

# EUPHEMISM



KATHRYN SMITH

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Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year 2004

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2004

Monument Gallery, Grahamstown  
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Museum, Port Elizabeth  
Durban Art Gallery, Durban

2005

Johannes Stegmann Gallery, Bloemfontein  
South African National Gallery, Cape Town  
Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg

# DEAD CERTAINTIES:

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*The Art of Kathryn Smith*



“The trick is to find the trace.”<sup>1</sup>

Criminologist Edmund Locard's (1877 – 1966) exchange principle states that 'every contact leaves a trace'. This is a cornerstone of forensic investigation. Time corrodes and extinguishes such traces. Much of Kathryn Smith's work seeks to capture such traces, and, indirectly the circumstances and woundings that produce them, even and perhaps especially when both have disappeared. Or, in a more sinister way, suspected to be present but absent in our familiar systems of technology or knowledge. Indeed, her interest, and ours, intensifies when faced with the scene empty of the act, object or person which attracted us in the first place.

The old phrase 'morbid fascination' speaks to what Smith calls the "close connection between violence, intimacy and desire – when 'normal' interactions are subverted 'pathological' desire".<sup>2</sup> She concerns herself with the debris of death, its violence, its pain and its peace.<sup>3</sup> In 'Words Misunderstood' Milan Kundera has his Sabina say "there are things that can be accomplished only by violence. Physical love is unthinkable without violence".

In her notebook Smith includes a comment by Theodor Adorno; "Every work of art is an uncommitted crime" and makes this link – or its inversion – explicit in the draft proposal for her performance *Jack in Johannesburg*;

This public performance continues existing research into the relationship between art and criminal practice. *Jack in Johannesburg* takes its cue from the resurrected theory that celebrated British painter Walter Sickert was implicated in, if not solely responsible for, the murders attributed to Jack the Ripper that took place in Victorian England, and possibly, further afield. The Ripper himself allegedly claimed to have 'given birth to the twentieth century'; in other words, modernity as we know it. The Ripper is also the model for the modern serial or 'signature' killer, driven by intense visual fantasies, desire and process.<sup>4</sup>

There is a lighter side to this connection. A very recent video work titled *Get the Picture: phase one* (2004) is ironical and humorous and focuses on the theft of a Walter Sickert

Euphemisms are great things – how to lie well, a way to soften the blow. They also seem to function as a kind of dumb allegory – dumb in the sense that they don't quite know/can't know how to speak as eloquently as allegories can. Does this

make them an appropriate means of response to the blunt-force trauma of contemporary society? In other times, artists came up with symbolic/

referential systems to process difficult or metaphysically perplexing issues. I'm seldom satisfied with the reportage/auto-documentary-style of much



painting of a view of the Royal Hotel in Dieppe, France. The work was stolen from the South African National Gallery in 1998. Smith's video is loosely 'documentary' and structured by an ongoing series of minimally edited 'talking head' interviews with anyone who knows anything about the theft. For Smith, this work reveals things about memory and truth, and "the idea of 'testimonial'; of how supposedly objective accounts get shored up with anecdotal and sometimes quite revealing personal agendas. And then one must ask if one is left with anything of value at all?"<sup>5</sup>

The aesthetic atmosphere of this assembly of ideas drives all her work. In her serial *Psychogeographies: The Washing Away of Wrongs* (2003-2004)<sup>6</sup>, she examines, amongst other things, the evacuated spaces left by British serial killer Dennis Nilsen, of whom Smith speaks with some empathy.<sup>7</sup> In one instance the place designated is the moody Gladstone Park, where Nilsen walked his dog 'Bleep'.<sup>8</sup> According to the killer, 'Bleep' possessed the "great redeeming feature... she was not formed in my image".<sup>9</sup> In another work – negative frame thirteen – light leaks inadvertently into the pictorial field; an eerie, alien illumination tinges and interrupts an otherwise banal image of three green refuse bags and a path.

