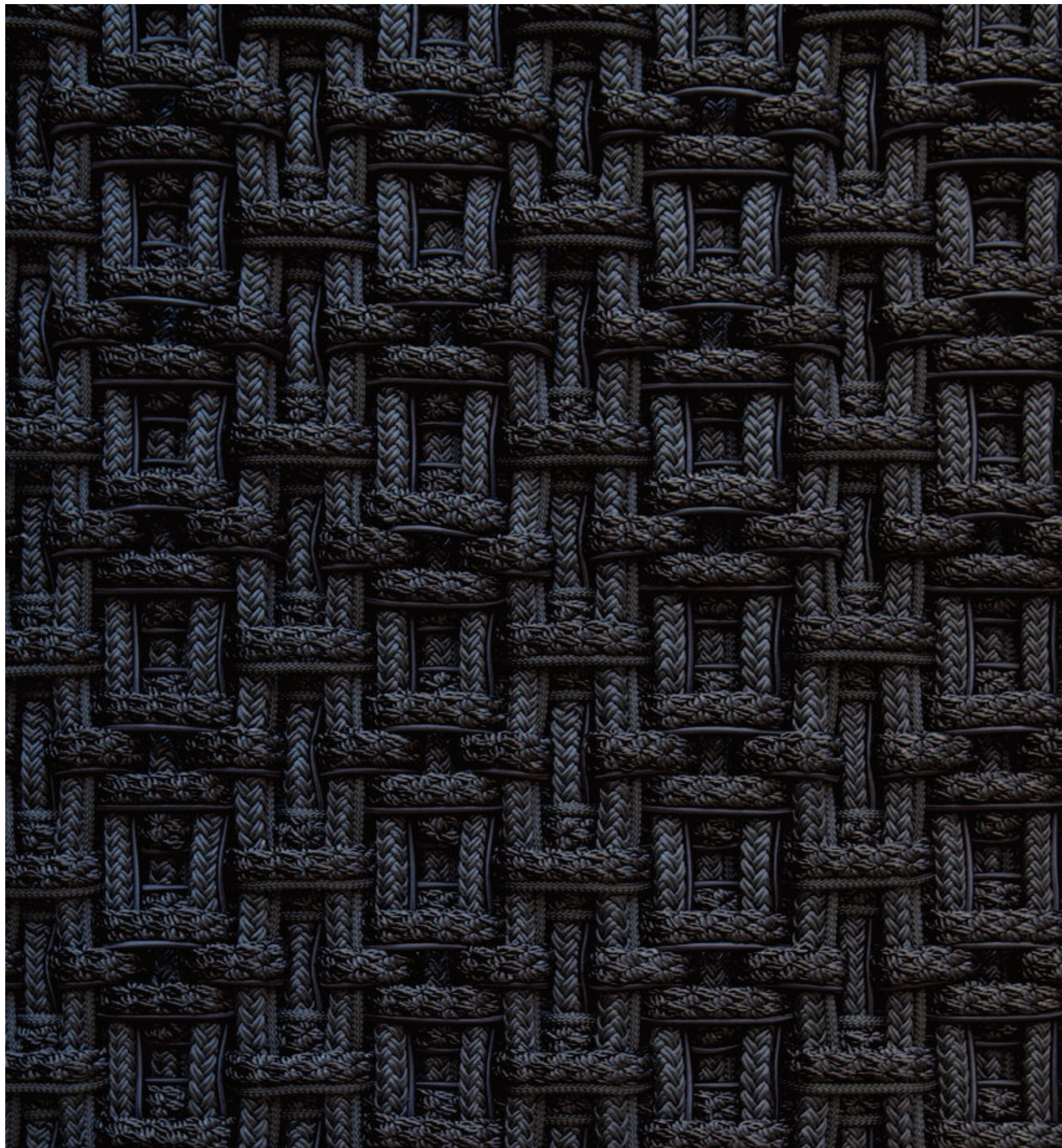


**DANI
MARTI**







DANI MARTI



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ARACHNE/ ATHENA/ HERMES/ JOHN

Ovid tells us that Arachne was a woman from humble origins. Her distinction lay in her skill as a weaver: nymphs were drawn from throughout the island of Lydia to see her work; even Athena, the goddess of crafts, was moved. Admirers sometimes suggested that Athena had been her teacher, but Arachne denied it, claiming she could prove her supremacy if only the goddess would compete. And so the two came head to head. Athena wove scenes showing the fates of mortals who had challenged the gods: transfigured into mountains, birds. Arachne answered with scenes denouncing the sex crimes committed by the gods when they took on the forms of bulls, swans, satyrs. When Athena saw the splendour of her rival's work, she shredded it, beat her with a spindle, and turned her into a spider. And so Arachne's descendants weave on to this day.

Artists, traditionally melancholics, are sometimes said to be born under the sign of Saturn, but it is easier to appreciate Dani Marti under the patronage of Arachne. For if he is to have a patron, it must be one that comprehends what seems to be the very stark division between his work as a painter/weaver, and a filmmaker whose subjects probe the sexual lives of others. This book treats those practices separately, though the puzzle of their connection remains. Colin Perry resolves it by identifying what we could call a complementarity of pain and desire: "The videos are cathartic," he says, "the paintings are sublimatory." The fact that the paintings sublimate feeling should remind us how indebted they are to Modernist abstraction and Minimalist sculpture – though they offer an eccentric and expressive version of that tradition. They are tributes and fetishes whose reek of bodily yearning puts them at a far distance from the kinds of modernist objects we usually contemplate with aesthetic disinterest. *The Pleasure Chest* (2007) tangles necklaces and Rosary beads into a design with the all-over infinitude of a Jackson Pollock and the rich materiality of a Piero Manzoni. Meanwhile, as a filmmaker, Marti delivers catharsis by drawing us into his subjects' lives of desire: *Time Is the Fire in Which We Burn* (2009), for example, telegraphs the confessions of John, a male prostitute.

But if Marti follows Arachne in one respect, he follows Athena in another: he refuses to judge. For the Greeks, morals were a human concern: the gods, immortal, were free of such taboos; they were thought to live as humans might if they only dared do as they pleased. In that sense – if in no other – John is a god, and some part of the compelling power of tales such as his is the narrator's apparent indifference to conventional morality. Certainly, Marti isn't going to deliver any judgment himself.

Or might Marti be neither Arachne nor Athena? Might he instead be Hermes, who traffics messages between the gods and the mortals? After all, his films often take a transactional form. Money might not change hands, but a deal is still done – Marti supplying the listening ear and the sympathy, his confessors providing the revelation. In that exchange – as in so many involving money – moral judgment is suspended. Marti never seeks to deny the appeal of his narrators' tales, nor to insist that they are the honest and truthful product of documentary

enquiry. His narrators, as they describe their experiences, are complicit in his probing; we, his audience, are accomplices, too.

If desire is the common *force* that binds the strands of Marti's practice, on a more typological level the strands are also united by his ambition to portray. Of course, these are not conventional portraits, pictures that mistake a visual likeness for a spiritual essence: he does not present faces as windows-on-the-soul. Marti's painting-objects are metaphorical, his films are allegorical: both use one thing to describe another. Beads describe their wearer; tales of sex describe a life with or without love. Marti doesn't pretend to offer up the whole, essential individual to our gaze. Indeed, his work insists on the fact that identity is not a stable essence that can be recognised and captured again and again; instead it is something performed, and it changes each time in the performance. The damaged narrators in Marti's films may well feel themselves to be "mining their souls" when they speak of their experiences, but what they surely come to realise is that that soul is worn on their sleeve – it can be changed at will. A tale told one way offers one version of a truth; told another way it offers another version; neither offers a more honest reflection of feelings than the other.

Finally, though, if it is true, as Marti suggests, that subjectivity is no more than skin deep, then it is surely a folly to go looking for any common strands in his work at all. He makes objects, he makes films; one urge finds its outlet in one form, another finds its outlet in another. The result can be the basis of a rich public discussion, not merely soulful contemplation.

Morgan Falconer



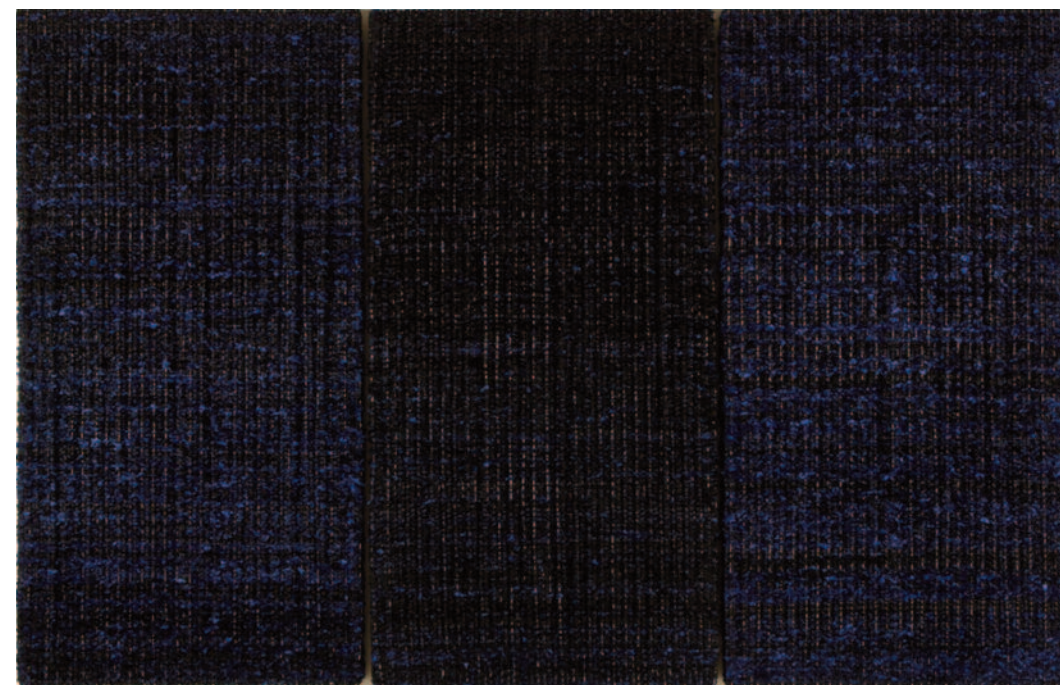


**BOUND AND UNBOUND DESIRE:
DANI MARTI'S PAINTINGS
BY COLIN PERRY**

1. MATERIALIST PORTRAITS

Dani Marti's paintings are physical distillations of human encounters. Each abstract image seeks to capture and portray the impact of a person that Marti has known, either directly or through the mediation of rumor or popular culture. Defining these works as portraits, however, rapidly leads to a quandary of interpretation, for they appear fundamentally unrelated to classical notions of representation, the end result of which is the revelation of a sitter's inner core by the incisive visual description of outward appearance. Far from seeking to reproduce the physiognomy of a sitter or subject, these large surfaces of woven plastics and rubber, rendered in monochromatic black, white, or (more rarely) bright or clashing hues, nevertheless hint at a form of expanded portraiture. Most obviously, their titles often bear the name of a person – normally a first name only, leaving the exact identity unknown to all but the artist. Even when the titles do not designate a subject, we may notice other parallels to an individual presence in the paintings' uniqueness of design, materials, and singularity within a gallery space, their dense interiority isolated within the white architectural void. Indeed, for the artist, the point of departure for each work is a person, their emotional life, and their material existence.¹

Marti's paintings have a deep personal connection to the subject based on the ritual of weaving, the lengthy time taken to produce the work, the choice of materials, the techniques employed, and the patterns made by the artist. He rarely uses assistants, and does the majority of the weaving himself. For example, the work *Shadow after Shadow (Portrait of the Artist's Mother at the Age of 73) (Take 2)* (2007) is a dark surface of fine woven rope forming a delicate and fragile-looking surface, which the artist made after his mother suffered a heart attack. Its complex material fabrication corresponds with a labor of love issued from son to



Shadow after Shadow (Portrait of the Artist's Mother at the Age of 73) (Take 2)
2007
Polyester rope, stainless steel ball chain, and knitting yarn
3 parts, 230 × 118 × 5 cm each
Photo: Jamie North

Portrait of John Snedden (Alias John Connery) with His Little Dog Rocco (Take 1) 2010–11
Copper coated steel mesh and pure copper scourers
c.130 × 220 × 25 cm



mother, while its dark shadowy coloration alludes to the foreboding possibility of death. Marti has also deployed materials that cannot be woven in any traditional sense – including plastic utensils, feathers, chains, glass beads and metal scourers – and are instead sewn or bolted to their frames. Even then, however, each work's title indicates a person for whom the work is a tribute – as in the work made from hemoglobin-like metal scourers titled *Portrait of John Snedden (Alias John Connery) with His Little Dog Rocco (Take 1)* (2010–11). Such a subjective, artistic response to an individual is surely best described as portraiture; but what is the specific nature of Marti's form of portraiture, expanded as it is beyond the limits that we might ordinarily assign to such a category?

This is only the first in a series of decidedly challenging questions posed by Marti's art. We might encounter difficulties too in defining Marti's relationship with painting itself as a medium and practice. One might, for example, imagine a traditionalist asserting that for a painting to be counted as such, it should consist of: (a) canvas, and (b) oil or acrylic paint. Marti's paintings are unusual in that they are made entirely without paint or canvas, mixing contrasting materials to striking effect, including polyester, rubber, natural rope, barbed wire, and metal threads, which he affixes onto armatures of wood and more high-tech metal frames and mesh supports. For example, in the series *The Last Sins of St Francis* (2003–04), there is a striking contrast between the inviting silky surfaces of nylon, the texture of manila rope and the embedded and exposed spikes of barbed wire, as well as the contrast between the natural hues of the rope and the modernist-looking geometric pattern. In terms of scale, many of these works are larger and more elaborate than the tradition of domestic weaving might suggest – some are over three and a half metres wide, and nearly as tall. Marti has also produced commissioned work large enough to fill hotel lobbies and foyers. The techniques used by the artist go beyond weaving into other forms of material assemblage – and push traditional notions of painting to the limits.

Fabricated from woven or stitched plastics, they nevertheless clearly relate to painting as a medium and lie within its historical trajectory – the artist cites influences including



The Last Sins of St. Francis: Scarring the Flesh (Episode 4)
2003–04
Nylon, polypropylene, polyester, and rubber
200 × 140 × 16 cm
Photo: Paul Green

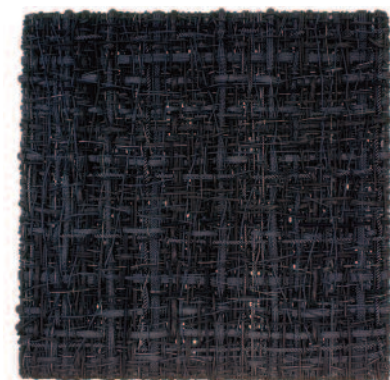
Time Is the Fire in Which We Burn
 2009
 Metal scourers
 435 x 620 x 30 cm
 Hilton Hotel Melbourne
 Photo: Adam Bruzzone



Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.15.
 Lost in Desire
 2004
 Polyester, nylon, and polypropylene
 200 x 200 x 8 cm
 Photo: Paul Green



Installation view of the exhibition
 'The Seven Pleasures of Snow White'
 at Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 2006
 Photo: Paul Green



Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.14.
 Pheromones Percolating Like Atoms in
 the Rainbow
 2003
 Polyester, nylon, and polypropylene
 200 x 200 x 8 cm
 Photo: Ian Hobbs

Kazimir Malevich, Lucio Fontana, and Frank Stella, and his works evidently partake of their abstract grammar. For example, the circular form and monochromatic white of *The Seven Pleasures of Snow White* (2006) might be seen as a nod toward the globular organicism of Piero Manzoni's *Achromes*; the black voids of Marti's series *Variations in a Serious Black Dress* (2003–04), might refer to Frank Stella's proto-minimalist *Black Paintings* (1958–60) (the title also recalls Stella's usage of the term 'variations' in later works). This modernist name-check is indicative too, for over the last century radically innovative painters have demolished the grounds of their own practice and virtually leveled the traditionalist standpoint, replacing the old model with a new convention of abstraction. In other words, when we look at Marti's paintings, we are not witnessing a radical attack on the pieties of oil-on-canvas painting; rather, we are looking at a subtle intervention into a modernist lineage of art as anti-art. The question to ask of Marti's paintings, then, is not how they challenge the history and norms of painting, but how they seek to allegorize the modernist impulse towards abstraction. The answer, in part, is the premise of this essay and entails questions not just of medium, but also of ethics and ontology. In what follows, I shall seek to unpick how Marti enacts a dramatisation of personal encounters via the history and forms of abstract modern and contemporary art.

