

## Seeing in the Dark: Dani Marti's 'Variations on a Serious Black Dress

By Gao Gao, February 2011

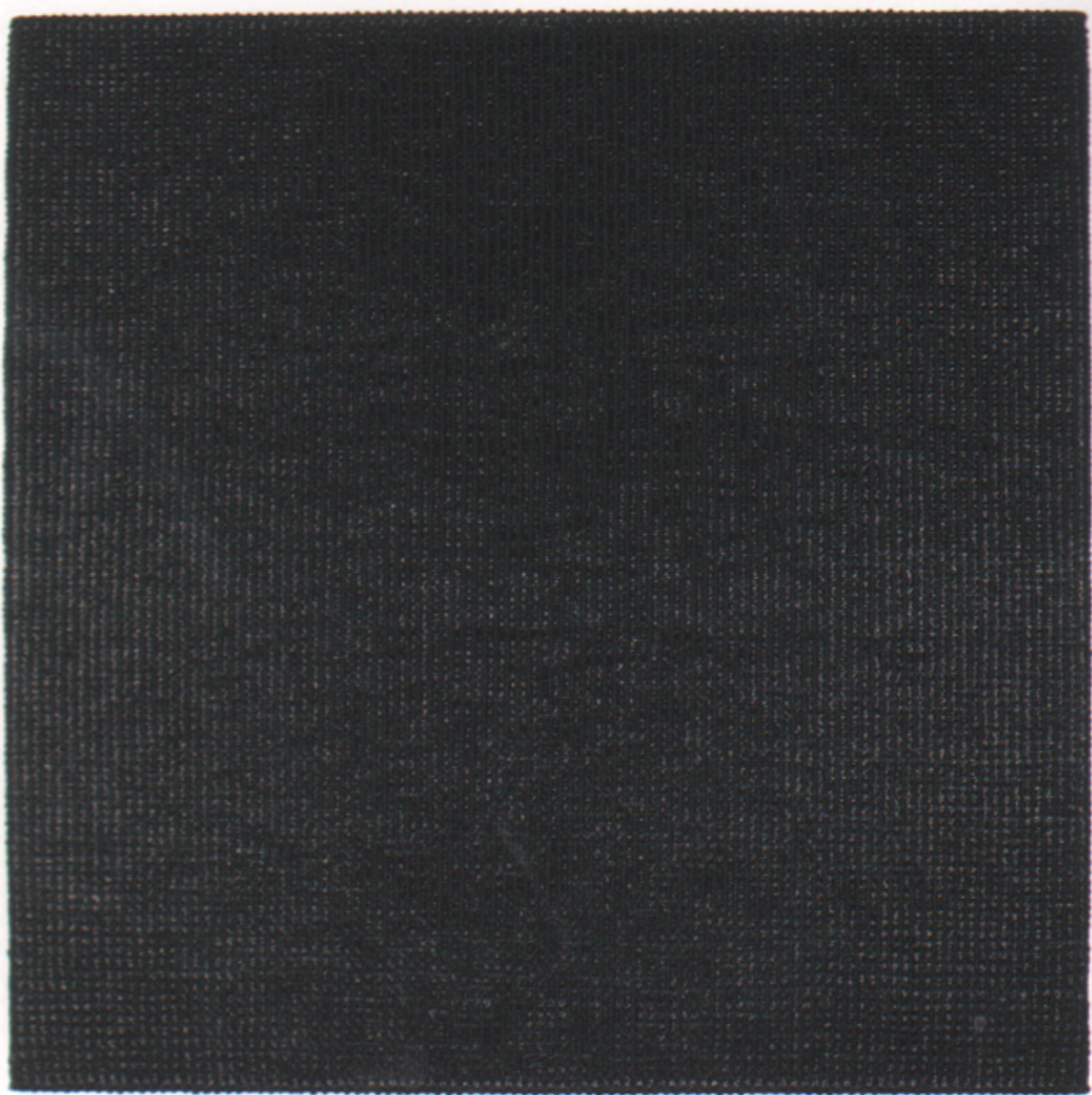


Figure 1: *Variations in a Serious Black Dress #8 2003, (Agnes, cupping her breast)*, by Dani Marti, Polyester and polypropylene on wood, 200 x 200 cm.