contemporary art dealing with identity, placelessness, indigency, transience. Form's relationship to content is one thing, but this stuff can get so dead-boring. I have always tried to downplay, if not outright deny the relationship of my work to some 'usual suspect' issues – identity, history, memory, body politics. But if you live in the world,



there's no denying their place in the mix. Biography is where things have started getting interesting for me – a weird kind of biography that is a deliberate mix of reality and artifice, of

Another work, of the front door of one of the houses in which Nilsen stayed, is shaky, suggesting some haste and anxiety suffered by the photographer. All the photographs in the series are accompanied by handwritten notes by Smith recounting the tracking process. These look like a sort of school project; or is it punishment, or atonement by proxy? Nilsen considered himself “a professionally perfect person”, and was diagnosed as suffering a ‘false self syndrome’.<sup>10</sup> This touches on ideas of doubleness and duplicity in a sense invoking ideas of fraud, surrogacy and similar ideas around duplicity – which, as we see later, is another leitmotif of Smith’s work.

More to the point here is perhaps the vexing relation between art, violence and death. Writing of serial killers, Anna Gekowski points to a familiar link between art and death; for example, William Blake’s Lucifer is “associated with energy and the pleasures of the flesh, with the creative power latent in that which is hidden or repressed: with Art. And this suggests complex relations between darkness and light, death and life, murder and sexuality”.<sup>11</sup> In her early *Still Lives* (1997), Smith explores such relations in an uncanny alignment of police photographs of dead victims and her living body. Slides were projected

artistry and art history, of returning to paintings or styles of visual representation that have made certain memories for me (or are they fantasies of memories I wish I had?) 17th century Dutch painting, European romanticism, the British Pre-Raphaelites. In contemporary South Africa, these are not innocent areas to be exploring. But for me it’s about another kind of colonising – of someone’s else’s language and symbolic system, to steal,

bastardise and make it my own. Regardless of what we like to think, this stuff is popularly, irrefutably recognised as art of the highest order –



onto her skin and she composed herself to conform to the 'found' disposition of the dead body documented in the forensic photograph. The entire scene was then re-shot, the forms and contours of her living body-as-screen altered and disfigured by the lights and darks of the projection. In these works cast shadows become scars, unhealed wounds; facial bruises and lacerations mingle with cosmetic manipulation in a forensic version of a mortifying sexuality; a kind of extended 'Death and the Maiden' trope. Is this a variant of Edgar Allen Poe's infamous formulation that the death of a beautiful woman is the most "poetical topic in the world"?<sup>12</sup> There is also a very real sense of flaying skin in these images, suggesting not so much passive vision but vision that penetrates and cuts into the visual field; what Claude Gandelman calls "haptics in extremis".<sup>13</sup> Smith herself speaks of "transgression and license" as being primary for her, "focusing on the threat of danger and its association with the erotic".<sup>14</sup>

In her Carravagesque *Memento Mori* (2004) Smith turns the tables by imaging herself made up as death. Caravaggio's (Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571 – 1610)) pictorial practice and indeed his life were stained by sexual and mortal instabilities.

sentimental, nostalgic, gothic in its melodrama it may be, but it communicates. In trying to find a kinder way to deliver some pretty difficult thoughts, these traditional systems are so much about coded languages and secret histories that they seem perfect. Like taking photographs in Latin. Reading Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, one character is described as being in a state of "advanced disbelief". The disbelief in question was not run-of-the-mill; it was well-developed, matured. This appeals to me.



