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DISTORTION TO REFLECTION:
AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC AND ARTISTIC EXPLORATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
MAGISTER TECHNOLOGIAE: FINE ART

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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates a diagnosis of bipolar affective disorder through a critical engagement with Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory and an auto-ethnographic reflection of my lived experience, and presents an artistic exploration of my experience of amplified emotions, affects and feelings. My self-reflection on mood episodes prior to my study inspired and motivated me to pursue an in-depth investigation into the transformative possibilities of bipolar mood episodes. My research explores bipolar mood episodes as transformative cycles vital to personal growth rather than as symptoms of mental illness. Whether or not psychiatric drugs delay or desensitize these cycles is part of a complex discourse that I do not discuss in this dissertation. The medical model is one way to approach mood episodes. However, I am concerned rather with self-transformation as narrated through a detailed and descriptive account of emotion, affect and feeling, which I engage with through Kristeva’s (1982) theory of abjection. I expand on Kristeva’s discourse on abjection by applying it to my experience of bipolar affective disorder. My research highlights the therapeutic role of the creative process. It contributes towards the academic validity of the exploration of personal lived experiences as a research domain in terms of emotion, affect and feeling. I investigate, through my reading of psychoanalytic theory and through my painting, what, for me, triggers the mood episodes from which transformation is aroused.

Auto-ethnography allows for my reflective voice, my poetic voice and my visual voice to parallel my academic voice throughout my dissertation. I document my lived experience during a significant two-year period of my life and delve into the present and the past. Stigma forms a counterpoint to my journey. I explore themes of stigma and shame associated with diagnoses of bipolar affective disorder and consider how emotion, affect and feeling may be alternatively approached through an auto-ethnographic study, making use of creative writing and photographs, and an engagement with psychoanalytical theories. Through my writing and exhibition of my art, I intend to open a conversation about the ways in which emotions, affects and feelings alter us, about the ways in which we experience them, and about the experience of emotional metamorphosis. Although my stance is not an activist one, nor is it one of identity politics, my experience might open up the possibility of destigmisation for others. My work
aims to be an expression with which people can identify: an honest expression of how I experience life.

**Key words:**

Abjection, affect, auto-ethnography, bipolar affective disorder, destigmatisation, emotion, feeling, growth cycles, mental illness, metamorphosis, personal transformation, shame, stigma, sublimation.
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DEDICATION

To my sister Mia, who, - parallels we seem - lives a life unfiltered, intensified. My sister with whom, in enigmatic synergy, I beckon light through colour, dance and song. My sister who - like art - saved my life quite a few times and who confirmed throughout my journey that even in our most unique individual expression, we can, but do not have to dance alone.

Figure 1: @everdreamy. Instagram. 6 November 2018. Melville, Johannesburg. (photograph by author).
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INTRODUCTION

Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman - a rope over an abyss. A dangerous going-across, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and staying-still. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal; what can be loved in man is that he is going-across and a down-going.

(Nietzsche 1978:43, 44).

From a philosophical perspective, emotion has played an inferior role in the conception of self and has not long been considered a counterpart to reason:

...the idea that emotion is as such more primitive, less intelligent, more bestial, less dependable, and more dangerous than reason, and thus needs to be controlled by reason (Solomon: 2018:21).

Stigma regarding mental illness stems from the same root as the idea that emotions are irrational, embarrassing, inappropriate and weak. Robert Solomon (2018:21) writes in *Philosophy of Emotions*:

One of the most enduring metaphors for reason and emotion has been the metaphor of master and slave, with the wisdom of reason firmly in control and the dangerous impulses of emotion safely suppressed, channelled, or (ideally) in harmony with reason.
My study is a multi-layered articulation of my experience of amplified emotions\(^1\), affects\(^2\) and feelings\(^3\). I interrogate a diagnosis of bipolar affective disorder by my exploration of mood episodes as transformative psychic growth cycles. Parallel to my academic voice, throughout my dissertation, is my reflective voice, my poetic voice and my visual voice explored through Instagram\(^4\) images.

In this dissertation, I explore my experience of these cycles and their transformative power, and further articulate the experience through photography, painting and creative writing. Self-awareness during, and reflection on, these mood episodes has made it clear to me that an enriched understanding of myself and the world around me is a result of the experience. Recognising bipolar affective disorder as a vital transformative process brings the question of medicating to mind. Whether or not psychiatric drugs delay or desensitize these cycles is a complex discourse that I do not explore in this dissertation. The medical model is one way to approach mood episodes. However, I am concerned rather with self-transformation as narrated through a detailed and descriptive account of amplified emotion, affect and feeling, which I read through Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) is a key text in my study and has guided me towards understanding how abjection may be seen as a vital part of my creative process. My objective is to expand on Kristeva’s discourse on abjection by applying it to my experience of bipolar affective disorder.

I aim to investigate, through my reading of Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory and through my painting, what, for me, triggers depression, i.e. that which disrupts and brings to a halt - a complete standstill – my being, and from which transformation can be aroused.

My theoretical framework brings together psychoanalysis and auto-ethnography, grounded by Kristeva’s abjection which has links to both modes of analysis. My qualitative form of research

---

\(^1\) “An emotion is a complex phenomenon that forms a new unit of self-experience. It includes affect, but it is also a condensation of many other elements, such as ideas, memories, unconscious perceptions, derivatives of somatic states, and other mental ingredients. Emotions may become conscious, or they may remain entirely unconscious” (Bollas 2009:41).

\(^2\) “Affects are phenomena such as anxiety, rage and euphoria, in their pure, essential form. They are part of the raw material of our internal life” (Bollas 2009:41).

\(^3\) “To describe the perception of affect or emotion we commonly use the word ‘feeling’. This has connotations of a physical sense – that of touch. Feeling, when used to refer to the psychic rather than the somatic, can in fact be considered as a separate sense… A feeling, then, is a form of unconscious perception based on the matrix of emotional life” (Bollas 2009:41).

\(^4\) In chapters one and two, Instagram images relate to the text by encapsulating a particular emotion, affect or feeling. In chapter three, Instagram images serve as a timeline of experiences over a significant, approximately two-year period of my life.
methodology, auto-ethnography, allows for self-reflection through autobiographical writing. This, will provide the reader with more insight into my experience of amplified emotion, affect and feeling, documented over a two-year journey.

Stigma forms a counterpoint to my journey. Although my stance is not an activist one, nor is it one of identity politics, destigmatisation may be a side effect of sharing my experience. Through my writing and exhibition of my art, I intend to open a conversation about the ways in which emotions, affects and feelings alter us, the ways in which we experience them and the experience of emotional metamorphosis. The experience of engaging with my work aims to be an expression with which people can identify: an honest expression of how I experience life.

In Chapter One, I provide a detailed description of my experience of emotions, affects and feelings, in order to contextualize my study and provide insight into the relevance of the consequent theoretical choices I have made during my study. I outline and discuss auto-ethnography as a research methodology by considering the views of Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner. I consider how Kristeva’s concept of the “subject-in-process” may be better understood through an auto-ethnographical approach to research. I explore how Kristeva’s theory of abjection may influence the way in which I look at what psychotherapy considers to be bipolar mood episodes. In Julia Kristeva (2004) Noëlle McAfee provides insight into Kristeva’s theory of abjection. I explore how the process of sublimation, as defined by Kristeva, allows me to create reflective works of writing and art in my study. Elspeth Probyn’s (2005) Blush: Faces of Shame assists me in defining and understanding shame in the context of my study and I draw from Robbie Duschinsky’s (2013) “Abjection and self-identity: towards a revised account of purity and impurity” to understand shame in the context of abjection. Shame is a central theme in my experience of mood episodes and forms a part of the negative side effects of stigma.

In Chapter Two I engage with the work and philosophy of artists and theorists with whom I feel an affiliation, in order to deepen my understanding of my own artistic processes. I apply the theory I outline in Chapter One to the selected processes and works of artists dealing with themes of trauma, metamorphosis, the cathartic process of abjection, vulnerability and mental illness stigma. I discuss Bracha Ettinger’s artistic process and philosophy as an example of the experience of art as a means of healing from collective trauma, and consider how Ettinger’s ‘matrixial border space’ resonates with Kristeva’s notions of the semiotic and symbolic realms. As an example of self-reflectivity and the therapeutic role that art can play, I refer to the artist,
Jessica Merle, and explore her art-making process in her work *Rebirth* (2016). Frida Kahlo’s cathartic transformation of trauma through her painting process is discussed as an example of purifying the abject and I consider how artist, Ashleigh Christelis, counteracts social stigma through honesty by sharing her bipolar affective disorder experience via public platforms. Tsoku Maela addresses the stigma of mental illness in black communities and his artworks create powerful pivots of conversation about depression, bipolar affective disorder and anxiety. I discuss these artists and their work to gain deeper insight into my own creative processes and draw parallels between my own processes and theirs. Finally, I discuss Christopher Bollas’s (2009) theory of thinking and the creative process in his *The Evocative Object World*, and the therapeutic role of the artistic process. I look at the bell jars and Instagram images that I use in my paintings, and that form a self-reflective thread through my artworks, in relation to Bollas’s theory of evocative objects. This contributes towards the groundwork that may aid the reader in order to better understand the discussion of my own work and processes in Chapter Three.

In Chapter Three creative writing from my journals plays a vital role in guiding the reader through my personal journey. This chapter includes a multi-layered and detailed articulation of my experiences from May 2016 until November 2018. Through this articulation of my experience, I also consider how the theoretical component of my study has aided me in reaching a better understanding my own artistic practice.

My study is a documentation of my journey from self-loathing to self-love: it is a journal describing my passage from shadow to light, and from a distorted world to a place where I can reflect. My journey has neither ending nor beginning. It is a continuous folding and unfolding that morphs and moves and mutates. As Friedrich Nietzsche (1978:44) suggests in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “[I] am a bridge and not a goal…. [I] am going-across and a down-going.”
CHAPTER ONE

We are all midwives to ourselves. We fear if we are too much ourselves we will destroy ourselves, but failing in this task also involves self-injury (Eigen 2009:10).

Where once an ethereal, intangible satellite swerved a few medical terms transformed that which was silver-white, stark-white, that which would glimmer and glow and its constant companion in pitch black - the absence of colour - that which shines in moonlight, dark tunnels of sickening slime, glacial green. My supernatural capacity grounded, humanised by classifying it an illness of the psyche. My magic-wand a soul-influenza. My sjambok a soul with a heart, with a crack. Mania was a cloudy dream where I sat and considered that I was the cause of street kids suffering in Sunnyside. I believed the world outside to reflect my rotten insides. Depression seemed Calvinistic, unlike Mania, which was hedonistic, a God-syndrome, and a sin. I was so tired, and I accepted, gladly, something that would allow me to sleep. I accepted that I was sick (Reflection by author, 2000).

Figure 3: @everdreamy. Instagram. 22 May 2015. Emmarentia, Johannesburg (photograph by author).
INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I present detailed and descriptive research on my experience of amplified emotion, affect and feeling. Drawing on Kristeva’s theory of abjection, I investigate these phenomena as vital experiences in my creative journey, as opposed to their being seen as symptoms of a mental illness. I am using the process of abjection, and its consequent effluence through sublimation, to underpin my cathartic creative processes. I extend Kristeva’s theory of abjection to my experience of what is considered in psychiatry to be bipolar mood episodes. It seems to me that the abjection of entangled emotion is a fundamental part of my creative process and journey to self-awareness. Phases of mental confusion, which I call distortion, appear to mark the beginning of a process of abjection. On my journey, the entanglement of my amplified emotions, affects and feelings, demands recognition and refuses to be further ignored. Once seen and felt in pure intensity, a transformation through sublimation is allowed. It leads me to a place of clarity where I can reflect on the experiences I have had. From a different angle, it is my creative process which pulls me through the most destructive of my mood episodes.

This chapter opens with a description of my experience of amplified emotion, affect and feeling. I then discuss auto-ethnography as a research method which allows for poetic freedom in my emotional expression through the addition of autobiographical writing as an expression of my reflective voice.

Next, I investigate how my experiences of emotional extremes mirror the process of Kristeva’s theory of abjection viewed as a vital process of self-formation. She writes in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) that abjection of the self, reveals “that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (Kristeva 1982:13).

During mood episodes, certain emotions, affects and feelings seem to shed light on the parts of myself which should be discarded but cannot be cast aside. I emerge from these cycles both humbled and elated. McAfee (2004:1) explains that through Kristeva’s eyes, borders are touched by forces on either side: “[t]o live is to be in a state of change, to be nearly under siege from a variety of forces.” Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:3) shows that subjectivity is a dynamic, continuous process that can never reach completion. My mood episodes are not phases of
illness that I recover from, heal from, or are released from. They are continuous cycles of fierce metamorphoses.

I investigate shame as a central emotion during mood episodes. It is the experience of shame, disgust and despair that drives me to seek cathartic sublimation. Shame links to the social stigma and experience of both depression and mania, and forms an integral part of my experience of amplified emotions, affects and feelings, as discussed later in this chapter. Finally, I use the process of sublimation to underpin my creative processes. I recall mood episodes during which I felt a deep desire to end my life, and the subsequent process of painting myself out of a place of despair. The process of my creative practice, which is led by intuition⁵, is a journey of working through emotions, affects, and feelings, by allowing myself to be immersed. By immersing myself in my experiences of emotion, affect, and feeling, I am following what Kristeva calls the process of sublimation. Sarah Beadsworth, in her text, *Kristeva’s Idea of Sublimation* (2004b:123), describes sublimation as a form of creative work, a way of gaining a better understanding of the experience. Sublimation, in turn, enables me to produce reflective works of writing and art.

I investigate Kristeva’s views on the relationship between the work of art and the process of working through trauma. For her, the process of sublimation is therapeutic: also, it forms a part of a transformative journey (Oliver 2013:20). Sublimation allows me to communicate my experience of emotions, affects and feelings through the visual and textual languages of my paintings, my digital journaling and my creative writing. Sublimation also releases me from emotions, affects and feelings, that may lead to self-harm in various ways.

Although my experiences of amplified emotion, affect and feeling have been life-threatening at times, I regard the ability to feel such intensity to be a powerful occurrence which lends insight into the nature of psychic growth. These fluctuating emotional experiences form cycles that are milestones in what are both harrowing and liberating metamorphoses. It is a journey where I tip-toe around, in-between, and in the very insides of, as Kristeva (1982: 9) would say, horror and *jouissance*⁶.

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⁵ “Intuition refers to the ability to understand something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning” (Oxford 2018:[sp]).

⁶ “Physical or intellectual pleasure, delight, or ecstasy” (Oxford 2018:[sp]).
These cycles have no beginning and no end: they form part of a seemingly never-ending spiral that slowly, and sometimes swiftly, moves as I breathe. Even if in a place of elation or equilibrium, even after surviving that which threatens my existence, and even after sublimating what in me has become abject, there is always the possibility of my moods once again turning against me. This possibility is ever-present, a shadow of my functionality, threatening at any stage to overshadow my existence. In the words of Kristeva (1982:2):

And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out.

In the light of the perspective gained by transforming my experiences through my writing and my art, my fear of the ever-present shadow lurking seems absurd. In fearing the shadow that leads to mental pain, I would deny myself the growth to which it leads.
AMPLIFIED EMOTION, AFFECT AND FEELING

Dark are the spaces I dwell in as dawn breaks with clouded clarity and the abject.

Light are the shapes that are born from abjection, green to blush pink to magenta until it dies once again.

A bloody mess.
And again and again, and again.

#distortion to #reflection

Cycles that had resulted in significant personal growth and change are marked with a disruption to my life – a loss of hope, a desperate yearning to cease to exist. I cannot alone accept the diagnosis of a major depressive episode (one pole of bipolar affective disorder) for these tumultuous tides, these transformative experiences, so similar to the cycles of the natural world: my experience of life. I have often questioned, under psychiatric care, how humans can be set apart from nature which I perceive as being pure: the seasons of autumn and spring, and when close to the glorious warm equator still, the stark contrast of a season dry and a season when it rains. It is undeniable that medical intervention may have prevented my suicide, but more effective than medication it seems, is the solitude that I discovered under psychiatric care, which brought me to a place of clarity through drawing and painting and creating with words. Capturing moments of laden meaning in tiny squares through photography helps me heal; listening to music I find beautiful and meaningful helps me heal. And sitting in sunshine, simply feeling what I feel, and reflecting, is healthy for me.

I am enthusiastic, positive and easy-going – my default position – I may have even referred to my bubbly-self as my natural state as recently as today. I am also sad. I remember the discovery

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**Figure 4:** Jana van Schalkwyk, *Magnified in progress*, 2017. Mixed media on Fabriano, 800 mm x 2000 mm. Johannesburg (photograph by author).
of the term *Weltschmerz*\(^7\) on the pages of a John Irving novel, and how good it felt to have revealed on pages what I understood but about which no-one around me spoke. I felt less strange. The times of feeling alone and strange in a sadness indescribable, became less strange as I became occasionally surrounded by people more comfortable with honesty regarding what humans feel. This brings me to the question: why do I consider enthusiasm my natural state, and my sadness, my weariness, merely temporary afflictions in the ways of living my life? It seems as though a conception that one’s success at being human is tied to maintaining of happiness, is deeply ingrained: happiness is good and sadness not so. Also, not too happy: it’s too exhausting for those around me. Not too loud, either, nor occasionally accidently interrupting out of enthusiasm, or expressing how simply beautiful I find you. It’s uncomfortable. This is what I, for example, may think:

*I want to draw your nose, the shape of your perfect nostrils, and your eyes, and the curve of your exquisite lips. You smell lovely, and your voice is a soothing bliss, please, yes, keep speaking! You are divine, but I dare not tell you. Telling you would be uncomfortable, telling you would be strange.*

I’m allowed to show enthusiasm, within certain limitations. I may be sad when appropriate, justified by certain instances such as death. There has to be a *reason*. If I disclose that I’m bipolar, there is a risk that I become simply bipolar, either manic and thus delusional, or depressed. It’s a tricky thing, this expression of emotion, affect and feeling with all its rules - and worse, its *unspoken* rules that we learn via disapproving glares or stares from the very beginning of our lives.

From where does my weariness stem, my thoughts dictating when it is acceptable to feel? Best of luck to those controlling thoughts: emotion, affect and feeling run through me with force! Where did I learn that there are limitations to my instinctive reactions to experiences? When did my instinctive nature become controlled by seemingly automatic warning signals of what may possibly be inappropriate? When did I start feeling shame, or guilt, when instinct overrides the automatic?

The medical perspective on elated states such as mania, and a milder form thereof, hypomania, blurs the borders between what are acceptable states of elation and what is inappropriate or

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\(^7\) “Mental depression or apathy caused by comparison of the actual state of the world with an ideal state” (Merriam-Webster 2018:[sp]).
potentially harmful. I often find myself concerned about my states of enthusiasm, considering whether I am ‘too much,’ or if my behaviour is inappropriate in some way. The diagnosis of mental illness has caused me to feel a certain weariness about my being: it brings an awareness of a wrongness, of being different from what is considered appropriate and has caused immense feelings of shame, embarrassment and self-doubt. It is a difficult thing, going through life, wondering whether you have done something wrong.

A diagnosis of my natural cycles of life, intensified, affect my sense of belonging. I am often grouped with ‘the artists’, those who are ‘different’, and the art teacher who is a bit crazy may even be celebrated in a strange way, yet my sense of belonging to a society where there are many differences that make up a world full of unique individuals with unique qualities and afflictions is affected by the diagnosis. To be labelled as mentally ill disregards how certain qualities are simply a part of who I am as a unique human being, and places me in a category of not okay. The not okay, for me, feeds shame. The ingrained caution as to what I do and what I say, seems absurd, yet the world seems so calm, so subtle: so stable. And so I am the other: I am strange; I am “unstable”.

While giving the experience a name in medical terms may not do harm, and has brought relief in times of mental exhaustion and confusion, it could distract from finding the true cause of such an experience. It worsens the otherness that prevents a sense of belonging and while the weather, brain chemical imbalance and traumatic life events may contribute to this experience, I believe that this fragmentation of being is far more intricate and that it may be vital to emotional growth.

When I speak of belonging, I am not seeking to be like others, but simply to be accepted, in a state of being myself. I have been subjected to bullying, as an adult and as a child. “It’s better to have no friends than to have friends that are cruel” I am sure I was told, and may even have told ones I have taught. It seems to me simply not possible to feel comfortable when in a state of rejection. Accepting a diagnosis of mental illness appears to me, to accept that who I am is rejected. There lies grace in medication I have been told, and at times there certainly does, yet this is the message I receive: let us try to control your unusual intensity with medication, and overall suppression. And so, there is a lifetime of trying to be someone other than yourself.

From a point of deadlock, a place where I can no longer function because of an unusual intensity of sadness that medication can no longer supress, a complex journey into strange and seemingly unexplainable terrains starts: through my passage I experience amplified emotions,
affects and feelings, that I wish to describe in my work. These experiences eventually bring me to a deeper understanding of my being. For me these disruptive cycles are a vital element in the emergence of my self-awareness. Before a psychiatric assessment in 2000, these cycles were both magical and maddening. It was named a mental illness and remained that for many years. Now, it appears it is simply a gift of sensitivity that I am learning to accept even despite its unacceptability. There are years and generations of stigma I need to override it seems.