Dani Marti's *Variation #6, (Agnes, cupping her breast)* (Fig. 1), fills the eye with fragile inky black lines. Tightly woven ropes disappear and then reappear along a vertical plane, folding into a dense grid of imperceptibly delicate striations. In a structure of viewing that seems to be conditioned by practices of consumption, we scan the work in the attempt to recognise forms coded for legibility. It is an attempt, to see Agnes. This casual glance yields no reward; we adjust our distance from the work – closer, and then

further again. In this act, the grid expands, and contracts. For a moment, a flash of pale gold emerges, and then retracts into the darkness. This encounter lasts for a few seconds, or several long minutes: it is punctuated by a recursive glance at the exhibition catalogue for the title. At that moment, it seems imperative to link our memory of the gold fleck with the title. However long we spend looking at the surface however, it is not long enough. Agnes's hand, her breast, is nowhere to be seen.

It is in the first 'moment' however, that Marti demands that we must make a choice. One can browse through the works, all variations on a woven theme, engaging each superficially where detail is not seen, but looked at.<sup>1</sup> Here, to look at the work is to see blindly and hope that meaning emerges quickly; the black surface is tenaciously resistant to our perceptions of colour or texture. The alternative comes because this cursory structure of viewing fails. The intricate details of Marti's 'portraits' are densely repetitive and overpoweringly expansive - the 'processes of perceptual recognition' through which we attain clarity deteriorate as the dark monochromatic tones and delicate striations of the work strain our ability to see difference.<sup>2</sup> The gaze, through which subjectivity is affirmed, is temporarily obscured.

Engagement with these works calls for a structure of 'slow seeing' because the conditions of visibility are put under intense pressure. Time must be taken to adjust the eye to the form of the grid and the opaque obsidian hue. The risk of losing sight under these circumstances is inevitable, yet vital. In this process, we traverse a temporal landscape characterised by cycles of recognition and misidentification; the ability to 'see' the brilliant flecks of light interlaced into *Variation #6* (Fig.1), the sculptural relief that undulates through the surface, is fleeting – if one looks too hard, the eye, somehow, loses focus. This optical resistance is frustrating, even demoralising. The 'portraits' are uncompromising because they reject our underlying desire to engage with the 'antique' terms of objectivity and clarity.<sup>3</sup> Because these works refuse visual immediacy, our structures of knowledge and seeing collapse, and we are projected into an interstitial void of ambiguity.

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<sup>1</sup>Finnegan 2004, 23.

