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Scene 1. Bright as youth, a promise arches across the between. And where is its substance: in a face, a sound, a movement? In a fleeting configuration of surfaces? Weaving from one to the other, threading these loose strands, these stranded instances, into a... human tapestry. There the face; steady eyes, mouth in waves of supple movement. Here in this room: relics of forgotten moments, idly brushed into the present by vague glances. Recent leather sighs under shifting weight. Some obscure imperative drives tapping fingers, random rhythm in this intricate mesh of us and them, and here and now. Every tightening of flesh and tautened muscle, each new curve and angle, draws a desire, drives a response.

Scene 2. Your tears, my bewilderment. Your agitation, my discomfort. Your thoughts, your face. Your passion, your body. My eyes, your skin. Your thoughts, my thoughts. My thoughts, my thoughts. Our fullness, our void. Your face, my uncertainty. Your self, alone.

Scene 3. Anticipation vaults over intention, skewing its trajectory. What does this mean? As light subsides, features and gestures lose something of their sharpness. The blurry texture of voices gradually drapes across vision's angular framework. A promise issuing from imagined depth, a promise of depth. Evidence fails. We are beyond science and law.

In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art. (Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', 1964),



Llorona (arrangement in grey and black), 2006
video still, 3:4
16'00"

OUT

Portraiture is the challenge accepted by Dani Marti: how to represent not only an other individual, but also a situated set of relationships, be they physical, psychological, erotic, imaginary? Likeness alone, physical resemblance within representation, is inadequate. Likeness must take its place alongside a host of more abstract qualities and concepts, such as presence, impression, inconsistency, projection, desire, will, time and place. And this other being that the portrait wishes to capture is already enmeshed within representation, an intricate fabric of codified signs and conventional expectations. To approach the "real" of the other, we need to somehow risk venturing beyond the comfort of the familiar. We must be prepared to confront the disconcerting incomprehensibility of otherness itself. For 'otherness' is not solely a quality of all that is non-self, it is also a quality that pervades and threatens to undermine the self. Remember Rimbaud: "Je est un autre." Remember Sartre: "Hell is other people." Under such circumstances, as Marti demonstrates, the conventional strategies of portraiture - its reliance upon, among others, likeness, verifiability, consistency and an appeal to traditional humanist values - are no longer sufficient to accommodate this complexity. New modes of analogy and homology, for example, will be called upon. Abstraction and connotation will operate on a par with figuration and denotation; the differing densities and tensions of woven fibres and textured surfaces will signify individuality as much as moving human images on a flat, bright screen; and fact will share equal status with fiction, desire and fantasy. In order to reveal, the portrait must not congeal.



MSDEBS, 2007
video still, 16:9
15'00"

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"Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman," wrote Walter Benjamin. Although not strictly a painter, Marti's international reputation derives from his production of woven surfaces that bear comparison with the painter's canvas, and his practice has recently expanded to incorporate video works. But what, asks Benjamin, should we expect from the painter-magician and the cameraman-surgeon? "The magician," he suggests, "maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and his patient by penetrating into the patient's body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, in contrast to the magician - who is still hidden in the medical practitioner - the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates him."

The invasive gaze of the surgeon, searching for evidence. 'Evidence': the word derives from the Latin root *videre*, meaning 'to see' [cf. video]. Such professional objectivity may sound reasonable, but, as others have noted, "an evidence-based, empirical world view is dangerously reductive insofar as it negates the personal and interpersonal significance and meaning of a world that is first and foremost a relational world, and not a fixed set of objects...."ⁱ Under such circumstances, the patient can too easily be reduced to an object under the scrutiny of the clinician's all-knowing gaze. Furthermore, "the absolute authority of the gaze becomes the manner in which the patient will see him- or herself. Obvious examples here are the hysterisation of the female body and the pathologisation of homosexuality within medical discourse."ⁱⁱ

How does Marti resist this potentially oppressive force?

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The imagery of male masturbation, which features in some of Marti's video portraits, such as *Braveheart* and *MSDEBS*, is still shocking, one of the last remaining taboos. Only exceptionally does it appear in art (some pieces by Egon Schiele, Stan Brackhage's 1957 film *Flesh of Morning* and Gillian Wearing's photographic work *Masturbation* of 1991-2 providing rare examples). Since at least the seventeenth century, masturbation has been regarded as an aberrant, dangerous and harmful sexual activity. Foucault, among others, has charted the history of society's attempts to police and control the practice, if not eradicate it. Masturbation necessitated the implementation of power to control it, thus the spread of masturbation was linked to the spread of the power addressed to it. But why the fear?