I clearly remember my first experience, twenty years ago, of what is considered in psychiatry to be mania. I believed I had special abilities. I could beckon the wind with my arms to the sky; I could call the rain with my movements while simultaneously wanting to die, to cease to exist, to dissipate and evaporate into the nothingness I believed I was. These extremes of emotion, affect and feeling resulted in a diagnosis of bipolar affective disorder. On forms requesting chronic medication benefits I was labelled with an ICD-10 code: ICD-10 Diagnosis Code F31.9 Bipolar affective disorder, unspecified (ICD 10 codes 2018: [sp]). In my acceptance of the label I became, for a while, an ICD-10 code in psychiatric care, on prescriptions: I became an ICD-10 code when the face of a physiotherapist or biokineticist changed when they read Lithium or Lamictin or Seroquel among a long list of medications, all compulsory to disclose for any medical care.

The United States National Institute of Mental Health (Bipolar Disorder 2017) defines bipolar disorder and mixed episodes in the following terms:

People with bipolar disorder experience periods of unusually intense emotion, changes in sleep patterns and activity levels, and unusual behaviours. These distinct periods are called “mood episodes.” Mood episodes are drastically different from the moods and behaviours that are typical for the person. Extreme changes in energy, activity, and sleep go along with mood episodes (Bipolar Disorder 2017: [sp]).

A mixed episode refers to the presence of high and low symptoms occurring at the same time, or as part of a single episode, in people experiencing an episode of mania or depression. In most forms of bipolar disorder, moods alternate between elevated and depressed over time. A person with mixed features experiences symptoms of both mood "poles", i.e. mania and depression, simultaneously or in rapid sequence (Bipolar Episodes 2017: [sp]).

My magic powers and periods of purification became medical terms: mania and depression. The diagnosis was in many ways a relief, but also contributed to a time of existential crisis where I struggled to grasp how feelings that felt so real could simply be due to a chemical
imbalance in my brain. I could not accept that states which enabled me to delve so deep into the core of life could be a malfunction in my psyche.

As always, my mood is in sync with the weather. What was a warm summer’s morning can become an icy afternoon. Depression is easier to understand; mania is incomprehensible, and a combination of these leads to confusion that leaves me with the realisation: I’ve gone mad. I panic because my mood swings are becoming more and more intense. A few months of happiness with intermittent ups and downs, and inside the ups and downs more intense ups and downs, and a few months of sadness with occasional ups and downs and inside these ups and downs deeper ups and downs swinging from one side to the other: a pendulum gaining momentum. I am like the term feminism it seems: first wave with first wave generation and first wave second generation and first wave first generation first phase…. Second wave... third. I am two beings who are enemies, who are at war with one another (Reflection by author, 2000).

There is a social stigma with regard to bipolar affective disorder and it is a diagnosis that I initially rejected only in the context of my study. During the course of my journey, my perspective on the diagnosis changed significantly. Upon reflection it became clear, that what is considered a mental illness, is a vital and integral part of my existence. It also became apparent to me that self-awareness and a deepened understanding of my ‘bipolar’ experience may allow me to be more aware of warning signs than I was before. Denying my emotions, affects and feelings their rightful place as reactions to my experience of life, had caused a different kind of illness: an illness of fear, an illness of shame, an illness of believing that I was in the way, an illness of what I call ‘my soul’. The medical treatment that was meant to suppress my abject emotions, affects and feelings, was possibly a barrier between me and what would lead me to health. The meaning of health, to me, is a life free from fear in its multiple manifestations, as experienced in the world I recently left behind.

What happened to me was somewhat surreal: it was as though creativity broke through chemical and mental suppression and oppression. It is as though, although on large doses of medication, my emotions, affects and feelings reached an intensity that surpassed that which should supposedly have kept me reasonably stable. It was as though creativity had been accumulating, growing in ferocity, ready to explode from the point of nothingness, from a place where meaning had collapsed, at the crossroad between choosing to evaporate into nothingness, or to exist. It may not have been an actual choice I made to live. Perhaps creativity was always
bound to burst forth with force, as it has many times before, as my own rhythm, as something not unusual or an illness, but instead the way I function when I am free from fear.

Rather than conceptualising my mood episodes in medical terms, I can experience them as though I am reborn, intermittently, acquiring a deeper understanding of the language of my creation each time. In this way, my transformation echoes the process of abjection that Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:13) describes as the discursive or signifying system in which “the speaking subject makes and unmakes himself”. I forget how to speak, and then I learn again. I forget and learn and forget and learn and make and unmake myself – a seemingly infinite cycle of transformation possibly not unknown to anyone – simply, slightly amplified. It is a continuous state of painful and beautiful becoming that forms a part of my human experience. I do not consider my emotional growth patterns to be necessarily different from that of others, yet the extremity of my emotional fluctuations allows for a very clear and defined picture to be drawn of what I regard as cycles of becoming that apply to all of existence.
AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

It is an illusion to think we get “outside” our emotional life. Even if we are cold or dead, we are gripped by emotion. To be trapped by coldness or deadness is a powerful affective state. To think about emotion is not an unemotional business. It is permeated by a feeling perspective and passionate interest (Eigen 2006:2).

In order to collect self-reflective data of myself as a “subject-in-process,” to borrow Kristeva’s words (in McAfee 2004:4), my method is auto-ethnographic, as well as psychoanalytic. As a part of my study, I integrate my reflective and visual voice in the form of reflective journaling and digital photography.

Telling my personal story and using auto-ethnography as research methodology seems most appropriate in the context of looking at bipolar affective disorder through the lens of Kristeva’s abjection. I discuss auto-ethnography as research methodology. I unpack Kristeva’s “subject-in-process”, and finally Kristeva’s use of personal narrative and the focus on the importance of emotive language.

Auto-ethnography as Research Methodology

Tony Adams, Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, in their essay, “Autoethnography: An Overview” (2011), write that auto-ethnography is a research methodology that aims to describe
and analyse personal lived experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach to research and writing challenges traditional methodologies and writing in the representation of others and considers research to be a “political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (Adams, Bochner & Ellis 2011: [sp]). The auto-ethnographic method allows the researcher to use components of autobiography and ethnography to write an auto-ethnography. As research methodology, auto-ethnography is a documented process while also a product of research (Adams, Bochner & Ellis 2011: [sp]).

In their article, “The ICQI and the Rise of Autoethnography: Solidarity through Community”, Bochner and Ellis (2016: 208) trace the origin of auto-ethnography from its beginning when it was considered a form of ethnography. Auto-ethnographic methods were a response to the limitations of conventional ethnographic writing practices. The introduction of its narrative identity made it an alternative to traditional ethnography (Bochner & Ellis 2016: 208).

Bochner and Ellis (2016: 208) write that auto-ethnography has become a research tool for studies that require:

- first-person, vulnerable writing that calls attention to subjectivity, emotionality, and contingency and brings readers into ‘feeling’ contact with the suffering of others.

Bochner and Ellis (2016: 211) identify auto-ethnography as a method that allows the reader, in addition to ‘knowing’, to ‘feel’ the ethnographic truth, by means of first-person accounts. This, they argue, enables the reader to be “more fully immersed and engaged morally, aesthetically, emotionally, and intellectually” (Bochner & Ellis 2016: 211).

Bochner and Ellis (2016: 213) observe how, in the early stages of auto-ethnography, most methods of inquiry prescribe specific criteria, such as the need for a methodical approach and making a distinction between “objective and subjective, between science and art, between facts and values, and between the daylight of reason and the darkness of emotion”. A conventional research approach to auto-ethnography is not possible, as predicting and controlling goes against the values the methodology espouses (Bochner & Ellis 2016: 213). For example, Bochner (2000: 270) writes that “auto-ethnographies reflect a desire to grasp or seize the possibilities of meaning, moving readers and listeners to understand and feel the phenomena under scrutiny”. He (2000: 270) describes social life as messy, uncertain and emotional. Bochner’s approach resonates with me in the context of my aim to communicate my experience of amplified emotion, affect and feeling, which in terms of raw honesty are often very messy, uncertain and emotional.
In her study, “Finding Your Place through Story: An Autoethnography of a Storyteller and Filmmaker in Academia”, South African auto-ethnographer, Phyllis Dannhauser uses autoethnography as research methodology in relating her journey as a filmmaker working in academia. She investigates the use of storytelling and filmmaking to address challenges of marginalisation in both society and the academic environment (Dannhauser 2018:18). Dannhauser’s (2018) research emerged from her professional journey as a filmmaker in the milieu of the South African film industry. By using auto-ethnography as research methodology, Dannhauser (2018:18) aims “to evoke emotion and receptiveness, responsiveness, reverberation and resonance in the reader”.

Eisner (in Dannhauser 2018:25) suggests that through presenting experiences in the form of auto-ethnography, the researcher beckons the reader to experience the narrative from a perspective that may allow for a deepened understanding “into the human condition and the experiences of others”. Eisner (in Dannhauser 2018:25) continues that in sharing personal life experience, the researcher enables a platform for communal reflection.

Anniina Suominen’s (2004) dissertation, “Writing with Photographs, Re-constructing Self: An Arts-Based Autoethnographic Enquiry”, is one of the few auto-ethnographies I have found that is specifically referred to as being art-based. Suominen (2004: iii) finds her study significant as:

the exploration of the processes of gaining access to intellectuality and the construction of understanding, only available through the emergence of artistic, self-reflective, and theoretical thinking with the intention of increasing awareness about visual knowledge that has remained largely uninvestigated.

She (2004: iii) argues that people create an understanding of who they are through reflecting on the stories they tell, and on the images and other documents created about their lives.

In her investigation of her fragmented sense of “self”, Suominen (2004:4) makes use of photography and refers to her camera as her faithful guide dog and ally:

For a visual story to be born requires a special moment and privacy. I react to my own visuality through the camera while photographing and while looking at the proof sheets; these images trouble me, please me, and touch my emotions and feelings. The photographs that I choose to further work with are the ones that seem willing to have a conversation with me, or the ones that require immediate attention. Through my camera I see the world differently; it limits, crops, selects and guides seeing.
In combination with autobiographical creative writing, I make use of Instagram images in lieu of field notes of my experiences throughout this chapter. Each image contains memories of experiences which evoked intense emotion, affect and feeling. I value the instantaneous nature of capturing experiences through digital photography. The process often entails limited contemplation and has a spontaneous quality about it. It adds a valuable layer to capturing and communicating experienced phenomena.

**Subject-in-Process**

For Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:29) the study of language parallels a study of the subject. She observes that we come into being by means of a signifying process. Self-awareness is not present prior to our use of language. Simultaneously, language is a signifying process because it is the expression of a being who is herself in process (McAfee 2004:29). Moreover Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:29) studies language in a way that cannot be separated from the beings who make use of it. These speaking beings, what Kristeva calls “*parlêtres,*” are embodied in an array of processes (McAfee 2004:29).

For the “subject-in-process” (*le sujet en procès*), according to Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:41), subjectivity is reached in an open system, a notion that she derives from biology. She explains that a living being is not a solitary structure, but a structure open to other structures and that which surrounds it. It is in this openness that interactions of the order of creation and destruction occur, and it is this very open structure that enables a being to grow and allows for renewal according to Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:41).

Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:43) states that the aspects of the signifying process that are perceived as more logical and orderly stem from what she calls the symbolic realm - and the aspects that seem more chaotic and driven by instinct are from what she calls the semiotic realm. She further argues that she does not perceive the aspects of the signifying process in the symbolic realm to necessarily be stronger than those aspects in the semiotic realm. Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:43) recognises that signification is a complex process, and that primal impulses are continuously present. Moreover she observes (in McAfee 2004:43) that our subjectivity is not

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8 “Kristeva refers to speaking beings as *parlêtres,* combining the French words for speaking and being” (in McAfee 2004:29).

9 The concepts of the symbolic and semiotic realm become vital in understanding my view on mood episodes and cycles of transformation. I further unpack these concepts later in this chapter.
a state that is reached and maintained as such, but rather, as speaking beings, we are in a continuous state of growth.

**The Power of Emotive Language**

Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:13) argues in her book, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) that the works of avant-garde writers produce a “revolution in poetic language”. Their writing changes the way in which we regard meaning in text. Meaning is not derived only from words describing thoughts or things, but more so by poetic and emotive aspects of the written word. Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:13) further states that this “revolution in poetic language” not only applies to the language of artists, but is present in communications where we are expressing ourselves:

> All our attempts to use language neatly, clearly, and in an orderly way are handmaidens of our attempts to be neat, clearly demarcated, orderly subjects. But such attempts are continuously disrupted by certain elements of our signifying practice.

Kristeva makes use of biography as a powerful tool in her trilogy, *Female Genius: Life, Madness and Words - Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette – a Trilogy* (2001). My autobiographical creative writing is therefore a language that forms an integral part of my multi-layered practice. Kristeva (2001) describes the three women in her trilogy on female geniuses as “lucid and passionate investigators... drawing on their existence as much as their thinking and sharing their unique perspective on the most important issues of our time” (Kristeva 2001:169). Beardsworth (2004b:134) points out that Kristeva makes it very clear that the exceptional qualities which the three women display are qualities found in most of us. Hence Kristeva is using the three women to mirror similar strengths and potential in the reader.

Kristeva (2004:493) in “Is There a Feminine Genius?” identifies the “provocative hyperbole of the term genius” as the central theme that enabled her to grasp how the women surpassed themselves in their fields of political philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literature. Kristeva (2004:493,494) aims to encourage the reader through the experiences of Arendt, Klein, and Colette, “to surpass him- or herself in a similar way, in following the struggles of Arendt, Klein and Colette and in working on his or her own”. I draw from Kristeva’s use of these examples of lived experience, aiming to inspire and motivate, and the power that seems to lie in sharing real stories as experienced by real people.
On the personal nature of the visual narrative of Frida Kahlo’s work that I discuss in Chapter Three, Leticia Alonso (2014:408) in her article, “Frida Kahlo and the Improper/Unclean: Toward the Condition of Abjection,” suggests that instead of reading Kahlo’s representation of her body as a “narcissistic narrative of her own life,” she regards Kahlo’s main objective to be open to the act of chance and to put herself “on trial in the process of creating art”. For Alonso, Kahlo’s art-making process is a cathartic remedy for her physical and psychic agony. Alonso (2014:408) observes that Kahlo’s artistic journey reaches a point of self-destruction, while simultaneously providing a release from her delirium and despair.

In *Blush - Faces of Shame*, Elspeth Probyn (2005) refers to affect as the concept used in psychology to describe the experience of feeling or emotion. Probyn (2005:136) suggests that there is an inherent contradiction in theorising about emotions. For example, she (2005:136) argues that:

> an abstract way of approaching affect and emotion places the writing itself in an uninterested relation to affect. This is a contradiction in terms – affects are inherently interested... How can you represent a sense of emotional and affective intensity if the feeling in question is generalised in the amorphous category of Affect?

As Probyn (2005:136) suggests, the idea of an uninterested affect is a contradiction in terms. This contradiction perhaps explains why I feel that I cannot adequately and effectively communicate my experience of amplified emotion, affect and feeling via theory alone. Probyn (2005:133) points out that although a view of academic research as purely objective might have changed, there is a need for alternative modes of writing: “the gulf between research and writing is becoming especially fraught with the increase in academic studies about emotions and affects”. The method of auto-ethnography fulfils the need that Probyn (2005:131) identifies, that is in allowing the integration of autobiographical writing to act as a connecting thread throughout my dissertation.
ABJECTION

On the trail of my fear I meet again with my desire, and I bind myself to it, thus leaving stranded the concatenation of discourse with which I have built my hallucination, my weakness and my strength, my investment and my ruin (Kristeva 1982:42).

I feel my bell jar of captured sunlight slowly fading into empty fragility
Skin thinning
My moist insides outside Subtle hints of vital-organ-pink billowing Protruding through what could be perceived as a sphere mysterious, cold and electric blue.

Figure 6: Jana van Schalkwyk, Magnified, in progress, 2017. Mixed media on Fabriano, 800 mm x 2000 mm. Johannesburg (photograph by author).

The key text in my dissertation, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (Kristeva 1982), illustrates how subjectivity is initially constituted through the process of seeing oneself as a being separate from others, i.e. with clear borders. For Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:45), our initial experience is homogenous with our environment, in the realm of the semiotic chora, which I will unpack in detail later in this chapter. We come into being without borders and develop these through the process of abjection (McAfee 2004:45).

McAfee (2004:48) explains that abjection first arises when the child is still in a state of imaginary homogeneity with the mother. Abjection takes place prior to the child recognising herself in the mirror as being an individual separate from her mother (the Mirror phase), and before she learns to speak and so enter Lacan’s Symbolic order. However she is not yet a being

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10 “We borrow the term chora from Plato’s Timaeus to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases” (Kristeva 1984:25).
11 “At this age, Lacan notes, children become capable of recognizing their mirror image. This is not a dispassionate experience, either. It is a recognition that brings the child great pleasure” (Jacques Lacan 2018:[sp]).
in her own right. Abjection starts when she recognises her mother as the other, as that which blurs lines that allow her to stand on her own, as that from which she needs to step away in order for her to be a separate individual. When she learns to make her first expressive mark, she draws a line which divides her and her mother: the other. In this way she creates a border, a boundary (McAfee 2004:48).

Kristeva (1982:9) writes that abjection is a place where boundaries begin to break down, but the boundaries are blurred, they are confusing:

> We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it- on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.

Sarah Beardsworth (2004a:82) in *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, observes that there are no angles from which to measure this ambiguity: “everywhere, the negative and positive meanings of abjection are tightly held together”.

Beardsworth (2004b:126), in “Kristeva’s Idea of Sublimation”, explains that a narcissistic battle occurs when the subject opposes the separation of the mother and the child. Furthermore Beardsworth (2004b:126) points out that here the focus of Kristeva’s attention:

> is the ambiguity of the early life of the drives. For rejection of the mother’s body (the destructive portion of the drive known as death-drive) means life; and clinging (the attachment or life-drive) would mean no life. And vice versa.

Beardsworth (2004a:83) observes that abjection therefore enables the “fearsome beginnings of otherness”. Abjection is the process of creating a space for becoming an individual separate from the mother, while still connected (Beardsworth 2004a:83). For Kristeva, abjection is not only pre-symbolic, but pre-imaginary, and the earliest initiation of the process of subjectivity (Beardsworth 2004a:81). Abjection, Beardsworth (2004a:84) explains, can be understood as a very early, pre-symbolic intention to separate from the mother, while connectedness to her is still vital. The instability of this phase of subjective development, ignites the need for a space for the subject to come into being (Beardsworth 2004a:81).

Abjection, writes Beardsworth (2004a:83), captures the experience where the subject, faced with her boundaries, finds herself in a place where there is no subject and no object: only abject. Alonso (2014:407) describes Kristeva’s abjection as a threshold condition that involves the collapse of both meaning and of the subject. While the object catalyses the desire for
signification that protects the self, the abject causes chaos by disrupting consistency of identity. According to Alonso (2014:407):

in this system, the body adopts an in-between space that allows for the fusion and confusion of categories, namely, the inside and the outside, pleasure and pain, cleanliness and filth, life and death.

For Kristeva (1982:1):

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated… The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I.

McAfee (2004:46) observes that the abject for Kristeva is what one “spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself: sour milk, excrement, even a mother’s engulfing embrace”. What is abjected is rejected - but always present: “it hovers at the periphery of one’s existence, constantly challenging one’s own tenuous borders of selfhood” (McAfee 2004:46). The abject is different from that which is repressed, as it never disappears from consciousness: the abject “remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one’s own clean and proper self” (McAfee 2004:46).

McAfee (2004:57) observes that although abjection entails the expulsion or rejection of what is other, it is a process that is never completed, and one which simultaneously enables and threatens subjectivity. Abjection remains a looming threat that may overturn what has been created at any time, hence maintaining a sense of self is never constant, and the subject remains alert (McAfee 2004:57). For Kristeva (in McAfee 2004:57) much of creative expression is a cathartic expulsion of what is experienced as abject. These creative expressions portray a dark side of humanity where what is other is perceived to be impure (McAfee 2004:57). McAfee (2004:57) explains that it is not only what is other or unfamiliar that is rejected, but also that which is strangely familiar.

It is hard to see what is me and what is other, I am myself and I am my mother. She protects, she nurtures, she gave me life, yet she takes the life I need to now live, to stand, to be, to become: she will not allow me to stand on my own. Trust me, I yell in excitement, I can dance, I can run! She flinches as I pirouette, the clumsy attempt at the tightrope of existence, a few more lessons, a few more warnings, a few more feedings, a few more. I need her nourishment; I need her judgement, her protection and her hand-knitted jerseys against the brutal cold. I
need her reassurance, but more, I need to be free. A pang of guilt in my gut as I see how much it hurts her that I need to leave (Reflection by author, 2018).

The focus of my study is not that which should be abjected or rejected, but on abjection as a vital part of my creative process. In other words, abjection is vital to my creative process, and my creative process is vital to my abjection. Kristeva (1982:61) writes:

> The non-distinctiveness of inside and outside would thus be unnameable, a border passable in both directions by pleasure and pain. Naming the latter, hence differentiating them, amounts to introducing language, which, just as it distinguishes pleasure from pain as it does all other oppositions, founds the separation inside/outside. And yet, there would be witnesses to the perviousness of the limit, artisans after a fashion who would try to tap that pre-verbal 'beginning' within a word that is flush with pleasure and pain.