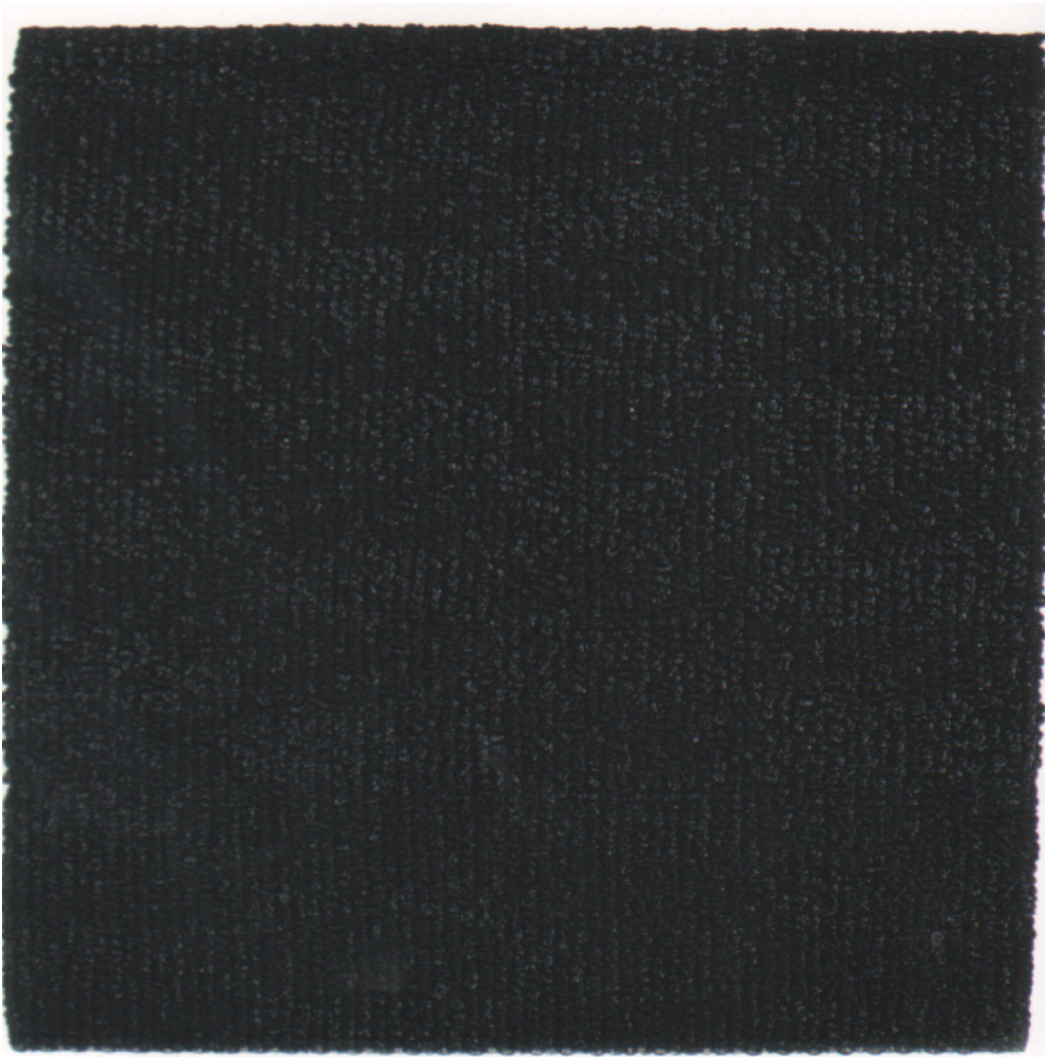
The 'Variations in a serious black dress' are often hung together with three steel floor pieces titled *Codpiece (Felipe II) 2003*; *Codpiece (Henry VIII) 2003*; *Codpiece of an unknown ruler in the Golden Age 2003*. They act as 'the masculine counterpart and counterpoint to the dresses' and 'establish themselves as floorworks – sculptures which literally take the floor, centre stage, in the manner of traditional pontificators or rulers.'

Whilst these works provide an interesting dimension to the 'Variations', they are often multicoloured, and are displayed from the floor. For the purposes of this essay on 'slow seeing', which engages the conditions of difficulty that arise from viewing under strained light, I will not be including them as part of the collection.

<sup>2</sup> Fer 2007, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Krauss 1992, 337.

It is in the time spent engaging, and preserving this visual ambiguity, however, that we ultimately gain redemption. The pressures of 'slow seeing', where our ability to see is clearest precisely as the structure of viewing disintegrates, are relieved only when we accept that the compact surface will not accommodate this clarity.<sup>4</sup> Instead, a sustained encounter with these works offers us an anxious and unresolved subject position that trivialises the notion of 'visual reward'. This experience is redemptive in its ability to retard the dialectical process of identification by materialising the ambiguous, the dangerous, the temporary and the multiple.<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> Fer 2007, 72.

<sup>5</sup> Krauss 1992, 333.

Figure 2: Variations in a Serious Black Dress #12 2003, Neo Gothic Barbie lost in knotted fantasies, Dani Marti *Polypropylene on wood*, 200 x 200 x 9 cm.