The artist was mercurial, quarrelsome, antisocial, violent and murdered one Ranuccio Tomassoni in 1606, for which he was sentenced to death (*in absentia*). His later work especially is a high-temperature meditation on violence, sacrifice and martyrdom. In *Memento Mori*, Smith references Caravaggio's *Self-Portrait as Ill Bacchus* (c. 1593 – 1594), where grapes feature prominently in a diseased Dionysian imaginary which creates a link to Jack the Ripper. The Whitechapel killer was reputed to have lured his victims to their awful deaths with poisoned grapes.<sup>15</sup>

Smith also references the *vanitas* tradition of Western painting. *Vanitas* is a tradition of still-life painting in mainly seventeenth-century Holland and Spain which cautions viewers about the corruption and transience of earthly delights, worldly pleasures, power and vain-glory. The tradition's source is biblical, from the pessimistic Ecclesiastes 1:2; 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'. Some grand *vanitas* works – for example, the Andalusian painter Juan de Valdés Leal (1622 – 1690) – show decaying, maggot infested corpses, skeletons and much else besides in a *paean* to us knowing our (final) place in God's world. In *Memento Mori* Smith simulates a dead body in bits, close-up – hands, face, legs, upper torso – viewed

Watching a documentary on television one night (*The Roots of Evil* I think it was called), a learned-looking professorial type commented (I'm paraphrasing) that the job of culture is to contain certain narratives of 'evil', which to his mind includes private enterprises like serial or signature murder, and more public or political evils like genocide. When one can't sublimate these

'narratives of evil' in images, symbols or any other creative form, one acts them out on other bodies. Evil, he noted, is determined by which 'projects' you choose to join.



through the aesthetic lens of crime scenography. These works are darkly contrasted, replete with a burnished, golden light and heavy chiaroscuro. The pictured figure's skin puckers under the weight of the hand-fashioned flies and maggots, which are actually cast in bronze. Flies and maggots are of course agents of decomposition; ironically here they are inanimate, while the body upon which they feed is living, albeit pale and wan.

Photography – the camera is the quintessential prosthetic eye – is Smith's preferred medium. A photograph is itself dead and death-defying in trying to hold captive lost traces, people, objects, events and environments. Grabbed stills from already shot movie-scenes offer this deadliness and something more. As Sean O'Toole puts it, Smith "offers viewers glimpses of what happens in freeze frame, revealing the invisible actions and expressions that haunt a moving image when frozen".<sup>16</sup> The photographic image is almost not a form of direct contact, but a spatially distant, light-induced trace; here metonymy becomes almost metaphysical.<sup>17</sup> One also recalls Roland Barthes's equation of the photograph with death, and the observation that for Barthes "the only images that belong to one's own history become a 'wound' ".<sup>18</sup> Rather perversely, Smith speaks of trying to work with "images such

*So you read my mind?*

*Did you see how red my mind is?*

In the early 1980's, convicted sadist and murderer

Joseph Kallinger ('The Shoemaker') wrote a rather

melodramatic poem in prison called *The Unicorn*

*in the Garden*. He was supplied with contraband

paper and pencil stubs by a lady friend who would



visit him. The poem is an indictment against the

perceived stifling of his creative drive by his

(adoptive) parents, who he claims forced him to

give up his hopes of becoming an actor in order to

that they begin to behave like the body, so that they twitch, breath, jerk, 'sweat' and 'bleed' ". Such imagined 'behaviour' is threatening, as the usually contained image seeps into and contaminates the world of the viewer. The skin of the photograph is porous.

In a provocative psychoanalytic study of art, Parveen Adams (2003) argues suggestively of photographer Joel-Peter Witkin that "Witkin constructs an ego by making marks and makes himself into a picture. The skin of Witkin's pictures is at the same time the skin of Witkin's body".<sup>19</sup> The subject of Smith's Master of Fine Arts research dissertation was "Limits of Excess: Abjection in the Photographic Work of Joel-Peter Witkin", and her Master's exhibition 'Lifetime Guarantee' (1999) drew extensively on this research.