Marti's works might best be understood under the rubric of what I shall call *materialist portraiture* – images that seek to capture a human presence through material means. In doing so, I do not seek to slew off yet another new sub-genre from the ever-bifurcating nomenclature

of conceptual image making. Rather, the term is a useful way in which to understand a means of creating a quasi-devotional art that is nevertheless critical and dialectic, invoking self awareness in the viewer and drawing attention to the artist's role within the construction of the image. I use the word 'devotional' here carefully, and in order to clarify the point, a contrasting practice might be useful, since I do not mean to suggest that Marti's work is in any way sentimental or spiritual – plainly it is not. By contrast, we might look to another practice that combines weaving and suggestions of portraiture: the use of human hair in 'mourning jewelry' – a centuries-old English tradition that reached its zenith in the Victorian era (and which has since all but vanished), in which strands of a deceased loved-one's hair are knitted into patterns and embedded in miniature portraits, pendants, or brooches. The aim of such a practice was to preserve an aspect of a person's essence beyond death. Mourning brooches are fetish items – in the anthropological sense of superstitious objects with quasi-magical powers – with a private audience of one or two mourners. By contradistinction, Marti's paintings, with their public engagement in the gallery circuit, are closer in spirit to forms of contemporary monuments – albeit with an elusive and enigmatic core that is never fully disclosed to that public.

A fruitful parallel might be found in the work of the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–96), one of Marti's key influences. The former's *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA)* (1991) consisted of an installation of a pile of cellophane-wrapped sweets that gallery visitors were allowed to take away and consume. The work is essentially a devotional portrait with a twist on the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation: the subject of the work was the artist's partner, Ross Laycock, who died of an Aids-related illness in the year that the work was made. *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA)* suggests with a morbid and subversive intonation that Laycock might live on through the transubstantiation of sweets into human flesh, assisted by the perhaps-unwitting gallery-goer's sweet tooth. It is this oddly generous subversiveness – quietly critiquing the viewer's appetite for art and the mainstream press' fear-mongering of the spread of Aids by infection, whilst adoring a loved one in a public anti-monumental monument – that gives Gonzalez-Torres's work such a potent edge. Marti's works are – likewise – platforms for enacting a public tribute to persons whose secrets are nonetheless discreetly withheld behind an abstract and inscrutable surface. It is, however, important to note certain key differences between the two artists. Gonzalez-Torres's work is an art of absence, utilizing the notion of the dematerialization of objecthood prevalent in late 1960s/early 1970s conceptual art as an analogue for the loss of human life wrought by HIV/Aids. By contrast, Marti's works exist in a world that has already traversed the high-tide of identity politics in the 1990s and the shocking effects of Aids, and as such are often concerned not so much with loss and mourning, but the surprise of still being alive; not with the migration of souls but with bare life; not with absence but with presence. His paintings emphasise the richness of a person's sensorial, sexual, and emotional existence – the facticity of bodily presence.

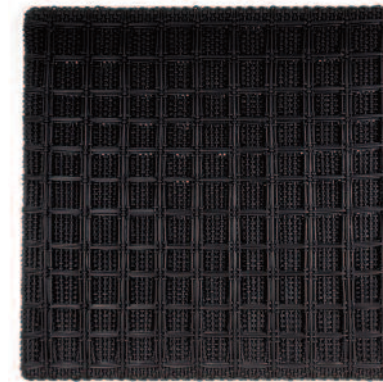
How might we theorise such a celebration of pure existence? Perhaps we might listen again to Gonzalez-Torres, who in an interview with Robert Storr in 2005 stated his particular, pragmatic take on the French philosopher Louis Althusser's writings: "Something that I tell

my students is to read [a text] once, then if you have problems with it read it a second time. Then if you still have problems, get drunk and read it a third time with a glass of wine next to you and you might get something out of it, but always think about practice. The theory in the books is to make you live better and that's what, I think, all theory should do. It's about trying to show you certain ways of constructing reality."² It is not known which text Gonzalez-Torres was concerned with here. However, in discussing Marti's paintings it seems fruitful to look to Althusser's essay 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter', in which the latter describes a hidden tradition of the 'materialism of the encounter'.³ In the essay, Althusser outlines and theorizes a long and hitherto undocumented history of philosophy that extends from Lucretius to Epicurus, Spinoza, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, Heidegger, and Derrida – writers for whom materials are present as facts of a human life subject to chance and forms of individual, social, and collective agency. He notes that in the work of such thinkers: "It is no longer a statement of the Reason and Origin of things, but a theory of their contingency and a recognition of fact, of the fact of contingency, the fact of the subordination of necessity to contingency, and the fact of the forms which "gives form" to the effect of the encounter."⁴ As such, these writers tend to reject notions of essence, idealism, and teleology. The thread that weaves its way between such discourse and artistic practice is the notion that an ordinary human encounter can be transformed into a practical life-enhancing methodology, philosophy, or art. This is precisely the point of departure for Marti's videos and paintings.

In Marti's case, it is evident that what he presents is not just the essence of a person, but the material margins of their everyday existence – beaded necklaces, rosaries, domestic scourers, melted plastics, and taut expanses of sexualised polyester, polypropylene, and industrial rubber. These are traces of encounters in which the woven materials act as metaphors both for a person's inner life and as redoubled forms of their material presence. Here a person's aesthetics and personality – or at least Marti's sense of them – can be key. For example, in the exhibition 'You Make Me Feel Like Love, Peace and Happiness' at Gallery 4A in Sydney in 2001, all the works were named after a woman called Linda – a former neighbor of the artist whom Marti felt wanted to be admired, given attention, and to be loved. The artist describes her as a strong woman but with an edge of fragility – qualities that he references in the use of a delicate mesh over a core of polypropylene rope. He selected bright, warm



Linda
2001
Polypropylene, polyester, and nylon
50 x 50 x 16 cm (one of multiple parts)



Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.11.
Strictly Porn
2003
Rubber
200 x 200 x 7 cm
Photo: Ian Hobbs

colors including red, pink, orange, and white. Presented on the gallery floor, Marti's re-working of a minimalist cube looks entertainingly akin to a small forest of footstools. This, of course, is playful, unmonumental portraiture that uses aspects of Linda's character to gently bring the ideals of modernist sculptural discourse down a peg.

2. KNOTS OF DESIRE

In order to unpick the meaning of these works, it is necessary to give an account of the life that has been distilled into them. Marti first began weaving in school craft lessons when he was eleven years old, and he relished mastering the skill of turning bare thread into ply. Later, adolescence kicked in and cultural pressures and the impending uncertainties of manhood put 'feminine' activities such as textiles beyond the pale. After leaving school, Marti decided to study business and, in a way that reflects the duality embedded both in Marti's work and personality, also set himself up as a freelance fashion designer, a job he held for four years. He continues to draw upon the technical skills and material knowhow of the fashion industry in order to produce his large and intricately crafted woven paintings. In 1989, Marti, then aged twenty-five, was diagnosed with HIV. At this time he was working as a trade commissioner in Australia, and "just trying to stay in control" of a life that seemed on the verge of slipping from him⁵. At the age of thirty-three, he contracted pneumonia – an attack that was so serious he thought he was going to die. Finally, in the late 1990s, he began to turn fully to art, painting abstract forms on canvas. More than color or abstraction, however, Marti was obsessed with the idea of surfaces: with their fragility and dermis-like properties. When he finally hit on the idea of weaving his surfaces from colored materials rather than daubing them with paint, everything began to make sense. It was, after all, a return to a creative impulse.

When we look at Marti's paintings with his life experiences in mind, it is important to understand the spirit with which they are made. Each work is shot through with a sense



Give a Bit of Hmm to Me
2007
Polyester, nylon, gold thread, brass
ball chains, metallic braid, and
Swarovski glass
3 parts, 210 x 132 x 8 cm each
Photo: Jamie North





Msdebs
2007
Video 16:9
10 min 26 sec

of levity, irony, and wit coupled with an unabashed commitment to sexual politics. Take, for example, the brilliantly subversive series *Variations in a Serious Black Dress* (2003–04): a group of void-like squares of woven polyester, nylon, and rubber. It is almost impossible not to notice that these works are keyed in to the sadomasochistic scene's aesthetic of tightly bound ropes, straps, and girdles. *Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.11*, which is subtitled *Strictly Porn* (2003), is a modernist-looking grid composed of fetishistic black industrial rubber. Seen up close, each loop and stitch suggests constraint, entanglement, control, and domination. The sexual/S&M nature of these works is often spelled out in titles such as *Lost in Desire* (2005), *The Last Sins of St Francis* (2003–04), and – more bluntly – *A Hundred Lashes* (2006). Similarly punning is the golden shimmer of *Give a Bit of Hmm to Me* (2007), whose precious constituent materials include gold thread, brass ball chains, metallic braid, and Swarovski glass – the painting corresponds to one of Marti's videos, *Msdebs* (2007), which centers on a character called Dennis whose home is adorned with cheap, fake gold décor. No doubt, even with these hints, the coded undercurrents of such a work might pass by some viewers. In fact, part of the delight of these works is precisely in knowing that some viewers will not get the references. In his exhibition 'The Seven Pleasures of Snow White' at the Sherman Galleries in Sydney in 2006, Marti installed a large 180 cm-tall yellow woven cube titled *Troughman (The Yellow Peril)* (2006). Resembling a large modernist cube, it in fact pays homage to a local Sydney man, well known in certain circles, who gets his kicks from laying in the troughs in men's toilets and being urinated on by strangers. In these works, sexuality, domination, sadomasochism, religion, and aesthetic pleasure are fused. If we were to look for real examples of materialist 'encounters', these works suggest that the fetish scene is a good place to start.

Of course, Marti's works are much more than emblems of a subcultural scene. Rather, they frequently utilize its imagery to deflate the rhetoric of high culture. The monochromatic white painting *Canvas* (2007), for example, is made not from the titular fabric, but from the artist's almost trademark weave of polyester and nylon rope. Similarly, the monochromatic paintings in the exhibition 'Book of Miracles' (which corresponds to a video of the same name), establish a contrast between the modernist blank square and the tattered glamour of the surfaces, which are rendered in rope, beads, and feathers – their torn surfaces recalling Lucio Fontana's *Spatial Concept* series (the so-called 'slash' paintings). Ultimately, Marti asserts that he wants to bring the beauty of Minimalism "down to earth" – a statement that places these works within a postminimalist discourse.⁶ More specifically, they recall the evolution of what might be dubbed 'Queer Minimalism': a coded look that winks knowingly at the norms of certain puritanical strains of Minimalism.⁷ Critic Jörg Heiser has explored wider facets of what he calls 'Perverted Minimalism' – which he sees evident in art practices as diverse as those of Eva Hesse and Richard Artschwager.⁸ His persuasive argument is, in fact, that Minimalism has always been somewhat 'perverted' by aesthetic pleasure, metaphor, and the messy anti-formalism of postminimalist practices that arrived almost in chronological parallel with a putative rarefied Minimalism. This was highlighted by the fact that Lucy Lippard was able to stage postminimal exhibitions such as 'Eccentric Abstraction' (1966), at the very moment that Minimalism is said to have been at its height. Another factor is the rich, glossy seductiveness of



Troughman (The Yellow Peril)
2006
Polyester, polypropylene, nylon, and castor wheels
182 x 182 x 182 cm
Photo: Paul Green



Canvas
2007
Polyester and nylon
95 x 95 cm
Photo: Andrew Curtis

Book of Miracles (Take 1, Take 3, Take 5)
2011
Steel, automotive paint, nylon, and polyester
60 x 60 x 3 cm



much supposedly 'minimal' abstraction, especially that of Donald Judd and John McCracken. Indeed, we might state that, of all art forms, it is Minimalism – with its advocacy of surface over depth, and what the art critic Michael Fried notoriously called its 'theatricality' – that places it squarely in the path of queer appropriation.⁹

In order to understand the complex location of Marti's practice in recent art history, and to return some agency to our understanding of it, we must also highlight strategies adopted by Second Wave feminist practitioners in the 1970s, which were deliberately targeted at the assumptions of the (male) modernist avant garde. Notably, these strategies entailed a return to craft and decoration in the face of a modernist vision of art-as-art. Pioneering feminists such as Joyce Kozloff and the Pattern and Design Movement of the 1970s sought to place the term 'decorative' back within an art lexicon that had hitherto placed, as she put it, "men's art above women's art".¹⁰ Reading this carefully, it is clear that despite Kozloff's desire to return to surfaces, her rationale was based on yet another spurious notion of essence that Marti's work renounces. For Kozloff's essentializing analysis defines and limits as much as the patriarchal art history that she critiques: what, after all, constitutes 'men's art' and 'women's art'? Are they not both cultural constructs? Are the borders not porous? The fundamental queer critique proffered by Marti's paintings is their dual resistance to the discredited (and never real) minimalist denial of the pleasure of haptic experience, and its resistance to the homogenizing conceits of certain practices within Second Wave feminism. What they explore, rather, is a realm of bound and *unbound* desire. The discipline and repetition involved in weaving is thus seen as analogous to S&M – a process of binding, tying up, and knotting, which corresponds to the ideas of castigation, judgment, and guilt wrought by society on those of sexual difference. In both the videos and woven works, Marti explores the simultaneous process of breaking away from and re-inscribing these restrictions. We might go further and note that the sadomasochism in Marti's works forms a pointed comment on the restrictions

placed on individuals by society at large, whatever people's gender or sexual orientation, and suggest ways that social agents might take hold of known images of domination (for example, the Nazi-police-torture aesthetic of the S&M scene) in order to appropriate its agency.¹¹

3. PAINTING AND VIDEO: CONFLICT AND CONTEMPLATION

The notion of duality is fundamental to Marti's practice, not least in his exploration of the tensions between the private (sex, sexuality) and the public (the display of art work). Marti makes two bodies of work: painting and video. How might we understand this doubling? Are they complementary or antagonistic? Certainly Marti's paintings and videos could not be more different in their temperament: his videos are frequently highly explicit, featuring sexual encounters and personal stories orchestrated by the artist precisely for the purpose of producing an art work. His paintings, by contrast, are quiet, contemplative entities, redolent of an individualized skill and a host of undisclosed subjectivities. Indeed, the problem of reading Marti's work as a whole is rendered more acute by the manner in which he frequently presents his paintings and videos together in a gallery space, often partnering works of different media together. For example, in his recent exhibition 'Bacon's Dog' at BREENSPACE in Sydney, Marti showed the painting *It's All about Peter* (2010) alongside the video *Bacon's Dog* (2010). In the latter, Peter, a middle-aged Australian arts professional is shown in the throes of his first real – mind blowing and identity defining – sexual experience. By contrast, *It's All about Peter* is a painting constructed from cheap plastic objects collected by the subject of the video over a ten-year period (traces, perhaps of an underemployed aesthete seeking beauty in the everyday rather than in the bedroom?). Marti has partially melted these garishly colorful buckets and spades, and arranged them on an armature according to hue and tone.

How do these two bodies of work relate to one another? Might we define it as a conflictual relationship, based on a dialectical opposition between the two art forms and their *modus operandi*? Collision as practice and concept is certainly a key aspect of Marti's videos, which often document a subject's cathartic or painful real-life experience as they confront the ruthlessly penetrative (aggressively male?) lens. Repeatedly, the videos portray men admitting to feelings of loneliness, sexual inadequacy, and deep psychological pain. The videos are not for the faint hearted. In *Time Is the Fire in Which We Burn* (2008–09) a Glaswegian rent boy recalls having marathon group sex whilst high on crack cocaine; in *Disclosure* (2009), an elderly Scottish man appears wretchedly unhappy with his own body (he is fat and suffers the indignity of piles). As artistic parallels to psychotherapy sessions, the video works mine the depths of a subject's psyche, and can be seen as tools for the subject's better self-understanding and cues to enacting a better life (not unlike Gonzalez-Torres's reading of Althusser). Certainly, Marti's video work relates to other practices that unsettle the ethics of display. Elsewhere in this monograph, Kirsten Lloyd has insightfully explored Marti's video work in relationship to contemporary artists such as Artur Żmijewski and Santiago

Sierra. Like them, Marti's videos are deliberately self-reflexive and imply a degree of manipulation (even coercion) on the part of the artist. We frequently see Marti himself in bed talking and coaxing stories from the men who lay or sit beside him. Such works tread the line between exploitation and exhibitionism, posing difficult questions about the relationship between the author of a work and the subject, as well as the viewer and the consumption of art. In *Bacon's Dog*, the experience is a positive one (Peter, the man in the video, now has a steady boyfriend) – although it was a difficult one – and the positive outcome is certainly not necessary to the realisation of the work. Needless to say, Marti's videos are at once compelling and uncomfortable to watch.