Marti's work embodies several of the qualities seen in the black paintings produced by Abstract Expressionists such as Mark Rothko or Frank Stella.<sup>6</sup> His employment of the grid, the readymade, and the Greenbergian 'all-over' plane denote tropes of formal geometric abstraction. However, unlike Rothko's black paintings, notable for their rectangular composition, there are no windows, no passage ways through which form manifests as a point of optical entry.<sup>7</sup> We are confronted with a mass of seemingly uniform black squares. Intuitively, (or conditioned by practices of viewing), we look to the title to signify narrative and symbolic content because the meticulous grid does not yield an opening or focal point. The title of the portrait becomes a lexicon for the work where its allusive content has set up a series of expectations.

In this body of work, the repetitive emphasis on '*Variation*' conjures up notions of seriality, evocative of Yves Klein's readymade blue monochromes.<sup>8</sup> The iterative reference to a 'serious black dress' establishes ironic associations of femininity, materiality and frivolity. We almost expect to experience the works as if perusing through a closet, or a shop window, where the dresses are put on display on identical mannequins to view at our leisure. This expectation is extended, moreover, as we look to the man-made fibres and their status as a 'readymade' to give some indication of quality, or origin; undertones of capitalist production are emphasised by sequential numbering.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, by-lines such as '*Neo Gothic Barbie lost in knotted fantasies*' (Fig. 2), or '*Japanese smile in translucent, transcendent polyester*' (Fig. 3), have explicitly sexual and bodily overtones that border on fetishistically perverse.<sup>10</sup> We then look for a materialisation of the body

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<sup>6</sup> Rosenthal 2007, back cover.

I am referring here to the black works produced in the late 1940s to 50s by 'prominent artists of the New York School--among them Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko and Frank Stella'. Their work, 'interrelated but not collaborative, resulted in an astonishing number of almost monochromatic black paintings' that were 'textured black, striped black, blue-black, brown-black, black-black'. Examples of such qualities are attempts to render 'the end of painting as illusion', of the opening up of the pictorial plane 'as a window onto the world, and the beginning of painting as the mode for the creation of self-sufficient perceptual objects--a change that granted new roles to both artist and viewer'. See Stephanie Rosenthal's discussion of these works in greater detail in *Black Paintings* (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Rosenthal 2007, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Alison 2005, 45.

In Klein's show 'Proposte Monochrome, Epoca Blu' (Proposition Monochrome; Blue Epoch) at the Gallery Apollinaire, Milan, (January 1957), he featured 11 identical blue canvases, using ultramarine pigment suspended in a synthetic resin 'Rhodopas'. The colour was patented and trademarked as 'International Klein Blue' or 'IKB'.

<sup>9</sup> There are several different versions of each work, but each version of a 'Variation' maintains the same general structure and use of polyester, nylon, polypropylene or rubber on wood.

<sup>10</sup> Finnegan 2004, 5.

in the work suggested by these titles– for a solid body that is sexually coded – but this structure of reading is obstinately resisted. The ‘Variations’ hold our eye for an indeterminable time, in the course of which little in the way of formal or symbolic detail comes into view. The title’s synecdochic allusions do not transmute to the formal elements of the grid; the thousands of tiny metallic knots on *Neo Gothic Barbie lost in knotted fantasies* (Fig. 2), for example, do not manifest a direct visual correlation. A sense of paralysis settles into the mind, as the imagination stutters, falters and pauses as the relationship between narrative cues and the visual field are abstracted beyond recognition. The pleasure gained in the process of identification facilitated by the gaze, is denied.

Our ability to perceive is dependent on our ability to orient ourselves ‘in relation to the moment as it is lived’.<sup>11</sup> Briony Fer describes this need in the desire to ‘feel the full force of [a] phenomenological, rather than perceptual, experience. Just as we can never be outside of language, we can never be outside our own phenomenological and bodily sense of the world’.<sup>12</sup> A phenomenological experience is important because the surface obfuscates our ability to relate to the work; this inability renders an imminent threat of subjective alienation and utter isolation. If we cannot be ‘outside of our own phenomenological and bodily sense of the world’, then how is the viewer to resist alienation into obscurity?<sup>13</sup> Marti emphasises that these works are portraits – how do we identify and engage the subjects portrayed if they are abstracted to a point of formal dissolution?