Body, site, event are, in Smith's work, haunted by links that always seem on the verge of decomposition, the relentless decay of all sensate presence. We can imagine here a loved (or loathed) body purged of life; life lost in sleep, or death, inert, fully empty, as she engages in her *The Forensic Qualities of Sleep* (2001). This work is comprised entirely of stills from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), *Dial M for Murder* (1954), and Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), recast rather fitfully as film noir. For *The Forensic Qualities of Sleep*,

work for the family business (his father was a cobbler). The unicorn was his metaphor for his desire, and perhaps his 'true path'.

There is a strange, yet probably trivial, synchronicity between Kallinger's poem, the unicorns and ponies aphorism courtesy of the FBI investigator and the general mythology surrounding unicorns, that involves a latent



the selected film stills were “bleached... of their colour almost to the point of erasure, a kind of inversion of film noir to film blanc?”, and an arguable reference to the more symbolically loaded terrain of whiteness and blackness. This work was produced for the exhibition ‘Clean’ (2001) held in Johannesburg, to partner her *There Was Nowhere to Go: The Small of Her Back was Pressed up Against a Writing Desk* (2002) work on ‘Grime’ (2002), held in Cape Town. Both exhibitions were curated by Retha Erasmus.



Smith stalks such moral, mortal, muddy terrain searching for ‘narratives in denial’ and moments of inversion “when a passionate embrace begins to look like an assault and the close focus on a face in a love scene (head thrown back etc.) seems to imply something entirely more violent”.<sup>20</sup> It would, of course, for many of us be debasing, even a profound insult, to think of a crime scene or body dump-site as a kind of imaginative creation, worse a site-specific installation, but the parallels are there. We struggle here with the contending forces of desire and duty, and perhaps in some way murderers are failed artists; or is it that artists are failed murderers?<sup>21</sup> Here the usual sublimations, repressions, displacements and fears – the things we might pour into art to protect us from what we really desire – do not

eroticism (the unicorn – also said to represent

Christ – is said to be a violent, aggressive animal,

which can only be tamed by a female virgin, in

whose lap the animal rests his horned head) and

something

the ability to ward off death. The unicorn’s horn, it

is said, is an antidote to poison. Interestingly, the

narwhal, whose disembodied, washed-up tusks

were held as evidence of the unicorn’s existence,

or is it that is also referred to as ‘corpse whale’. But that’s

enough National Geographic for now.

work. The boundary between symbolic and actual violence has been a leitmotif in contemporary art, and the subject of much polemic.<sup>22</sup> Daniel Cottom, for example, discussing artist Chris Burden's *747* (1973) (Burden being characterised 'terrorist' but 'one of America's few really scary artists' [Holland Carter]) refers to

the erasure of the line commonly drawn between symbolic and real violence... through the sorts of uncertainties, equivocations, contradictions and over-determination... Burden's act drew forth the misanthropy of art; its undoing of humanity, its drive to betray what Samuel Beckett called 'anthropomorphic insolence'.<sup>23</sup>

Last year Smith produced the remarkable *Jack in Johannesburg* (2003) performance mentioned at the beginning of this essay. In this work she paired with tattooist Milo in a mostly silent (apart from the mock-macabre muzak of *Mack the Knife* and *I've Got You Under My Skin*), multimedia spectacle staged in the elaborately prepared Luytens Room of the Johannesburg Art Gallery.<sup>24</sup> Here the absent – dead – *dramatis personae* were Jack the Ripper and the artist Walter Sickert (a.k.a Richard) who crime writer Patricia Cornwell (in her *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper, Case Closed* (2002)) argues are one and the same. The present *dramatis personae* included the spirit of both, Smith herself, Milo, and various working extras disporting themselves in a heady and hearty mixture of quite perverse

As a teenager, reading excessive quantities of non-fiction crime writing, the people that had eluded capture always fascinated me, not least the Green River Killer. These nomdeplumes they give these killers are

often ludicrously B-grade. This one at least had the benefit of geographical specificity behind it. Recently, my teenage years came flooding back



with headlines in local papers proclaiming the Green River Killer, going by the overly-average name of Gary, had been caught. His DNA got the

pleasure.<sup>25</sup> At the time I experienced a powerful reaction to this work, and penned some impressions of the occasion (slightly altered);