According to William Simon, "The major condition for [the] increased significance of masturbation... was the development of an interior self distinct from any of the self's overt appearances; a lack of a consensual, public clarity about the individual's present and future sexual roles..."ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus masturbation indicated the emergence of a complex modern subject, a 'public' self incorporating an 'inner' self, invisible to public scrutiny and thus beyond public accountability and social control. Equally problematic, this 'inner' self was not only divided from the public self, it was also divided from itself; "Even in masturbatory fantasy, people dwell upon their actions with others; they do not get excited by thinking of themselves or of themselves masturbating while thinking of themselves."^{iv}

The masturbating self chooses to ignore the 'real' self that is masturbating and focus instead upon the 'ideal' self that participates in the masturbatory fantasy. This upsets the prevailing social order based upon the presumed transparency and accessibility of the individual's subjectivity. The threat posed by masturbation is not entirely a consequence of the physical act: it is equally a dread of the invisible powers of the imagination to re-work images in order to re-constitute reality.

Among the pleasures sought in masturbation may be that of experiencing oneself in a context of scripted social action where a version of the self is experienced as more free from conflict or ambivalence than may ever be achieved in real life. In this sense, the pursuit of orgasm through masturbation or other forms of sexual activity may be less a primary end than a means of experiencing a construction of the self different than that required by the established identities of everyday life...^v

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[Donald Kuspit]: I've always been struck by the sense of rich, dense materiality in your work. Is the material mosaic landscape a surrogate body, at once metaphor for an elusive bodily wholeness and an articulation of the body in metonymic shambles?

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[Julian Schnabel]: In a sense, yes. I want a body viewing a body. The entire picture is like a body or figure. I want it to be on a par with the spectator's figure, to engage his or her person on the most intimate bodily level. The picture is also like a body because of the weight of its material, and I want it to make the spectator feel the weight of his or her body...

[DK]: You seem to think of your pictures as though they were alive, and as though you were a Pygmalion bringing them into being.

[JS]: I experience it like a fictive person. It's a kind of psychoparadigm of an imaginary person...

[DK]: So your plate paintings are erotic objects to possess, in the literal as well as the figurative sense of the term? They're full of sexuality and psychosexuality?

[JS]: ...I want my painting to make something humanly possible - something that will show you the face of fear yet let you survive. I want it to show you whatever keeps you from being free and thereby makes you free.

Interview in J. Siegel (ed) *Art Talk*. The early 80s.



Braveheart (take3), 2007
detail
Polyester, nylon and leather on wood
190x125x5cm

To see, Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us, is to have a body. It is also, he added, to have a body that is seen by others. This ambiguous body in fact is entangled in a web of vision and visibility. The one who sees and the one who is seen are like people shaking hands: "I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching." There is an interweaving, the warp and weft of reciprocity, "a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and the sensed to the sentient." Carnality thus becomes central to Merleau-Ponty's theory of vision and his understanding of the relation between the seeing body and the world at large. "Where", he asks, "are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?" When we see, we do not stand outside of the world: On the contrary, we are immersed in it; "as flesh applied to flesh, the world neither surrounds [my body] nor is surrounded by it."^{vi} Vision is fleshly.

Works of art are things, and things are not people, but people are sometimes mistaken for things (objectified), and things - all things - return our gaze.

"Of course what most often manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction. But the look will be given just as well on occasion where there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by a silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain." (Sartre)

The kinds of looking elicited by Dani Marti's woven pieces and his video works may be of different orders (aesthetic and contemplative, or sexualized and voyeuristic), but so are the ways in which they turn their look upon us. Beware hasty judgement. Vision is an all-encompassing net that ensnares, and it has no centre.

John Calcutt.

ⁱ D. Holmes, S. J. Murray, A. Perron and G. Rail, 'Deconstructing the evidence-based discourse in health sciences: truth, power and fascism', *International Journal of Evidence Based Healthcare*, September 2006; vol. 4, Issue 3, pp. 180-186.

ⁱⁱ Holmes, et al. *op cit*.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 66.

^{iv} R. Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1989, p. 62.

^v Simon, *op cit*, p. 87.

^{vi} Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, 1968.