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<sup>11</sup> Fer 2007, 73.

<sup>12</sup> Fer 2007, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Fer 2007, 73.

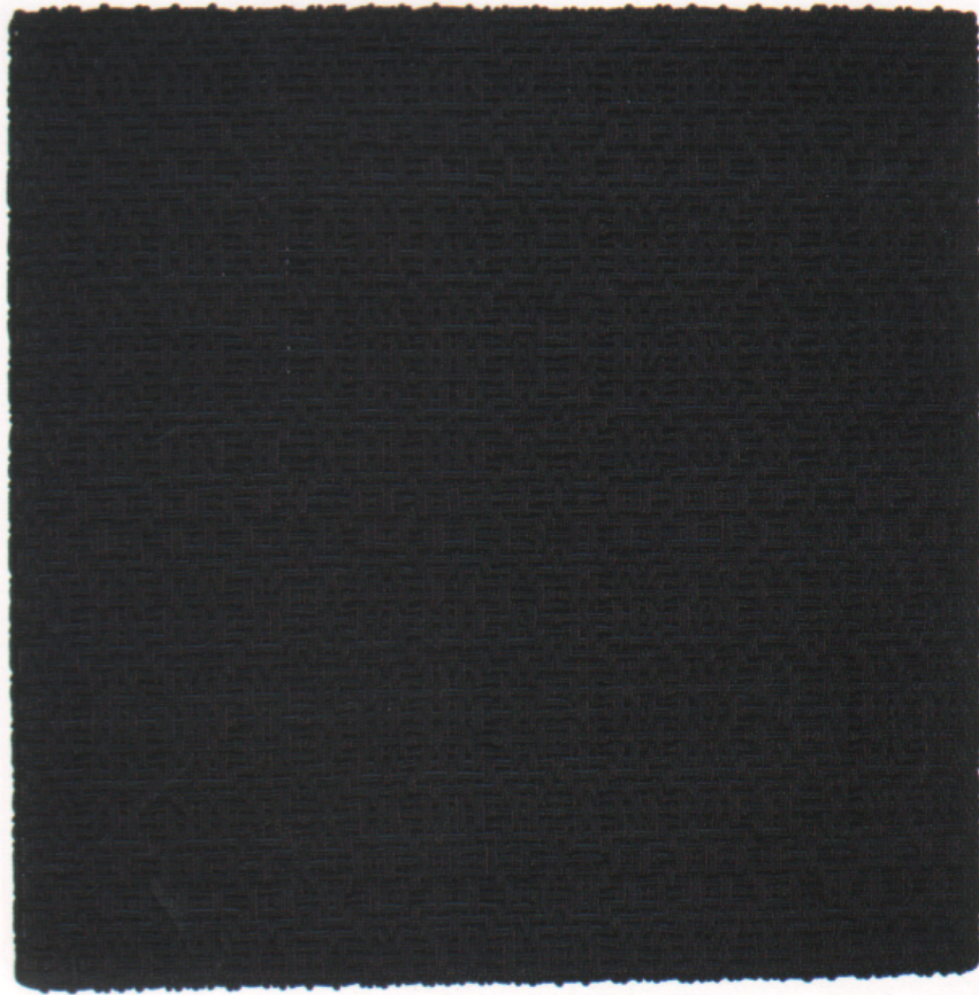


Figure 3: *Variations in a Serious Black Dress #4 2003, (Japanese smile in translucent, transcendent polyester), Dani Marti, Polyester and polypropylene on wood, 200 x 200 cm.*

To answer this, I refer back to the canonical black paintings by Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt or Frank Stella, wherein the figural subject is abolished in an attempt to transcend the pictorial plane, but where there remains some central formal element – be it variation in the opacity, shape or texture of the form.