The barely believable light; copperish, cold... sunshine dimly through glass, the internal, artificial light, the flashes of those who document gore – leached of sanguinity to be honest – with studied indifference, professionals. All very cool and temperate. Obsessive, laconic. The rather wonderful twisting and turning of the ‘real’ and the projector’s reel. The click of that machine, ambient noise, footsteps, whispers and murmurs, silent gazes... An exaggerated costume drama of a moment out of step, out of time. But still now. The space a vaulting mausoleum in a museum *mise en abyme*. The staged scene and the action... slow comings and goings (talking of Michelangelo?), the supine violence on the body frozen in the tepid atmospherics of wrapped pictures and the fuzzy ferocity of lions and lambs... And then the sense of a somnambulists’ ball, a social *séance* (*à la* Paul Delvaux). The tractable but tenacious coincidence of London’s sicker East End, and the east end of this city centre. The railway rift valley outside where people sit, shit, sun... The artistic misogynist (Jack) and the misogynist artist (Sickert). A faint air of listless decay, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and the Marquis de Sade hanging about... A bit like the overwrought, voluptuous Jacques-Louis David’s *Death of Marat*, for Baudelaire the secular *pietà* of the modern age... bits and pieces of other things... So, beautiful in its way.

Patricia Cornwell’s contention – that it is far-fetched seems not to matter – provoked in Smith a wanderlust for what has been called ‘dark tourism’.<sup>26</sup> She did a couple of the Ripper trips in London, one under the auspices of the famous Ripper expert Donald Rumbelow.

better of him, bringing to an end over two decades of hunting. It was something of a

momentous occasion for me. I could see his face. There is something about bearing witness, admittedly a very mediated witnessing, to the eventual capture of these people. And he was a painter – of signage on the sides of trucks, admittedly, but it made for great pull-quotes in the papers. (‘Painter to confess in order to escape death penalty – sounds more suited to a

report on Hitler’s public derision of modern art)

In *The Golden Section*, a novel I read recently, about an extreme performance artist suspected of

In a more solitary, more directly artistic, pilgrimage Smith retraced Sickert's steps in the French coastal town of Dieppe, a camera and prints of his paintings underarm, seeking to step into the misogynist artist's shoes. She positioned herself as closely as possible to Sickert's perspective, trying to see with his eyes, trace with his hands, grapple with what she calls his "elastic... perspective".<sup>27</sup> Each work in the series is titled according to the painting that inspired the 'point-of-view' adopted. On the first page of her notebook she quotes Sickert; "The plastic arts are gross arts, dealing joyously with gross material facts".

The flesh-mortified, leaden spectre in *Memento Mori* I spoke of earlier is a post-*Jack in Johannesburg* character. She wears the same nightdress, and nearby is the monogrammed handkerchief used to mop up blood leaking from the inscriptions of tattooist Milo. The embroidered monogram is taken from a Ripper letter, but is also a monogram of the artist Sickert.

This image/object – as often happens in Smith's sometimes self-cannibalising art – enjoys a long afterlife in her iconography; polyglot references expand and contract in a disconcertingly labile palimpsest of meanings. The text tattooed on her arm in the *Jack in*

taking his work slightly too far, the protagonist (a psychologist, obviously), repeats the refrain, "Pictures and the person who painted them. Lives and the person who took them". They used to say similar things about early photographers, believed to be in the business of stealing souls. A bit Faustian for my tastes. But there is a resonance in terms of the Sickert project.