My cycles, ranging from distortion (mood episodes) to reflection (mental stability) entail the experience of a vast array of emotions, affects and feelings. I relate to Kristeva who rejects the dominance of dualistic oppositions derived from a Cartesian perspective and shows how poles of dichotomies are intertwined (McAfee 2004:17). Thus, according to Kristeva (1982:9), ‘[t]he time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth’. Medical terms such as ‘mixed episodes’ and ‘rapid cycling’ are used to define the phenomena of experiencing polar emotional states at once (despair with vast amounts of energy) or extreme emotional fluctuation (suicidal in the morning and euphoric at night). I have found that its complexity cannot be confined by these terms and it is my intention to instead express this experience of entangled emotion, affect and feeling through my creative writing, my practice and my theory. Kristeva (1982:10) describes the ambiguity of abjection:

> But when I seek (myself), lose (myself), or experience jouissance—then “I” is heterogeneous. Discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt against, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise. Thus braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as alter ego, points it out to me through loathing.

The views of psychoanalyst, Michael Eigen in his work *Psychic Deadness* (1996) are relevant in his reference to the ‘doubleness’ of psychic products. He refers to Freud’s work on Eros and the death instinct and says that a doubleness marks psychic products. What is fundamental to psychic survival is movement between states, selves and worlds. (Eigen 1996:17). In “Frida Kahlo: Abjection, Psychic Deadness, and the Creative Impulse”, Marlene Goldsmith (2004:7)
points out that psychic survival demands a rhythmic fluctuation between aliveness and deadness. Eigen (1996:8) says:

> There are two tendencies – toward maximum aliveness and toward total deadness, toward building up and tearing down, toward increasing tolerance of energy and complexity, toward a zero point of sensitivity and stimulation

In order to express the complexity of cycles of amplified emotion, affect and feeling, I look at each point as neither good nor bad, but as knotted and entangled contrasts that form the stark cycle of transformation. I explore and express my personal experience of abjection, and the way in which it evokes in me a creative response which allows for the transformation or sublimation of my emotions, affects and feelings into my art. In both its process and affect, my creative work can be thought of in terms of the workings of a “subject-in-process” and my passage between emotional states is never settled nor complete.

On the one pole, I find an exploration of the inner-world, a universe within a fertile space, mise-en-abyme\(^\text{12}\). Within the abyss I become nothing, and from nothing, I grow. I relate to Elizabeth Grosz (1989:73) who says that abjection summons us to an “abyss that haunts and terrifies”. The other pole is one that expands and discharges outwardly: a continuous state of transformation seemingly evolving from a blueprint. From nothing, I grow.

**The Semiotic and the Symbolic**

Kristeva (1984:24), in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, describes the semiotic and symbolic as the two modalities of the signifying process that constitutes language. Kristeva expands on Jacques Lacan’s Symbolic order without clarification and there is an important distinction that needs to be made. Kelly Oliver (1993:10) in *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double-bind*, explains the ambiguity in Kristeva’s use of the term symbolic:

> whereas Lacan uses the Symbolic\(^\text{13}\) to refer to the Symbolic order, Kristeva uses the symbolic in two senses to refer not only to the Symbolic order but also to a specifically symbolic element within the Symbolic order.

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12 French ‘placing into the abyss’ (Mise-en-abyme 2017:[sp]).

13 “The Symbolic order of signification, for Kristeva, has traces in the maternal, and is composed of both semiotic and symbolic elements” (Oliver 1993:10).
The symbolic for Kristeva includes the “field of the meaningful object, that is to say, a representation, idea, or thing” (Beardsworth 2004a:25). The semiotic embraces aspects of signification such as rhythm, gesture and tone of voice (Beardsworth 2004a:25). The importance of the semiotic, as an aspect of subjectivity and meaning, for Kristeva, is that it “exceeds the field of human capacities and limitations determined by the structure of language” (Beardsworth 2004a:25).

Rather than moving from the semiotic to the symbolic, Kristeva considers them to be inseparable, and the dynamic between the semiotic and symbolic realms changes according to different discourses (Kristeva 1984:24). Non-verbal communication, driven by emotion such as music, sprouts from the semiotic, and discourse regarding what is considered to be logical and formal, from the symbolic. Poetry has a strong link to both modalities (Kristeva 1984:24). For Kristeva (1984:24):

the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system it produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both.

Beardsworth (2004a:31) in Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity, writes that although Kristeva’s views changed with regard to certain theories since writing Revolution in Poetic Language (1984) it is the only text where reasons for her departure from Jacques Lacan and an in-depth distinction between the semiotic and symbolic realms are explained. Kristeva’s theory expands on those of Sigmund Freud and Lacan (McAfee 2004:30). The confluence of linguistics and psychoanalysis is key for Kristeva in building on the work of Lacan (McAfee 2004:43). Lacan considers the imaginary realm to be beyond the scope of analysis, and the Symbolic realm to be what carries weight in understanding subjectivity (McAfee 2004:43). Here, Kristeva disagrees with Lacan and argues that the pre-symbolic realm is always present and continues in the semiotic as an integral part of signification (McAfee 2004:37). Lacan finds that at the core of Freud’s theory of the unconscious, the Oedipal structure14, are elements that indicate the structure of language: furthermore he identifies the Oedipal structure as the foundation of culture (Beardsworth 2004a:27). Beardsworth (2004a:27) further observes:

14 “Lacan claimed that the position of the father could never be held by the infant. On the one hand the infant must identify with the father, in order to participate in sexual relations. However, the infant could also never become the father, as this would imply sexual relations with the mother. Through the contradictory dictates, on the one hand to be the father and on the other hand not to be the father, the father’s position is elevated to an ideal. He is no longer a real material father, but the function of a father. The father, and accordingly the phallus (not a real penis, but a representation of mastery), can never be reached” (Jacques Lacan 2018:[sp]).
when Lacan shows that structures of subjectivity depend on the structuration of the subject in language, he demonstrates how finitude (lack) and the acceptance of finitude, found and remain the mainstay of human powers and limitations. However, the identification of the unconscious with the structure of language also appears to tie culture, as such, to a founding, paternal law (the Law).

In addition, according to Beardsworth (2004a:27) the link Lacan made between the Oedipal structure and the formation of language ties culture to the Symbolic as Law of The Father\textsuperscript{15} which for Lacan, is acceptance of the superiority of the father, and which allows for separation of the child from the mother (Jacques Lacan 2018:[sp]).

In his understanding of subjective development, Lacan refers to the phallus as that which the child perceives as the desire of the mother (Jacques Lacan 2018:[sp]). For Lacan the elimination of this desire lies at the resolution of homogeneity of the child with the mother and the intervention of the father will contravene and serve as principle of separation (Jacques Lacan 2018:[sp]). A symbolic castration (elimination of the phallus/desire) leads to the unsettling disempowerment of the child’s ego (Jacques Lacan 2018:[sp]). For Lacan, desire marks the shadowing of Freud, and acceptance of a symbolic castration as final separation from the mother, and hence the resolution of the Oedipal complex.

Lacan thus creates a clear hierarchy between the mother and the father, and a definite transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, and also from the instinctual to signification. Kristeva does not support an absolute migration from the one to the other. She (2003:43) recognises that Lacan’s Imaginary realm has traces in the semiotic mode and is always present in evocative means of signification. For Kristeva, the Symbolic as the Law of the Father does not preside over what she calls the semiotic. Signification for Kristeva is always infused by the instinctive. McAfee (2004:43) observes “as speaking beings, we are always works in progress. Our subjectivity is never constituted once and for all”.

To explain the clear distinction between the semiotic and symbolic realms, McAfee (2004:16) describes them as similar to familiar dichotomies “such as the distinctions between nature and culture, between body and mind, between the unconscious and consciousness, and between feeling and reason”. For Kristeva, the semiotic energises the symbolic and “is showing how the poles of these dichotomies are intertwined” (McAfee 2004:17). Similar to Kristeva’s

\textsuperscript{15} “This term is specific to Jacques Lacan’s formulation of the orderly aspects of our signifying practices” (McAfee 2004:43).
notions of the semiotic and symbolic being interconnected and intertwined, is the dichotomy of mania and depression which in my experience are interlaced and which in medical terms would be referred to as ‘mixed episodes’.

*The semiotic is the space of drives*\(^{16}\), the place where emotion, affect and feeling thrive; it is a space without words, where non-verbal communication takes place through energy, rhythm and sound. It is maternal and nourishing, the phase where the universal infant is not aware of the self, and one with the mother, the nurturer, the other.

*The symbolic is the space of structure, the place where rules, law and order rule; it is a world of words, where language is used in communication. There is clarity and order: the phase where the universal infant has gained its independence. It can stand on its own two feet, yet be grounded in the chora from where nourishment through roots are reached* (Reflection by author, 2018).

In this context my art becomes the semiotic communication that energises the symbolic. I experience my cycles of amplified emotion, affect and feeling, similar to the process of acquiring a new language. In the light of my creative process being compared to language acquisition, my body of paintings becomes a documentation of my learning (or remembering how) to speak. Kristeva’s semiotic realm becomes my distortion that leads to a comprehension of the symbolic - my reflection. It could be argued that my creative writing forms the semiotic counterpart to the theoretical component of my research, which is symbolic: it seems that the one cannot fully be without the other.

**The Chora**

If, in my reading, the rhythmic impulses of the semiotic can be thought of as the sphere from which my art is born, the concept of the chora and its meaning for Kristeva must also be located. The chora, for Plato, as McAfee (2004:19) writes, was “the original space or receptacle of the universe”. For Kristeva, the chora belongs to each individual and plays a significant role prior to creating borders and personal identity (McAfee 2004:19). However McAfee (2004:20) observes that Kristeva does not agree with Plato’s view of the chora as a vessel that changes

\(^{16}\)”A drive is an instinctual need that has the power of driving the behaviour of an individual” (Drive instinct 2018:[sp])."
shape. Kristeva considers the chora to be more than a receptacle, or a space: for her it is a rhythmic articulation that precedes language (McAfee 2004:18). On the other hand she supports Plato’s view of the chora as the cradle of becoming and emphasises its capability of engendering spontaneous movement. For Kristeva, the chora is not merely a container that receives energy, but rather a space from which energy can be generated – i.e. the energy which propels the psychic and signifying process (McAfee 2004:20).

In the words of Kristeva (1984:26):

> Our discourse - all discourse - moves with and against the chora in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. Although the chora can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the chora and, if necessary, lend it a topology [sic], but one can never give it axiomatic form.

*When there is a breakdown in meaning in my psyche, when intense emotion has taken the reins of my thought patterns, I am immersed by the chora. I am between life and death drives, I am in a state of confusion, in chaos, and my emotions become the abject, that which threatens order, and that which threatens my life. I find myself through the semiotic, where my soul is led to speak through colour, what it could not in the world of words: the symbolic. It is as though, when I reach a point in the symbolic where I am to express or comprehend that which cannot be articulated in language, that I am pulled back into the semiotic. In the semiotic chaos where I am scattered across its universe, I am grounded by expressing the ineffable. I am made whole by becoming homogenous with the chora, I am nourished by the building blocks of my existence, and I tap from the very source of life.* (Reflection by author, 2018).

I consider stigma, diagnosis and medication regarding bipolar affective disorder to be attempts at enforcing order in a society that functions according to The Law of the Father. Its expectations are obedience, stability and calm. My emotions, affects and feelings threaten order: I am awkward and uncomfortable in the realm of The Law. My chaotic mental confusion is a character weakness, a lack of discipline, my chaos is a shame. Opposing the rules, the core of my existence seems to pull me back to the realm where I am nourished in the semiotic chora. In equilibrium I seem to dance between semiotic and symbolic realms that are devoid of hierarchy, the one enriching the other. I both break and am revived from where my rebirth is awakened. From nothing, I grow.
SHAME

Guilt, fear, and shame attaches to development and to failure to develop. Fusion of opposites is the rule in psychic life. Creative theft melds with destructive dreads. Unbearable agonies prompt easeful lies and falsity to escape pain and helplessness (Eigen 2009:10).

I didn’t want to live. No one can make that indescribable discomfort disappear. At least no one I had come across. And depression is repulsive, when I reach the bottom of the slimy gutter I am alone, abandoned because I had become an atrocity. That is the point when I can justify suicide. My thoughts are crisp and clear. It makes perfect sense. I am a failure. I am an embarrassment. I feel so deeply ashamed of who I am (May 2016).

Probyn (2005:x), in Blush: Faces of Shame, points out that if the opinion of someone matters, we are bound to be moved by shame. As Probyn (2005:x) points out shame points us towards our interests: “[s]hame goes to the heart of who we think we are. In this sense, shame puts one's self-esteem on the line and questions our value system”. For Probyn (2005:x), the cause of our shame, reminds us of our priorities: “[w]hat shames me may not shame you. But whatever it is that shames you will be something important to you, an essential part of yourself”.

Probyn (2015:xvi) identifies the feeling when we sense that we do not belong: “a variant of shame I call the shame of being out-of-place. When you feel like a fish out of water, your body reacts in shame”. I am familiar with feeling out-of-place, and I am familiar with shame. I am not familiar or nearly comfortable with openly sharing my shame (as I now am doing via these pages). As pointed out by Probyn (2015:2) “shame makes us feel small and somehow undone”.

Probyn (2015:2) observes that it is not unusual, in most societies, to discuss the darker emotions, affects and feelings, such as sadness and rage. Shame, though, is different, and seems
only to appear when pride is discussed, and in discussions it remains a shameful thing (Probyn 2015:2). Shame, writes Probyn (2015:3), causes the fear of being rejected by humankind and cast away by society. By denying shame, or attempting to eliminate it, “we impoverish ourselves and our attempts to understand human life” (Probyn 2015:3).

Robbie Duschinsky (2013:709) in “Abjection and Self-Identity: Towards a Revised Account of Purity and Impurity”, observes that Kristeva’s work on abjection is among the most prominent approaches to the analysis of themes concerned with “purity and impurity”. Kristeva (1982:2) describes abjection as the process that turns us away from defilement. She uses the example of being repulsed by food items or bodily fluids as examples. Kristeva (1982:2) writes that a repulsive reaction protects one, it turns one away from the filth. It is “the fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them” (Kristeva 1982:2). Food loathing is for Kristeva (1982:2) possibly one of the most basic forms of abjection. She describes the experience of encountering skin on the surface of milk, when brought to the brink of vomiting, and the way in which it evokes a feeling of nausea: “spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire” (Kristeva 1982:3).

Moreover, according to Kristeva (1982:3), along with light headedness and utter disgust, it separates one from the parents who offer it. She (1982:3) writes:

But since the food is not an "other" for "me,“ who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that they see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death.

Shame for me stems from a view that certain emotions, affects and feelings are abject and hence not socially acceptable. Kristeva is in agreement with anthropologist, Mary Douglas, that ‘dirt is matter out of place’ (in Duschinsky 2013:710). In Purity and Danger (1966) Douglas (in Duschinsky 2013:710) suggests that “impurity is associated with that which is rejected from classificatory systems or the social structure, and that this rejection is caused by an innate human desire for order”. For Kristeva (1982:4) it is:

not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.
Moreover she (1982:69) describes the abject as a chaotic threat to the order of the symbolic realm:

The danger of filth represents for the subject the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed, to the extent that it is a device of discriminations, of differences.

Apropos the nature of “purity” Kristeva (1982:69) writes that “the pure will be that which conforms to an established taxonomy; the impure that which unsettles it, establishes intermixture and disorder”. In this light I observe depression as impure, in the way that it causes a disruption, an emotional whirlwind in my life.

Duschinsky (2013:711) argues that “not all phenomena that we classify as impure is [sic] in-between or ambiguous, and not all in-between or ambiguous phenomena are impure”. Furthermore Duschinsky (2013:711) derives from Kristeva the argument that “the impure is that which is constructed as deviating from an essential state of originary homogeneity”. Whether we use terms such as pure and impure, mania or depression, positive or negative, I cannot be one nor the other. I am both – always and at the same time. In my mood episodes that take me from one extreme to the other, I find a certain delicate balance in the experience of both poles by whichever name or description, and gain a deeper understanding of my existence with each intense cycle. It appears to me that for psychic growth to occur, it is essential for the poles of affective dichotomies to be intertwined.

As I mentioned earlier in relation to Probyn’s argument, shame is a manifestation of the social stigma that attaches itself to the experience of both depression and mania. The experience of shame suggests that I perceive my experiences as impure or imperfect, or in the context of Kristeva’s notion of the abject, improper and unclean. Kristeva discusses the organisation of corporeal identity by distinguishing between the improper or unclean and the clean and proper self. In her view, there is an area between the inside and outside of the body, as to what is socially acceptable and unacceptable. Accordingly, those bodily functions that regulate the individual’s inner life, namely the expulsion of filth and waste, are considered not only to generate revulsion and nausea, but also to endanger individuality. For Kristeva, abjection does not centre on the contemplation of a consistent subject but rather on its cutting edges, on those interstitial spaces which, in dividing life from death, are the site for desire and repulsion (Alonso 2014:407, 408).
The ways in which the experience of amplified emotions, affects and feelings are manifested in a person are often regarded as socially unacceptable, hence our most intense emotional experiences remain a part of our inner worlds or can be likened to a ward in psychiatric care. Emotional defecation in public mostly ends in self-deprecating thoughts fuelled by stigmatised ideas. It is an experience that is both attractive (as cathartic and instinctive) and repulsive (as shameful and automatic). Stigma becomes a part of the process - like a Kristevan mother one has to reject (Kristeva 1982:3). Stigma, for me, presents itself as the mother who covers the unsightly, bloody signs of wings emerging with the safety that shame brings. Similar to abjection, she allows her child to live in self-loathing; she protects her child with humiliation.

As with abjection, shame functions ambivalently: it is both enabling and disabling. Probyn (2005:x), argues that shame’s protective function can have a beneficial effect on a person as an essential emotion in the process of self-reflection. Shame in my case, however profound the personal realisations of self-reflection may be, can be debilitating. Stigma regarding bipolar affective disorder doesn’t only apply to the social misunderstanding of this mental illness, but includes, for me, the heavy stigma of how I see myself. In my own experience, I often feel deeply ashamed of my intensity. Shame is a central theme during mood episodes. It resonates with the embodied experience that Kristeva (1982:1) so potently describes as “a vortex of summons and repulsion [that] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself”. Moreover, she (1982:1) expresses the conflicting emotions, affects and feelings that form a part of abjection:

It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned.

It is as though I feel ashamed of my emotional states because I perceive them to be unbalanced and impure. An ambiguity arises as I am fighting between what comes naturally for me, an intense state of being, and the label of mental illness which makes my natural state ‘impure’ or ‘wrong’ or socially unacceptable. The diagnosis of bipolar affective disorder brought me relief in many ways, but far greater was the resulting shame in momentarily accepting that who I am was sick and it could be rectified by medication. I felt deeply ashamed of being so flawed in my essence that it had to be chemically controlled. In this embodied experience, I find it hard not to feel as though there is something about my very being that is malfunctioning.
SUBLIMATION

To grow psychic taste buds and digestive capacity in the face of suffering is our true evolutionary challenge (Eigen 2006:3).

A cycle of painting my pieces back together seem to start at the point where I have broken down and dissolved completely: the point where I am neither alive nor dead, yet so strangely, both. From the ashes or someplace less cliché I am yet to insert I rise in oil paint. I battle through that which pushes me down down down down into nothingness: the abyss. From nothing, I grow (Reflection by author, 2018).

Beardsworth (2004b:123) points out that the Kristevan idea of sublimation needs to be distinguished from that of Freud’s “where sublimation often appears as the displacement of drives and desire understood as the excessive demand for suffering”. While Kristeva (in Beardsworth 2004b:122) acknowledges sublimation as a transformation of drives, it is for her where “suffering, the residue of false authority, is negotiated, and so it is where authority is exposed and interrogated”.

Figure 8: @everdreamy. #distortion #reflection #contrast. Instagram. 11 July 2016. Johannesburg (photograph by author).
In her text, *Hatred and Forgiveness* (2010), Kristeva (in Oliver 2013:20) states that the art-making process places the artist in the position of being an “active agent of creativity” rather than a “passive victim of trauma”. Drawing from Kristeva, Oliver (2013:20) argues that art transforms the artist. For Oliver (2013:20), this relationship between “the work of art and working through trauma” takes us to the question of what type of artistic representation of trauma dissipates violence, and what type could exacerbate and perpetuate violence. Beardsworth (2004b:123) writes that when Kristeva considers sublimation:

> in terms of the aesthetic, the aesthetic is beyond semblance and sublimation is beyond displacement. Sublimation is a type of transformation of drives but, as acknowledgment of suffering, it means work.

In her article, “Kristeva’s Sadomasochistic Subject and the Sublimation of Violence” (2013), Oliver investigates the probability of the process of abjection enabling the sublimation of violence. In my experience of abjection, the severe self-loathing during a depressive state is experienced as violence towards myself. This response perpetuates a cycle of shame. As Oliver (2013:1) writes, Kristeva offers a way to consider the difference between representations of violence that reassert violence, and representations of violence that sublimate the desire thereof and therefore prevent violence.