In this reading, we could say that the videos and paintings are fundamentally unlike. The videos are cathartic and the paintings are sublimatory; the videos are explicit and representative, the paintings are abstract; the videos offer the subject the possibility of defining their own self-image, while the paintings lack the option of feedback. As much as this makes sense, we might seek alternative ways to read Marti's twin body of works. They may be viewed not as conflictual or antagonistic, but as holistically coherent: both aspects of the artist's practice might be said to be fundamentally similar. One model for such a unity within an apparently split practice would be Andy Warhol, whose film and painting output were similarly centered on an expanded notion of portraiture. But here too, the comparison falls apart rapidly. While Warhol's films placed the performer in the role of exhibitionist and the viewer in the role of voyeur, they also suggested that the mechanism of the camera apparatus was determinate (everyone under its gaze would be reduced to a frustrated celebrity); likewise in his screen-printed portraits, the individual loses his or her agency to the serialism of the machine age, each face being subjected to a technological process that reduces their presence to a blank icon. Warhol's art is modernist and technocratic; he wished to be a machine, and to produce machine-like art. If his diverse practices were internally coherent, it was because of a vision of modernity that has since been superseded. While Marti certainly draws on Warhol's mix of anti-humanism and Catholic-devotional image making, he moves it into a territory that Warhol would have found alien and un-modern.

I would argue that it is more accurate to view Marti's video and painting as instantiating not an internal logic of conflict or a secret singularity, but rather as enacting a form of multiplicity in which contradictions are accepted as a political and aesthetic strategy. From a British perspective, I would push the associations drawn by Lloyd to Artur Żmijewski and Santiago Sierra back toward works that are both agonistic (to borrow Chantal Mouffe's terminology) and concerned with the politics of identity: Jayne Parker's *Almost Out* (1984), Michael Curran's *Amami Se Vuoi* (1994), or Isaac Julien's *Trussed* (1996), as well as the video portraits of Jordan Baseman and Hilarly Lloyd. This genealogy might enable us to more easily touch on theoretical discourses fomented in the 1980s and 1990s, which unsettled the notion that a singular artistic or sexual identity is either necessary or possible. Theorist Judith Butler has pointed out that the notion of gender upends the very foundations of a stable and fixed identity from which we may claim to recuperate meaning.¹² In her analysis, gender is based not on a pre-given quality of a person (as one's physical sex might be), but rather on a set of

cultural norms and codes. As such, gender itself can be performed anew to create new modes between the hard and fast categories (for example, Kozloff's 'men's art' and 'women's art'.) Such an analysis leads to the notion that Marti's split practice offers both the audience and the artist a set of polarities that should not be synthesised or defined under a single essence – save, perhaps, the leitmotif of multiplicity itself.

Finally, we must note a central *modus operandi* that unifies Marti's practice. It is performative creation – the notion that one might instantiate an image for oneself through an act of image making. As he weaves a portrait of a subject, Marti at the same moment inscribes his own identity. While it is a truism that all portraiture is a form of self-portraiture, it is also clear that Marti's works are constantly doubled so that subject and author comeingle. It is important that the artist continues to occupy the role of maker – as he did aged eleven in school craft lessons – using his own hands to fabricate the works. Marti operates as a double agent, between media and subject/author positions. When the artist melted together plastic objects in *It's All about Peter*, his act of image-construction knitted together his own

It's All about Peter
2010
Melted plastic (collected by Peter Fay from 1999–2009)
200 x 330 x 16 cm
Installation view at BREENSPACE, Sydney
Photo: Jamie North



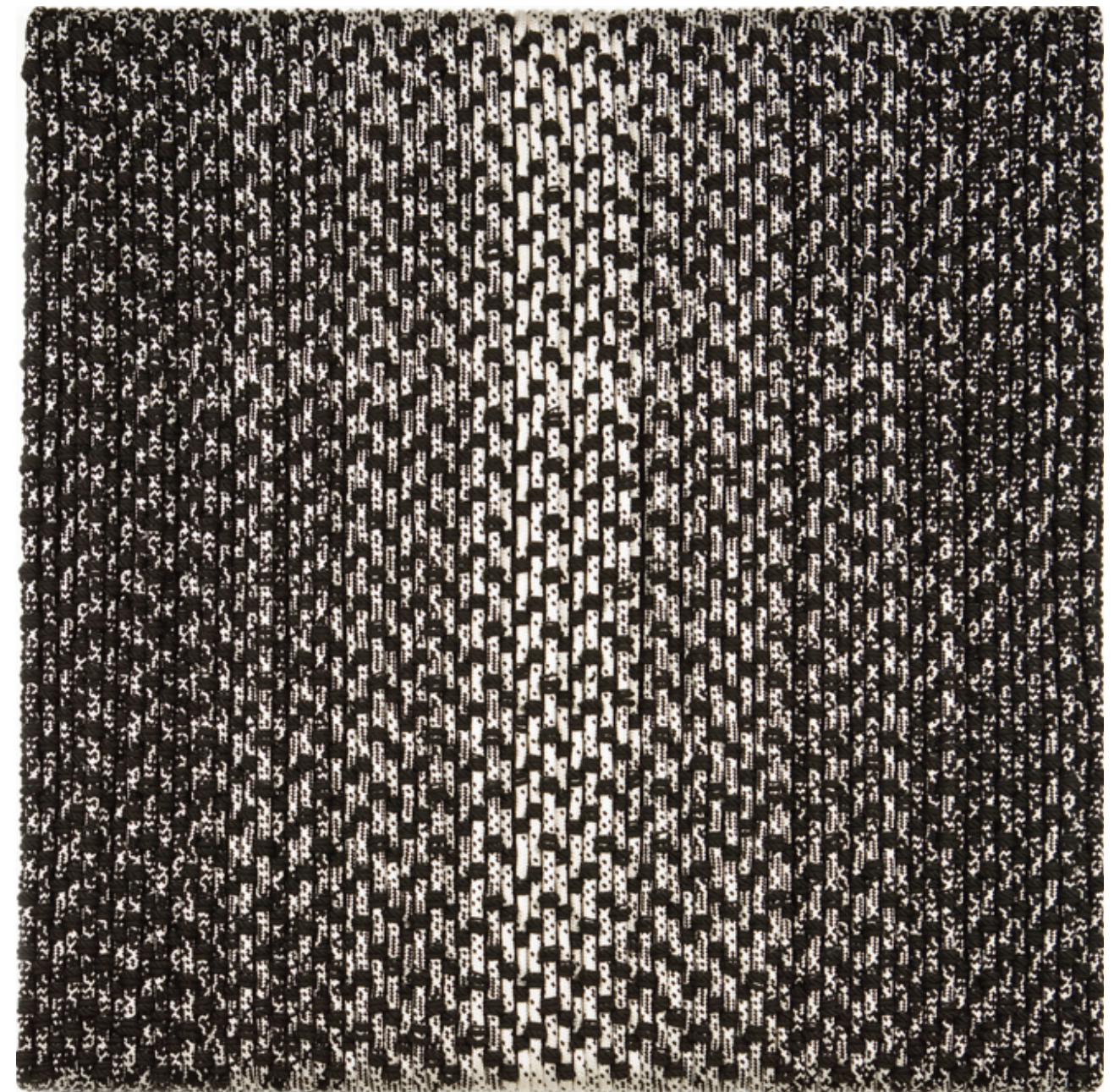
One Breath below Consciousness
2008
White polyester, nylon, and dirt
c. 200 x 240 x 10 cm
Photo: Jamie North

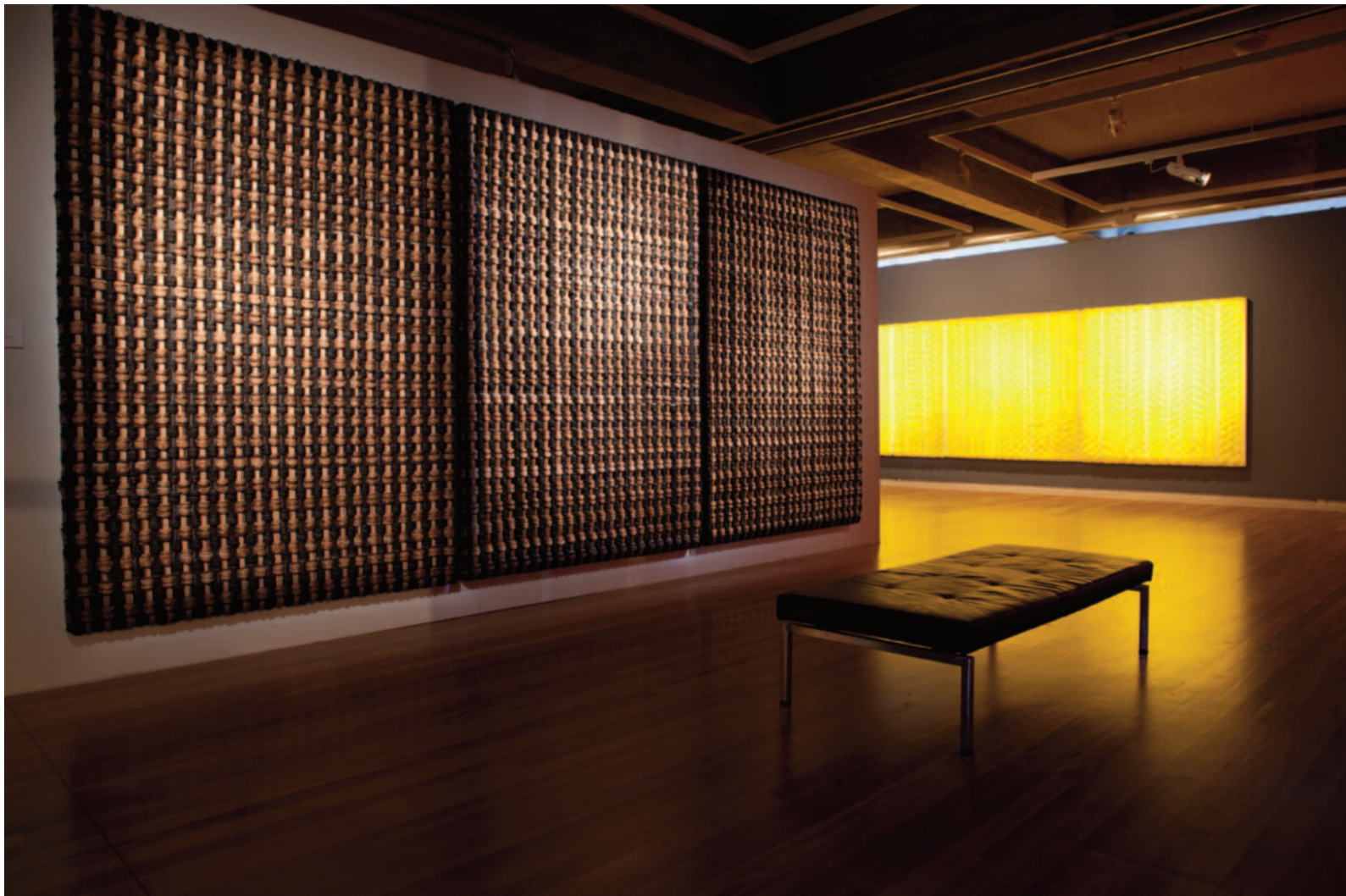
subjectivity with that of Peter's. In *The Pleasure Chest* (2007), the artist entwines his own magpie sensibilities with those of the countless women whose necklaces and rosaries, still carrying the smell of the wearer, form the work's surface (his own mother's necklace is apparently in there somewhere too). The soiled and ragged painting *One Breath below Consciousness* (2008) corresponds to the video *David* (2007) – a documentation of a semi-conscious homeless man in Glasgow – and was made from clean white polyester and nylon ropes that Marti dragged behind a car along different road surfaces (including bitumen and mud). The surface of the rope was thus stressed and torn, analogous to David's worn and battered clothes and skin. In such works, the motivation is at one with the videos, which knit together the interviewer and interviewee in a ballet of problematic ethical questions and self-inscription. These works are about surfaces and material presence, conflict and contemplation, portraiture and abstraction. In Marti's materialist portraiture, specific human encounters are woven and stitched into a fabric whose potential formal variations are rich and without limit. Depth is beside the point.

- 1 In conversation with the author, August 18, 2011.
- 2 'Etre un Espion: Interview with Robert Storr', *ArtPress*, January 1995, pp.24–32. Available at: <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/FelixGT/FelixInterv.html>
- 3 Louis Althusser, 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter', *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–87* (London: Verso, 1996), pp.163–207.
- 4 Althusser, p.170.
- 5 In Conversation with the author, August 18, 2011.
- 6 In Conversation with the author, August 18, 2011.
- 7 In an interview for *Mousse* magazine with Maurizio Catalan shortly before he died, Gonzalez-Torres noted the advantages of having 'coded' works: "You know, when I had a show at the Hirschhorn, Senator Stevens, who is one of the most homophobic anti-gay senators, said he was going to come to the opening and I thought he's going to have a really hard time trying to explain to his constituency how pornographic and homoerotic two clocks side by side are. He came there looking for dicks and asses. There was nothing like that." The interview is available online at: <http://www.moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=59>
- 8 Jörg Heiser, 'Surface Tension', *Kaleidoscope*, 2009. Available online at: <http://kaleidoscope-press.com/magazine/?p=mag&iss=4&art=2#art2>
- 9 'Art and Objecthood', *Minimal Art a Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) p.116.
- 10 Joyce Kozloff, eds Kristine Stiles, Peter Howard Seiz, *Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) p.154.
- 11 This is clearly expressed in artist Hito Steyerl's video *Lovely Andrea* (2007), a film centered on Japan's self-suspension scene. Pablo Lafuente notes that Steyerl looks at "local and global structures of political control and domination, the position of women within those structures, the constructed nature of documentary images, the modes of availability of images through video and the internet, the commercial value of those images (including artworks) and the subversive potential of submission and role play." Pablo Lafuente, 'For a Populist Cinema: On Hito Steyerl's *November* and *Lovely Andrea*', *Afterall*, Autumn/Winter, 2008.
- 12 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990).



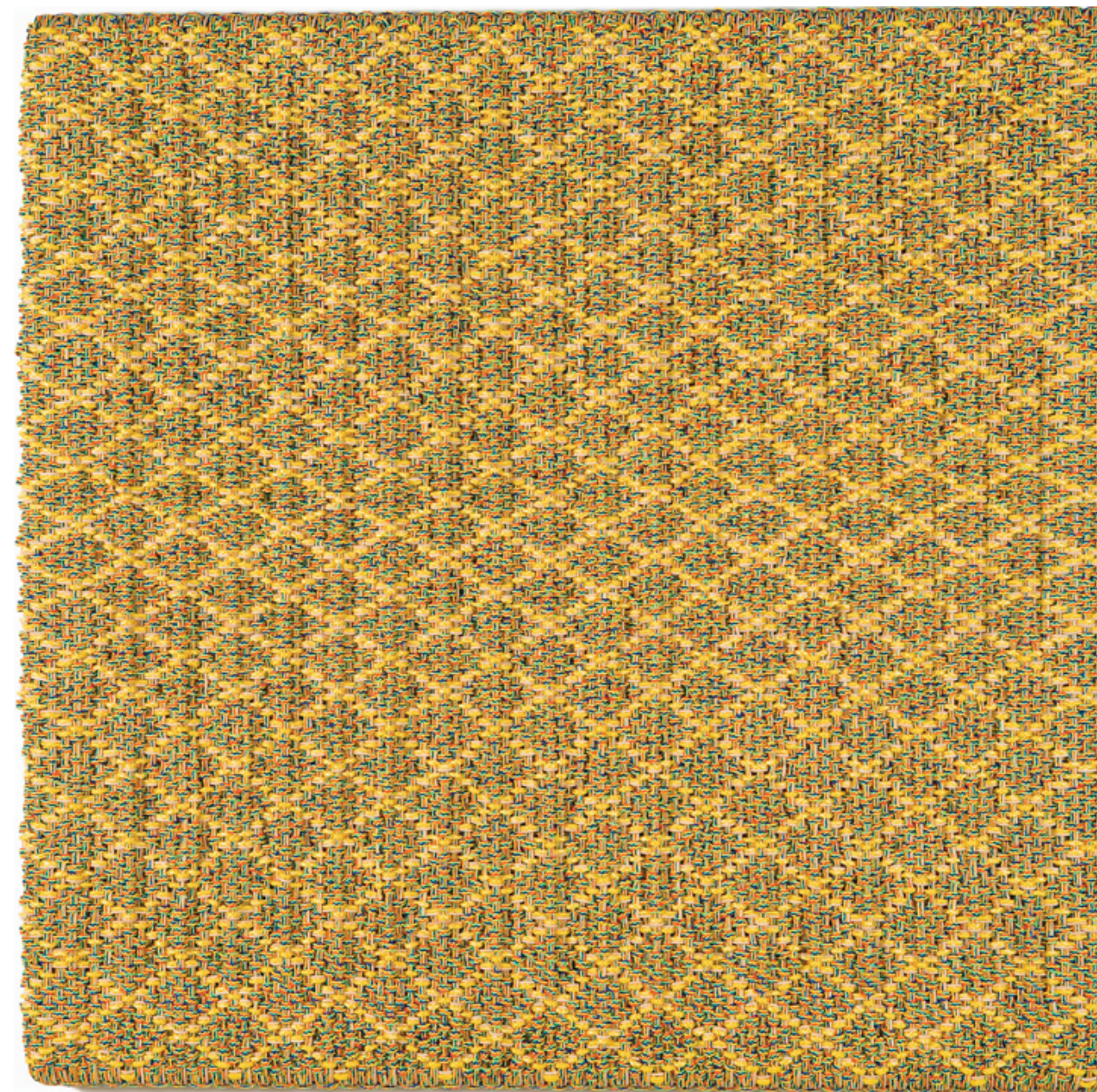
WOVEN





Beige (after David, Glasgow), 2008. Polyester, nylon, and leather. 3 panels, each 260 x 190 x 14 cm. Commissioned by Casula Power House, Liverpool, Australia.
Installation view at Newcastle Art Gallery, Australia