Pursuing these kinds of investigations/fabrications seems to require a certain amount of patience and certainly an element of obsession. I tend to have

*Johannesburg* (2004) performance, for instance, is a quote from an FBI investigator and serial murder specialist. The words read “Never look for unicorns until you’ve run out of ponies” and capture this expert’s pithy personal view – evidencing traces of Occam’s razor – on how to go about his business. Smith sampled the handwriting itself from a Ripper letter written with a paintbrush and pigment. At the ‘Art of Murder’ conference held at the Tate Britain last year, and which Smith attended, this particular letter was authenticated as written by Sickert. Smith writes that this makes the artist, “if anything, an über-hoaxer/impersonator and perhaps even identifying a need on his part to implicate himself, secretly it seems, in all the media attention the Ripper was getting.”<sup>28</sup>

Smith is sensitive to this doubling and duplicity, and wonders whether Sickert thought, at some level, of the Ripper as his *alter ego*. She herself explores this terrain in *There Was Nowhere to Go: The Small of Her Back was Pressed up Against a Writing Desk* (2002), where “one Kathryn Smith” appropriates “the voice of an other Kathryn Smith”.<sup>29</sup> In this series the artist pillages sources from a North American namesake, a popular Canadian writer of pulp romances called Kathryn Smith. In this work, Smith photographed an



an inability to leave any kind of detail alone, no matter how trivial it may seem. Of course this means I get lost in detail, which by extension might imply getting lost in the translation of that detail, but I figure, what the hell - welcome to the tradition/genres of History and Biography. Like photography, we are expected to trust in the proximity of these genres to the 'real' or 'truth'. In traditional visual art, an equivalent would be illusionism in all its variants. Paradoxically, this is achieved through trickery. As Darian Leader notes,

extreme close-up of the cover of a Smith book (*A Seductive Offer*, 2002) in black and white, achieving a rough kind of micro-scopia. The process rendered visible “invisible scratches and flaws... providing the perfect patina of violence”, and the artist “literally turned the book on its head by reworking selected text into an opposite kind of narrative from the original one”.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly the artist's interest in author Kathryn Smith, pulp-romance writer, is as the occasion of unnerving doubling, where the artist becomes something of an impersonator, perhaps even an imposter, in her perverse ventriloquism. This interest is also apparent in her *Episodes: Me & My Shadows* (2004), the result of a preoccupation with the Rat Pack (Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr) who performed – by proxy – in Johannesburg in 2004.<sup>31</sup> Smith considered this *faux* Rat Pack as her ‘three muses’, and writes the following in a notebook; “muse/inspiration/desire/fantasy... Muse as ‘familiar’ (in the witchcraft sense – always with you)/as a shadow, alter-ego... me and my shadow... doppelgänger”.<sup>32</sup>

Smith's fascination with Jack the Ripper, a paradigmatic figure of notoriety and sensation, and unfinished and violent business, self-evidently articulates a fascination with

in his remarkably engaging *Stealing the Mona Lisa – what art stops us from seeing* (2002; Faber and Faber), the artistic image is there to capture a look; it's not necessarily about representing well than it is about fooling the

viewer. He speaks of painting, but to my mind this is especially true of some photography. As Leader



says, what is painted [*sic*] is there to attract the other, but more importantly, to attract the other away from the artist: “As Francis Bacon said to

pre-and post-mortem sensation and celebrity, and more recently this has turned to Marilyn Monroe whispering to small, uni-horned ponies from Parys! In the last – *Episodes: The Hour Has Come, But Not the Man* (2004) – a set of staged moments in a series of eight paired panels, present scenes of “sitting on the fence, staring narcissus-like into the pool, the pastoral idyll of the field, the barn.”<sup>33</sup> For Smith, this series turns on expectation, desire, and “the Big Wait, but not necessarily knowing exactly what is desired or being waited for – Hitchcock said suspense is not fear, but a dilated wait. Suspense, I suppose, is also a good motivator”.<sup>34</sup> The image merges the tattoo taken from the FBI investigator and the cult of Marilyn Monroe, a connection which seems quite arbitrary, but in hindsight, or anticipation, makes sense and, in doing so, becomes increasingly deeply motivated and meaningful. This rich, relentless linking is something Smith’s work encourages, and seems to be a major impulse in its origins.