According to Oliver (2013:21), Kristeva suggests that for representations of trauma to be sublimatory, they cannot be dogmatic, ideological or fundamentalist as this would risk perpetuating violence. For Kristeva we avoid becoming dogmatic and ideological by not allowing artistic intention to yield to the art object that represents violence, but rather to create art that transforms the way in which we perceive the representation of that violence (Oliver 2013:21).

Kristeva guides us towards understanding that through art, we can get distance from our wounds and give them meaning (Oliver 2013:21). This allows the subject to work through trauma and protects him or her from violence. As Oliver (2013:21) comments: “[t]he object of art cannot become a fetish; rather, it must always be a passage, a transition, and fluid rather than fixed”. Oliver (2013:21) emphasises that the focus must remain on the artwork and its layered meaning, as opposed to the artwork as object. It is the journey of figuration, Oliver (2013:21) writes, and in particular the driving force behind it, that makes art sublimatory and not merely an object of art. Kristeva (in Oliver 2013:21) says that the artist must be true to the trauma so that the artwork can ‘speak’ the truth of the trauma. As Oliver (2013:21) highlights, Kristeva would suggest that “we must leave open the wound, trauma or loss, the horror, out of
which creative representation is born, and through which it offers us rebirth”. Oliver (2013:21) writes that the difference “between spectacle that incites violence and art that sublimates it is that spectacles reinforce one way of seeing the world while works of art open up new ways of seeing”.

Kristeva considers sublimation to be the defence against abjection. It is the subject-in-process’s way of translating the emotional extremes of self-disintegration. For example, it is sublimation that shapes my understanding of my creative practice, and my experience of creativity in the midst of mania and depression. Through sublimation, I transform my experience of emotional extremes into my art. As Beardsworth (2004b:129) observes: “Kristeva treats artworks as transformations of drives and affects foregrounding what it is for each work – each artistic performance – to inhabit the space of the absence of authority”.

The amplified emotion, affect and feeling that I experience and am able to express through my paintings, enact this Kristevan process of sublimation: “the space,” as Beadsworth (2004b:130) puts it “of working and reworking the acknowledgement of the absence of authority [that…] releases us from the past and allows us to begin again”. For me the process of creating my paintings involves an acknowledging of the absence of that which does not serve me any longer.

Kevin Jones (2010:3), in his paper “Sublimation, Art and Psychoanalysis”, points out that in taking up the relationship between death and desire, Kristeva describes the release of negativity at the core of sublimation as an intrinsic part of the development of subjectivity, art and creativity. As stated in my introduction, thinking of my art as a way to process my experience of emotional extremes through sublimation has both creative and therapeutic value. Jones (2010:3) writes that Hanna Segal developed sublimation as a way of healing from depression. This process for Segal means giving up phantasy and coincides with mourning of loss. The process of sublimation has restored “the lost object in unconscious phantasy and brought something new into the world” (Jones 2010:1).

Adela Abella (2010), in “Contemporary Art and Hanna Segal’s thinking on Aesthetics”, writes that Segal proposes looking at art-making in the context of depressive anxieties as an attempt at healing. Art making, in this context, would therefore form part of a mourning process (Abella 2010:163). For Segal (in Abella 2010:163), these healing processes are communicated through what she calls “formal beauty which represents the victory of reparation over destruction”. Furthermore Abella (2010:163) points out that contemporary art often requires “the intervention, in art, of more raw and less symbolised/sublimated processes, including acting-
out in often primitive, psychotic or perverse ways”. Abella (2010:168) writes too, that for Segal a catalyst for art-making lies in a need to resolve the feelings of death and despair that stem from a phantasised damage to a loved object by the destructiveness of the subject. For Segal (in Abella 2010:168), the restorative and revitalising effect art-making can have, allows for relief from psychic pain: further, this relief lies in the “pleasurable experience of harmony and formal beauty which [art] offers”.

In the context of my experiences, I mourn the parts of myself that I discard: abject. There is a sense of loss and emptiness before the experience unfolds into a psychic transformation, which involves creating various forms of art. It is a daunting journey, challenged by shame, which brings me to such beauty as colour in paint and self-acceptance. It is a battle with doubt and fear and a reminding of myself, again and again, that there is nothing, really, to lose.

In the wake of what I have seen and felt and thought remain paintings that tell stories of where I had been. These stories may be read, they may mirror self-awareness; these stories may be seemingly meaningless in the magnitude of abstraction in colour. These stories may horrify, simplify, magnify and justify my very existence. These stories may be mysterious, or they may make someone feel less alone.
CHAPTER TWO

INTRODUCTION

When overcome by the desire to die, I have always found myself alone. It seems as though no one’s efforts can make it less painful, and the kindest of words translate as rejection through the warped tentacles of the cruel creature that wants to suffocate me. It’s only art that seems to save me, again and again. During these times there is no self-love to sustain me, and the love of another is not something a being in a state of self-loathing can believe to deserve. When I’m creating I am not lonely, although I am on my own. In creating, I am not alone, I am connected to a universe, connected to something far bigger than my tiny world in which at times I struggle to breathe.

Art for me may be the only way to be less alone, to be seen, to be felt, to be briefly understood. It is through experiencing the art of others, and my own, that I connect to an enigmatic macrocosm that has an atmosphere which infuses, drenches, invigorates with creative vitality without which I cease to exist. Devoid of this atmosphere, I become a shadow of myself (Reflection by author, 2018).

Figure 9: @everdreamy. Instagram. 23 June 2017. Parktown, Johannesburg (photograph by author).

In this chapter, I engage with the work and philosophy of artists and theorists with whom I feel an affiliation, in order to deepen my understanding of my own artistic processes. My intention, in both my practice and my theoretical research, is to offer the viewer insight into, or
identification with my experience of amplified emotion, affect and feeling. The artists and theorists whom I include have diverse elements in their respective work with which my art practice and theory resonate. This chapter allows the reader an understanding of my experiences from the perspective of where they meet in confluence with others in amplified emotion, affect and feeling. I explore themes of trauma, metamorphosis, the cathartic process of abjection, vulnerability, mental illness stigma and mental pain.

Eliana Tossani (2012) in “The Concept of Mental Pain” writes that although as real as other forms of pain in the body, mental pain does not get adequate consideration. She (2012) identifies a lack of consensus regarding the definition and characteristics of mental pain. Furthermore she (2012) observes that the border between mental and physical pain is blurred as a psychological component is always involved in the experience of pain. George Engel (in Tossani 2012) defines pain as:

A psychological experience involving the concepts of injury and suffering, but not contingent on actual physical injury. The idea of injury as well as the need to suffer may lead to pain, just as may a real lesion or injury. Similarly, the need not to suffer or not to accept the fact that injury may render a “painful” injury painless.

The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) (Pain 1994) defines pain as: “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage” (Pain 1994). The IASP (Pain 1994) further notes that there are often reports of pain where there are no signs of physical damage, and the cause is likely to be psychological:

If they regard their experience as pain, and if they report it in the same ways as pain caused by tissue damage, it should be accepted as pain. This definition avoids tying pain to the stimulus (Pain 1994).

The severe physical trauma and pain involved in the experiences of some of the artists and theorists with whom I engage in this chapter, cannot directly be compared to my experience of amplified emotion, affect and feeling. I explore the cathartic nature of processing pain in its multiple forms, whether psychic or physical, although the experience of pain in my case is psychological. Physical devastation appears as a phenomenon parallel to psychic trauma.

Symbols of blood such as in the work of Merle, Rebirth (2016), signify for me catharsis and painful rebirth. The abject in its most literal form is bloody and repulsive, and as discussed in Chapter Three, I did not plan, consciously, to create my most cathartic expression in paint to be in alizarin crimson. I also did not intend for glass bell jars floating like planets in a galaxy,
to morph into what appears to be molecular and maternal. I connect blood and flesh to death, birth and renewal. Where there is death, it appears, a transformation awaits. Blood to me is jarring and alluring, and it signifies hope. In my emotional responses to blood and the colour red and cells, I am aware that colours and shapes signify different things for different people, and evoke different emotions, affects and feelings. I also accept that meaning is not stagnant, and recognise that I once considered crimson shades to signify strength, to signify my soul, and now they signify a brave encounter with the abject that brought me hope.

At the core of what threatens physical life, lie my suicidal tendencies. My experiences can be considered as violent in the context of my abject emotions, affects and feelings. I regard certain states of depression and mania, and in particular, a combination of these poles where the self is rejected by the self through debilitating self-deprecating thoughts, to be emotional abuse inflicted on the self. I turn against myself, and in the unsettling confusion of an existential crisis where I question and doubt the authenticity of my reality, I can justify, with seeming clarity, why I should end my life. This blurs the edges between psychic deadness and the threat of physical death.

During these moments of emotional self-harm, I cannot protect myself from myself. I become both a victim and a threat to myself. In these instances, my abject emotions, affects and feelings threaten the borders between life and death and I am engulfed by emotional chaos. I delve deeply into the realm of Kristeva’s semiotic, and in the face of the abject, I am unable to clearly distinguish between myself and that which threatens me. It is in this chaotic and destabilised state within the ruins of collapsed meaning that I experience a surge of creative energy that seemingly comes to my rescue.

Painting is, in part, an expression of my emotional despair, and provides a process during which I am in a state of reflection that leads to a place of peace, and eventually, a place of ecstatic joy. It is for me a process of personal transformation and parallels, as a physical manifestation, psychic metamorphoses.

In this chapter I discuss Bracha Ettinger’s artistic process and philosophy as an example of the experience of art as a means of healing from collective trauma. Ettinger’s perspective on the way in which art can evoke compassion and ultimately empathy, resonates with my creative process which for me is a journey of healing and which allows for a better understanding of, and compassion towards, myself. Ettinger describes how art can raise an awareness of dehumanisation through violence and persecution, and allow the viewer a deepened
understanding of the traumatic events that she commemorates through her art. Ettinger’s understanding of the genderless transformative space in which art allows artists and viewers to meet, mirrors Kristeva’s notion of finding a balance between her semiotic and symbolic realms. No matter whether it involves a lack of a certain gender, or the masculine and feminine intertwined, Ettinger and Kristeva still recognise a non-bias, non-hierarchal balance. In finding my balance, it was helpful to understand the parts of my world that are unbalanced – such as stigma that appears symbolic – thereby leading to a greater understanding and acceptance of myself.

As an example of self-reflectivity and the therapeutic role that art plays in recovering from abuse, I refer to the artist Jessica Merle. Merle’s art-making process in her work *Rebirth* (2016) reflects a journey of healing, and her creative process can be seen as a form of psychotherapy. Trauma suffered from abuse translates as physical embodiments in Merle’s *Rebirth* (2016) through her use of forms and material that resonate with her psychological trauma. *Rebirth* (2016) can be seen as a narrative of metamorphoses, and her use of stain imagery and delicate embroidery mirrors the stark contrast between pain and beauty that forms a part of growth.

Frida Kahlo’s art can be read as retaliation against psychological and physical trauma. Her creative process mirrors a transformation of traumatic experiences into works of art. It appears also, as a means through which she can articulate her sense of devastation. I refer to Kahlo’s cathartic transformation of trauma through her painting process, as an example of purifying the abject. I read Kahlo’s work as an extension of the emotional and physical pain that she endured.

Ashleigh Christelis counteracts social stigma through honesty by sharing her experience of bipolar affective disorder on social media platforms. As a result, the artist opens herself to emotional support. Christelis’s process of tracking her mental wellbeing, and digitally documenting and sharing her experience of emotional extremes, resonates with my own processes. I discovered this artist in the year that led up to her exhibition, *#365 Bowls: An Exhibition of Emotion* (2016), and found solace in what she shared as it reflected my experience of bipolar affective disorder. Ashleigh Christelis tracked her mental wellbeing through clay by making a bowl a day for the duration of 2016. My use of Instagram, as a digital journal and form of field notes, serves as a research tool in order to track my experiences.

In his online exhibition, *Abstract Peaces* (2016), Tsoku Maela addresses the stigma of mental illness in black communities. These artworks create powerful pivots of conversation about depression, bipolar affective disorder and anxiety. Maela accepts the diagnosis of bipolar
disorder, but also considers the ways in which mental illness is a process that allows for self-awareness. My experience of stigma is from the perspective of a white female in various environments, including conservative, predominantly Afrikaner towns; Taiwan; work environments with various class differences and a predominantly Afrikaner city. There are striking similarities, in both my and Maela’s experiences of not having a voice, and becoming the ‘other’, either through being victims of discrimination or by not belonging. In the diverse cities in which we now live, Maela and I have both found a space to claim voices that are heard.

Finally, I discuss Christopher Bollas’s (2009) theory of thinking and the creative process, and the therapeutic role of the artistic process. I look at the bell jars and Instagram images that I use in my paintings, and that form a self-reflective thread through my artworks, in relation to Bollas’s theory of evocative objects. By looking at the iconography in my art as evocative objects, I simultaneously explore the indexicality thereof, as it forms links, through memory, to experienced phenomena. Bollas (in Marks 2016:252) sees evocative objects as “containers of dream material and desire” – serendipitously similar to the glass bell jars which contain memories in my art.

I am meant to paint with my inner voice. In sleepy moments when I did not, what I created was not art, but mere clumsy representations of what I had seen with my eyes, but not with my heart. I paint with a flow; it is as though a blueprint of myself sheds light on where I should go, and I follow.

I may be a universe and my blueprint a godliness, a source of guidance towards what are perfect patterns. I may be a planet forming part of a universe, and my blueprint connected to a source greater than myself, a divinity, a source from which everything in sync with the cosmos connects. I may be an illusion, moments away from being deleted, of being unplugged into nothingness, a fragment of a programmer’s imagination. I may be an experimental subject. I may be in a simulation preparing me for battles and adventures unimaginable.
There is nothing mediocre about my being. I’ve yearned for it, when exhausted by racing thoughts thinking, feeling, analysing, worrying, wasting time on an unbearable misplaced intensity, I yearn and yearn for peace. I don’t always get it right, but when I do, oh when I do I’m summer-love-girl. I’m thin, even if I’m fat. I’m light and breezy and bubbly and beautiful and beyond any thoughts that mere moments ago had dragged me to the depths of disgust. And then the heavy. The shame. When I’m ashamed of my being I don’t deserve to live. I bounce between light and shadow, sometimes settling into one or the other for a while, sometimes bouncing between them like a ball, like a rocket, into the abyss, crash, into the abyss, crash, I may want to die at dawn and dance when met at dusk. Medication can control it to an extent, and routine and ritual, but never, not ever have I been mediocre.

I tried, surely subconsciously - surely unconsciously succumbing to the state of my sullied soul. Shame is a terrible, terrible state of being. Had I known, had I seen myself from afar, from a bird’s eye perspective, raised above my humanness, raised above my flawed body and mind, perhaps even a short distance beyond my very soul, I would have known that I was like the seasons and similar to lunar cycles. I would have chosen differently. But instead on a search for the breather I anticipated mediocrity to be, I chose to be with beings who despised my intensity. In love they might have thought that it was a phase that would pass, that would dilute, and that would dissipate into comfort. And when I didn’t, when I was overcome by the first signs of the shadow, when my dancing on tables turned to sobbing and sadness that I could not explain, I was safely placed on eggshells. In fight-and-flight to remain. Until.

Art seems to be a part of my being, and at times when left unnoticed, treated as unimportant, when I forget, when I am entangled elsewhere, distracted, enthralled by that which temporarily soothed my cracked self-esteem, my underlying shame - a disruption brings me to a halt. It is as though art steps in as a journey of healing when my broken being yearns to dissipate. I come to a fork in my road where I can either end it, or make art.

I’ve always chosen art (Reflection by author, 2018).
Griselda Pollock (2010:831), in her article, “Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma”, writes that theorist, psychoanalyst and artist, Bracha Ettinger, proposes that creating and experiencing art can be a means of commemorating and being with the other. Ettinger (in Evans 2016:[sp]) in an interview with Brad Evans (2016) proclaims that:

Painting pains me. And it will pain you. We join in sorrow so that silenced violence will find its echo in our spirit, not by imagination but through an artistic vision. Light and space can flourish without us, the humankind. Light and space in painting works in colour, line, and forms for the humane. After an earth-shattering catastrophe, must I not allow the traces of the horrifying to interfere with my artwork? Why should this be any different to psychoanalytical and critical interventions?

Ettinger (2006b:147) writes that “[i]n art today we are moving from phantasy to trauma. Contemporary aesthetics is moving from the phallic structure to the matrixial sphere”. Pollock (2010:834) considers that Ettinger implies contemporary art to be in transition from the logical, to the emotional. From the perspective of the Law of the Father, as discussed in Chapter One, this would imply regression. Ettinger seems to suggest in her quote, that a certain affective state is necessary in art. This movement would, in Kristevan terms, be a tendency towards the semiotic, more than towards the symbolic.
Pollock (2010:834) further observes that Ettinger points to an alertness in contemporary art, to the historical facts that cause trauma in the present. Pollock (2010:834) deduces from Ettinger’s theory that historical events that caused severe individual and collective trauma, have in their extremity of violence, perhaps surpassed previous means of representation. In the light of my reading of Kristeva, this would imply that the articulation of traumatic events within the Symbolic order, cannot take place from the symbolic realm alone, as it evokes powerful emotions, affects and feelings, which are rooted in the semiotic realm.

Ettinger (in Evans 2016:sp), in an interview titled “Art in a Time of Atrocity” (2016) with Brad Evans, a reader in political violence at the University of Bristol, proposes that we are connected through art, even if we are, as individuals, isolated from society. Ettinger (in Evans 2016:sp) discusses her paintings that are centred on traces of female figures and children in the face of death in the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. For Ettinger (in Evans 2016:sp), the figures’ wounds are their own, but as we indirectly observe their trauma, we are changed by the artwork’s processes which allows us to realise that traces of their wounds are in ourselves too. It is Ettinger’s (in Evans 2016:sp) intention for the viewer to embody the trauma expressed in the artwork.

Ettinger’s paintings refer to the photographic evidence of traumatic events (Pollock 2010:854). Her abstract application in her painting adds layers in veils of colours as if to protect the figures from the viewer’s gaze (Pollock 2010:860). Ettinger ties art, psychoanalysis, and critical theory together in her approach to images of devastation. Pollock (2010:831) writes that the concept of ‘aesthetic wit(h)nessing’ emerged from Ettinger’s practice. Furthermore Pollock (2010:831) observes that “Ettinger is proposing an aesthetic wit(h)nessing: a means of being with and remembering for the other through the artistic act and through an aesthetic encounter”.

Ettinger (in Evans 2016:sp) employs painting as a way of transforming painful traces of violent and traumatic events. She (in Evans 2016:sp) refers to residues and traces of violence that continue to circulate throughout societies, perpetuating a collective trauma. I have found that art transforms in me whatever threatens my existence - whether it is life threatening through that which evokes suicidal tendencies, or that which disrupts emotional functioning. What resonates with me in Ettinger’s view, is the possibility of a passageway, the possibility

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17 Lacan’s use of the Symbolic order, the social realm (Oliver 1993:10).
18 ‘Kristeva’s specifically symbolic element within the Symbolic order that forms a part of her understanding of the signifying process’ (Oliver 1993:10).
of a link that can be made between my experience of emotion, affect and feeling, and the world outside of my own reality.

Ettinger (2006a:219) writes in her article, “Matrixial Trans-Subjectivity,” that her reference to the feminine evades the dichotomy between masculine and feminine. In understanding the formation of subjectivity, Ettinger’s (2006a:219) model breaks away from the paradigms which privilege phallocentrism, (such as those of Lacan). It also opposes the stance of Kristeva (1982:13) for whom the passage to the Symbolic involves “a violent, clumsy breaking away”. Ettinger (2006a:219) observes the passage into the Symbolic to be a non-psychotic connection between the feminine and creation: this connection does not involve rejection or abjection, and is neither male nor female. However for Ettinger (2006a:218), the non-phallic feminine field is a psychic realm that she refers to as the ‘matrixial border space’.

Subjectivity for Ettinger (2006a:218), is not an act of breaking away, but rather a meeting of the I and the non-I. She (2006a:218) considers the mother to be a link, rather than an object that one must separate oneself from, as Kristeva does. Ettinger (2006a:219) defines the matrixial border space as a realm where intensities, vibrations and traces of memory can be experienced by others who ‘re-attune their affective frequencies’.

Thus Ettinger’s theory appears to mirror that of Kristeva (1984:24) in resisting a hierarchy between the maternal and paternal, as the feminine remains a powerful shaper of the psyche. Kristeva (1984:24) considers the semiotic and symbolic realms to be inseparable in signification, and the dynamic between the realms changes according to different types of discourse. Considering traumatic events such as those Ettinger (in Evans 2016:[sp]) refers to, the dynamic between the semiotic and symbolic would thus lean towards the semiotic realm.