This moment, characterised by a reconciliatory attempt to experience the work over time, is the second moment of slow seeing. Where in Barnett Newman's *Abraham* or in Frank Stella's *Black Series II* the geometric demarcation of a stripe or diamond acts as a point of focus, Marti's 'Variations' are unyielding. One scans works such as *Variation #4, (Japanese smile in translucent, transcendent polyester) (Fig. 3)* for a point of orientation or direction, but the eye does not and can not come to rest. It zooms over the surface, as if by expediting the process of seeing, we can gain visual returns faster. One should know better by now.

The gaze slips to the edges, where the lines weave into, and behind each other infinitely. There is no indication of top, or bottom. The gaze cannot be sustained at the edge, and so blurs back to the centre, without respite.

This frenetic illegibility differs from the ‘slow seeing’ rendered by formal elements found in the Abstract Expressionist’s black paintings because space operates differently. Where in Rothko’s black paintings, the feathered edges hinted at an entry way of depth, Marti’s ‘Variations’ do not expose the same sense of representative space where the viewer is transported to transcendent depths. There is, however, a similarity to Agnes Martin’s grids, where the ‘ambiguities of illusion take over from the earlier materiality of a surface redoubled by the weave of Martin’s grids or bands’.<sup>14</sup> Kasha Linville’s phenomenological reading of Martin’s paintings, where viewing them is like experiencing “sequences of illusions of textures that change as viewing distance changes” is relevant to Marti’s work.<sup>15</sup> By adjusting one’s distance to the surface, we experience the stages of materiality, atmospheric and ultimate opacity of the work. Marti’s work has a similar effect, where the repetitive structure of the grid locates the spectator at a specific distance at specific times, and under the mandate that seeing is experienced slowly.

Moreover, the ambiguity of the edge *as a boundary* differs from previous ‘black paintings’ for a seemingly obvious reason: Marti’s works are not paintings. These woven works are portraits that double an articulation of difference: whilst they all name ‘women’ as the subject, and in doing so solicit ground for a gendering of the viewing position, the facture of the ‘Variations’ is entrenched in narratives of male femininity, subversive sexuality and the resignification of codes of domesticity – themes Marti often employs in his work. Seeing is conditioned by the willingness to engage these narratives, and by relinquishing the urge to site difference through direct objectification. In order to emphasise the futility of objectivity in this context, Marti’s grid literally coincides with the material support of the frame. In weaving, there is a differentiation between the function of directional lines. The warp is defined by the fixed vertical threads and the weft is the thread carried by the shuttle perpendicular to the warp.<sup>16</sup> There is a sense that the work gains depth, density and tone as the shuttle, or the hand, weaves in and out. ‘In the repetition of gestures the form asserts and annuls itself, forcing the actions of another gesture’: the direction

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<sup>14</sup> Krauss 1992, 333.

<sup>15</sup> Krauss 1992, 333

<sup>16</sup> Conversation with the artist, October 11<sup>th</sup>.

of the lines unify, double, and negate form.<sup>17</sup> Weaving ‘energises the grid at the edges, the visual cues coalesce’ and propel one’s awareness back into the interiors; neither the act nor the work replicates established signs of subordination or objectivity, but instead articulates a ‘not yet commodified’ language of subversion that is materialised in the fabric.<sup>18</sup>

Whilst the repetitive nature of the act of weaving is associated with domesticity and femininity, it is the same repetition that divests the hierarchical and gendered associations from their meanings. Fer posits that ‘if repetition is an attempt to perpetuate sameness, then enunciation and enumeration emphasise that in sameness lies difference. Repeated in the making is the uniqueness of each movement, the interplay between intention and creation, the act and the natural.’<sup>19</sup> There is a reorganisation, a re-definition of what is associated with seeing here; meaning is shifted because each movement is unique. The re-definitions are endless because whilst the warp remains rigid, the weft is indeterminably long: infinite. As the threads weave in and out, pulses of alterity are exposed, and then retracted – revealed just long enough for us to recognise difference, but not long enough for us define stable subjectivity.