Smith’s interest in Marilyn Monroe derives in part from her reading of the ‘fictional biography’ (a paradox) by Joyce Carol Oates titled *Blonde* (2000).<sup>35</sup> Her reading, amongst other things, has provoked an eccentric and idiosyncratic suite of prints collectively titled *Peculiar Modern Behaviour, or, don’t go away, it gets better* (2004). These images are



David Sylvester, painting is about setting a trap.  
 [...] As Gainsborough put it, painting is there to provide ‘a little business for the eye’: it is kept busy, and, crucially perhaps, away from the artist. This effect can be produced through the serial production of single works [...] or the complex architecture of an isolated work [...] Art in this sense is desperate. As Degas said, painting requires as much cunning as the commission of a crime’. [KS – Degas was Sickert’s mentor] It is less

fractured and layered, embracing a wide range of sources for form, structure and content. Disconnected fragments, symbolically laden, float and clash in indeterminate, off-colour space. In, for example, *Smiling Meant Not That You Understood, but That You Were*

*Happy Not-Understanding* (2004), the title, like all the other titles, is paraphrased from Oates and 'quoted' from Marilyn Monroe's words, some of which were from clandestinely recorded conversations and mysteriously-acquired correspondence by the FBI and the CIA.

The middle face is Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) – the model slasher film – juxtaposed with a collaged eye lifted from a close-up of Janet Leigh after the shower murder in the same film, outtakes from Monroe's unfinished

*Something's Got To Give* (dir. George Cukor, 1962), *Don't Bother to Knock* (dir. Roy Baker, 1952), a police photograph of Monroe in the mortuary, and a shot from Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1959). Of Marilyn, Laura Mulvey had this comment;

still today [Marilyn Monroe]... may represent a construction of female glamour as a fantasy space: its investment in surface is so intense that it seems to suggest that the surface conceals 'something else'. What might this 'something else' be... what is repressed, and then reinvested with even more intensely in the fascination of surface? Marilyn's own form of cosmetic appearance is particularly fascinating, because it is so artificial, so mask-like, that she manages to use her performance to 'comment on'... both its constructedness and its vulnerability and instability. But there is a



the relaxed pastime of the aesthete than a furious defensive manoeuvre to ward off a malevolent Other. The pleasing, satisfying quality of some art diverts our attention away from this darker thread."

Speaking of the impulse to doodle (like when you're on the phone), or simply the act of making marks on any kind of surface, Leader notes:

"Innocent as it may seem, the doodling is a sort of response to the invasiveness of the other's speech, a way of transcribing not their words

further point. Marilyn's image is an ethnic image; her extreme whiteness, her make-up, her peroxide blonde hair bear witness to a fetishisation of race. But its cosmetic, artificial character also bears witness to an element of masquerade. Her image triumphantly creates a spectacle that holds the eye and distracts it from what should not be seen".<sup>36</sup>

Smith is preoccupied even more intensely with this surface, so much so that the dialectical inversion of pure surface to immeasurable depth becomes possible, with all the attendant ironies this possibility might entail.

The Monroe phenomenon (in which Sinatra the Rat Packer and just about everyone else was implicated) is one of the quintessential conspiracy-mongering moments in the history of American popular culture. Here, as with Jack the Ripper, conspiracy theorising (maybe most theorising is 'conspiratorial', as perhaps is most interpretation), causality and death intersect; as Zakaria Erzinçlioglu notes "the trick is to find the trace", and he responds to the trick thus;

is it necessarily true that every contact leaves a trace?... The answer to this is that every time a grasshopper jumps, the planet Earth is pushed in the opposite direction, but we may not be able to detect such a movement. By this I mean Locard's principle

but their intrusiveness. [...] The pressure [...] is to make some sort of mark, suggesting that at those times