The emotive art of others has at times brought me relief - even when alone in emotional agony I am reminded of a world of which I form a part. I am further reminded, through their vulnerability, and through the honesty of others, that I am not alone in my experience of amplified emotion, affect and feeling. This realisation evokes sympathy towards myself for the often-debilitating emotional states in which I become immersed, and which instigate an experience of shame. Sympathy directed towards myself forms a counterbalance to shame which, as mentioned in Chapter One, forms a destructive part of my experience of emotional extremes. Ettinger (in Evans 2016:[sp]) says that “[p]ainting leads to thought and then leaves it behind”. This expression leads me to understanding that I leave my agony on wood and
underneath a linseed glaze, and that others may, for a moment, feel my pain. As I write in Chapter Three:

*Once what I feel is translated into elements of art, a short distance away from me, larger than me – taller and wider – there is a shift in my perspective. That which felt unbearable in the past, become clear points in growth cycles, signposts, or landmarks with transformative powers. When I leave the studio I am not who I was before, yet it feels like a return to a familiar and sacred innocence.*

Ettinger (in Evans 2016:[sp]) states:

> [t]he space of painting is a passageway. By trusting the painting as true you become a witness to the effects of events that you didn’t experience directly, you become aware of the effects of the violence done to others, now and in history — a witness to an event in which you didn’t participate, and a proximity to those you have never met.

Hence Ettinger (in Evans 2016:[sp]) does not regard the purpose of art to represent or aestheticise reality, but to invent images and spaces, either with or without traces of earlier images. For her, art acts as a maternal healing when it commands the viewer “to wonder, to feel awe, to feel compassion, to care, to trust, and to carry the weight of the world”. What the viewers see doesn’t mirror reality or themselves. Therefore Ettinger (in Evans 2016:[sp]) says that “[w]hen violence kills trust, art is the space where a trust in the other, and by extension of one’s being in the world, can re-emerge”.

Thus Ettinger considers painting, like psychoanalysis, to be a healing process (Evans 2016:[sp]). Looking at my art-making process in retrospect, there is a distinct pattern in which prolonged phases of experiencing abject emotions, affects and feelings, are followed by a surge of creativity that enables me to sublimate that which threatens my existence. Painting becomes an expression of my emotional despair, and a process during which I am in a state of reflection – and a vehicle that leads to a place of peace, and eventually, a place of ecstatic joy. During these phases, my routine does not always allow time for creating art. It is as though the disruption caused by emotional chaos was meant to wake me, in order to create.

**Ettinger’s Self-Fragilisation**

Ettinger (in Evans 2016:[sp]) finds dealing with traces of violence almost unbearable. For her, the vulnerable other can only be approached by “self-fragilisation” (Ettinger 2009:22). By self-

The enigma of self-fragilization goes beyond the "pleasure principle" in the Freudian sense. As such, it comes close to the "death drive", as it goes beyond any claim for homeostasis and enters the zone of not-enoughness that releases the grasp on any idea of satisfaction of a need. It is however the principle of besideness, in operation inside the matrixial sphere, that evades the sacrificial potentiality of any self-fragilization as such.

Ettinger (in Evans 2016:[sp]) considers transforming traces of violence, whether private or historical, to be a responsibility of healing: one of art’s most important functions is to make the world more tolerable and liveable, and to carry one another’s burdens. Hence Ettinger (in Evans 2016:[sp]) does not see art as a reaction to violence-based structures, but rather as a form of resilience from a different perspective:

To the vulnerability of the other, known or unknown, we gradually become more responsible. There are no promises; a painting might not do its work. Yet it does give us a chance.

My creative journey is a process, during which I allow myself to be fragile, a process of transforming emotional chaos into something tangible. Thus, it is a process during which my ‘suffering’ is justified and becomes no longer ‘suffering’ but a thread in creating a visual tapestry of that which cannot alone be expressed in words. The viewer may feel less alone through recognising the similarities between my experiences and theirs, and it may also allow for a better understanding of these afflictions. Although at times I feel as if I am immersed in self-indulgent rumination, this ‘self-fragilisation’ and the accessing of memories that connect me to emotions, affects and feelings, allow for a transformation of my experiences. This transformation into art alters that which causes me emotional chaos, and unlocks the possibility of it becoming accessible to others.
Instinctive search for equanimity, to disintegrate into insignificance. 
The prerequisite spectators bear universal witness. I feel the fool of life. 
A whirlpool in an ancient city where I wear sand-coloured robes, it weakens it dissipates. 
And when I hit the dry ground deep below the swirling waters of this otherworldly odyssey from carnal to ethereal, I find a moment of relief. I evaporate into both darkness and light. Into nothing. 
Equilibrium

(Reflection by author, 2016).

Figure 12: Bracha Ettinger, Eurydice n.5, 1994. Oil on canvas, size unknown (Wikiart 2018:[sp]).
I am different to who I was when I embarked on this journey.
From thin to fat to fine to the way in which I faced what I fear.
From long to short to silver.
From one with that which threatened my existence,
to one with whom I am meant to become

(Reflection by author, 2018).

In her work, Rebirth (2016), Jessica Merle explores themes of metamorphosis, catharsis and healing. Through her practice the artist addresses trauma and abuse, working in a range of media which includes embroidery, mercuriochrome and iodine (Merle 2016:[sp]).

Merle’s (2016:14) practice is influenced by, and grounded in, feminism. While themes around her work may be interpreted from various angles, the core narratives of her work refer significantly to trauma, and in particular as experienced by women. Merle (2016:14) engages with trauma through her practice, and by sharing her personal journey, her work becomes political. Symbolic references to the uterus and menstruation in her work further reference feminist elements (Merle 2016:15).

The concept of Merle’s (2016:20) practice grew out of a paradoxical phobia and love of moths. She distracted herself from a painful phase of her life by immersing herself in research of these insects. Merle (2016:21) presents the theme of metamorphosis as both literal and metaphorical in her practice. Her literal understanding thereof is based on the biochemical transformation of moths (Merle 2016:21). A fear of moths was for Merle (2016:20) transformed into a symbolisation of hope, and a toxic environment from which she escaped. Merle (2016:20) draws comparisons between the enigmatic lives of moths and similarly hidden facets of human nature. She (2016:22) draws a comparison between the ‘pupal’ phase of the moth and the
human response to trauma. This resting phase in the metamorphosis of the moth, for Merle (2016:22) mirrors the process of withdrawal that appears to be a common human response to emotionally taxing and traumatic experiences. Thus for her (2016:22) the pupa that appears inactive in a state of resting, while internally processing change, mirrors the change that occurs in humans during phases of self-reflection.

Merle’s conceptual framework developed from metamorphosis and catharsis in the context of the life cycles of moths, and became a metaphor for the healing processes associated with recovery from trauma and abuse. She addresses issues of gender-based violence in South Africa from a female perspective. Her personal experiences of an abusive relationship, together with friends’ experiences of abuse, propelled Merle to use her creative practice as a vessel for confronting and creating an awareness of these realities that permeate South African society (Merle 2016:20,21).

As an additional layer, Ovid’s poem, *The Metamorphoses*, influenced Merle’s (2016:22) interpretation of metamorphosis. For her, the most prominent manifestation of the theme is the transformation undergone by characters who, often with divine intervention, are literally and metaphorically turned into plants or animals. Thus Merle conceptualises metamorphosis as a process that allows escape for victims of abuse. Moreover metamorphosis as an escape mechanism plays an important role in her concept and mirrors her interpretation of moth pupation signifying a person’s emotional withdrawal from trauma. She explains that:

> in this sense the ability to transform or be transformed and take flight from a situation becomes a physical withdrawal where the person is further able to escape their situation. (Merle 2016:22-23).

A clear comparison is evident between catharsis and abjection: as for Kristeva (1982:2) the abject causes “spasms and vomiting that protect me”. She continues: “…spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire” (Kristeva 1982:3). On the other hand Merle’s theme of catharsis explores concepts of both physical and emotional catharsis. Studying Hippocrates influenced her concept of physical catharsis. Purgation was induced to rid the body of excessive build-up of bodily humours19 believed to be the cause of disease. The elimination of these20

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19 “Hippocrates established the four humours of the body as phlegm, bile, black bile and blood” (Merle 2016: 23).

20 All of which are the boundary transgressions Kristeva diagnoses as triggers for abjection.
could supposedly be achieved by inducing vomiting, bowel movements and menstruation (Merle 2016:23-24).

The Collins Dictionary defines Aristotelian catharsis as “the purging or purification of the emotions through the evocation of pity and fear, as in tragedy” (Collins Dictionary 2018:[sp]). I identify in Merle’s work a parallel between physical and emotional catharsis, and her use of stain imagery becomes a physical manifestation of emotions, affects and feelings. Merle is inspired by Ancient Greek theatre which often aimed to evoke an experience of emotional catharsis. The aim of both physical and emotional catharsis is to promote healing and the restoration of a natural, healthy balance of body and mind. Together with metamorphosis and catharsis, Merle explores processes of healing on both a physical and emotional level that accompany recovery from trauma and abuse. Merle uses her creative practice as a facilitator for emotional catharsis (Merle 2016:24).

For Merle, (in Vercillo 2017:[sp]) art offers a space to express and reflect on our experiences. Art for her, (in Vercillo 2017:[sp]) can be journalistic without being self-indulgent, and can assist an artist via a psychological process, while also offering the same support to the viewer. Through the process of creating, art is a form of personal therapy, and becomes similar to group therapy when it is shared (Vercillo 2017:[sp]).

In this, the viewer becomes part of the process. Thus Merle’s art can initiate important conversations and can act as a catalyst for confronting personal obstacles (Vercillo 2017:[sp]).
As with psychotherapy, my creative process constitutes a journey that includes unpacking what is hidden in the subconscious. The process of painting is one of delicately unlocking painful experiences which become a part of the space in which I paint. It is as though only the memories that I am ready to process will emerge. This brings to the fore the possibility that these memories would not have surfaced had I not been painting, i.e. had I not been doing the work required by sublimation (Beadsworth 2004b:123). Light is shed on my emotions, affects and feelings in that they are better understood when connected by psychic strings to memory. Here I draw a comparison between Merle’s process of emotional catharsis and my own.

*Rebirth* (2016) is an artist’s book that includes 23 pages of delicate embroideries that explore themes of metamorphosis, catharsis, and healing. Merle makes use of symbolic stain-imagery and draws from Ancient Greek beliefs that the evacuation of bodily fluids results in health of body and mind. The repetitive process and cyclic application of stitches resonate with the cyclical process of metamorphosis, and with her themes surrounding catharsis: in this way they mimic the psychological journey from trauma to healing (Vercillo 2017:[sp]).

The process of embroidery becomes metamorphic through the way in which the evolution of the work is evident (Merle 2016:78). For example, Merle (2016:78) writes that “[e]ach small stitch becomes a cell that adds to the growth of the work”. For Merle (2017:[sp]) it further leads to insight into how and why embroidery has been regarded an ideal activity for calm,
submissive women. Merle regards the size of the embroideries in *Rebirth* (2016) to be an important aspect of the work. Being small, they allow for an uninterrupted process of creation which becomes an intuitive stream of consciousness (Merle 2016:76).

The book format of *Rebirth* (2016) enhances the narrative effect of the series and for her the act of binding the embroideries together in a book format reinforces embroidery and sewing as metaphors for reparation and healing (Merle 2016:[sp]). Each embroidery creation acts independently as a page, while being part of a larger story (Merle 2016: 75). It is Merle’s (in Vercillo 2017:[sp]) intention to evoke feelings of hope and optimism in the viewer, and to add to a greater understanding of her themes:

> It is so encouraging and fulfilling when someone approaches me to say that seeing my work provoked an emotional response, a feeling that they are not alone in traumatic things they have been through. I just want to make connections with others by being brave enough to express topics that are otherwise considered taboo to be open about.

Merle (2017:[sp]) writes that bodily fluids are typically looked upon with disgust, but that she portrays the stains and marks left behind by these fluids as vital elements of metamorphosis and of both physical and emotional catharsis that result in healing. Here a clear comparison can be drawn between the expulsion of bodily fluids, and the process of rejecting the abject, which Kristeva refers to in a material form, as discussed in Chapter One, as repulsive bodily fluids. For example, in her explanations of the concept of abjection Kristeva uses the example of repulsive bodily fluids to illustrate a revolt against that which gave us life or that constituted a state of being.

In *Rebirth* (2016), the colour pink represents flesh, bodily fluids, scars, and scabs. It further depicts ideas of privacy and discretion. Merle regards pink to be a calming colour which for her signifies solitude and internal cathartic and healing processes (Merle & Sickles 2017:[sp]). Much of the embroidery thread Merle uses in the work were given to her by her grandmothers (Merle & Sickles 2017:[sp]). In her works Merle uses mercurochrome and iodine which are mainly home-treatment antibacterials used to treat minor wounds. For her, this relates to the scientific themes of her work, and the theme of the stain as a symbol of catharsis and healing.

The sight of mercurochrome on a wound can be jarring but for Merle it signifies healing (Merle 2016:76). While this may be the case for Merle, the stain remains a site of ambiguity. Merle (2016:25) refers to “an essential, almost stylised, rounded, organic shape” such as is found in
cells, uteruses and embryos, which became prominent during her early creative process of working with iconography. This shape, as presented through stain imagery, becomes an encapsulation of “the themes of metamorphosis, catharsis and healing” (Merle 2016:25). Merle (2016:25) elaborates: “[i]t is the cell, the uterus, the cocoon, the stain”.

Figure 15: Jessica Merle, Page 16 Cellular and Division, 2016. Fabric, felt and embroidery, 260 mm x 265 mm. Durban, South Africa (Merle 2016:[sp]).
Figure 16: Jessica Merle, *Page 23 Mother and Moth*, 2006. Fabric, felt and embroidery, 260 mm x 265 mm. Durban, South Africa (Merle 2016:[sp]).
Catharsis

For Merle (2016:78), the moth, which appears on the final page in *Rebirth* (2016), is a symbol of metamorphosis and emerges from what she calls an internal space which can be compared to Ettinger’s matrixial space, where healing takes place.

I draw a thread between the significance of catharsis for Merle, and the cathartic process of purifying the abject. I find it relevant here to also interlace the reflective role: this is the phase of catharsis that requires introspection and for me, the role that rumination plays in my creative process. Rumination is the process of continuously thinking about aspects of emotionally upsetting experiences (Selby 2010:[sp]). By consciously focusing on certain memories which are linked to emotions, affects and feelings, I relive and reflect on traumatic experiences.

Similar to forms of psychotherapy through which I have been treated, rumination requires me to focus on specific traumatic events. The process of rumination also takes place unconsciously, and I have considered whether it is a futile and obsessive activity to focus on often destructive frames of mind or states of being. Henry Bergson’s philosophical method of intuition refers to the idea of entering into something, as opposed to viewing it from the outside. This, for Bergson, gives us absolute knowledge (Leonard & Valentine 2016:[sp]). It can be said that rumination allows me to gain a deeper understanding of these states of being, by allowing me to be fully immersed in them in order to be released from them. In the words of Bergson (2012:111):

![Figure 17: @everdreamy. #distortion to #reflection. Instagram. 28 May 2018. Johannesburg (photograph by author).](image-url)
But suppose that instead of trying to rise above our perception of things we were to plunge into it for the purpose of deepening and widening it. Suppose we were to insert our will into it, and that this will, expanding, were to expand our vision of things.

As considered earlier in this chapter, immersing myself in my experiences of emotion, affect and feeling may be what Beadsworth (2004b:123) refers to as doing the work, a way of understanding the emotion which enables me to sublimate my experiences into art. Bergson (2012:112) further writes that: “[f]or hundreds of years, in fact, there have been men whose function has been precisely to see and to make us see what we do not naturally perceive. They are the artists”.

Central to Merle’s artistic practice is the exploration of the materiality and emotional symbolism of embroidery and textile crafts. Merle found the processes of embroidery and sewing to be cathartic by virtue of its repetition (Merle 2016:33). It can be said that my rumination on emotions, affects and feelings that form a part of my painting process, are metaphorically similar to the repetition of stitches and the working towards catharsis.

Leticia Alonso in “Frida Kahlo and the Improper/Unclean: Toward the Condition of Abjection” (2014), discusses how catharsis, together with abjection as its counterpart, elevates the impure to the level of a therapy that requires repetition in order to cleanse oneself via contact with filth and defilement. Before shamans can tend to the ill, they themselves experience a calamity such as a disease from which they have recovered (Alonso 2014:414). Dealing with the infected is necessary to purge oneself of the ailment. It is not strange that abjection entails violence, and that it is usually tied up with blood. In line with this view, the artworks of Kahlo are representative of this cathartic state, as she returns to the abject by figuratively portraying the trauma of her life (Alonso 2014:414).

Kristeva (1982:28) writes on Aristotelian catharsis, as opposed to Plato’s catharsis with its focus on the mind. The former enables Kristeva’s (1982:28) interest in the impersonation of a diverse array of emotions, affects and feelings, in rhythmic and powerful poetic language.

Alonso draws a comparison between the French playwright, Antonin Artaud21, and the work of Frida Kahlo suggesting that her work re-enacts the cathartic effects he aimed for in his theatre of cruelty. Similar to Merle, Kahlo engages in art-making as a way of eradicating her

21 Antonin Artaud developed The Theatre of Cruelty. Its aim was “to shock audiences through gesture, image, sound and lighting” (Tripney 2017:[sp]).
severe pain and existential dilemma. For Artaud, a theatre of cruelty should portray existential crises, and he pushes both actor and audience to states of agitation, in order for the ailment of living and the torment of humanity to be exhibited on the stage (Alonso 2014:413).

Kahlo uses her own body when it comes to the expression of torment in her work, and blood is the utmost expression of the violence inflicted upon her. The use of blood in her artworks may signify physical trauma, but it may also act as an agent of purification if the viewer’s response involves a cathartic experience via the release of emotions, affects and feelings (Alonso 2014:413). As mentioned earlier, Merle sees the wounds and bodily fluids in her work as signs of healing. For Merle, what was once terrifying or repulsive, now signifies hope, and for Kahlo, what was unbearable torture, a symbol of that which she survived can bring to light an almost unbearable beauty.
FRIDA KAHLO – ABJECTION

Carlos Fuentes (1995:15-16) in his introduction to The Diary of Frida Kahlo: an Intimate Self-Portrait writes:

Through her art, Kahlo seems to come to terms with her own reality. The horrible, the painful, can lead us to the truth of self-knowledge. It then becomes beautiful simply because it identifies our very being, our innermost qualities. Kahlo’s self-portraits are beautiful for the same reason as Rembrandt’s: They show us the successive identities of a human being who is not yet, but who is becoming.

Frida Kahlo did not plan to become a painter, and intended to study medicine before a devastating accident left her with serious injuries. Painting was Kahlo’s response to various traumatic life experiences. Goldsmith (2004:2) writes that “[i]t was a way of creating psychological aliveness from out of the numbness and deadness arising from her many tragic life experiences”.

Goldsmith (2004:4) proposes that it is in the letter that Kahlo wrote to her partner, Alex Gómez Arias, with whom she was in the accident, that she describes her experience of the abject. An extract from Hayden Herrera’s (1983:75) biography, Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo, reads:

Why do you study so much? What secret are you looking for? Life will soon reveal it to you. I already know everything, without reading or writing. A short while ago, maybe a few days ago, I was a girl walking in a world of colors, of clear
and tangible shapes. Everything was mysterious and something was hiding; guessing its nature was a game for me. If you knew how terrible it is to attain knowledge all of a sudden—like lightening elucidating the earth? Now I live on a painful planet, transparent as ice. It’s as if I had learned everything at the same time, in a matter of seconds. My girlfriends and my companions slowly became women. I grew old in a few instants and now everything is dull and flat. I know there is nothing behind; if there were something I would see it.

Goldsmith gathers from Kahlo’s life and work a psyche recreating itself from out of tragic life events. She writes:

In Frida’s life and work we see the psyche recreating itself from out of the abject conditions of its own mortality in a cyclical process of death, transformation, and rebirth (Goldsmith 2004:41).

Her creativity emerged from the darkness she experienced. Creativity was for her a mode of being that expressed her relationship to her inner and outer worlds. According to Goldsmith (2004:2):

It was an active, originary, and generative dimension of her psyche, transforming the latter through cycles of death, transformation, and rebirth. These cycles encompassed the mortal and tragic as well as vital and joyful dimensions of existence.

There was for Kahlo a struggle between psychic deadness and vitality as she confronted the abject and transformed it by means of her art. Through this transformation she gained rejuvenation of her creativity, and freedom. Goldsmith (2004:41) observes that she did not deny death and trauma, but integrated it in her internal and external worlds. Symbolism in her work often signifies both creation and destruction. Kahlo’s psyche reconciled opposite poles so as to restore her vitality and appreciation for life - and its prosperity depended on death being interlaced with life in order to create a new internal and external vision (Goldsmith 2004:41).

Alonso (2014:408) applies Kristeva’s discourse on abjection to the work of Kahlo by arguing that Kahlo’s main concern is to be exposed to the act of chance: it is an act of putting herself on trial in the process of creating art. Kahlo experiences the cathartic effects of visual language as a countermeasure to her physical and spiritual torment (Alonso 2014:408). Alonso (2014:408) observes that “[i]n order to empty herself of delirium and dejection, Kahlo embarks on a personal aesthetic journey that reaches the point of self-annihilation”.