The fabric materialised in these works gives voice to a multiplicity, and yet is predicated on the bondage of the portraiture of a singular one. The status of the object is challenged by signifying plurality in meaning because the repetitive banality of the grid dematerialises the visual field into opaque saturation. Marti’s subjectivity is inextricable from that of the woven portrait as the relationship he has with the ‘dress’ is intrinsically entangled. As he weaves and twists the lengths of thread his position as ‘creator’, ‘man’, ‘artist’ and ‘homosexual’ slide into the portrait’s status of ‘woman,’ ‘object’ and ‘sexual’. For Marti, weaving the ‘Variations’ are acts of bondage. On the other hand, the viewer’s subjectivity is inextricable from both because one cannot then determine a difference between these signifiers. In *Variation #4, (Japanese smile in translucent, transcendent polyester)* the colonial desire to see what makes the smile ‘Japanese’ - to capitalise on the translucency of the material – is undermined. In *Variation #13 (Holding her last born son)*, the undertones of maternity conflict and coincide with our image of Marti – his creativity is conflated with that of child birth. This over-determination of meaning, enhanced by the repetition of a grid structure, is an important mechanism in ‘slow seeing’. Viewing the grid, locates the viewer at a particular

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<sup>17</sup> Crow 2005, 104-5.

<sup>18</sup> de Zegher 1996, 352, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Crow 2005, 29.



distance akin to Linville's second distance, where illusion takes over from the materiality of the surface.<sup>20</sup> The grid disintegrates, dissolves, and our structure of viewing stutters to gain orientation; we go through temporary moments of blindness. That is, the grid does not close itself off as a system, but resists sight in pulses – notable for the oscillation between moments where the surface contracts, devoid of content, and moments where the surface expands overwhelmingly in detail. Thomas Crow describes this phenomenon where the “relatively invariant [structure] induces a fatigue that sends the viewer back to a distance where imposing scale becomes a property to be apprehended in terms of a ceremonial remoteness rather than a confusing intimacy”<sup>21</sup> In these moments, orientation seems impossible.

Eventually, we have to rely on rational logic to negotiate the way in which we 'see' the 'Variations' because there is not one precise focus - the 'Variations' cannot be engaged from one vantage point. How can one regain one's sense of orientation if subjectivity is constructed with the multiple, the multi-directional, and not the singular? Does 'slow seeing' allow for clarity only over a temporal framework? We use logic to adjust our distance to the work once more. There is a rationality in the idea that distance, as well as time, must be adjusted to gain focus. Just as the weaves of the 'Variations' oscillates between external and internal, there is simultaneously a constant, frenetic negotiation of distance that undermines a stable viewing position. When close up to the work, the viewer surrenders to the totality of material details, and can concentrate only on the irregularities in the texture of the cords. If far away, the work recedes into a void, presenting only blackness.<sup>22</sup> In this adjustment, there is a shift in experience from that of the optical to the haptic.<sup>23</sup> This shift is uncompromising, and engages the temporal structure of 'slow seeing' as the gaze is trapped into a sustained encounter with the work. Because perceptual recognition has failed, and the viewer has to depend on the synaesthetic tactility of the surface. For a moment, we no longer see the irregularities of the grid – the flecks of colour and infinitesimal misalignments of the line give a sense of texture because the dimensional materiality of the fibres project a sense of presence into the space between us and the work. The status of the cords and ropes as readymade objects twist around our sense of touch. We are aware not only of the woven surface of the grid, but that the cords themselves are tightly wrapped

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<sup>20</sup> Krauss 1992, 333.

<sup>21</sup> Crow 2005, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Which itself may be another function of distance: the blackness could allude to that of explicit racial othering. Marti was originally born in Barcelona, but lives in Australia and the UK. His work often deals with themes of cultural and linguistic displacement and marginalisation, especially in his series *Looking for Rover (2004)*. See Hynes, Victoria. 2004. *Looking for Rover*: (Sydney, Sherman Galleries) for more on this.

