are also pertinent to my own approach to the ordinary, especially in my latest works. The comparison is particularly apposite with regard to my evident struggle to regenerate imagery that has become too familiar through the abuse of aesthetic conventions and through the familiarising tendency of photographic representation. Kozloff (1993:95) notes that the artist accords 'transitory, prosaic appearances ... acute, optical justice'. He points out that

the struggle in López's vision is inconceivable before the modern age or, more precisely, before the advent of photography. Velázquez's gaze is confident in its power of material apprehension. ... Viewers feel close not so much to the thing presented as to a fugitive instant in the perception of it. ... By contrast, López has no choice but to look back upon that realism flawlessly rendered by an optical instrument. An instantaneous view, with its micro-stoppage of time, is a commonplace of our visual culture. It would be quixotic in the extreme for a painter to spend years in an effort to duplicate it. In fact, a very different, and conflicted, imaginative goal unfolds in Antonio López's art. He wants to detain and mature the spontaneity of his contact within the extended season of his interest - to make the whole of this count, in a performance that finally represents no single moment. Every picture is designed to fuse the buoyancy of a glimpse and the weight of long-term scrutiny. That synthesis could only

be worked through in a pondered layering of textures. ... With a kind of evasive glint, the acuity of resemblance to outer appearances is seemingly won and lost, and won again. It takes time to trace the energy absorbed by this act, a time that lengthens in emphatic response to the painter's fascination with process (Kozloff 1993:100).

The above statement emphasises the notion that photographic time - the single, fleeting, mechanically recorded moment - is one of the main ways in which we experience the temporal qualities of reality. Although I make use of photographs as source material, most of my own works are made up of a multitude of moments; the time investment makes it a history of involvement with the subject-matter. Each 'retake' brings a slightly different element to the work - e.g. the artist's mood, powers of observation and ideas vary - thus these subtle nuances become embedded in a work that is executed over a long period of time. The approach points to an understanding of time as a complex phenomenon which cannot be adequately dealt with by the photographic processes described above. By my investment in time, a great deal of visual value is added to the depicted scene - it is not merely a throwaway glance, but an almost ritualistic approach.

In terms of my own work, reference to visual conventions or prototypes is justifiable because it contributes to the process of encoding particular aspects of contemporary conceptions of reality. Since my exploration of conventions is linked to the encoding of everyday, objectified reality, it is accessible to a wider audience than a select elite who would understand certain academic subtleties. Such 'academic' references may be tantalising intellectual games in a highly sophisticated Western context, but could become problematic when transposed to local circumstances in an uncritical manner.

Reference to formal and stylistic prototypes tends to provide a framework for the exploration of a number of potentially contradictory interests with regard to my personal perceptions of 'reality'. The works could be understood as an investigation or even celebra-

**WORKS THAT WHISPER**

tion of the ordinary, commonplace landscape. Yet my later works are also a subtle reflection on cultural, social and political matters. At a cultural level, they engage with notions concerning the role of pictorial art in contemporary cultural discourse. In a sense I have moved away from a confrontational approach to a more contemplative one, reaffirming the viability of the 'whisper' as a counterpoint to the 'scream'. Compared with earlier works, such as *The new emperor's clothes*, most of the later works show a more emphatic interaction and respect for the objecthood of the chosen natural phenomena. Instead of manipulating the subject-matter to express ideas in a narrative fashion, ideas intrinsic to the subject-matter are allowed to emerge through the creative process. This leads to quieter works where content is integrated in the total fabric of the work; which includes references to conventions, formal and stylistic investigations as well as an intimate interaction between subject-matter and the medium.

As landscape paintings, they also need to be seen within a local tradition of predominantly scenic landscape painting as well as current ideas about this genre. All landscapes are always social and political constructs. Since many of the scenes depicted in my works are fragmentary and could be read as relics, they also subtly allude to 'green' issues - namely the increasing degradation of the earth. Much of this is through necessity, as the urban sprawl reflects human needs. Once again, it is an understated, subtle approach and not a loud form of protest.

By affirming the value of these ordinary landscapes - one also confirms the importance of quotidian experience. The emphasis on non-picturesque, quotidian experience of the environment, as opposed to the earlier traditions of grand, picturesque landscapes, leads to a dialogue with earlier traditions of landscape painting, albeit in a subtle and non-declamatory manner.



The potential for locating a position within and a vision of contemporary life experience in the face of these concerns, could constitute a future point of departure for personal artistic development. Semi-urban landscape imagery, approached from different vantage points, offers a wide range of alternatives which have not been explored in the current visual research. The interface between these 'relics' of nature and a more pronounced presence of industrial intervention in nature, provide just one new avenue to be investigated. On the other hand, the ordinary may also be further surveyed as a source for contemplative viewing.

Richard Kalina (1993:118) notes that Viktor Shklovsky, the Russian formalist, stated in his 1917 essay 'Art as Technique', that through art 'one may recover the sensation of life ... . The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged'. The intertextual nature of most of my works closely reflects the objectives delineated by Shklovsky. Despite the apparent simplicity of the works, the underlying texts point to the many complexities surrounding the artwork. These complexities will only be revealed by close interaction with the artwork. In a sense the immediate 'appeal' of the works is merely an invitation to engage in far deeper interpretation.