Alonso writes that as Kahlo is pushed to the limit and challenged, she creates art based on what she perceives as this limit. Her traumatic near-death experience causes her to paint in a manner
where Alonso (2014:408) finds that the appropriateness of representation is violated: “Kahlo purges her soul by exhibiting the excess and spillage of fluids and wastes that traverse the demarcations between the inside and the outside of the body”. In this infringement of limits the clear margins of consciousness and the divisions between the cadaver and the living being, and also the self and the other, are called into question in the very condition of the abject (Alonso 2014:408). Furthermore, according to Alonso (2014:409):

The destabilization of the selfhood, especially in the creative process, is what characterizes Frida Kahlo’s abject art, in that it exhibits the tensions aroused by the porosity of boundaries. If Kristeva makes use of language in order to register the abject as a liminal space, Kahlo translates it into violent chromatic shades and forms. Her art shatters the onlooker’s gaze before the spectacle of suffering and terror and at the same time supersedes the ability of language to convey such a state.

In the light of the abject being of a material nature such as blood, filth or a corpse, Goldsmith (2004:5) writes that instinctual bodily reactions like nausea and vomiting protect the subject by turning her away from repugnance. A primal constraint thus keeps the abject from conscious awareness. If she didn’t turn away, she would be assailed psychological and physical death.

For Kahlo the abject was material in the context of her accident, illness and miscarriages, and examples such as bodily fluids are relevant. In the context of her emotional trauma the material examples become metaphors for that which psychically “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 1982:2). In my experience of abjection, the abject colonises my emotions, affects and feelings: in particular, this applies to emotions, affects and feelings associated with depression, including a sense of hopelessness, the yearning to cease to exist, and feelings of worthlessness, and sadness: these all threaten the self that at times struggles to exist. The abject, for me, are at times also emotions, feelings and affects associated with mania, such as a heightened sensory awareness, anxiety, feeling disconnected from reality, mental confusion and feeling completely overwhelmed. In the words of Kristeva (1982:1): “Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself”. However, as with Kahlo, it evokes in me a creative response which forms part of a transformative process.
For me the mysterious chora, the interval between being and not being, is a space where I return to that by which I am nourished, and through the creative nurturing am able to proceed to the symbolic until it is time to return to the semiotic for more growth to occur. I fluctuate between the semiotic and symbolic realms, the enigmatic chora always lingering, into which I can tap. The semiotic and symbolic are parallel: they spiral, intertwined, dipping in and out like rapid cycling, like mixed episodes dipping into the chora, emerging into the symbolic, sometimes dipping into the symbolic and catching a breath of life in the chora.

In this maternal space where the subject is controlled by drives - intuition - language is not yet formed. We speak in rhythm and vibration and colour. I believe this complete breakdown in
meaning and being immersed by chaos to be a vital part of emotional and creative growth. This nurturing space is to me a return to a place where the parts of myself that should be discarded, are threatened, and that which should further blossom, nurtured.

I dip into space seemingly frequently, this matrixial whirl-wind-womb. It dissolves my being into nothingness, scattered across the cosmos, and then, time and again, it is from nothing that I grow and once again become whole. Creativity is the life force that guides me from out of the chaos into a place where I am psychically reborn, similar to the processes in the life of an infant, but these cycles that I regard vital in the process of becoming are never completed: they are a continuous fluctuation between two equally significant universes. On the one hand, the semiotic: the homogenous, chaotic and feminine, and on the other, the symbolic: the heterogeneous, orderly and masculine.

I find there not to be a hierarchy, with semiotic preluding symbolic, but rather a delicate and essential balance between the feminine and masculine, or chaos and order. In this light of an equilibrium created by two seemingly conflicting worlds, I find it fitting to weave in depression and mania. The emotions, feelings and affects that lead me to a place that borders shadow, also lead me to light. It is in the maternal womb-space-chora, where I communicate my subconscious through colour and contrast. It is a language read by the senses, and nourished by the same emotions, feelings and affects that caused the disruption. These are transformed, by the creative process, into what is accessible, into that which gives life, and does not take it (Reflection by author, 2018).
ASHLEIGH CHRISTELIS: HONESTY

When I am honest, I need to trust that whom I confide in will have the insight to understand. It’s not as simple as taking two weeks’ sick leave because I have suicidal thoughts: in my experience, sickness of the soul is still widely regarded as a character weakness. When I am honest about needing a moment to heal my madness, I may never know how that honesty might change how I am perceived. Disclosure of mental illness also allows for support. Most people remain silent about their affliction because the risk of being labelled is simply too high.

In her exhibition, #365 Bowls: An Exhibition of Emotion (2016), Ashleigh Christelis had tracked her mental wellbeing through clay by making a bowl a day for the duration of 2016 (Grant-Marshall 2017:{sp}). Apart from the 2016 exhibition, Christelis was in a continuous conversation through public digital journaling on Instagram and Facebook.

Part of the exhibition was an installation piece made from bits of broken bowls representing the emotions she experienced during 2016. Followers of the artist could tap in and see where she was in her progress and what her frame of mind was at the time. It was also possible for viewers to refer back to her digital diaries after having experienced the exhibition.
Christelis’s digital visual diary entries are brutally honest, sharing her joy, accomplishments, frustration and despair during the process. The artist shares her experience of daily life which entails extreme emotional fluctuation and physical pain due to rheumatoid arthritis, particularly in her fingers, which greatly affects her ability to create. Abandoning the project crossed her mind when she fell behind in her schedule, all of which was communicated through her online journaling. Christelis’s transparency allows for support and motivation that would otherwise have been limited to a select few. Looking at Christelis’s honesty and the supportive response she gets, it seems absurd to me that I would first consider rejection to be a result of sharing an experience of mental illness, or rather, of life. It is as though I anticipate a negative response when I share what is to me something that causes shame: my illness. Individuals who may not have comprehended bipolar disorder might now have a better understanding as a result of Christelis’s shared journey. One also remains in control of the process as it is via a controlled platform of sharing, where a supportive community is created: therefore any cyber-bullying can be eliminated.

I find the honest way in which Christelis opens herself up on social media to be exceptionally brave. I feel protected by layers of metaphor through the poetry I share on a similar platform. It is as though only through deciphering my creative writing can the reader look into my inner-world; it is as though an understanding of

Figure 21: @ashleighchristelis. Shards. #365bowls. Instagram, 14 December 2016. Johannesburg (Christelis 2018: [sp]).

Figure 22: @ashleighchristelis. #wip #porcelain #365bowls. Instagram, 25 November 2016. Johannesburg (Christelis 2018: [sp]).
my poetry allows for an understanding of the way I experience the world. Poetry might also be a layer to protect the reader from what I consider often to be draining or negative, but ultimately it is a sublimation of my experience. The negative aspects of bipolar disorder that Christelis shares, certainly do not drain me, but rather make me feel less alone in my experience of amplified emotion, affect and feeling. I feel it is my responsibility to share on social media only the parts of my journey that I consider to be beautiful or artistically justified. The label of bipolar disorder, it seems, does not sit comfortably with me. Hence my expression of emotion, affect and feeling are my own, and not a side-effect of a disorder or illness.

The process of creating 365 bowls during 2016 was poetically parallel to the nature of bipolar disorder. Christelis (in Grant-Marshall 2017) says:

[s]ome days I open my eyes in the early morning and dread the fact I am alive, on other days, I open my eyes and excitement fills my being at the thought of another creative day. It is a scary condition. The thing about a manic episode is that you don’t feel safe with yourself. You feel you are standing on the tip of a precipice with nothing around you.
Stigma has often left me feeling powerless. Even if in a position where I am brave enough to be honest about my experience of emotional extremes, there is always the risk of being judged. There is always the risk that people will treat me differently, have different expectations and see me in a different light - a light that isn’t mine. I may be protected by the constitution and a growing awareness of the nature of mental illness; still, I have no control over the embedded stigma that still lies so deeply rooted in society.

Tsoku Maela created a visual diary to communicate his experience of depression in his online exhibition, *Abstract Peaces* (2016). In an interview with the blog, *Between 10 and 5*, Maela says that:

contrary to popular belief, when someone is brave enough to open up about their struggle with depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts or mental illness, they are most likely not looking for your sympathy or attention (Between 10 and 5, 2016:[sp]).
Judging from Maela’s title I assume that *Peaces* might indicate a journey that led to healing. The courage it took to share his experience in what he perceived to be an unsympathetic community, may have been a cathartic experience that resulted in relief. Sharing his experience brought him closer to being understood by his family (Between 10 and 5 2016:[sp]).

Maela says that internalising depression can be draining, and a toxic experience. He describes the feeling of depression as quoted below, except, he says, you never know when your next breath is coming:

> I want you to take a deep breath, don’t be shy, take in as much air as you need. Now hold it in for as long as you can. Feel the pressure on your chest and on your diaphragm. Listen to your heartbeat reverberate through your body. Louder and louder. You’re probably thinking to yourself, “I can do this for a while longer. I’ll be fine”. Once you become anxious for your next breath, seconds start to feel like hours until, depending on your level of tolerance, you eventually take your next breath, and it’s amazing (Between 10 and 5 2016:[sp]).

Maela grew up in a community where it was believed that certain things do not affect black people:

> Mentally ill? Bewitched, or you simply study too hard. Depressed? Lighten up, you’ve been watching way too many of those white teen movies. Seeing a psychologist?
You’re weak and should probably stop that before the neighbours find out (Between 10 and 5 2016:[sp]).

Maela writes that he has struggled with bipolar disorder and anxiety his whole life but had only in recent years summoned up the courage to discuss it with his family, and although they may not fully comprehend, they have a better understanding of who he is. Maela says that society has been taught to avoid the dark and try only to be in the light. In other words, to embrace our virtues and ignore our vices is not part of our biological, genetic or spiritual make-up (Between 10 and 5 2016:[sp]).

Maela describes depression as not only being a dark place:

Depression isn’t all doom and gloom, there is so much beauty to be drawn from it. It’s an opportunity to learn about yourself and how your intricate mind works – and the reason why it works the way it does (Between 10 and 5 2016:[sp]).

According to Maela society speaks openly now about many types of illnesses and without prejudice or judgment. He would like to see mental illness treated in the same way: “We are
all going through something, but you do not have to go through it alone” (Between 10 and 5 2016:[sp]).

His online exhibition, Abstract Peaces (2016), provides a visual diary of the experience of mental illness.

Using his body paired metaphorical imagery, his images elicit feelings of fear, hopelessness, and solitude, with underlying resilience. The images are also interspersed with lines of journal entries (Jannasch 2017:[sp]).

Abstract Peaces (2016) started during a depressive episode when Maela took up photography to create a visual diary depicting a person’s experiences during different states of depression (Zwane 2016:[sp]). Maela (in Zwane 2016:[sp]) says:

being able to face myself and going with the tide instead of against it has helped me deal with the episodes better. I’ve grown to love and appreciate myself more. The exhibition is a result of allowing myself to be immersed by shadow and finding beauty in that.

Maela’s (in Zwane 2016:[sp]) main objective was to start a conversation and to encourage people who live with mental illness “to not only be open about it to those they care about, but

Figure 27: Tsoku Maela, When I was Apart, 2016. Photograph, 800 mm x 635 mm (Maela 2016:[sp]).
to love themselves and realise that it’s not ‘illness’. The real illness here is ignorance”. In his Abstract Peaces (2016) he says:

Mental illness in black communities is often misunderstood, misdiagnosed or completely ignored. “Abstract Peaces” is a visual diary of a subject at different stages of their depression and anxiety. Depression isn’t all doom and gloom, it’s an opportunity to face oneself and this is a result of going to places you hate the most about yourself and finding beauty.

Through his art Maela addresses important social issues and evokes empathy: it sparks conversations that may lead to meaningful change (Hunkin 2016:[sp]). Maela (in Hunkin 2016:[sp]) continues:

Human connection and enlightenment are very important to me. Transparency in a world that is in a constant game of charades and false ideals or standards, where even the non-conformists eventually conform because they feel alone. Individuality is romanticized in theory but criticized in practise. So the work aims to turn all of those false ideals on their heads and bring it back to what really matters.

Maela’s focus has thus been in those communities where mental illness is not regarded as a serious or valid issue and he hopes to touch on those topics that are on our lips but no one is brave enough to speak about them in open spaces. Only a year after his exhibition, Abstract Peaces (2016) did Maela first openly communicate the motivation behind the body of his work (Hunkin 2016:[sp]). Maela grasped the severity of the mental illness stigma in the light of the public’s response to Hip-Hop Pantsula’s 2016 interview, during which the musician openly discussed his suicidal tendencies (Hunkin 2016:[sp]). Hence he felt motivated and compelled to be honest about his own experience of mental illness (Hunkin 2016:[sp]).

For Maela (in Kumalo & Ross 2017:[sp]), his work stretches beyond the gallery space. It represents all individuals who are affected by social issues such as the theme of mental illness that he addresses in his work: “Abstract Peaces broke a culture of silence, even among a lot of artists” (Kumalo & Ross 2017:[sp]).

In a 2017 interview (Kumalo & Ross 2017:[sp]) Maela refers to a Nina Simone quote: “to reflect the times” that is according to him a common outlook on the role of an artist. For Maela the environment is indicative of the times, and the role of the artist is not only to reflect the times outside of themselves “…there is an ever-changing internal environment that they must also seamlessly represent” (Kumalo & Ross 2017:[sp]).
Maela describes his artistic process as conflicted and often chaotic. He experiences it as “a process of unlearning where new ideas challenge what you have known to be true your entire life – about the world, about yourself – and maintaining a level of sanity” (Morris 2016:[sp]). Maela says that the beauty of his artistic process does not lie in the final works; they merely represent his process (Morris 2016:[sp]). This process reinforces the thematic repetition in this chapter on art as a means of working through emotions, affects and feelings.

![Figure 28: Tsoku Maela, A Brief Reminder of Solitude, 2016. Photograph, 800 mm x 640 mm. (Maela 2016:[sp]).](image)

Maela and Christelis both contribute to a conversational platform around mental illness. Whereas Christelis continues to grow her online community which has become a space for empathic sharing and support, Maela is growing his political voice. For example, he addresses, apart from mental illness, a manner of issues that contribute to the South African pursuit of diversity. Both Maela and Christelis contribute, through their honesty, to a greater understanding of the experience of amplified emotion, affect and feeling.
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OBJECT

In May 2016 my intuition led me to start painting for the first time in years. It led me to paint a bell jar into which I packed my most remarkable experienced phenomena - some for the sheer delight of remembering how good I once felt, while others are reminders of seemingly insufferable disarray I endured and somehow survived.

It was a time during which, in the shadow of myself, images that linked to memories when I felt happy, felt unreal. I remember paging through my Instagram feed, in search of moments which could fill the jars. I remember looking at images of happier times: their meaning would slowly change as the tiny details I would deny in the summer sun, gnawed and demanded to be revealed. Nothing escapes the all-encompassing night and memories become somewhat warped by the darkness by which at times I am slowly consumed.

I was searching for a reminder, for proof, I needed a photo album of better times to attempt to believe that they existed. It is as though I was old, not that I know what old entails, in search of something meaningful that would justify my life.

During times of prolonged despair, misery becomes the norm. It feels as though the joy I had experienced in memories had been a passing phase, maybe something I felt when I was younger but certainly not something I could experience again in my near future. When memories of better times have been dissipated, then hopelessness prevails, an all-consuming helplessness that covers every bit of life in me, and by which I was surrounded.

Whether the bell jar came from reading Sylvia Plath is something I will never know, and yes, if depression was a jar and I was underneath it was most definitely suffocating me. I might have felt in existential angst as though part of a scientific experiment, in a laboratory, or on museum display. The memory may have been further away, a vessel in which I keep precious things: treasures, a slice of baked cheese cake may have been kept fresh underneath, perhaps,
or I was supposed to like it because it was valuable - an antique - but I was never allowed to touch it because it was fragile, and children should be seen and not heard, like the dolls who lived in glass cupboards, is there enough air in there, can they breathe? And the dolls with porcelain faces and porcelain hands, delicate like glass, and the dolls partly made of plastic but untouchable because they came from far off lands, here, I brought you a doll, no, you are never, ever to play with it, it lives behind glass doors, perhaps, if you have to, on a very high shelf.

One thought stuck with me during that time: no one knows what I think or feel unless if I tell them. It’s a dreadful thing to feel misunderstood (Reflection by author, 2018)

In *The Evocative Object World* (2009) Christopher Bollas observes that in using the model of train travel to explain his theory of free association, Freud simply took note of how, when we think by not focusing on something specific, on a journey from one thought to another in an infinite string of connotations, “we create lines of thought, branching out in many different directions, revealing diverse unconscious interests” (Bollas 2009:6). He further writes that the revelation of a chain of ideas was the motivation behind the method of free association (Bollas 2009:6). I find my thought process during my creative process to be like free association as it reveals a train of thought, initially scattered and unrelated, but finally it reveals a pattern that leads to a better understanding of myself.

During this thought process, objects, like the bell jar, play a significant role in the way that they become a part of my paintings. These objects, through free association, may evoke in the viewer a very different emotion than that which I felt during the process of painting. The meaning of my objects transforms as I give shape to my inner world and recreate my experiences of emotion through combinations of meaningful shapes whose meaning is yet to be revealed.

Bollas (2009:7) points out that Freud did not discover free association, but that his invention of the psychoanalytical session shed new light on what was an ordinary way of thinking. By asking a patient to think aloud, Freud preferred the monologist essence of inner speech in solitude, to the structure of a dialogue between two people (Bollas 2009:7). Bollas refers to this phenomenon as the ‘Freudian Pair’ (Bollas 2009:7). In this context, my thought process during my painting process is again similar to the method of free association in that it can be likened to having a conversation with myself - a conversation which leads to greater self-awareness, whilst I am expressing the conversation in paint.
As mentioned in my discussion of Merle’s work, a comparison can be drawn between psychoanalysis and my creative process. Painting, for me, is a therapeutic process of making sense of scattered thoughts and feelings and finding patterns that lead to a clarity of thought and a greater understanding of my emotions, affects and feelings. Bollas (2009:37) says that seeking your truth is to represent unconscious conflicts and to allow for the representative process to catalyse self-liberation. For Bollas “[t]he pleasure of representation promotes other pleasures: the pleasure of self-discovery, and of being understood” (Bollas 2009:37). What I understand by representing my unconscious conflicts, is that I give voice to them and my conscious self then becomes a vessel through which my unconscious self can speak.

Here Bollas again turns to the ‘Freudian Pair’ saying that the process of free association constantly satisfies the drive of the self to represent its unconscious interests (Bollas 2009:37). From here I conclude that it is an inherent need for the self to express the unconscious in order to untangle inner conflicts, and that the conversations I have with myself during my painting process, is an instinctive drive to be understood. I recall what I wrote earlier about my thoughts at the start of my Masters journey:

*One thought stuck with me during that time: no one knows what I think or feel unless I tell them. It’s a dreadful thing to feel misunderstood.*

Bollas (2009:40) regards free association as a kind of individual creativity in which individuals allow themselves to express their experience of life, unaware of which thought patterns might emerge on any given day. Each therapy session will be unique. For Bollas ‘The Freudian Pair’ allows a patient “to feel the echo of his or her being in the method within which the analysand is a vital participant. It is like seeing one’s soul in a particular type of mirror” (Bollas 2009:40).

In her study, “Accidents, Evocative Objects and Art: Meanderings of the Mind in the Work of Christopher Bollas and Gabriel Orozco” (2015), Lesley Marks (2016:251) highlights the parallels between Bollas’s theory of thinking and the creative process, and the work of artist Gabriel Orozco. Marks draws a comparison between the psychoanalytic journey to find the true self, and the artistic aim to create art that offers a transformative experience.

Marks (2016:252) observes that both Bollas and Orozco use the mundane in search of authenticity, and a greater understanding of the self. Both psychoanalyst and artist emphasise that communication takes place through our choice of objects, and Marks (2016:252) suggests that objects that fill our work and home spaces:
evoke feelings which are emotionally charged to a greater or lesser extent and which, in their impact, both define and are used by the individual to communicate something of one’s self to others.

Bollas (2009:79) writes that the “integrity of an object – the character of its thingness – has an evocative processional potential”. When an object is used by a person, there is a possibility – or not – that it will cause an intricate psychosomatic experience (Bollas 2009:79). I use Instagram images to represent field notes of experienced phenomena. Through memory these images provide passages to emotional experiences. Each image takes me to a specific time and place when I felt intense emotion. The photos are field notes of what I have felt; it could be said that they form a graph, a visual diary of experienced emotion. I chose delicate and fragile glass display jars to hold my emotional experiences. No one knows what I think or feel unless I tell them, and even then, with explaining, it is rare for people to truly understand the most intense of my emotional experiences. Bollas (2009:79) explains that:

All the time, as we amble about in our worlds, we come across objects, whether natural or man-made, material or mental. For the unconscious there is no difference between a material and a non-material evocative object; both are equally capable of putting the self through a complex inner experience.

When I am painting, I am re-experiencing and re-telling the stories of past emotions through memories that are held in my digital visual diary. Memories, to me, are deeply connected to emotions, feelings and affects. Connected to memories, are evocative objects – very specific images – that I use in my art. It can also be said that evocative objects are passages to memories. I approach this from both sides in my practice. Either evocative objects connect me to memories which subsequently link to emotions, feelings and affects or memories connect me to evocative objects, which subsequently link me to emotions, feelings and affects.