Black Dot, 2011. Polypropylene and nylon. Ø 135 cm x 45 cm

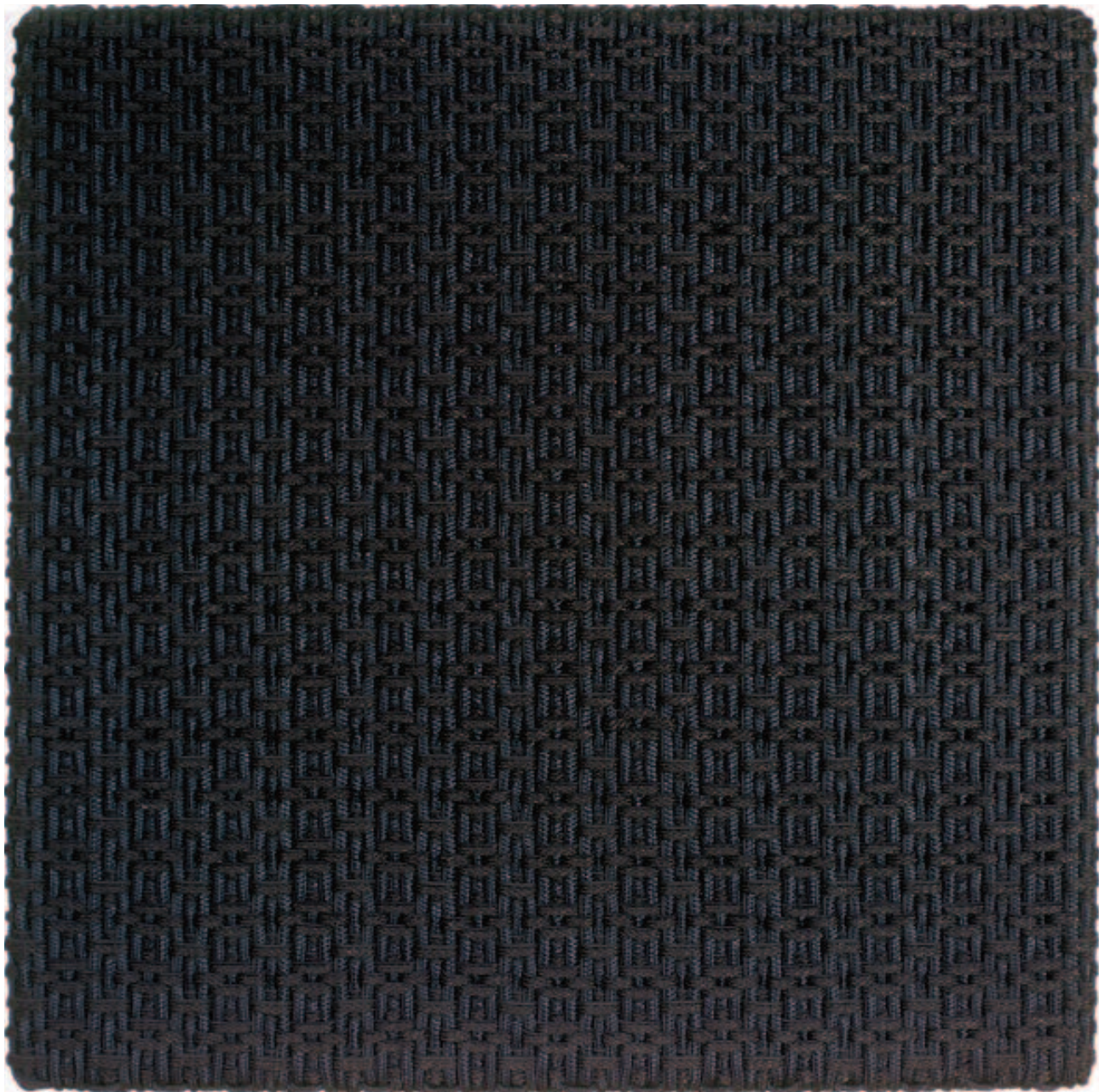


Braveheart (Take 4), 2008. Polyester, nylon, and leather. 200 x 145 x 13 cm. Photo: Jamie North

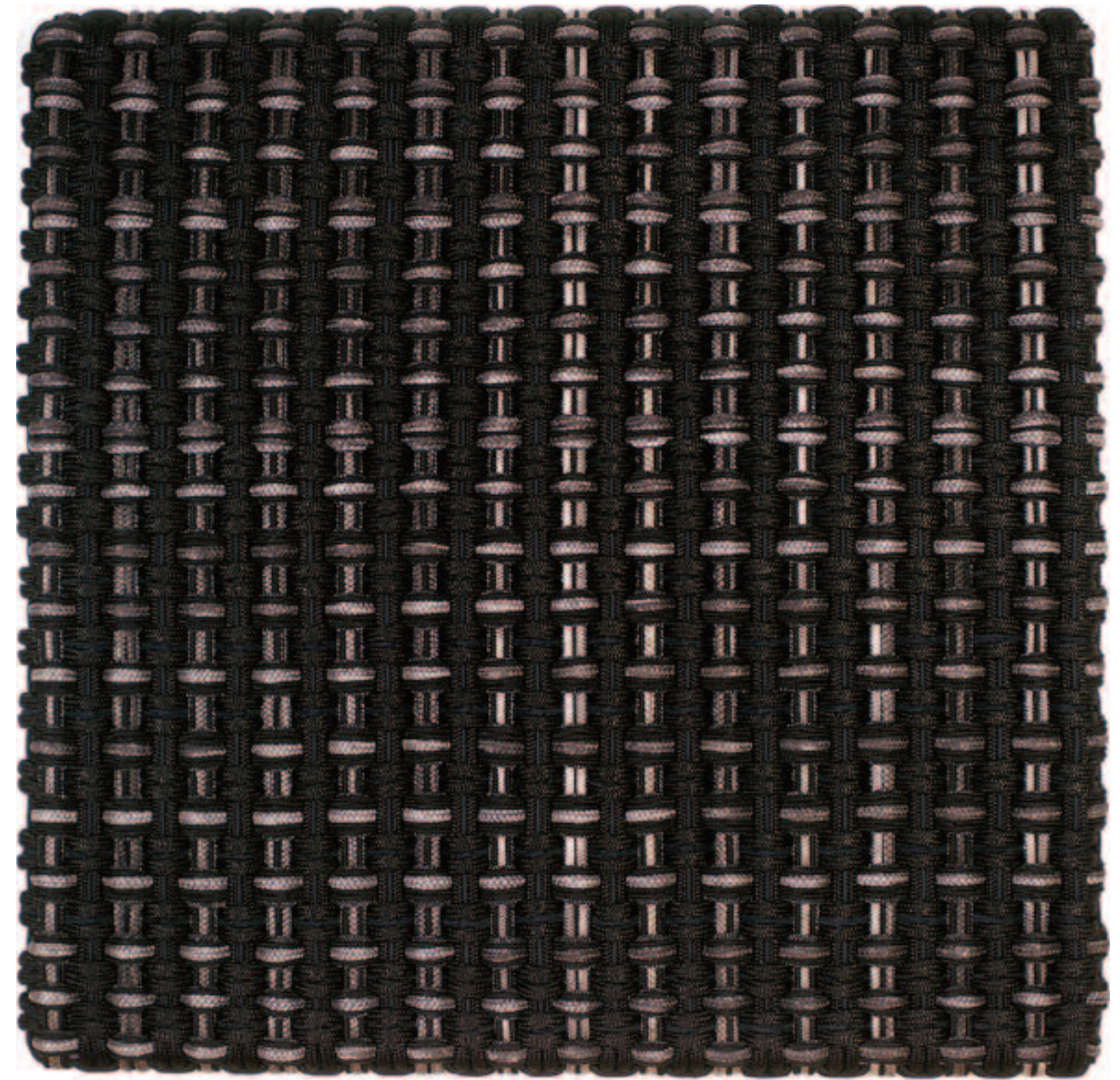


Looking for Pablo, 2006–11. Stainless steel braided hose, polyester, polypropylene, leather, industrial rubber, glass, and magnetic beads. 250 × 140 × 70 cm. Photo: Iain Bond

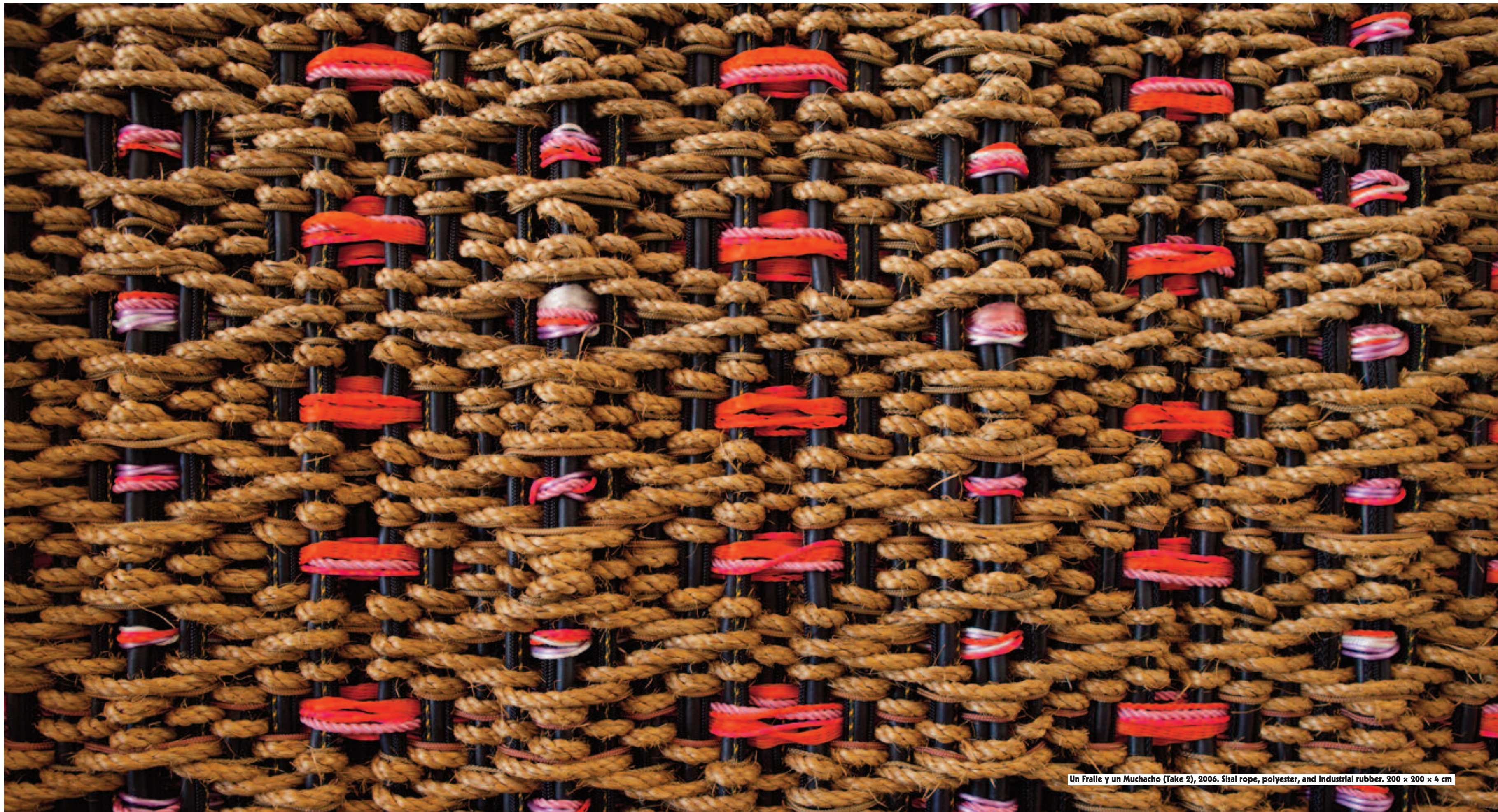




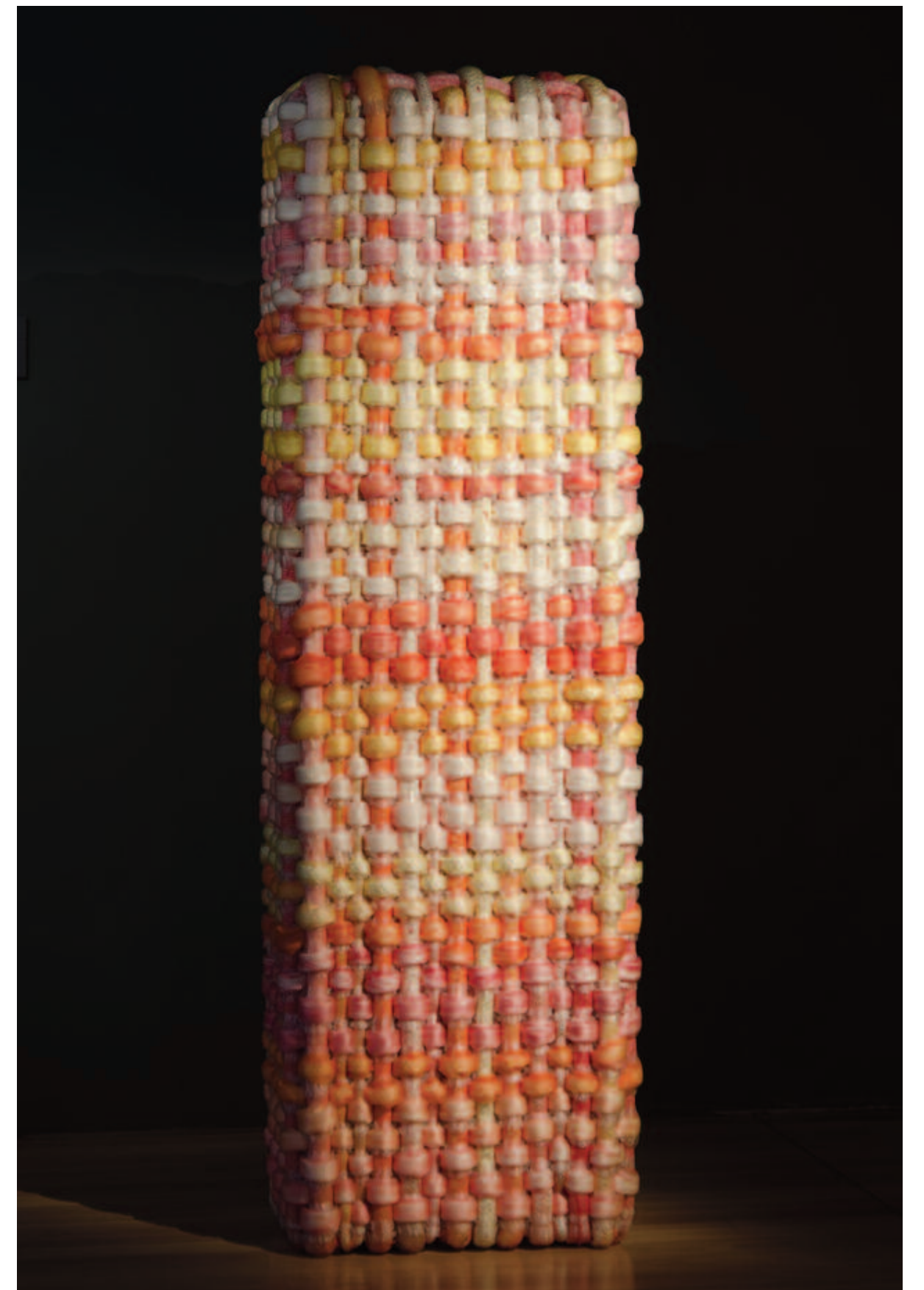
Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.1. Asiatic Angel Greeted by a Young Nipple, 2002. Polyester, nylon, and polypropylene. 200 x 200 x 7 cm



Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.5. Dry and Calm, Casually Looking Away, 2003. Polyester, nylon, and polypropylene. 200 x 200 x 8 cm. Photo: Ian Hobbs



Un Fraile y un Muchacho (Take 2), 2006. Sisal rope, polyester, and industrial rubber. 200 x 200 x 4 cm