This is an important objective in my rendition of the ordinary - to make it new again through defamiliarisation. The same applies to my use of established conventions - they become renewed through the artistic processes involved in encoding reality and through personal intervention. My own work and the procedures I employ are an acknowledgement that all life experience and all approaches to art are mediated by conventions. Conventions are not seen as obstructions, but rather as building blocks for the construction of meaningful

**DEFAMILIARISATION OF  
THE ORDINARY**

pictorial art. Conventions constitute an encyclopaedia of source material that, due to its capacity for manipulation and reinvention, provides the contemporary artist with an inexhaustible artistic language. The mediating role of conventions is not only a fundamental factor for achieving communication with the viewer, but also provides a viable artistic strategy to forge a meaningful vision of current realities.

## NOTES

1 By this I mean perceptions which are rooted in a personal, psychological realm and which colour one's observations of the outside world.

2 Fredric Jameson (1983:115) observes in this regard:

There is another sense in which the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and new worlds - they have already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already. ... Hence, once again, pastiche: in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum.

Although I am in agreement with the idea that stylistic innovation is no longer possible, I would nonetheless maintain that the artist may resurrect established conventions to encode current realities by means of an extremely complex artistic 'language'.

3 All along, during the modernist era, there was a concurrent stream of figurative and representational art - produced by such prominent artists as Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud - which constitutes a counterpoint to mainstream formalism. At the cost of figuration, formalism is often upheld as the most important manifestation of art in this century. However, in a certain sense, the opposition between postmodernism and modernism applies mainly to the dogmas formulated in respect of formalism.

4 It may be argued that in their opposition to the ideology of apartheid, many South African artists have engaged with aspects of 'protest' art, which implies an ideological position to the left of the former hegemony.

5 One of the works in question is *Chinese pillow* (1990), oil on canvas, approx. 100.5 cm x 110 cm. Private collection, New York. (Henry 1994:86).

## CONCLUSION

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It has emerged from the research that visual reference to conventions and prototypes constitutes a valuable creative strategy to reinvent the past in terms of the present and to regenerate and defamiliarise imagery that has become ineffective through overuse. Visual reference to conventions should be viewed as a procedure which may assist artists to reflect current sociocultural exigencies. The art of the past - which would include prototypical subject-matter, styles and formal conventions - has become an inexhaustible vocabulary which is available to the artist and which may be reinterpreted to suit specific requirements. These prototypes may also be employed in service not only of self-expression, but within a large network of signs that contribute to the overall meaning and complexity of artworks.

With regard to the nature of visual reference in pictorial art, Chave (1989:128) maintains that

no doubt Rothko, like Duchamp and Picasso, did not consciously make all the quotations that may be discerned in his art, but that does not mean that they are not there. The influence and the perpetuation of existing cultural forms is not something artists can fully escape, either by design or by ignorance. Tradition, as Harold Bloom wrote (following Freud), is 'equivalent to repressed material in the mental life of the individual.'

On the one hand, by consciously incorporating conventions into the artwork, it is acknowledged that conventions form an inalienable part of the creative realisation of the work. In my practical research, visual reference has proved to be a means to establish an underlying intertextual richness in deceptively simple works. In addition, visual reference was employed to elevate ordinary landscapes to images worthy of contemplation. As far as the conventions of photography are concerned, it was demonstrated that painting may be

used to destabilise the hegemonic position of photography as the principal means of representing the surrounding world.

Visual reference to aesthetic conventions and prototypes is a prevalent and viable component of contemporary artists' exploration of diverse realities. From the investigations it became clear that the notion of the relevance of subject-matter may be located within a vast web of conventional and potential meanings and visual references. The artworks discussed in the dissertation reflect, through their own complexities, the complexity of the many realities that form the subject-matter of individual artists. Thus 'reality' cannot be defined from a restrictive ideological perspective, but should instead be viewed as an extremely complex phenomenon.

McEvelley (1982:61) underscores the complex nature of the artwork in noting that

the artwork exists in a context of both the viewer's and the artist's sensibilities, with all the conditioning and acculturation involved in them - it exists ... not as an isolated absolute or an end in itself, but as a rounded cultural object which relates to philosophy, politics, psychology, religion and so forth'.

Allegorical and iconic reference, and the conventions inherent to these procedures, enable the artist to manipulate content through established means while at the same time allowing for a great deal of reinterpretation and for the idiosyncrasies of personal vision.

I have attempted to demonstrate that reference to stylistic, formal and conceptual prototypes, when used judiciously, provides the contemporary artist with a valuable tool for making relevant art that nonetheless permits the exploration of the inherent properties of art and the pursuit of a high degree of aesthetic quality. The simultaneous presence of conventions, juxtapositions, permutations, confirmations and denials contributes to the complexity of the artwork and provides subtexts for the viewer to discover in his or her interpretation of

**REFLECTING COMPLEX  
REALITIES THROUGH  
COMPLEX ARTWORKS**

**AFFIRMING THE  
POWER OF PICTORIAL  
ART**

the work. The synthesis of these diverse elements demonstrates that 'reality' and its reflection in art is extremely complex, non-monolithic and not susceptible to rigid dogma or one privileged ideological interpretation.

Through realising the mediating role of conventions and prototypes in the perception and artistic recreation of diverse realities, artists may exploit the recycling of conventions in a creative manner to give form to the surrounding world in powerful images that, through their sheer aesthetic presence, will be able to stand out in a world numbed by the oversupply of visual information. The avowal of the immense capacity of visual and aesthetic conventions to meaningfully respond to the world, may be seen as an affirmation of the undiminished potency of pictorial art.

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