when we have an experience of being overwhelmed, it is not simply a question of making sense of it, of giving it a meaning, but just celebrity, of making an inscription. Obviously, human beings respond to painful circumstances by trying to make narratives out of them, but this notion of inscription is much more archaic. Something can be fixed or arrested by making a mark, as we see,

remains true, even if we cannot find a trace. The trace will be there, but the likelihood of finding it will be limited by our abilities, our knowledge and the degree of refinement of the techniques and equipment at our disposal.<sup>37</sup>

for example, in the feeling of relief sometimes experienced by 'self-harmers' after they have made a cut in their body surface. And it is a positive step in such cases if, perhaps due to a

These words refer to forensic science, but they open onto to 'art' too; Smith's work dramatises the 'truth' of these same words in her aesthetic 'episodes' of life as we represent it. Here art and science begin to converge in an almost divine, devilish disorder.

therapy, it becomes possible to make marks on paper or canvas rather than on the flesh itself. [...] There is a kind of circuit here that goes from

Two kinds of insanity come to mind here; that madness where nothing connects with nothing, where all is isolated and alienated, and that madness in which everything connects with everything. Kathryn Smith's work shows us how these two madnesses cohabit in that house with many rooms we call our 'selves'; where we are all secret agents in our own skins.<sup>38</sup> Her oddly upbeat but decidedly dystopic vision – a kind of quest narrative meets a road movie – encourages us to relook at the world almost as a vital, cosmic, interconnected nursery/mortuary, where our fragile selves are lodged in lost landscapes of unmarked graves – in ordinary, everyday locations, city and countryside – and we become bit players in an image-saturated, quietly manic psycho-history of love and terror.

the invasiveness of the Other to the use of one's own body to make inscriptions. One might wish to see this as a form of discharge: a better term might be barrier or limit. And isn't the crucial moment in the act of inscription, after all, the moment when one ends a line or mark or brushstroke? This is less an art of representing than an art of stopping." Yes indeed.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> p.11 Erzinçlioglu, Zakaria (2004), *Forensics: True Crime Scene Investigations* (London, Carlton).

<sup>2</sup> O'Toole, Sean (2004), 'Kathryn Smith', Artthrob  
<http://www.artthrob.co.za/04/artbio.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The literature is large on pain and death, culture and creativity. Pain includes Scarry, Elaine (1985), *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), Morris, David B (1991), *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley, University of California Press), O'Dell, Kathy (1998), *Contract with Skin: Masochisms and Performance Art in the 1970's* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press), Spivey, Nigel (2001), *Enduring Creation: Art, Pain and Fortitude* (London, Thames and Hudson); Burns, Bill et al (1999), *When Pain Strikes: Theory Out of Bounds Vol.14* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press); See also Farrell, Kirby (1998), *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press) and Elkins, James (1999), *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (Stanford, Stanford University Press). For imaging death see Black, Joel (1991), *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press), Lesser, Wendy

(1993), *Pictures at an Execution: An Enquiry into the Subject of Murder* (Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press), Tanner, Laura E. (1994), *Intimate Violence: Reading Violence and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press), Friedman, Alan Warren (1995), *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press) and Seltzer, Mark (1998), *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York, Routledge).

<sup>4</sup> Draft proposal, artist's notebook.

<sup>5</sup> Personal correspondence, May 31, 2004. In the video Smith has removed the audio track, so instead of hearing these people in their own voices, the viewer is left with a 'silent film' with visual subtitles that run at the pace of speech.

<sup>6</sup> Smith here references Zakaria Erzinçlioglu's (2000) *Maggots, Murder, and Men* (New York, St Martin's Press). The words were the title of the first recorded manual of forensic investigation, published in 13th century China and recounting the tale of the murder of a farmer. A sickle was the murder weapon, and no one would admit to the crime. The local leader called a meeting and ordered everyone to bring their sickles. When flies settled on one, the murderer was found out.