Linda, 2001. Polypropylene. 180 x 50 x 40 cm



It's All about Peter (detail), 2010. Melted plastic. 200 x 330 x 16 cm



Sure, Perhaps, Maybe I Will, 2011. Stainless steel. 120 x 90 x 6 cm

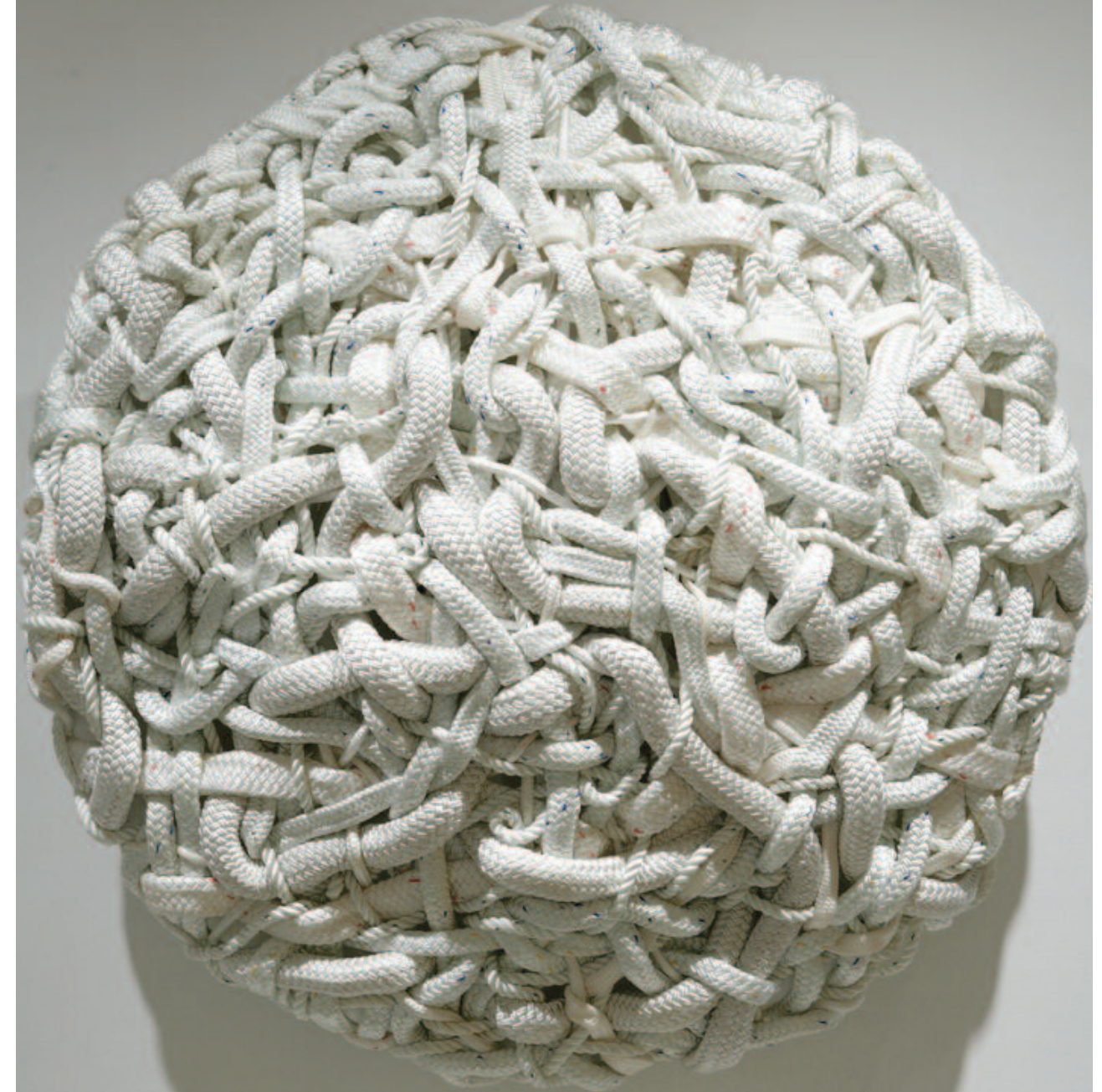


My Sad Captain (Take 2), 2011. Polyester and glass beads. 210 x Ø 10 cm. Installed at Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, 2011. Photo: Iain Bond





A Hundred Lashes, 2005. From the series The Seven Pleasures of Snow White. Polyester, nylon, and polypropylene. Ø 130 cm x 30 cm. Photo: Paul Green



Becoming Animal, 2005. From the series The Seven Pleasures of Snow White. Polyester, nylon, and polypropylene. Ø 130 cm x 30 cm. Photo: Paul Green



The Last Sins of St. Francis: Scarring the Flesh (Episode 5), 2003–04. Nylon, polypropylene, polyester, rubber, and barbed wire. 140 x 200 x 16 cm. Photo: Paul Green



57 **The Pleasure Chest, 2007. Second-hand beaded necklaces and Spanish rosary beads, collected 2000–03. 130 x 255 x 10 cm. Photo: Jamie North**



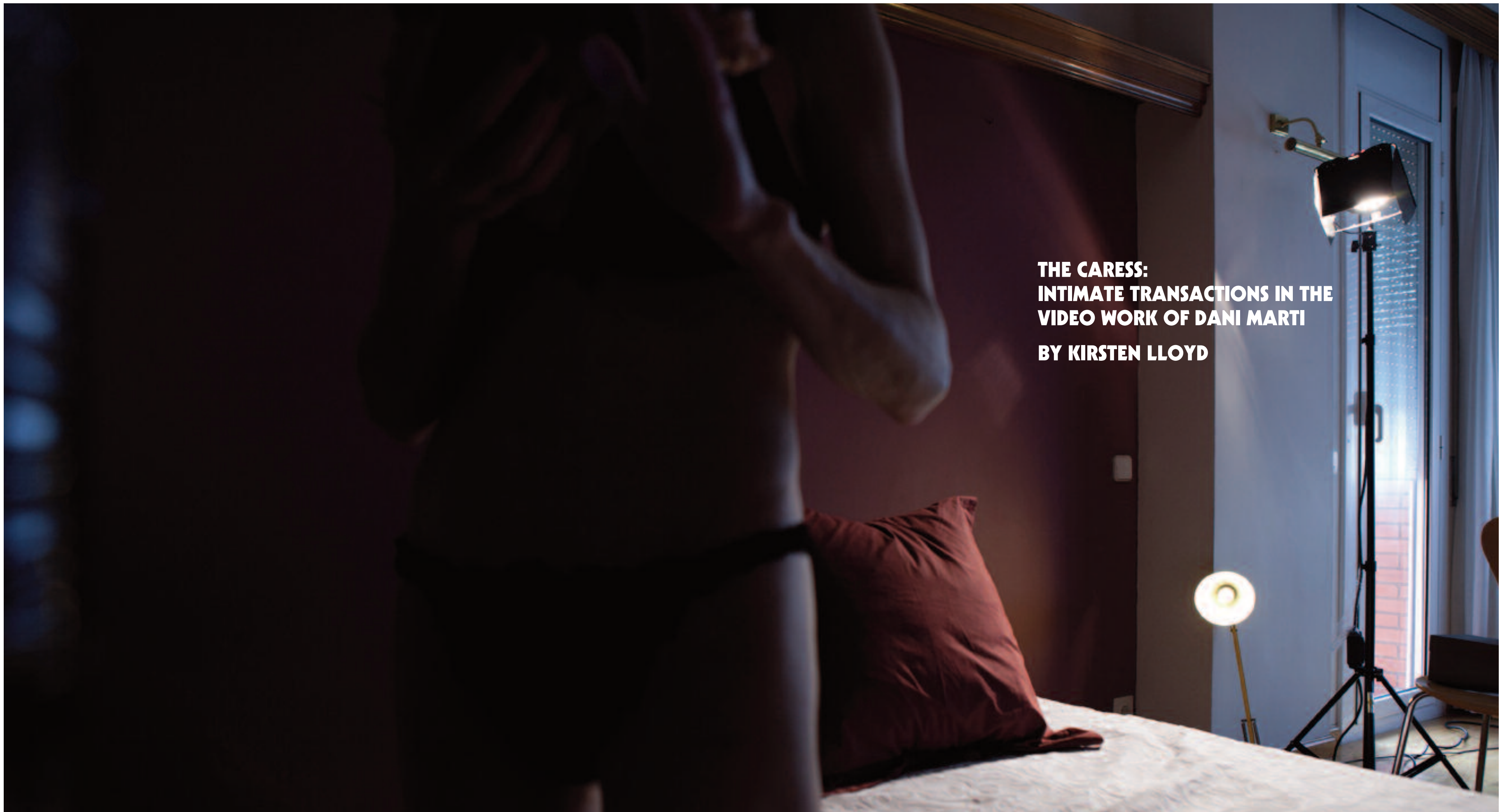
59 **Time Is the Fire in Which We Burn (Take 2), 2009. Metal scourers. 240 × 600 × 30 cm. Exhibition view at Arc One Gallery, Melbourne, 2009**



Sydney, 2010. Cast concrete. Approx. 7 x 15 m.
Westfield, Urban Art Projects, John Wardle Architects,
Centre Point Tower, Sydney.
Photo: Mark Llewellyn photography



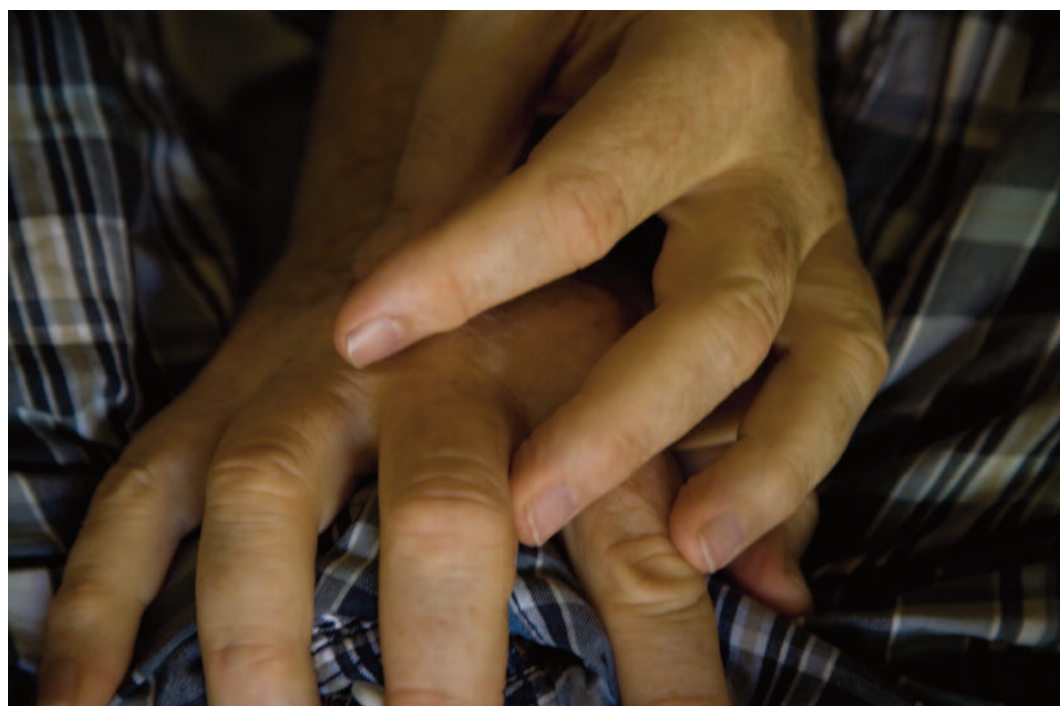
Installation view of the exhibition
'One Breath below Consciousness',
BRENSPACE, Sydney 2008



**THE CARESS:
INTIMATE TRANSACTIONS IN THE
VIDEO WORK OF DANI MARTI
BY KIRSTEN LLOYD**



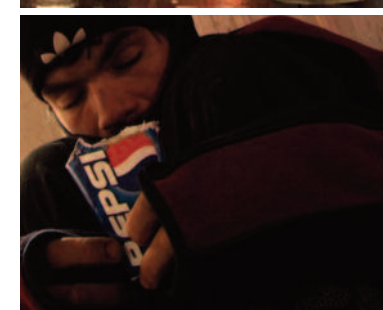
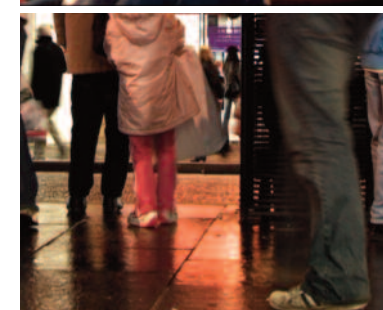
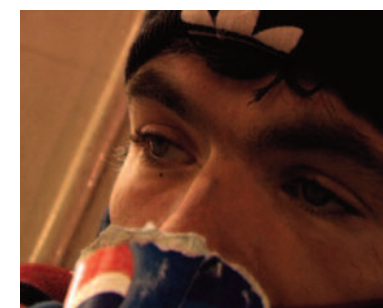
Bacon's Dog
2010
2 channel video 2.55:1
11 min 30 sec
Production shot



"SKIN AND LIGHT AND TOUCH"

Dani Marti's video *Bacon's Dog* (2010) opens with a single shot of a naked man splayed face-up across a bed's crumpled sheets. The narrow split screen fades in and out with close shots of pale, mottled skin and clasped hands. Strangely blackened fingers caress and tug at a nipple. The tick of a clock mingles with the sound of passing cars, of bodies touching, mouths sucking and gasping breaths. Snippets of speech interject to describe the intensity of somatic sensations, to offer the briefest of reflections or narrative insights. *Bacon's Dog* is a visceral account of the first sexual experience of Peter Fay, a sixty-five-year-old writer, curator, and art collector from Sydney, Australia. Over a period of five months, Marti introduced him to physical intimacy in exchange for the opportunity to film their encounters. In the associated excerpts taken from email dialogues between the two men Peter is devastatingly honest about his situation, going into some detail about the harrowing impact of his childhood medical problems, his failed encounters with prostitutes and the revulsion in which he holds his own body. Such anecdotes are contrasted with poetic attempts to articulate the acute sense of anticipation, desire, and fear he experiences in the build-up to their encounters yet these texts pale next to the intensity of the video document itself. Condensed into an oppressive eleven-minute vignette, the footage places Peter under an almost unbearable level of scrutiny, dwelling on moments of unbound desire, jealousy, post-coital reflection, and loneliness.

Since he began using a camera in 2004 Marti has compiled an extensive archive of such intimate encounters, which are often described as 'video portraits'. In tracing the development of his work, this essay will propose a shift of perspective that loosens the grip of the traditional art historical category of portraiture to instead locate his practice amongst alternative lineages



David
2007
Video 4:3
8 min 29 sec
Video stills
Commissioned by Glasgow International
2008
Sound arrangement by Diana Simpson

including the documentary genre and socially engaged art. Addressing *how* Marti works as an artist introduces complex yet pivotal questions around the reconfiguration of the artwork induced by the now pervasive compulsion to document as well as the significance of ethical discourse to contemporary art. By reflecting on his practice as a form of labor attention is refocused on the intricacies of the transactions he stages with both the subject and the viewer of the document: it is within these economies that the uniqueness and significance of his artworks can be discerned.

Marti's first foray with a camera, *David* (2007), recorded a young homeless man on the rain-lashed streets of Glasgow slipping in and out of consciousness as winter shoppers hurried by. Though this encounter played out in public, the context is rendered indistinct as shop and car lights refract and disperse across the soaked pavement. Instead, the camera closes in on David's half-shut eyes and stained fingers, hovering to capture his repeated efforts to retain his grip on a paper cup. Conflating the genres of portraiture and social documentary, this short, looped video established many of the key characteristics of Marti's subsequent video practice. The constrained scale, the focus on the body and the intense quality of concentration on an everyday scenario have since become defining features. In this early case, Marti paid his subject twenty pounds and closely recorded him for around ninety minutes. It was a sight that occasionally elicited indignation from passers-by troubled by the potential for exploitation. Though these reactions do not appear in the final edit, the presentation of this spectacle of poverty in slick white (or black) cube gallery spaces generates a similar sense of discomfort.

Based upon a reconnaissance into deprived urban territories, *David* is reminiscent of Thomas Annan's early photographs of Glasgow's slum dwellings in the late 1860s (though Annan's interest lay primarily in the dilapidated buildings and claustrophobic closes rather than in the transitory bodies of their inhabitants). But if Marti effaced his own position as an observer to create an apparently neutral description of destitution, this approach was quickly inverted in later videos. Working instead from the inside out he began to both mine his own relationship networks and forge new ones, training his camera upon homosexual men drawn from the artworld, gay scenes in his home cities, and the more loose-knit communities generated by online sites like Gaydar. Rejecting the happenstance of the street, he now proposes and plans individual projects over drinks or via webcams. Carefully composed scenarios then play out within the confines of domestic interiors, each focused on an exchange with a single individual lasting anywhere between a few hours and many months. Working alone with rudimentary recording equipment Marti's personal charm plays an important part in facilitating these encounters. Something of a master at engineering consent and eliciting confessional storytelling, he possesses an extraordinary ability to put his subjects at ease in front of the camera, suppressing anxieties and loosening tongues to document everything from explicitly sexual activities to confessional pillow talk.