For Bollas (2009:87) “each object provides textures of self-experience” and ‘experience potential’ is one of the reasons why we choose objects. Bollas (2009:87) acknowledges the inherent capacity of a single object to enable us to express ourselves. I will elaborate in Chapter Three on Bollas’s insight on the structural and conceptual effect of an object on the self in a discussion of the bell jar and images I use in my work.

Bollas (2009:80) discusses the nostalgic object as one of multiple forms of evocative object, and the way in which people experience nostalgia when they think of certain objects. He says:
[t]hese objects are often so important precisely because they are no longer present…. Nostalgia is the emotion of love lost, grief sustained and gratitude for the evocative power of memory that allows us to hold on to the lost object (Bollas 2009:80).

He uses the example of a department store and compares the way in which one moves through different product categories to entering different evocative categories, thereby evoking an array of psychic reactions. Bollas (2009:80) says that “we do not just see them. We experience them.” Therefore for Bollas (2009:80):

Each section of the store, each part of the section, each unit of visual space, contains evocative objects. As we see them their design elicits feelings within us, their function comes to mind, their names – generic and brand – come up in consciousness. As the unconscious registration of such objects, we can only assume that just as the store clusters like-objects in such units, our mind does the same thing, with the salient exception that we add personal meaning to each and every one of the things we see.

Bollas (2009:37) says that seeking one’s truth is to reveal unconscious conflicts in order to allow for personal freedom. I find in my choice of artists and theorists in this chapter a thread of hope. It is the same hope that drives me on a journey to a deeper understanding of life and healing, despite the pull of self-annihilation. Ettinger’s view on the healing power of art is one filled with hope in the human capacity for empathy and freedom from the damage of unfathomable cruelty. Merle’s view on the cathartic power of art is filled with hope in the human capacity for healing and freedom from the damage of abuse. Kahlo’s retaliation against devastation, is an act of hope in the human spirit’s ability to exceed the limits of the body and allow freedom from our physical limitations. Christelis’s view on the power of honesty is filled with hope in the human capacity for empathy and emotional support. Maela’s view on the transformative power of honesty and art is filled with hope in human strength of character and freedom from a life mired in fear. The sublimative power of my creative process brought me to a place within myself that I had hoped really existed. Through my creative process I am able to transcend painful experiences. My process allows me to identify shadows in my life, and is transformative, as it enables a life where I walk in light.
I was finally alone. The courtyard was my playpen to be, for a moment, free from a fight-or-flight response that had become constant. I remember sitting on the steps outside the kitchen door. I remember looking up at the sky, I remember the relief. It was for me an image of freedom. I was free.

I can’t remember exactly when it happened. It was a few days later, maybe even later that same day: the scooter accident. It was on the same steps, in the same place, when I was in agony from pain.

It was on the same steps, in the same place, when I felt ashamed: had I been good enough, I would be loved. I didn’t know who to call, I didn’t want to inconvenience anyone, and now I look at the image and I wonder why? It was on the same steps where I saw violence. I look at the image and I am scared. I look at the image and I am sad, I look at the image and I am angry, I look at the image and I feel hopeless and trapped, I look at the image and I feel anxious, I look at the image and I am grateful for that which I have survived. I look at the image and I am free.

So many thoughts and emotions and affects and feelings from a single image.

And still, it keeps changing

(Reflection by author, 2018).
CHAPTER 3

‘I will run alone, so that it may again grow bright around me. For that I still have to be a long time merrily on my legs. In the evening, however, we shall – dance!’

Thus spoke Zarathustra

(Nietzsche 1978:286).

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an in-depth and multi-layered articulation of how I experience being alive. This chapter consists of four parallel threads of my life that are interlaced and intertwined. My story includes the thread of creation, the thread of shadow, the thread of dreams, and a thread of light. I dip into these threads, documenting May 2016 until November 2018, and delve into the present and the past. My psyche dances around the threads in the colours of emotions, affects and feelings. It tumbles into darkness and becomes one with what is bright.

The thread of creation is my vehicle - my art - my following an enigmatic light. Dancing between shadows makes my world become distorted at times: shadows cast by objects of anger; objects that at times appear devoid of love and that control by fear. The thread of dreams includes the ones I’ve had while sleeping, and ones I have while awake. Dreams are signposts, they form maps that indicate where I should go. The thread of light is where I am from, light is where I see clearly, light is the voice I follow and it is light to which I, through reflection, return. It is through abjacting, the breaking away from toxic objects with which I became
homogenous, that I am able to reach a state of reflection. It is my emotions, affects and feelings that turn abject, that bring the shadows to light. My journey shows how my experience of abject emotions, affects and feelings can be understood as vital to my growth. It appears that the very mood episodes that threaten my existence ultimately save my life.

I identify threads I find vital in telling my story, and which cannot be separated from the core of my auto-ethnography. Reflecting on which threads would be most appropriate have made apparent my wanting to separate emotion from logic. Warning lights flicker and flag that certain things may be inappropriate, that I should keep certain things to myself. Self-censoring certain parts of my existence seems to come automatically, yet expressing emotion is instinctive. During my writing process, there is in me an inner battle between logic and emotion, leading to a sharing of what initially feels uncomfortable. It is a delicate balance, a gentle dance, between the two realms. I suspect that at the core of stigma, and central to shame, lies an embedded urgency that goes against our instinctive needs: to separate the semiotic and symbolic realms.

The world is full of people who feel that they do not belong. Endless energy is spent on trying to keep our emotional life under control. That vital, instinctive part of one’s being, I was taught, should be compartmentalised. There is a certain time and a place for the expression of emotion, but it seems as though for many people in the society in which I live, that time never comes, that time and place is never allowed. If I’m allowed to be myself, in honesty, if I’m allowed to ask for the things I need to be healthy, I feel a sense of belonging. It seems to be in a sense of belonging that I flourish. My study addresses the deeply ingrained rules of how I am expected to behave, rules I am not forced to follow, yet by which I am subconsciously controlled.
DISTORTION TO REFLECTION

*I love my life, even when I want to die (Reflection by author, 23 June 2018)*

![Image](image-url)

*Figure 32: @everdreamy. #sunset. Instagram. 23 June 2018. Johannesburg (photograph by author).*

I might have stayed in the job I was in for many years had it not been for a threat of harm from an object imprisoned by intoxication. It shook me. I might have lingered with what cast a shadow over my being for many years, had it not been for violent outbursts of anger. I was traumatised. I might have continued to believe that I’m not good enough as a human had it not been for the life changes that a severe depressive episode demanded. Had emotions, affects and feelings not turned abject and driven me to a point of choosing between death and life – life being the reclaiming of my space as an artist - I might as well have not been alive. I think of life and death differently from the way I did before my recent abjection. I have been born and died and reborn and died many times and suspect that the process will continue. The timid shape I had been, breathing shallow breaths in shadows of shame, was not me living my life. Whether it was a state of hibernation, or some form of subconscious preparation, or simply a result of bad choices, I do not know. The state of self-loathing in which I had survived for many years fuelled the ongoing trauma I endured. When I picked up a paintbrush, to paint from my core, I slowly remembered who I was. My inner voice guided me from signpost to signpost, tapping from a blueprint, towards a place where I could see with clarity.

My study records my multi-layered journey from distortion to reflection. This chapter captures my lived experience from May 2016 until November 2018. This documentation presents an
attempt to describe my experience of life, which had previously mostly happened in my mind, and remained unexplained when words failed me in my struggles to articulate my turbulent existence. The drive behind my documentation is a questioning of my diagnosis of mental illness. The search to find patterns is fuelled by a hope that it may lead to keys. Keys for me, and keys for anyone who, at times, feels overwhelmed by an ache to not exist. Keys for me, and for anyone who, at times, feels the ambiguous desire for a simultaneous life and death. Keys for me, and for anyone who, at times, feels their intensity to be out of place. Keys for me, and for anyone who, at times, feels a joy that seems impossible to describe. Keys, or a switch, for me and for anyone who, at times, cannot stop analysing everything. Keys for anyone who is open to a greater understanding of what it feels like to be alive. Keys for me and for those around me.

Michael Eigen (2006:2), in Feelings Matter, writes that no-one is outside their emotional world, and the possibility is an illusion. In my experience of life with amplified emotions, affects and feelings, it is perhaps easier to identify how the semiotic and symbolic appear to be intertwined. For Eigen, we are always held by emotion even when immersed in ‘coldness’ or ‘deadness’, as these too are powerful affective states. Eigen (2006:2) says that “[t]o think about emotion is not an unemotional business”. Moreover (2006:2), thought about emotion is infused by a “feeling perspective and passionate interest”. Eigen (2006:2) holds that engaging with emotion from within is not something with which we can grow accustomed. For Eigen (2006:2):

To work within emotional fields is always more than one can do. More truth: one is never up to the task. Psychically, we are babies trying to coordinate arms and legs before smooth coordination is possible. We flail along in semi-blundering fashion.

I feel my way through the solitary abyss of being human, and share those fragments of self that I am ashamed to describe. Probyn (2005:xiv) says “[w]hen we deny shame or ignore it, we lose a crucial opportunity to reflect on what makes us different and the same”. Through this transparency, I hope to contribute to a deepened understanding of others, and the acceptance of what is other, thereby allowing the other a sense of belonging. I also hope to allow space for others to relate, to feel less alone when in anguish, and to feel less strange about insecurities and how we are affected by life. Life seems, in its curated form, devoid of that which causes shame. Early in 2017, I attended a workshop and I recall feeling nervous about being around strangers. The possibility of being put on the spot causes me panic. My friend, Michaela Carr,
whom I did not know at the time, opened the workshop by sharing with the group how nervous she felt about having to present. She admitted to the rescue remedy she took to calm her nerves, and by doing so, made everyone in the room feel at ease. By sharing her insecurity, she allowed others to feel less awkward about theirs. People often seem untouchable, and we are unaware of the internal battles of those around us. By sharing our emotions, affects and feelings, we become more ‘human’ in fragility, and we allow others to feel less alone in theirs.

For Eigen (2006:2) emotion, feeling and affect are parallels to anguish. This emotional pain can be alleviated through medication that is based on knowledge of brain chemistry (Eigen 2006:3). Eigen (2006:3) questions the suffering, rooted in such a need for medication and asks:

> Who are we, where are we, and what are we doing, that such relief from our condition seems so necessary? It is unlikely medication will solve the human condition, although it helps many in distress. In the end, we have to work with each other, with ourselves. To grow psychic taste buds and digestive capacity in the face of suffering is our true evolutionary challenge.

As Eigen (2006:3) suggests, I choose to work with myself through my art and writing, and through sharing my honesty, I work with others. When I see what he calls my “emotional fields,” (Eigen 2006:2), as being unacceptable, it adds to my emotional stress and in particular, produces the experience of shame. It adds to emotional exhaustion when I try to put up a front during times when I cannot retreat. In my experience, hiding certain emotional states makes it worse, and it may even increase the medication I need. It certainly exacerbates anxiety. Conversations about the way I experience life on the other hand, make me feel less alone.

My paintings form a tangible, visual layer in my attempts to describe my experience of emotion, affect and feeling. At times I work with memories of my experienced phenomena, transforming them into images that smell of linseed as I layer in oil paint. I transform what I feel into movement, when immersed by memories while I paint. My body becomes a medium, and the energy I emanate fills the studio space. While painting, I embody that which at times threatens my existence, as well as that which exalts me to ecstatic states which I only seem to adequately articulate through art. It is a world of emotion, affect, feeling, and a world described by an alphabet that is different from the one I use to write. It seems as though this other-worldly language is infinite in characters and is made up of particles of energy which form rhythms, of movements that form patterns of sacred geometry, and endless colours for which names do not exist. Mixing paint is performing magic: a palette is a platform of possibility. At times, what
seems to me to be a sacred space of painting, is where I run to when nothing else makes sense. Painting is also the place I return to, where I am safe, where I simply, in complexity, am.

When I paint, my body is a medium that channels the unknown into the known, it communicates that which I cannot express in words, perhaps not only for the release it brings, but so that they-who-might-feel-what-I-felt may feel less alone. Perhaps, so that they-who-might-see-what-I-say will know that we are not alone in our strange experience of being human – we are moved by life, which, I suspect, moves mostly in silence. My body is a medium through which mental pain courses, the purpose of which I can, at times, not comprehend, but makes sense in the tangible beauty of the paintings in front of me. In the calm I comprehend the purpose of pain from a body exhausted by movement and tears. The studio is my chora, my space of expressing expansive despair and awe, a universe of creating, my link to myself, to the generative place where I am nothing, where I have no human qualities that may be admired or despised when I paint: I am simply being. There are no shadows present where I paint.

In the studio I am unaffected by social constructs that amplify my difference. In embracing my fluctuations, I find equilibrium. I often feel distressed by my surroundings and there are things that cause me discomfort. My senses are heightened, and at times acutely so: this-causes certain lighting, sounds, colour or crowded places to become overwhelming. People, seen through the intensity of my perception, often scare me, and at times, I feel as though I absorb the energy of those by whom I am surrounded. When I create, I am complete and I am at ‘home’. Creating restores me from the feeling of being overwhelmed when in contact with people for long periods of time. The studio is where I breathe fearlessly and with ease.

When I paint, I allow my emotions, affects and feelings to be a part of me. In solitude they are not right or wrong, but are rather reactions to my experiences. They often amplify things that are not healthy for me and allow me to learn better ways of surviving areas of my world that cannot always be avoided. Once what I feel is translated into elements of art, a short distance away from me, larger than me – taller and wider – there is a shift in my perspective. That which felt unbearable in the past, becomes clear points in growth cycles, signposts, or landmarks with transformative powers. When I leave the studio I am not who I was before, yet it feels like a return to a familiar and sacred innocence. I become lighter, as though I shed what does not serve me any longer. It is not the process of sublimation in and through painting alone that allows me to be light, but also the solitude of the process in which I find peace.
Eigen (2006:7) describes the death of self while we are living: we haul with us “annihilated corners of our beings” and for some, these corners are their very core. Annihilation, for Eigen (2006:7), ranges from tiny bits we aim to avoid to what he calls a “soul murder” that cannot be denied, and he describes health as “a broad term with many dark threads”. For him certain types of health rely on the destructed parts of others. What for Eigen (2006:7) is vital “soul murder” mirrors my experience of abjection. Kristeva too (1980:2) points to ambiguity of this annihilation:

A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.

For me, it is as though we look at one another through delicate glass bell jars. The glass can distort what is held inside. The glass can reflect oneself, show one’s insides cast onto another’s being, similar to colour on a canvas, similar in ways to recreating the inner-world in paint. If not a reflection, through undistorted glass, I seem to see a clear you and you see a clear me, we may still never know how our inner-worlds affect what we perceive. In feeling we collide, for moments, sharing what it feels like to be alive in all its brutality and beauty. To find the words to express what we feel, there has to be a level of trust. When I trust objects of anger, my trust is turned into fear. I am now learning to trust myself.
REMEMBERING WHERE I LEFT OFF

I have flown to star-stained heights
On bend and battered wings
In search of mythical kings
Mythical kings

Sure that everything of worth
Is in the sky and not the earth
And I never learned to make my way
Down, down, down where the iguanas play

(Dory Previn, 1971).

In May 2016 I didn’t know whether I could still paint. And when I finally picked up a paintbrush and dipped it into Prussian blue, my doubts dictated my actions. It was as though I had to delve through a murky layer of disbelief that kept me from the source from which I hoped I could still tap. At the start of a journey to paint myself from a place of distortion to a place of reflection, doubt distorted my way towards clarity, momentarily steered my vehicle meant to lead me away from fear. My doubt brought forth flat, clumsily drawn bell jars, yet I found in my doubt that my teachers were still with me. I remembered what they had said and their words continued to become clearer. They often spoke in practical terms: “it is a continuous process of comparison and adjustment”.

I remembered when I discovered how to scumble and to glaze. I remembered how a part of a painting that blocks the flow has to be eliminated, however precious the part has become. But mostly, it was the words of encouragement that broke through the opaque haze. “Do you think that I am good enough to specialise in Fine Art?” I asked in 1998. “I think you’ll make a great artist” was the reply. I didn’t need to be broken down to exalt myself to greater heights, I flourished through encouragement, as I still do today. Breaking down is something I have done to myself for as long as I can remember. External validation from the other who turns abject, however, has been a self-destructive need I recently have had to identify.
I remember a specific day in my third year of study when I received rare praise from an individual I put on a pedestal. *The Life of Trees* (2000) (Figure 34) was a diptych I consider a pre-sketch of my current work. It is an artwork of which I felt proud at the time. My painting was awarded the word ‘sophisticated’. It was when I tapped from the enigmatic source of which I became aware, that something powerful translated in my art. It was recognised, but like composition, it is something that may not be possible to teach. I was guided by studying Fine Art, towards finding my own doorways to this mysterious source. *The Life of Trees* (2000) (Figure 34) contained the dragon-like figures that have followed me in expressionistic expression ever since. These strange creatures seem to emerge when my thoughts shut down and I am led by what I feel. What they are, I may never know, but their existence to me is known: they play when I dance, and they dance when I play in paint. Perhaps this is the place where tales of dragons and sea monsters are made, the place where I find myself: I am what I paint.

![Figure 34: Jana van Schalkwyk, The Life of Trees, 2000. Oil on canvas, 800 mm x 1000 mm. Pretoria, South Africa (photograph by Marieke Theron 2018).](image)

I did not leave art school believing good things about myself. I was shattered by my mark and my theory was stronger than my art. If I was my art, I was simply not good enough: I carried the multi-layered self-deprecating theme with my abundance of joy and gratitude. I left feeling defeated, frustrated with myself, and with my inability to explain what thousands of ivy leaves meant. If only I had explained that I was immersed by amplified emotion, affect and feeling that I could not articulate in words. If only I had pointed out that I was organising chaos through
composition, by means of colour on gigantic canvasses filled with the obsessive repetition of a single stylised ivy leaf. But then I could not.

What I didn’t understand then, but so clearly know now, was that the unexplained ivy leaves were not the end of a journey; rather, those canvasses were a physical manifestation of the emotional chaos by which I was being engulfed. I didn’t know then, that I was taking the first steps in articulating what I had felt at that time. I conquered my Fine Art studies in the abyss of chaos on a high dosage of Lithium. This is a drug that can enable an optimal degree of mood stability: however, the level of Lithium that cause stability, is close to what causes Lithium toxicity\textsuperscript{22}, hence the need for regulation via two-weekly blood tests. I remember how lost I felt went I strolled through the streets of Arcadia for my unstable blood to be drawn.

The cycles that lead from distortion to reflection were not yet clear to me; it was as though I was immersed by the semiotic chora where I had not yet learnt to speak. I could not recognise the pattern. It felt like I had failed to live up to expectations. I knew what I had the potential to create, yet I was mute. I saw glimpses of my blueprint, of what I knew I could do, but I simply wasn’t there yet. I became acutely aware that no one knows what I think or feel if I don’t tell them, even when surrounded by artists. I am not unusual; we each have a language of our own that may take a lifetime, if ever, to translate. My awareness of a language of my own, drives me on my journey of translation, as there is so much that I feel compelled to share.

After I graduated I fled to the mountains. I couldn’t bring myself to paint windmills and the Cosmos flowers of the landscape, and instead I got a waitressing job and a teaching certificate. It was a painful crash from the art school cloud onto the dirt roads of commercial art. Lectures on art and what I should paint from locally famous self-taught flower painters who found philosophy and contemporary art to go against their values pained me. It pained me to be misunderstood, it pained me to not be seen, and I became the best teacher that I could possibly be. If I couldn’t make art, I would make neglected children feel loved, and I did so for many years. I taught in the mountains until my heart could no longer break.

\textbf{AN AMPLIFIED LIFE}

\textsuperscript{22} A lithium overdose.
It didn’t take very long for my experience of existence to be neatly packaged with medication, labelled and prescribed. It took exactly 45 minutes (Journal entry, circa diagnosis of bipolar disorder, 2000).

Mixed episodes, when mania and depression are intertwined, are hard to describe, and are in essence what I consider to be spiritual. In the context of psychiatry these spiritual experiences may be regarded as delusions, and my ability to feel deeply, visually see and control energy, as an imaginary gift numbed for many years by a cocktail of mood stabilisers, anti-depressants, anti-psychotics, sleeping tablets and tranquilisers. Art seems opposed to the numbing, and seems, at times, to sober me up completely.

My reality is strange in that it seems to change. A heightened awareness and sensitivity to the world around me seems to be charged by creative energy and to parallel the times when I create. Creativity, it seems, overrides the mood stabilisers I take. At times it is as though I enter a deeper dimension of where I had been moments before. Colours and sounds intensify and my landscape becomes amplified. At times strangers become like caricatures, other-worldly, and
it feels as though I am in a surreal film. My world becomes a weird work of art in which I walk. At times I am entranced by faces, the elegance of wrinkles in the way it accentuates eyes, like pencil markings, like fine brushstrokes. The mystery of skin: the multiple shades born from primary colours and shadow and light; the multiple colours in one skin shade; the texture of hands, the maze of complex patterns or the alluring smoothness of some.