<sup>23</sup> Krauss 1992, 334.

strands plaited together. This tension strains our vision, and the fraying of the cords as they are pulled, wrapped and twisted around the frame evokes a claustrophobic sense of decay and mortality.<sup>24</sup> The saturated blackness of the works feel heavy – so heavy that the viewer almost falls into the work; as we align ourselves spatially to view the work, there is a sense that our bodies are absorbed into the surface. The structure of seeing here is not linear – we are not ‘browsing’ through a shop front. What is at stake with this structure of viewing is that in our encounter with these ‘Variations’, there are oscillating moments of instability or closing off, of simultaneous identification and rejection, and these moments are the temporal spaces in which we have to irresolvably construct subjecthood.

The gaze is trapped because of our inability to coherently identify, grasp, or stabilise knowledge of the object: this is the condition of difficulty that structures how we see. Even if light is reflected dully from the rubber tubing of *Variation #11 (Strictly porn)*, the experience of seeing the reflection cannot be slowed down or reproduced. It is utterly individual to the viewer, depending on one’s position or angle, or even light of day. The reflection of the works on the shiny surface of the gallery space floor mirror back an imaginary unity – a unified mass of blackness and emptiness – it constructs a spatial confine in which the sense of illegibility is doubled. Stephanie Rosenthal describes this experience as only an ‘illusion of an illusion’: what in reality these experiences possess results from their function as ‘traps for the gaze’.<sup>25</sup>

We now come to the last moment of slow seeing – the temporal space in which the fractured gaze is trapped. Where the grid was first overwhelmingly muscular and claustrophobic in proximity, and then impenetrable from afar, it now is dissolved – dematerialised. One cannot focus on the grid for too long as formal elements emerge into the foreground and then disappear; over time, ‘the other [elements] soon intervene and reassert the planar character of the image’.<sup>26</sup> The gaze is trapped in a frenetic oscillation, as the lines ‘merge into one another, switch back and forth’ between the ‘perception of a monochrome surface

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<sup>24</sup> It is hard to mention Marti’s work without referring to the other aspect of his practice – of film. In attempting to portray in the impossibility of portraiture, Marti often chooses subjects that depict vulnerability. He often attends to the complexity of such subjectivities by using visual strategies such as split screens, long extended, unedited clips, and displacing audio. His most recent work, *Bacon’s Dog*, 2010, is a hauntingly beautiful montage a man’s exploration into his own gay sexuality. Other works, both material and visual, include *Orifices* (2000-2004) and *Time is the Fire in Which We Burn* (2009), in which he broaches issues of male homosexuality, how AIDS effects the body, as well as the way in which society materialises fear, rejection and subversive desire. Conversation with the artist, October 11<sup>th</sup> 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Rosenthal 2007, 50.

<sup>26</sup> Rosenthal 2007, 52

and of a simple geometric order'.<sup>27</sup> The intricate grid surface of the 'Variations' occupies the 'transitional realm between visibility and invisibility, between sensory presence and absence, between part and whole': the gaze is now contingent on maintaining the threshold of this dichotomy rather than that of the status of the object.

This fracturing of the gaze into a position of split identification leaves the viewer without a unitary vantage point or agency over the distance required for subjectivity. Over this structure of 'slow seeing', the gaze is turned inwards, and the mechanisms that produce meaning that are exposed as unstable. A prolonged encounter with Marti's 'Variations' embodies the potential to dissolve the boundaries of the Self – or at least the idea of it does. As the structure of seeing becomes the subject, rather than the viewer, objectivity becomes characterised by plurality – unknowability. As the pressure of vision is alleviated momentarily, the gaze is demystified and exposed as dependent on legibility; the ambiguities of illusion projected by the surface of these works are vital to preserving an anxious and unresolved subjectivity.

This reading is formalist, and perhaps pessimistic. However, it is in embracing the impossibility of portraiture that the subject/object dichotomy can be diminished. We find a utopian zone in this ambiguity, because it supports the idea that perhaps the contemporary figure is neither figurative nor abstract. In the striated space created by re-alignments, misalignments and negation, the viewer is woven into the image; any attempt at objectifying the image results only in frustration. Subjectivity slides from a position of stability, and is instead manifested as pulses, or temporary moments of clarity that last for a few seconds, or perhaps several long minutes of eternity.

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<sup>27</sup> Rosenthal 2007, 52.



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