Sometimes questioning his informants from behind a hand-held camera, at others lying in bed beside them with stray leads plainly in view, Marti makes no attempt to disguise the play of construction and manipulation upon which each encounter is based. While many subjects relish the opportunity to perform before the lens, allowing Marti an extraordinary



Oompa Loompa
2009–10
Video 2.55:1
38 min 10 sec
Video still

level of access into their personal histories and sexual proclivities, others are considerably more reticent. The surreal recording of an overweight male in a cartoon mask fervidly running his tongue between the artist's toes is a case in point. Recorded from the recipient's perspective – with all the connotations of pornography such an angle suggests – *Oompa Loompa* (2009/10) documents the foot-fetishist's slow progression to climax while almost comically attempting to hide his identity behind joke shop props. Looped and devoid of further narrative it's a difficult video to watch. As with *Bacon's Dog* the sense of discomfort induced by our transgression as viewers into such a private moment is doubled by the acute awareness that such moments have been constructed *for us*: they have been staged precisely in order to produce a document for display.

Flesh, tongues, breath, and fluids: the relentless focus on the corporeal in Marti's practice and his work has often been highlighted by various curatorial investigations dealing with aging, desire, masculinity, and disease. Yet his work moves beyond the obsession with the human body so prevalent in the art of the late twentieth century to incorporate not just the materiality of the body, but the materiality of the body's movement: the protagonists see, touch, talk, become sexually aroused, and engage in intimate sex acts. Rather than attempting to create portraits which incorporate those elements that elude the still photograph – an individual's mannerisms say, his voice, or even his carnal preferences – these documents record the 'presentness' of a specific exchange between the artist, the subject, and the camera. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has rejected the reduction of the body to mere matter, proposing instead an alternative conception based on relationality whereby bodies are not physical but "distant-near, reachable-unreachable, desirable-fearful, erotic, powerful, weak, fleeting, confrontational".¹ Marti's practice is positioned here, precisely within intersubjective gaps and touching points. As documents of emphatically corporeal encounters, his videos emphasise the materiality of social relations and social processes.

SEX WORK

Each of these video projects revolves around a transactional framework. While David received twenty pounds cash, in later works Marti has instead traded intimacy and sex for an opportunity to create his filmic portraits. *Time Is the Fire in Which We Burn* (2009) documents an encounter with John, a former bus driver turned porn actor and male prostitute. Recorded by a single camera mounted on a tripod the sixty-seven-minute video is only lightly edited. With their shaven heads and closely clipped facial hair the two men face each other in bed, tattooed torsos emerging from the sheets as John recounts his recent experiences in the USA. Young, handsome, and voluble, he talks frankly about his work as a rent boy, addiction to crystal meth, and the disintegration of his three-way relationship. We learn that following a mental breakdown he had returned home to Glasgow only two weeks prior to filming. Just inside the frame, Marti gently questions his friend, touching him, reassuring him, and getting up to adjust the camera angle. His pared-back interview technique is carefully based around open-ended questions discreetly posed to either maintain the momentum of John's thought flow or to mine a little deeper. He regales us with anecdotes about fetish fisting and marathon orgies before attempting to describe the intense sexual euphoria experienced under the influence of 'Tina'; a description that quickly digresses into a comically complex *Star Trek* analogy. But the incessant flow of stories doesn't stop there. John's laughter swings back and forth towards despair as he recounts drinking a full bottle of bleach in an attempt to commit suicide and struggles to control his emotions when talking about the pet dog he was forced to leave behind. The contradictions flow thick and fast when he discusses his experiences of being rented: pride in the glamorous lifestyle, the standard of his clientele, and the amount of cash



Time Is the Fire in Which We Burn
2008–09
Video 2.35:1
1 hour 7 min
Production shot
Funded by GoMA Glasgow

he was able to command on account of the size of his cock rubs counter to an overriding sense of degradation, of being used. In one of the most revealing passages in the video he admits that the attention of clients – at least at first – made him feel special but that his experiences may ultimately have taken away his ability to “feel love”.

Each confessional tale is rooted in somatic experience. As John narrates we watch his body shift from postures of confident exuberance to grief-laden vulnerability, shrinking back to cover his face or lay his head on Marti’s chest. According to the artist, the only way to make him comfortable enough to relate his experiences was to lie down beside him. In the event, John appears to actively enjoy the process of filming. In marked contrast to the fetishist’s introversion, he relishes the sustained attention of the camera, displaying a self-awareness and a desire to please that verges on the performative. Set against a narrative of rejection, indifference, and exploitation, the combination of his garrulous stories and on-screen gestures exposes an intense longing for touch, attention, and physical intimacy. He scrutinises Marti’s body, stroking his skin and picking at his blackheads as he talks. For all the explicit references to fucking, this is only part of his desire for human response and interaction: in this instance, when the two men do have opportunistic sex halfway through the recording, Marti switched the camera off.

Time Is the Fire in Which We Burn can be slotted into a venerable lineage of portraits of prostitutes in the history of art from Caravaggio to Manet, a lineage which has recently been expanded by the prominent place that the figure of the female sex worker occupies in contemporary art. What marks Marti’s video apart is that his constructed scenario specifically foregrounds the *transaction* between artist and model, between prostitute and client, positing the economy of production as a central theme of the work. A strange doubling takes place here; identifying a need in his subject for comfort and understanding then using his own body to trade intimacy for art material, the artist mirrors the role of the prostitute. At the same time, the document that emerges is an intense yet ultimately unstable record of an encounter which hovers ambiguously between homespun therapy and brutal exposure. Though no money changes hands, John’s exploitation is re-enacted and spectacularised for our consumption.

THE ETHICS OF ENCOUNTER

As an increasing number of artists site their practice within the social fabric of everyday life, the encounter has been placed at the heart of a newly defined aesthetic experience. It’s now commonplace for artists to employ participatory, collaborative, and relational strategies to engage directly with – and produce – interpersonal relations. When they do so, their work often bears a close resemblance to ethnographic mapping, journalism, or even community work. The ever-growing demand upon art to provide a framework for the documentation of social processes is closely linked with these broader developments. While many artists produce investigative video essays or use the lens to record durational artistic projects, scores of others adopt a similar approach to Marti, carefully constructing artificial situations in order to create a document of the episode. Yet, if many socially engaged artists seek to use their practice to

strengthen social bonds and create positive on-the-ground consequences, it seems that the introduction of the camera often transforms the ethical dynamic. Consider the Polish artist Artur Żmijewski’s disturbing short video *80064* (2004) during which he bullies a Holocaust survivor into having his identification tattoo ‘refreshed’ despite his clear protestations. Or Santiago Sierra’s photographic documents of the numerous disenfranchised and desperate individuals he has paid minimal sums to be tattooed, dyed, incarcerated, and otherwise humiliated. In these works the lens has effectively become a license to stage exploitative social experiments. The process of bringing interventions *back* inside the walls of the institution by means of the video or photographic document either introduces an additional ‘layer’ of audience or, more usually, fully displaces the participant with the viewer. Used and manipulated as so much raw material, individuals are once again reduced to the position of powerless subject, while the artist aggressively reclaims the authorial role. This despotic tendency is often highly gendered, falling almost exclusively within the purview of male artists. Adopting a directorial role they prefer to ‘manage’ situations, hiring others to perform the physical tasks of dyeing hair, inking skin, or documenting the proceedings: though they may well be visible these artists rarely physically touch their participants.

The ethics of image production and the inherently imbalanced power relationship between artist and subject have been extensively explored in the documentary genre, though much of the debate has focused on how to protect the most vulnerable, the most deserving, and alleviate the worst excesses of this disparity. As Brian Winston and Allan Sekula (among many others) showed back in the 70s and 80s, the situation is further complicated by the documentary lens’ apparently insatiable *appetite* for the victim. While Sekula talked of filmmakers’ predilection for “aiming the camera downwards”, Brian Winston later lambasted what he called “the tradition of the victim”, a tendency he saw as the product of John Grierson’s early dedication to social amelioration combined with Robert Flaherty’s poetic romanticism which so powerfully placed the trials of individuals at the center of his narratives. Along with many of his peers, Marti reflexively engages with the power asymmetries that are embedded in the very act of documentation. Yet while Żmijewski and Sierra apparently relish the shock induced when they substitute the ultra-ethical artist-as-social worker with the deliberately provocative artist-as-sociopath model, Marti’s case is not quite so clear-cut. In his video documents the implicit aggression of the camera lens, the manipulation and exposure of vulnerable individuals, is countered by the addition of an altogether different sense of care and generosity. It’s this curious mix that begins to open out alternative considerations that encompass – yet go beyond – the obvious questions of ethical valence which narrowly focus upon categorising interventions into the social fabric as either productively ‘good’ or transgressive, ‘bad’ and yet, ultimately, revealing. Instead, this work proposes alternative relationships between ethics and aesthetics. It draws in ethics in its broadest, multivalent sense, as concerned with ways of dwelling, or forms of being in the world and, crucially, *being with* others. To be sure, Marti’s transgressive engagements seek to disrupt the status quo, the de-politicising consensus brought about and maintained by what Jacques Rancière has called the reign of ‘soft ethics’. But they also break away from concerns with such normalising social

and legal imperatives to move into the more complex realms of ethical relations. Marti's subjects are not presented as mere sacrificial victims, rather from a perspective of intimate proximity. Care, responsiveness, concrete dialogic interaction, and empathetic identification are all central concerns of his practice.

Hints of this approach can be detected in the excruciatingly tender way Marti films David, where the gaze of camera resembles a caress. By entering the frame in later works he seeks to further collapse any sense of objective distance, the *sine qua non* of social research, documentary, and, of course, therapy. The bond created between the artist and the subject in these intimate recordings seems to speak to a midpoint between social documentary and the personal snapshot or home video. There are echoes here of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1979–2004), Nan Goldin's diaristic account of her 'community of lovers'. Discussing this accumulation of images which so closely recorded her life Goldin stated: "These pictures come out of relationships, not observation." Similarly fascinated by lived experience, Marti also makes full use of his privileged position, documenting himself alongside his subjects as an HIV-positive gay man. But though Goldin spoke openly about her strategy of "developing a community" to photograph, the individuals who have become part of Marti's video archive do not constitute a coherent friendship network or scene. Instead, he hunts out and engineers these singular encounters, determined not to arbitrarily represent but to actively intervene in social realities.

Boris Groys has identified the fundamental difference this type of practice presents, suggesting that it re-conceives the relationship between art and life in a completely new context "defined by the aspiration of today's art to become life itself, not merely to depict life or to offer it art products."² Leaping into the territories of biopolitical production, artists move away from the traditional tactics of mimesis and representation to instead stage experiments, shape situations, and otherwise direct social realities. These developments challenge the very framework of the artwork: does art documentation constitute art itself or does it simply refer to it? As productive as these points are, Marti's practice complicates Groys's assertion that the document simply makes visible an art event which takes place *elsewhere*. In his case, the video document is used as a work surface, as a site through which the protagonists stage a dialogic encounter, and, crucially, to forge emotional connections. This is not to suggest that these are collaborative projects, where each participant possesses an equal level of agency and authorship is shared. Rather, it is to contend that the camera is a mediator in the fullest sense of the term, that it is fundamentally imbricated in the production of social relations.

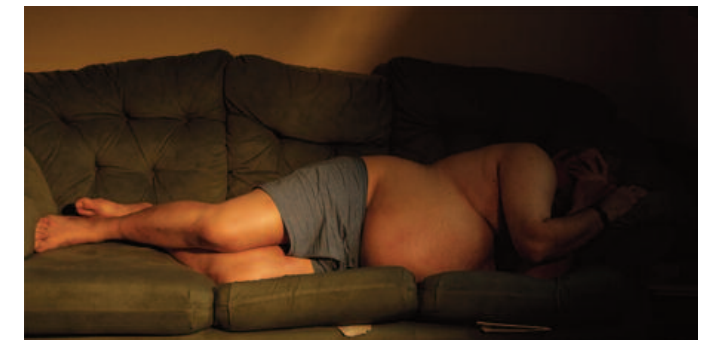
"HOW DOES THAT MAKE YOU FEEL?"

These notes and comparisons are particularly illuminating when considering two of Marti's most recent works: *And That's It* (2011) and *Jim Solo* (2011). Marti met the subjects when making the video *Disclosure* (2009), a work commissioned by the Glasgay festival and Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art as part of their shOUT social justice exhibition programme. William and Jim were two of seven men who agreed to be interviewed to camera about their sex lives,

And That's It
2011
Video 16:9
31 min 34 sec
Video still
Commissioned by
Stills, Edinburgh



Jim Solo
Work in progress
Video 2:1
Video still



their experience of coming out to family and friends, and, in some cases, contracting and living with HIV. Each lying naked or semi-clothed in his own bed, the only connections between this spectrum of individuals were their sexuality and geographic location. Through his editing process, Marti stitched together this series of brief, quotidian engagements across a dual screen, overlaying stories to create an occasionally incomprehensible babble of voices. Articulate accounts from confident, muscular men sporting tattoos, nipple piercings, and black plastic spectacles were threaded amongst those of more vulnerable men from the West of Scotland who possessed none of the easy eloquence of their metropolitan counterparts. Marti has often observed that the camera tends to catalyse this kind of confessional storytelling and, despite the obvious contrasts, these informants all appear to be familiar with the format and happy to deliver what is expected of them. The one exception is Jim, a middle-aged, overweight man from Gourrock, who halts the filming after becoming upset when trying to talk about the Aids-related death of his brother. Two years later Marti worked with him again to realise *Jim Solo* – a longer, more intimate project. Under the harsh glare of stage lighting, the pressure to perform before the camera is amplified still further and Jim is once again utterly unable to articulate his feelings. His conspicuous frustration abates when Marti moves out from behind the equipment to hug him, a gesture that is met with an overwhelmed response of tears and desire. The footage that follows is some of Marti's most graphic, picturing everyday sexual acts. These are cut alongside discussions between the two men during which Jim admits to having had very little sexual experience and struggles to express the self-loathing he feels when the artist can't get an erection. Braided with failure, loneliness, and an uncompromising focus on the subject's bloated, aging body, this is not the type of coupling that's often pictured. Despite his physical presence, Marti remains oddly peripheral, muted to the extent

that that his own personality appears to have been hollowed out in order to arrive at a condition of pure responsiveness. Informants like Jim expand into the gap he leaves, further exposing their desires and vulnerabilities.

And That's It also revolves around a raw, carnal encounter. This time the subject is William, a similarly inexperienced pensioner with a broad accent and a predilection for men in tight white shorts. His fear of HIV restricts his sexual repertoire to activities undertaken while in costume. Filmed from behind rubbing himself upon the incongruously tanned and muscular body of the artist, the episode that plays out on screen smacks of abasement: the economic differentiation between the two protagonists is inscribed through both their bodies and their sexual ken. While we often see Marti taking instruction regarding carnal requirements and displaying an extraordinary level of attentiveness, he makes his directorial role overt, positioning his subjects for lingering static shots, prompting them to look at the camera and popping into and out of shot. These are works that openly dwell on the challenges raised by the process of documentation. Marti makes it impossible for us to forget the process of production and our position as viewing consumers. Ratcheting up the tension still further William openly asks Marti if he'll come back after the video is finished, if they'll be friends. This artwork, after all, conforms to the ubiquitous logic of the project that pervades not only labor practices within the art world but contemporary society as a whole: the duration of a relationship is determined by its potential to be productive.

ART GOLD

Skepticism of official accounts coupled with the attendant demand for first-hand personal testimony has seen the power of storytelling and biography emerge as defining features of much contemporary art practice. Marti's own leap into the private emphatically illustrates that the document is ideally suited to this purpose: its ability to traverse both far-flung geographies and interior territories enables him to pursue an almost vampiric desire to draw closed encounters into the public sphere. Initially, the visibility of the ageing, queer body in his work seems to reflect the feminist insight that the personal is political and a time when the consciousness-raising and transgressive tactics of artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, Mary Kelly, and Nan Goldin identified the private world as a key battleground for politics. Such positions were of course brought into sharp relief through the Aids crisis, which saw illness become a pervasive theme in much lens-based art production. Understanding the divide between public and private social life as oppressive – even murderous – strategies that rendered visible and articulated counter, hitherto closed, realities were considered to be emancipatory. That such articulations continue to be perceived as threatening was well illustrated when Marti's contribution to the *shOUT* exhibition was censored by Glasgow City Council in 2009. In a shameful instance that attested to the virulence of 'soft ethics', which deny visibility to those who fall outside the normalising consensus, *Time Is the Fire in Which We Burn* was one of the works removed from display on the basis that it could be seen to promote prostitution and drug abuse.³ Yet, at the same time, it must be seen against a contemporary backdrop where a prurient mediatised culture

demands subjective narratives and sexual stories just as the art world continues to reward transgression by explicitly linking it with originality and therefore success. Under these circumstances the experiences of others are elicited, appropriated, and transformed into 'art gold' with astonishing regularity under the catch-all banner of knowledge production. The particular challenge of Marti's video works is that they speak directly to the complexity of this relationship between public and private spheres at the outset of the twenty-first century.

ETHICAL ECONOMIES

Traversing continents to produce projects, Dani Marti is the epitome of the nomadic global artist. In her influential study *One Place After Another*, Miwon Kwon connected shifts in artistic labor to the demands of capital and broader societal trends that had seen productive labor usurped by service-based economies in the West.⁴ A few years later John Roberts took this logic further, arguing that waged labor had converged with communication practices, placing an emphasis on the immaterial labor of knowledge production and giving rise to the prevalence of research-based art projects.⁵ *Bacon's Dog*, the video document with which this short essay began, offers a particularly illuminating example when considering how these developments relate to Marti's practice. Placed squarely within the network-driven economies of the art world, this work can be read as an attempt to engage with, and ultimately manipulate, the asymmetrical power relationship between the curator and the artist. Though it surely can't come as much of a surprise that sex is used as a cynical career advancement tactic in such an incestuous and egocentric field, realising art works within these specific dynamics is a strategy that has also been employed by other artists. To take *I'll Be Your Angel* (2001) as just one example, Tanja Ostojic exhibited herself as the curator Harald Szeemann's elegant escort during the opening days of his 49th Venice Biennale, accompanying him to press calls, dinners, and openings. Yet Marti's manipulating caress cannot simply be reduced to entrepreneurial opportunism or a reflexive commentary on art world power relations. The labor that he so carefully frames as part of each work is twofold, combining the performative encounter itself and the production of the video. While his dependency on the document as a mode of circulation provides the spectacularising ethnographic twist so common in art practices dedicated to knowledge production and dissemination, the intimate transactions he stages are closer to an ethics of care than an economy of service. The complex constellations of social relations between the artist, subject, and the viewing audience circulate around these contradictory impulses. At every turn Marti reaffirms that ethics lies at the beating heart of art's re-emergence as a social practice.

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Nancy/Pontibriand: An exchange', *Parachute*, no.100, pp.14–31.

² Boris Groys (2008) *Art Power*, 55.

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/sep/15/social-justice-glasgow-art>
It is notable that implementation of such ethical frameworks in art is no longer confined to so-called 'obscene' imagery, as in the repeated censorship of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, but in work involving actual social relations.

⁴ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002).

⁵ John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skilling and Deskillling in Art After the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007).











Fat Faggot, 2010. 2 channel video, 16:9. 13 min 40 sec. Video stills. Commissioned by Stills, Edinburgh







Disclosure, 2009. 2 channel video, 16:9. 35 min 5 sec. Production shot. Commissioned by GoMA Glasgow and Glasgay



















And That's It, 2011. Video, 16:9. 31 min 3 sec. Production shot. Commissioned by Stills, Edinburgh



**SKIN IS THE DEEPEST:
A CONVERSATION WITH DANI MARTI
BY OCTAVIO ZAYA**



Octavio Zaya All of the feelings and ideas that you expose in, or let slip through, your film works, and all of the possible conclusions you might entertain, and that the viewer might be inspired to think about – are they attempts to attain a truth of some kind? It feels as if a situation has been set up – perhaps through the hard labor, trust, and even complicity developed during the long periods, months, and years spent with your friends and subjects. At times it can feel somewhat pressed, or exaggerated, as if an amplification of normal life, some sort of microscopic view of people's souls and inner life, a situation imperceptible to most people from the outside. You befriend your subjects while seemingly having an insatiable fascination with their issues, and even with their states of mind. Is there any truth to this?

Dani Marti I am still not sure what I'm trying to convey when I am filming or even during the editing process. I am not aware of any concrete deep truth that I am trying to attain. Usually I work into a scenario – yes, created, instigated, as you suggest – without knowing the outcome of it. Often it is through the editing process that you can direct the film/video toward a particular conclusion, but that's not the aim of the whole exercise. There is a sense of hunting, though, of hunting for something deeply human – emotions, vulnerability, fear...

All the situations are set up, whether the filming of friends, family, or strangers. There is a performative aspect to it. Convincing, enticing the subject to take part is as important as the final work. You build up temporary relationships toward the goal of getting the subject in front of the camera. There is an exchange, intimacy, sex, comfort, and human values that are being traded in.

OZ How do you build these kinds of relationships?

DM The relationships I build up are brief in some instances, such as when I meet people through sex dating sites. This has resulted in videos I have made like *Under the Reclining Buddha*, filmed in New York, where I met a guy – I can't remember his name now – through the website Manhunt, and went to his place to have sex on my way to the airport. He had been awake for three days on crystal meth. His partner was there, and left as I walked in. It was a great scene, a strange place. He allowed me to film. The case of *Without Consent* was somewhat similar; I met 'him' through Gaydar. We had met only once, at his place. He did not want to be filmed, but as he was feeling horny he agreed to. I could feel his uneasiness, which felt so attractive. A few weeks later I asked him to sign a release form, but he did not want to. In most cases, though, I tend to build up a relationship and am in touch with the individual for a long time, sometimes for months or years, before we can make a project. For example, I finished filming *Jim Solo* in March 2011, though I first filmed him for a project commissioned by GoMA Glasgow back in August 2009. We kept in touch, and I said that I wanted to film him again but for us to go much deeper. By then I had built some trust and so he felt comfortable to go ahead.

When I film people I suppose that there is a microscopic approach to it, as you suggest. I guess I have an 'obsession' with going in deeper, deeper, and deeper, and it's through this process that I encounter ethical situations. My films and videos all involve intense situations, and I think there is a sense of claustrophobia about them. The individual becomes a vehicle for some deep truth that goes beyond both them and myself. It is all an intuitive process,

however – I could not talk about that truth, and would not attempt to. What is clear to me is that I don't have a prescribed outcome when I start filming. There is fluidity to it, and an urge to transgress.

OZ You have spoken already of exchange, intimacy, sex, and human values; you talk of online sex-dating sites, of consent and ethical issues; you talk of trust and of relationships, of intuition, and of transgression. When you speak of hunting for something deeply human, hunting for emotions, vulnerability, and fear, are you speaking about your work or are you talking about yourself, your life? Are you recording your sitters' lives and vulnerabilities, or are you actually recording your own desires, weaknesses, and need to heal?

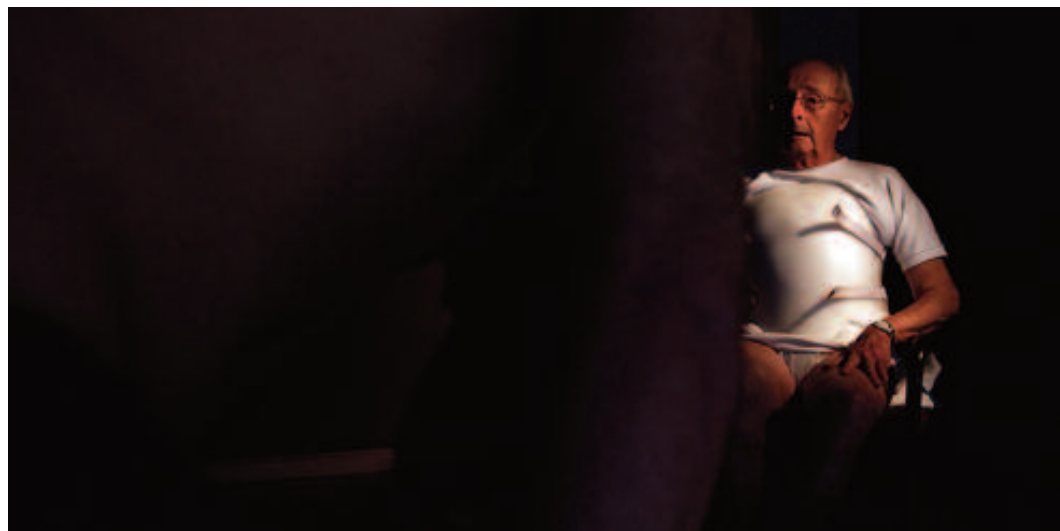
DM The intention behind the work that I do is not to help the individual to heal – it may be an inadvertent and welcome consequence of the project but it is not the aim of it. Some people have compared my work with that of certain visual artists who have a clear socially engaged component to their practice. That's not the case for me. When individuals agree to be filmed – and yes, my subjects do tend to be people with some level of angst or insecurity – I have to BE THERE during the process. That's the only thing I can offer them. There is no money involved, it is just important to be there with them.

For some people the whole process can be very cathartic or liberating, as it was for Peter Fay, a well-known figure from Sydney who is a former lecturer in English literature and a curator, writer, and art collector. At the time that we decided to 'collaborate' he was sixty-five. The whole process lasted five months. At the beginning, we went out for dinner and I asked him if I could make a portrait of him. During the course of the dinner he confided that he had never been intimate with anyone in the past. I told him that I would be happy to offer him intimacy and to sleep with him over the course of a few months. The final work is a film made from our various encounters, entitled *Bacon's Dog*, and a video text work called *My Sad Captain*, featuring a selection of the emails we exchanged for a period of five months prior to, during, and post filming. It is a very vulnerable and revealing diary. During these few months, he went through a whole spectrum of human emotions that he had read about in all those books throughout his life, but had never experienced himself. He lost almost twenty kilos during the process. He seems a much happier person now, with a new confidence and involved in a stable relationship, comfortable with his newfound sexuality.

Coming back to your question, yes, I do see myself as a hunter of sorts. I am not particularly interested in recording people's lives *per se*, but in some types of vulnerability. As you have said, Octavio, and as I also mentioned before, individuals can become vessels for something deeper. When filming, the subject, the camera, and myself work together, allowing ourselves to be in a situation in which we just become something else... I feel like we are working on something that goes beyond us. That's why the setup somehow gives me the ability to transgress. I stop thinking about where I come from, my values, background, and try to be there in the moment, fully. And there is always one manly aim, to keep moving forward, deeper.

I just filmed *Coraza (Shield)*, an intimate portrait of my father. He is eighty-three and quite fragile. I asked him if I could film him, both of us in underwear and to have a proper

Coraza
2011 (work in progress)
Video, 2:1
Video still



talk – I had not ever really spoken to him in the past as we have always had a quite distant relationship, but he comes from a generation in which men don't talk about feelings, fears, or love. It is the first time that I have spoken in such depth with him, even bringing up to the surface family secrets that we're not meant to mention. Because we were both part of that scenario/project, somehow it gave us a safe backdrop in which to communicate. It was a private/public space, a strange space.

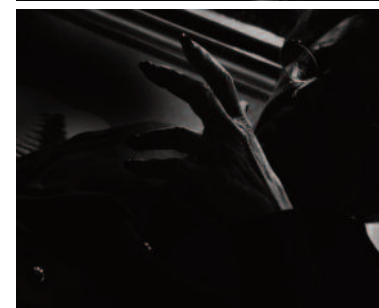
These projects take me to scenarios in which I get to meet individuals that otherwise I wouldn't normally meet. It is all these interactions and mini journeys that help me to grow as well as an individual. So, going back to your initial question, yes, there is a sense of self-healing in my work. Making all these 'portraits' is a journey. I constantly see aspects of myself in the individuals with whom I work, and it makes me question myself.

I am currently working on a couple of portraits of two gay men, both transfigured by lipoatrophy, a side effect condition of the medication taken to battle HIV. It does affect them and I want to 'hang out' with them with the camera and see what happens. I suffered from this condition myself to a certain degree, and it can be a very tough thing to live with. For them to sit in front of the camera and have lights pointing at them must be very challenging.

OZ Like your work, these intimate thoughts bring lots to mind. I am curious to know why you have always described these 'encounters' as portraits. What do they have that relates them to the portraits that we both enjoy at the Prado, at the Met, and in so much of the modern and contemporary photography that defines who we are – portraits of similar characters, lovers and loners, sex addicts and lost souls? When these portraits don't show the subjects from a convenient distance, they engage in a transaction that always maintains a safe difference between the artist and his/her subject, and the respective identities of both seem to be kept safely intact. For me, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and John Coplans come close to rendering the nature and truth of the twentieth-century body that the trauma of the Great War and the Holocaust didn't allow the abstract painters, pop artists, and mandarin conceptual artists to



David St. Vincent
2011
2 channel video, 2:1
18 min 46 sec
Video stills



Llorona (Arrangement in Grey and Black)
2007
Video, 4:3
16 min 50 sec
Video stills



Book of Miracles
2009–11
3 channel video, 2.35:1
17 min 30 sec
Video stills

reveal. But despite, or perhaps because of, your ongoing winks to Baroque painting, and to the margins and pains of our living condition, its hidden pleasures and its outcomes, I believe that you are looking and searching for the endurance and truth of 'the soul'. Is that right?

DM I call them portraits as a starting point, as a reference, but as we've already mentioned, these portraits go beyond the person being portrayed – the individuals are just vehicles for something else. It is a search for some kind of abstraction, or maybe you could call it emotion. You raised the notion of the soul. It might be, it might not...

I center my work on the impossibility of portraiture – the construction and consumption of various aspects of the self and personhood. When somebody stands in front of the camera I am conscious that I depict, and also construct, the subject, capturing, possessing, and consuming some sense of the self. Aspects of the subject become distorted but fixed at the same time. This subjectivity is central to the process of identity construction. Repeated narratives of self and identity often mask our anxieties.

I remember going to Glasgow School of Art in 2004 to study my MFA, where I picked up the camera for the first time. Some of my first projects were: *David*, a homeless person drifting in and out of consciousness; *Llorona*, my mother crying after suffering a minor heart attack; and *Looking for Pablo*, a video where I'm sucking off guys with big cocks wearing a bull mask. I received heavy criticism from both my peer group and tutors at the time. They thought it was too 'sentimental', too 'dramatic'. Glasgow, and I suppose other northern cities in Europe, tend to go for a more detached, intellectual aesthetic. Most of the works I saw at that time were so cool and the abstractions so intellectualized. No touch, no warmth.

I come from Barcelona, Spain, and I am afraid that has an effect on what I do.

As you said, Baroque painting, its imaginary, has transformed me. Seeing that pain, that 'drama' on the canvas, has excited and scared me for a very long time, since I was a kid. That brutality, struggle, pain, obsession, solitude; these are the conditions and aspects of human nature that I like to work with, as I feel that they can lead me to somewhere that is deeply human. I'm not talking about the soul, as after all those years in Glasgow, I find it a hard word to use. I like observing, and by going deeper into that observation, it becomes interaction.

Yesterday I finished editing *Book of Miracles*, a video on three screens that documents the domestic life of Enrique, the former Spanish Consul in Sydney. I met him at an opening and I knew that he wanted to have sex with me. He intrigued me as I could feel his complexity. I filmed him on and off for three months, documenting his surroundings, which were full of colorful art works, decoration, and furniture. Sometimes his Filipino butler would attend to him. There is so much 'beauty' around him, and yet he's so bored with life, disenchanted, carrying a deep sadness and loneliness.

I suppose I do have an attraction towards pain and an obsession with going deep into it, though my relationship with pain is a respectful one. If I walk into a scenario in which I am confronted with feelings of pain and loneliness, I do feel as if I have some 'power' that enables me to bring something to the situation, to the individual. I remember watching Michael Powell's film *Peeping Tom* (1960) and the lead character's obsession with capturing something deeply human that leads him to film his victims while he kills them by means of



some lethal device attached to the tripod of his camera. It is a logic that points towards the idea of snuff films. As with these films, I am aware of the balance of power while filming.

OZ When an artist or a curator critiques a specific object, there is usually a critical distance between them. In contrast to this, you and your work challenge that distance by actively engaging with the object of your interest, infiltrating, intruding, and ultimately merging with it. You are not trying to create a representation of your subject, but to access primary material from them directly, without any other intermediary but the camera. You don't allow the viewer any room to make assumptions or any prior structure or system that could enable us to analyze what we are seeing. Do you think you are approaching others' contexts and conditions as if in an experiment?

DM I agree with you that I am interested in somehow reducing that distance with the object and in merging with it, and it is only through that merging or interaction that the work gets generated. My work is evolving more and more in that direction. There is as little distance as possible during the interaction, and yes, you could call it an experiment. The work becomes documentation of that exchange. Elements of abstraction will arise in the editing process, but then I always want to retain and convey that sense of directness and interaction. Each project is an experiment, a walk into the unknown. The structure of each portrait evolves through the dynamics of the interaction between the subject, the camera, and myself. I often seek those moments and dynamics in which we have the strongest sense of self, whether through sex, introspection, or family relations. At times the work perhaps parodies therapy as well as heightened moments of domesticity.

OZ I am interested by the way in which you reveal your own HIV condition without the meta-language that one might expect to accompany it. How do you think your own experiences of HIV are important to your work? Are they related to the idea of the 'ethics of disclosure' that are a recurring preoccupation in your work, or to the 'transgressions' you have referred to?

DM As you suggest, Octavio, I suppose the fact that I have had to deal with my HIV condition since the late 80s, going through the whole process of self-marginalization and stigmatization, and to have overcome and survived it, that must surely have affected my view and understanding of private/public space and the politics of the body. Having had to hold everything in for such long time, it was only a few years ago that I really allowed myself to let anything out. You realize how much time we waste worrying about people's opinions. We live immersed in our social awareness of being judged, of rules and expectations – expectations of how to behave and how to interact with each other. When I walk into such scenarios, I try my best to put it all aside, to walk boldly and to travel fast through all those layers of noise. In that psychological space, transgression makes little sense to me, but I am aware that it must often read that way from the viewer's point of view.

I want the process to be sincere, rough, and – why not – painful and expansive. Sometimes it's also cathartic. There is always a risk that is intrinsic to the process. I feel like I am walking into unknown territory, where things can go in many directions that cannot be controlled. There is a risk during the making of the work, and after the work enters the public domain.

I have a couple of friends of mine, psychologists with whom I talk about the projects that I do. They have this shocked look on their faces sometimes, as what I do would be so wrong within their profession. They work within such a regulated framework, where everything needs to be justified and controlled. I suppose because I am making work in the context of it being art, it somehow gives me the space to violate some perceived boundaries, to explore personal states. Early works by Andy Warhol, his collaboration with Paul Morrissey, and the films of Kenneth Anger, are sources of inspiration for me, as in them the acting and the raw portrayal of each individual are interwoven. Drugs played a key role in some of their films, taking the subjects to mental states where they are not aware of the presence of the camera any more.

In my work, the video/film becomes some sort of documentation of these experiments, and sometimes the experience becomes aestheticized to some degree through the editing process. This documentation of the experience, this experiment, will always suffer a degree of abstraction through the editing, but it's basically raw experience. There is a strong contrast with my other practice, in which I allow myself to immerse totally in pure abstraction – an abstraction that, nevertheless, arises from that same exchange/experience.

OZ In addition to your films and videos, which we have been addressing throughout most of our conversation so far, you have also been developing your abstract constructions. When, how and why did you start with these abstract and woven works?

DM It all started when I was eleven years old in the mid 70s at school, where I was taught basic weaving and macramé techniques. I was fascinated by the process of creating a surface with a

George
2001
Polyester, polypropylene, and nylon
200 x 200 x 6 cm
Installation view at Newcastle Art Gallery,
Australia, 2011
Photo: Tobias Spitzer



line, thread, or rope in space and with the obsessive nature of its making. I carried on with it for almost three years. Once puberty kicked in, though, all that was put aside. Insecurities go hand-in-hand with self-consciousness at that age. I ended up studying business, and it was in the late 80s, when I was in my mid-twenties, that I was diagnosed HIV positive. It was not until my mid-thirties that I really decided to pursue my creativity again. I started to paint. Soon after I felt quite frustrated with the medium: its flatness, its lack of texture, tactility, body. It was at that time that I decided to return to the medium and materials that I used in my pre-pubescent years. It enabled me to start playing with the sensuality of surface, depth, material, color, and texture.

I started making works on a very intuitive level. People, individuals, and my experience of them became the starting point for my abstract works. They were abstractions that started to suggest a kind of intimate knowing, of somehow getting beyond the screen or the canvas, to some emotional decoding, to some revealing of the person. Family members, such as my mother in *Shadow after Shadow, Portrait of the Artist's Mother at the Age of 73* (2008) or my niece in *The Secret Life of Tweens* (2008) became muses for the making of codified abstractions. The same is true of friends such as *George* (2001), *Linda* (2001), or David in *Beige* (2007) and historical figures like Agnes Martin in *Agnes Cupping Her Breast* (2003), or Robert Thomas in *Looking for Rover* (2004).

Looking for Rover
 2004
 Polyester and nylon
 12 panels, each 100 × 185 × 6 cm
 Installation view at Sherman Galleries,
 Sydney
 Photo: Paul Green



**Portrait of Joni Waka as a Fallen Angel
 Crying behind the Wall**
 2006–11
 330 × 200 × 200 cm (approx)
 Feathers
 Installation view at Arc One Gallery,
 Melbourne
 Photo: John Brash



Installation view of the exhibition
 'Touch: The Portraiture of Dani Martí',
 Newcastle Art Gallery, Australia, 2011
 Photo: Tobias Spitzer

Different emotional tones are evoked by each of the works, the variation in materials, textures, and colors creating these coded surfaces that hint at the psychosexuality of each personality. When reading the full titles, the relationship that the viewer develops with each work might evoke more emotional responses than if they were untitled, as can be seen with works such as *Portrait of Joni Waka as a Fallen Angel Crying behind the Wall* (2006–11), *Goyesca – Alba Gently Lies Down* (2003), *Looking for Felix* (2000), and *It's All about Peter* (2009). For me the works have to be visually engaging and provocative within a refined minimalist aesthetic. They are contemplative pieces but all is subverted as you read the titles of the work and discover what's going on behind the work.

Some people have described my work as 'Baroque Minimalism'. Any number of Baroque canvases of the European masters – Goya, Velasquez, El Greco – depict the evocative draping of fabric around the body to amplify the Passion and aspects of the Spirit. I feel I somehow follow this tradition with a new interpretation of the sparse planes of Minimalism.

OZ You have been developing these parallel, simultaneous bodies of work for a long time now. Could you tell me about the relationship between these two very different sides of your practice?

DM They are indeed two separate mediums/languages, but at the same time they interact with each other, sometimes in an obvious way but other times in a more obscure fashion. I really like the polarity of going from abstraction, from a coded, individual language, to the narrative of the moving image. But I see similarities in that polarity – repetition, obsession, bondage,

and energy. They work independently, and they conceal such different kinds of energy. Somehow I need both of them to survive creatively. Both mediums reveal that portraiture is impossible; it is always in translation. It is provisional.

OZ Do you sometimes make abstract works that relate to the people in your film and video works? How do you go about exhibiting the two parts of your practice?

DM I treat the 'videoing' and 'knotting' of the individuals as an act of capturing and possessing some sense of the sitters' self. I feel that I am passively depicting and yet actively constructing the sitter. One medium works alongside the other. Many times the same subject will be depicted through the camera before being coded/decoded in a woven construction. Both mediums and their contraposition direct attention to contemporary identity and the processes by which they are constructed. Sometimes both mediums are shown together, in the same space, and their display, their physical interaction, may vary in relationship to the subject portrayed.

My woven work is focused on repetition and micro details that remind us of DNA and the double helix – complexity and subjectivity built from very basic building blocks. For me it's both an abstraction and a synthesis. There is a quest to achieve a sense of solidity and coherence through pattern and repetition. In contrast to this, the video/film work is reminiscent of the visual subjectivities that structure contemporary mass media and social interaction today as it is manifested on many Internet sites and on so many reality TV programs. Both mediums work with a constructed self, a relational one, and my understanding is that it is in a continuous process of dissolution and construction.

OZ For me the two faces of your practice came together most succinctly in the extraordinary photographic project that you created for *Atlántica* in spring 2011. Inspired by one of your



Vial Queen
 2009
 Glass vials (used by the artist from
 2004–06), linen thread
 130 x 40 x 30 cm



right:
 Vial Queen
 2011
 Documentation taken by the artist from
 2004–05
 Presented as part of a project made for
Atlántica magazine, Spain, 2011



Thin Wall PB/I-S
2000
Installation view
Plastic scourers and road reflectors
Artspace, Sydney, 2000
Photo: Brenton McGeachie

powerful constructions, *Vial Queen*, you then made a selection of images culled from more than 300 pictures that documented your own difficult experiences of dealing with HIV.

DM *Vial Queen* consists of the daily documentation of the intake of my HIV drugs for a period of four months during 2004, alongside photographs of the first things that I saw or experienced in the morning after taking my medication. At the same time that I was doing this project, I saved the vial bottles that contained part of my medication. It's a work that I started during that trajectory from abstraction to the moving image, but I did not begin to edit that material until 2010. Why did I do it? After spending years in silence and fear because of my HIV condition, and the possibility of deportation from Australia due to my health issues, I felt like exposing myself fully, to normalize part of myself, to overcome the stigma that was both projected onto me and that I imposed on myself.

OZ You once mentioned that you "started doing art kind of late", after you quit the job you had in some Spanish governmental office somewhere in Australia. Why did you decide to switch to the arts? Was it connected in any way to being diagnosed with HIV? What did you start with? And when was it that you realized film was going to be such an important medium for your work?

DM When I was diagnosed with HIV in the late 80s, it freaked me out, and I had to confront my mortality at quite an early age. For years I lived a 'quiet' life, half frozen. I stayed in a comfortable relationship, and kept working for the Government of Catalonia as a Trade Commissioner, helping companies to export to Australia. I had pretty much given up on the idea of creating art or having a career as an artist, something that I had dreamt of in my early twenties and perhaps even earlier. It was in the mid to late 1990s, at the age of thirty-three, after a bad case of pneumonia that forced me into hospital for some time, that I decided to

allow myself to pursue what I really wanted. It was soon after that I started my art studies in earnest, and began to exhibit in artist-run spaces and public galleries. I tried painting but felt I was quite an ordinary painter. I turned to familiar territory and materials such as ropes and industrial components. I started making works in a very intuitive way, and it just so happened that people's stories, and my experiences of them, became the starting point for making my abstract compositions.

One of the first works I made was *Thin Wall* (2000), at Artspace in Sydney. It dealt with my HIV condition, but in a very positive way. During a period of some six weeks I used to go to the gallery almost every day, where I would sew together red plastic scourers, inviting the audience to play with them and to lie down on these big islands of blood-red scourers. It felt good.

It was in 2004, though, that I finally decided to quit my job and make the big jump to being an artist. I wanted to study full time in an art institution, and that's why I went to Glasgow. I bought a camera and started shooting. Why did I move from one medium to the other? I needed to challenge myself, to feel as if it was the beginning of something. The whole process was very intuitive, and it was only during the last months of my two-year MFA program that things really started to make sense for me.

OZ Who was the first person you approached to film?

DM I remember the first time I asked permission to film someone, *David*, was in November 2004. He was a homeless person in the street, drifting in and out of consciousness. It felt like climbing a huge mountain in a matter of seconds. There I was filming him, sitting next to him late on a winter afternoon on the streets of Glasgow. I was there, with the camera a foot away from him, for over an hour. People in the street reacted very strongly: some were curious, others were angry at David for what he represented. Some people were upset with me – one woman started to cry and told me that she could not understand how I could be doing what I was doing, "taking advantage of him". It was an interesting moment that allowed me to experience the power of the camera, and how, in just a matter of minutes, it brought out all those reactions and issues.

OZ Between your story and the stories of those with whom you have been dealing, immersing yourself in the lives of these lonely, repressed, or desperate individuals, and your abstract works, there's a gap that seems to be filled by ignorance and curiosity, judgment, and punishment. As well as exposing yourself, you are exposing others to the world, often with defiance, beyond decorum and in contravention of social rules. Between 'ethical issues' and the 'pornography of pain and liberation' there's a thin line that you cross time and again to get across your story, and their story, in the context of a conservative art milieu that values 'transgression' as much as the 'charité du jour'. You know that, and you have savored the taste of censorship and the shock among both your peers and 'art professionals'. Was this what you were expecting?

DM Yes, you are right. A lot of the individuals that I decide to film can feel quite lonely – individuals missing the human touch, the warmth of another body. Some of them can be quite repressed, immersed in fear or ignorance, but I would never call them desperate. I would

be making a negative judgment on them, and that's not the premise for me to engage with someone. But, on the other hand, you might be right... I suppose that if I come across some desperation in the individual, as you say, it might be a turn-on and give me the upper hand in the situation. It's a funny game happening here... All relationships and every human interaction conceal a negotiation of power, even when I embrace my mother.

As for exposing, yes, there is an obsessive drive to expose both myself and those whom I portray in quite a raw way, and the deeper I can go, the more excited I get. It's challenging. The hunter, and, perhaps, the prize – a suspended moment that goes beyond time. I am meeting John next week. I met him once a few months ago. He's a man in his sixties, very intelligent, well traveled, and working for different Aids organizations around the world. He wants to spend time together and to have sex. He knows I am bringing the camera, and that I will be hanging around with him for three days with an open agenda. I know that he feels very sensitive about how he looks, about how the HIV medication has transformed his face and body. He is an old-time survivor. He feels particularly awkward about his swollen stomach, and he has mentioned to me that he does not want it to appear on film. I know that convincing him, and working together to allow me to feature it, will become an obsession – it already is.

OZ Do you think some people are uncomfortable with what you do?

DM I understand that lots of people question my methodology, my intentions, and even the outcome of my interaction with the subjects. The politics concealed in those interactions is what constitutes the work. The viewer is confronted by these politics on many occasions. The work demands from the viewer that he/she becomes an active participant and an accomplice. By witnessing and experiencing someone's vulnerability, they experience their own, and that's challenging. Value systems, judgments, fears, and ethical issues all come to the surface.

Any reality, any set of circumstances can be read in so many ways, and you are creating another new reality through the editing process. I'm not interested in questioning what's real, but, as a maker, you are aware of those different layers of construction. There is always a multiplicity at play, in every reality, in every situation. I am quite interested in working with situations that are open to misinterpretation.

It is interesting to experience how individuals, groups, and particularly politicians can react to the work. My work has been censored a couple of times. In 2009 I did a second version of the *Thin Wall* work I had made in Sydney back in 2000, resulting from a three-month residency and exhibition I was offered with Gay Men's Health Glasgow and GoMA Glasgow under their Social Justice Programme. This time I invited a group of women from Africa affected by HIV to sew with me. Later on, they were pulled out from the exhibition, and so myself and some friends placed the islands of scourers around town as a protest against Glasgow City Council for censoring the exhibition and a couple of my films that were to have been shown within the program. In the end, I withdrew my entire exhibition from GoMA as I felt that the integrity and cohesion of the work had been damaged, and contradicted the purpose of the three-month residency I had undertaken with the two organizations to develop the

exhibition. The purpose of the exhibition was to provoke thought and to invite reflection upon one's own experience of intimacy and disclosure, one's own sexuality, and one's own cultural attitudes to such aspects of human life. It also damaged the ability of the exhibition to reach a wider audience. There was so much paranoia, fear, misinterpretation, and ignorance surrounding the whole episode. It was an interesting time, and I'm happy that I experienced it. I have no particular interest in getting involved in politics, but once you put work out there, in the public sphere, it becomes political.

OZ What is it that you are ultimately looking for in your work?

DM I think that the aim is to reach something visceral, deep, and challenging, both for me, in the making of it, and for the viewer, to keep on pushing the envelope further. I want to be challenged, and to feel like I am taking steps forward. It is through the journey that I keep on learning more about myself, and the nature of being human. I am obsessed with surface, with the skin, and with the emotional surface. Both parts of my practice keep on feeding me, and when I feel like I take a step forward with one of them, the other has to follow suit. Narrative and pure abstraction walking hand in hand, revealing, and abstracting, ultimate human experiences, emotions, and anxieties on a digital or woven surface – for me these are just different types of skin and it's all a question of how deeply one can go underneath.

Summer 2011



Orifices
2009
Plastic scourers sewn by volunteers
affected by HIV
Documentation of action taken in protest
against Glasgow City Council
Photo: Ashley Paterson



Section divider page illustrations:

pp.2–3: *Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.15. Lost in Desire (detail)*, 2004. Polyester, nylon, and polypropylene, 200 × 200 × 8 cm.

pp.4–5: *Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.14. Pheromones Percolating Like Atoms in the Rainbow (detail)*, 2003. Polyester, nylon, polypropylene, and rubber, 200 × 200 × 8 cm.

p.6: *Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.1. Asiatic Angel Greeted by a Young Nipple (detail)*, 2002. Polyester, nylon, polypropylene, and elastic, 200 × 200 × 7 cm.

p.8: *Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.5. Dry and Calm, Casually Looking Away (detail)*, 2003. Polyester, nylon, and polypropylene, 200 × 200 × 8 cm.

pp.12–13: Portrait of Dani Marti by Juilee Pryor. © Juilee Pryor.

pp.14–15: *A Sharp and Dry Smack. A Body Fallen onto the Ground (Take 1) (detail)*, 2011. Plastic beads, feathers, plastic, polyester, and nylon rope, 150 × 150 × 5 cm.

pp.28–29: *Braveheart (Take 4) (detail)*, 2008. Polyester and nylon rope, leather, 200 × 145 × 13 cm. Photo: Jamie North.

pp.64–65: *Txell*, 2011. Production shot. Work in progress.

pp.76–77: *Bacon's Dog*, 2010. 2 channel video 2.55:1. 11 min 30 sec. Production shot.

pp.108–9: *Paseando*, 2011. Single-channel video. Production shot (work in progress).

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**Cover illustration: *Variations in a Serious Black Dress, No.14.
Pheromones Percolating Like Atoms in the Rainbow (detail)*, 2003
Polyester, nylon, and polypropylene. 200 × 200 × 8 cm**



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