In an intensified state I become aware of energy around me. I may suddenly feel anxious while driving. Moments later while the intensity of alarm grows, I see an aggressive driver speed past and my anxiety subsides as I see the car disappear. I know when people lie: I can feel it, but I have no proof. This allows me to create a space for honesty, or to understand who not to trust – if I trust what I feel. I can feel eyes with ill intent and I can feel when I am loved. Sometimes I lose track of time, while at others, I am confused by how little time has passed. Has it only been a few months? It feels like I have lived a few years. I have sought comfort and safety in the routines I have chosen, of which medication forms a part. I try my best to suppress my intensity, to make it possible to function in the world. Yet, I heal when away from time and time-tables, when I can simply be in my natural state, in solitude. Perhaps in time I will learn to live comfortably in the outside world while being as attuned as I am.
ART OUTSIDE THE STUDIO

In May 2016, it had been a while since I painted with real purpose. However, I was always connected to a creative source. My creative expression in the years after art school and those years which led up to this journey, burst through in various ways. At home I arranged objects to create stark contrasts and balanced compositions. My inner voice was always present when creating these interior and exterior works of art. I would paint walls and decorate door frames with flowers, and find material to create what I could feel but not yet see. At times I felt a vitality when bringing to life these creative urges, as though my actions made some kind of difference, and formed a piece of a puzzle or link in a universal chain I had to shape. If these expressions had to be delayed, I would be haunted by a discomfort, a feeling that something wasn’t right.

During these years, writing and playing music brought me great joy. I am as content singing as when I’m painting. I wrote songs, sometimes with a soul-sister, that were so strange in their complexity that they could be appreciated by only a few. I was scared of the city, which was described to me as one of traffic and crime, but I suspected that it was a place where I could grow. It felt as though life was happening elsewhere, and I wanted to be there.

In 2014 I started my journey in a city that I find in its unpredictability of how safe I am, also sublime.
Winnicott (in Eigen 2009:11) speaks of a vital spark that everyone possesses. For Eigen (2009:11) in *Flames from the Unconscious: Trauma, Madness, and Faith*, these sparks of vitality shift shape and undergo an array of fluctuations between trauma and being revitalised. Eigen (2009:11) notes that life events engage our vitality in ways that “aid and hinder it and, at times, the light can grow dim indeed, for periods gone”. An accumulation of traumatic events and toxic situations caused me to reach a point where I was living in complete shadow, totally devoid of light. For Eigen (2009:11), where the light of aliveness had died “therapy is like lighting matches near the mouth of a corpse, looking for signs of life, fanning sparks where embers seemed out”. The image of a corpse resonates with Kristeva (1980:3), who writes on abjection that “corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live”. For Kristeva (1980:3) “[I] am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death”.

For me the kind of therapy that for Eigen (2009:11) lights a spark in the dark of death, is my art. I have years of various approaches to psychotherapy behind me with which to compare the therapeutic effect of my creative process. While psychotherapy has been a powerful soundboard, and input from the analyser valuable, the most valuable realisations and ultimate sense of release, came as a result of painting in solitude. Perhaps art silently acknowledges the vitality of the death of the self: in fact it may, at times, demand it, and perhaps the comfort lies in the way it makes this dying of self feel right. Psychiatry, in battle with that which threatens
my existence, attempts to dampen the urge for death. Within my cycles resulting in death of an old self, I always reach a point of considering how to end my existence. It remains a looming threat, abject, my story has not yet ended in death that remains dead. My body may have died in a world of multiplicity, however complex life and death and dimensions and planes, the finer details of which momentarily are unfathomable and not of concern to me.

Eigen (2009:11) highlights “the aliveness Winnicott finds in aloneness, and the contribution aloneness makes to aliveness”. When my emotions, affects and feelings become abject, I am alienated not only from the world around me, but from myself. I abject myself: a solitary rejection of self, a nothingness, and a process of dying that is instinctual, beyond where the therapist’s logic can reach. It is a death of self that I cannot avoid, as sparks of a new life await to ignite from the fertile ground my death will allow. Kristeva (1980:3) writes:

There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver.

I retreat into an introspective space, and the journey of restoration through my art, my path back to a world where I can function, is solitary. It is as though emotions, affects and feelings turn abject to demand a place of solitude, the only state in which I can be deeply introspective, and the only place, it seems, for me to heal, to grow, to become. From nothing I grow.

In May 2016, I fell apart and crumbled into an emotional mess. A malignant depression brought me to a standstill. At that stage I was in a place where I allowed myself to be undermined in most areas of my life, and had been, for quite some time. Work was unhealthy, home was unhealthy, and play was precious moments singing with bands that probably saved my life up until the point where I was saved by my art.

The disruption highlighted that which did not serve me: that which slowly destroyed me; that to which I had grown accustomed; that which I accepted as my reality; that which honed my low self-esteem; that which fed the darkness from where seemingly annoyed voices whispered that I was not good enough; that which nourished the self-annihilating thoughts that voiced that I had failed. It highlighted my self-doubt. It highlighted my need for external validation. It highlighted the way in which I had accepted toxic objects rather than abjected them, and thus they became an integral part of my life, infecting my being, threatening my survival. It was a
state of death without an afterlife, until the self-annihilation that abjection demands led to my renewal.

I gave dark objects my trust when I could not yet recognise anger. I had become attached to an object of rage that cast tall shadows in which I hid, trapped by a false sense of security. Caught by being an object of adoration, and kept by occasional signs of acceptance, an object of anger slowly positioned me in a place of constant fight-or-flight. I became increasingly aware of its shadow, and the desperate need for approval that I couldn’t give myself became apparent. The barely visible signs that I had accepted as being worthy of love and good enough and deserving of life, weakened. I would be showered with flattery, just enough to keep me floating, just enough to keep me absorbed, while venom slowly ciphered through me: “your being is repulsive” the venom in me declared “our being shouldn’t be.”

MAY 2016

My thoughts were scattered everywhere, and before I could make sense of how I would end my existence, a familiar feeling became apparent. The feeling had a voice. I had heard it, occasionally, before. The sadder I became, the more nagging the voice. It nagged and nagged behind thoughts of my suicide and grew louder and demanded attention. The only way to make the nagging stop was to listen. It started to direct where I walked as though my landscape was a canvas and I, colour. In its dormant state its lingering cry was a mere murmuring to check the alarm clock again, and again, and again. In its hibernation its message was faint in sleepiness, and it whispered, as if in vapour clouds still able to reach me, of locks and keys and check and double check and check.

I listened, and walked. I walked around the dust-covered topography of my life in strange symmetrical patterns. In the sad landscape of my inner-life, the patterns I walked in on pavements seemed to connect me to patterns in my mind. “You need to paint” the voice guided. “I can’t remember how” I replied. “You need to paint” the voice continued. “I don’t know what to paint, even if I tried” I replied. “You need to paint” the voice continued, “you need to paint, you need to paint, you need to paint, you need to paint, you need to paint, you need to paint…”

I notice it first when it matters which way I walk around tables.
It starts out as a gentle, subtle hint.
Every time I obey, it grows stronger until unequivocal.
I awake to pandemonium I must regroup.
Again, and again.
I awake to pandemonium.
Again, and again.

I painted a glass bell jar. Inside I placed a memory, in the form of a painted Instagram image of autumn leaves. It was a memory of a time I felt as defeated as I did on that day. It was a memory of a time when I felt the same despair, the same desire to end my life, the same feeling that something wasn’t right. The memory of the moment in a park the previous year connected me to similar autumn leaf moments at the same time of year, years before that, and slowly a pattern became clear. I started to remember: when I don’t create, I am not alive.

After my birthday at the end of March, there seems to be a pattern of a sadness growing as the autumn leaves fall. It is a melancholy pattern braided with a sense of awe: the colours of autumn are pure fire, yet slowly dying out. I walk in parks, or in mountains, or the beach, and sing year after year: “since you went away the days grow long and soon I’ll hear old winter's song. But I miss you most of all my darling, when autumn leaves start to fall”. I seem to wither slowly as seasons grow colder, and at the start of winter my soul feels dead. At the end of winter, the end of August, at the start of spring, I have fallen in love, ended relationships, I had accidents, I quit jobs, I applied for new ones, I had daunting interviews and invigorating love affairs, I was anorexic and overweight, and I moved house and countries and felt an uncertainty that tested my patience. Spring is a season of longing and grief, hoping and healing and new beginnings and marks of an end. Am I a cliché?

A process of painting my pieces back together had started from the place where I had lost hope. It was in the moment when I decided not to die, but to fight through the demons that had been haunting me, that the possibility of healing and change came to life. It was as though I was remembering how to paint, as though remembering how to paint was the only way for me to survive.
I recall a similar experience in May 2009. I met an eccentric artist and in the creative space our exuberant and bizarre friendship allowed, I painted my then scattered pieces back together, after an escape from a shadow similar to the one from which I had recently run. While the glue was still drying, a dark figure walked into my life, an object of anger whose mystery I found magnetic. I was intrigued by what made me simultaneously feel a sense of safety and a strange dread. Danger signs that I chose to ignore at the time were always present. I translated anger as protection: it would be aimed at anything that may be harmful to me. When what I saw as protection became unreasonable jealousy and control, I found solace in believing it to be out of love, however strange.

4 May 2016 - I became overwhelmed by simple tasks. Indecision is always a sign of the darkness waking from its dormant state. I found myself, as I have many times before, sitting on a pile of clothes in front of an open cupboard, crying. I simply could not dress myself, nothing felt comfortable, nothing seemed appropriate, the choice was impossible to make. I couldn’t imagine working, going outside, getting there, sitting in a morning meeting surrounded by people, and the cold. The cold had reached my bones and I was in a constant state of discomfort. Around me objects of anger would repeat from multiple angles: “it isn’t cold, it isn’t cold, and it isn’t cold!”

8 May 2016 - A load of wood arrived. I stacked it neatly as though a puzzle, and when the puzzle was complete I felt a brief relief, as though organising chaos was an antidote to emotional dysfunction. Depression had reached the point of constant physical pain, literally in the area of my heart. I started building fires in my impossibly cold home at night. I would watch the flames, sitting as close to the fire as I could, anticipating when next to add a log.

Late at night when sleep arrived with tablets and wine, I would watch it die, not able to shake the fear of a tiny spark causing the house to burn down. Abjection sits in cold ash, between fire and what is burnt to the ground.

I felt like I was similar to those moments, when the last of the orange glow would disappear and my body grew increasingly cold. Where moments ago there was fire, now were ashes that
I would clean out with a cold, blue, plastic brush in the morning, repulsed by the bristles touching an iron surface. Nothing of substance would be left, bits of coal would crumble to ashes and form a barely visible trail towards a black refuse bin outside.

15 May 2016 - I briefly forgot about the power of fire in the seemingly swift frivolity of summer, the glorious golden glow of what always seems like eternal sunshine, the season of a bearably quiet mind distracted by scent and sound and soil. I momentarily forgot the way it can warm while dissolving icy thoughts into puddles of nothingness. Nothingness evaporates and each breath in a cozy room starts a new cycle of icy thoughts which dissolve and evaporate. Dissolve and evaporate. Dissolve and evaporate.

I recall an evening in the mountains in May 2012: I was in deep despair and the darkness cast by an object of anger drove me into the night. I had run away many times before. I ran from the village, crossed a national road and ran up the mountain, home. As a student I ran from Sunnyside to Hatfield clasping a blunt knife that I grabbed on the way out as protection. I would run until the maddening energy subsided and became transformed into physical pain. It was different in a car. In a car I could kill myself. I drove from darkness into darkness many times. It wasn’t simply pain I was running from in later years; it was as though that which was lurking in the shadow was out to destroy me, a deliberate exploitation of my vulnerability, and it would become unbearable.

Maybe my car reassured me of my freedom, my freedom to get away from the demons, my freedom to escape from pain that had become unbearable. Through my vehicle I could seek help. Help was an option to throw my car off the road, and sometimes it was other humans. On a night when the darkness filled my home, I drove myself, in a panic attack, to the ER in a town nearby. I had nowhere to go. I was given a large dose of Ativan and was sent on my way, in my car. I was clearly in a state. I was clearly unwell. I was clearly alone. All the more reason to believe that there was no help to give one who should not be alive. I took to the road, the
one on which many people had died, the one that leads away from the village, to run, to escape, to clear my distorted mind. On this night in 2012, something pulled me towards the water and I pulled off. I sat next to a river outfall, and I wrote and I cried and I sang the words and recorded it into my phone:

Verse 1
I remember the seed and blossom and fruit days
When honey dripped from everything I touched, it seemed
Honeysuckle scent surrounded everything I saw
Filled the air, even way up there

Verse 2
I remember the aerobatic displays
When everything I did was purely fun, it seemed
Playful interlocking talons, tricks and creates
Graced the air, way up, way up there

Chorus
The outside world, is a cruel, cruel destroyer
The heart’s desire, a filthy liar.
Just as you think you’re delicately indulging in delights,
open your eyes: it’s on carrion that you feed.

It was me, the darkness that consumed me, that which lurked in shadows, always, long before I became entranced by objects of anger. I thought it would protect me, an object so angry it vibrated at a similar frequency as the dark dog of destruction. I was desperate. Maybe I was naïve.
On the morning of the day on the date that an appointment made in a desperate need for relief arrived, I find myself on the back of a motorbike with wet hair, weaving through traffic. I'm terrified of dying while riding to the train station to see the most paramount soul I know on giving guidance on this predicament, on my discomfort with myself, on my deep desire to escape a sadness I can no longer endure.

Among shades of dying leaves, autumn bequeaths an allure to the streets that resonates with me. There are these trees that remind me of spring. Their exotic, pink flowers seem otherworldly. They are from a world where I once danced with bare arms in the sun, possibly even seeking occasional shelter in its shade. I recognise through a painter's eyes the impeccable beauty of autumn hues, yet it remains to me a message of mangling termination. Late at night when thoughts turn as dark and discomforting as wake-up time in winter, I envision the alleviation euthanasia would bring.

On the morning of the day on the date that an appointment made in a desperate need for relief arrived, I walk swiftly and hop on a train from platform A. I land in a seat straight across from a stranger. If we both sat comfortably our knees would meet. I feel too strange to make eye contact. I twist my legs into a yogic knot. I wonder whether I'm displaying negative body language. I wonder whether my sadness can be seen by everyone. I wonder whether the energy of my sadness affects him. I wonder whether I have become a distasteful sight.

Looking through the window while the landscape swiftly changes, I remember how I could look strangers in the eye, and smile. I remember how I travelled as an equal. I turn music up in my ears. I briefly close my eyes to escape the awkwardness. I open them to find my reflection in the window of a train that is underground. I'm too scared to close my eyes. When I close my eyes, I drift away. I can’t drift away in a world where I constantly have to be aware and awake.
19 May 2016 - I remembered a vivid dream I had many years before. It was as though I had a glimpse of a possibility. In the dream my landscape was a Prussian blue night and I was free and light and around me endless large paintings, and in these paintings floated delicate glass objects; they reminded me of stars, exquisite, delicate, moving in patterns across the canvas, creating perfect composition, painted star-like objects, yet free, as I was in that moment, when it was something from inside me. I was one with what I had to create, one with what I had created elsewhere, not here, not yet. It haunted me for years.

20 May 2016 - I was booked off work by the most paramount soul I knew on giving guidance on this predicament, on my discomfort with myself, on my deep desire to escape a sadness I could no longer endure, and I had started to paint.

_I paint with a flow, a blueprint of myself sheds light on where I should go, and I follow. If the voice to create is stronger than the voice of shame where I don’t mean a thing, I survive. It has always proven stronger over time. When the will in me to live has died, when I am in the stark emptiness devoid of love, I start to hear its whisper. In the absolute silence of my exhausted spirit, in my state of surrendering my life._

23 May 2016 - I knew that I had to apply for a Masters and sent an enquiry. I didn’t give it much thought; in my deep depressive state I could hardly think straight. I didn’t have the means to pay for it, and I had been hiding in the mountains for most of my time since graduating. It was simply something I had to do, something that felt like a part of my story, something that was a dream. Had my life not been disrupted, it may have remained an I-want-to-someday, drifting further and further away in believing that I wasn’t good enough.

25 May 2016 - When in a state of deep depression, my entire world turns against me. Security guards, cashiers, fellow drivers, the people I know and work with, friends become people who pretend, and the people I love most, become actors and actresses, inconvenienced and annoyed by my existence. I doubt reality. It is a harsh and confusing loneliness. It is a nightmare with no one to trust and no one to turn. My life becomes meaningless, as the universe impatiently waits for me to end my life. There is a secret that is kept from me. I cannot be told because it’s against universal rules. The message is clear though: the world doesn’t want me in it anymore. I am not rejected because the world is cruel, I am rejected because I failed. I become embarrassed, I feel shame as I realise that I am blocking the way, blocking the flow of that which is right. Everything about me becomes wrong.
It is a physical pain in the area of my heart. I try to do the right things; most things. I try. There is palak paneer and I eat. I want to exercise but I’m too scared to leave the house. I’m too scared to drive. I’m too scared of people outside. I’m so tired. I try to paint, I try to write a features article on discipline in schools. I try to write a four page motivation on why I want to embark on a Master’s degree in Fine Art, but I’m so tired. When I’m alone I start to think, I justify why I do not deserve to exist. I am hopeless. I choose music to make it stop, but even Joseph Arthur is singing "get yourself away from here, it’s over now".

23 June 2016 - I was to sing at a music festival in a few weeks. I was underweight, but I remember how the scale did not make sense, I was still fat. My clothes did not fit, yet if anyone looked at me, I assumed it was because they thought I was overweight. I’m not superficial, and I was never the pretty girl – I was the clever one - and I find people of all shapes and sizes beautiful: the human form is beautiful. What happened in my psyche somehow translated to my physical form. For some reason I had to shrink. Objects of anger grew dissatisfied with my breasts melting away. Perhaps I became untouchable. I drifted further away from my life as my body grew thinner. In the light shed as my shadow became a sliver, the irritation, the constant, subtle criticism in my world became apparent. It became very strange.

A soul-sister in a shadow of her own was planning her journey across the ocean and would soon be at a music festival with me. I had something to look forward to, warmth, live music, margaritas for breakfast in the bushveld, singing, having a soul-sister with me, the list was long. Everything was going to be okay.

What I ate, how I moved, and the way I cut my hair. The shape I take in physical form felt at the time like the only thing I could control.
When an object of anger casts shadows of discontent, when shards of cruelty aim to penetrate thin skin, infiltrate my rejected self, I consider that something is wrong. I was at my most fragile, rejected by what once was my protection.

There was no love, and whatever the cruel arrangement had become, was attacking my being, in sync with abject emotions, affects and feelings. In sync with self-deprecating thoughts, in sync with, and continuously exacerbating my shame. I was deeply unhappy. And confused.

Around June three years earlier, I was in psychiatric care, realising things that would in time change my life. I’d walked into hospital without hope. I wanted the world to stand still for a moment for me. I wanted everyone to stop drinking and dancing. I wanted to belong to an ancient tribe and I wanted to sit in the centre of its healing circle and be healed.

4 July 2016 – I reclaimed my space in the world: my art room.
6 July 2016 - Morning light bursts through a mix of oil and turpentine. Dark hues that had touched the golden pool had sunk to the bottom of the gherkin jar. All that remains is a soft glow of linseed. Until night falls.

Away from work and the rest of the outside world, I clumsily sank into my natural healing routine. My world contained my dogs, my morning coffee in the sun, my newly claimed art room where I could paint and dance, my glass of wine at night, and when the object of anger fell into intoxicated slumber, I could stare into the fire for hours, and think.

10 July 2016 - I used the image of the autumn leaves as reference and started to paint obsessively. I painted and I cried and I painted and I cried and I slowly started to remember. It took much comparison and adjustment to slowly find the flow. Memories of dreams emerged as signposts. Every brushstroke was a reward, a step closer to what I knew I could become.

11 July 2016 - The world is a puzzle made out of perfect patterns where I acquire everything I desire at exactly the right time. Solidity balancing that which is textured, vertical equivocal concourse balancing off-beat horizons. Colours become brighter. Reflections and shadows call out to be captured. Cold become colder and the winter sun sublime while I organise surroundings that could open doors to the divine. I push the end of a thin brush through the sticky top layer on an old tube of paint. Eventually it oozes out onto the palette. First the scumbles and then the most enjoyable glaze.

When the clutter in the corner is finally packed away, when bottles filled with linseed oil and mineral turpentine are in a straight line, when my hair is loose and wild, when new music discovered is interpreted as a sign, only then, can the floodgates open wide, emitting a seemingly electric current of creativity. It is what my being had yearned for. My notes and sketches are celestial certification. I embark on a journey to express everything I have ever felt.
It demands a place of obsession. With each brushstroke, each line, each idea, I merge with a multitude of feelings that I have felt and have to once again feel for it to be released. As long as it is alive, even when dormant in dark corners in the depths of the mind, the power of its distortion cannot be escaped. I have to plunge into unknown depths in order to take control. The current takes me through my subconscious, opening the doors that consummate the heart’s desire. The desire of my heart.

Where seemingly moments ago gently drifting, floating, sky rocketing crazy love, now into the abyss of nothing where it’s cold and the light only shines when memory arises in a soft glow. I crash down confusedly spitting soil from my mouth, dirt from a place desolate and dreary.

In the centre of emotion, I find myself where I seemingly simultaneously feel everything I’ve ever felt. Out of the heart of the place where love was born I emerge and I am drawn by the music to dance at the end of the night where my soul spontaneously combusts. Drawn from out under layers of ice. Drawn from out the inside of fire, unscorched, for in colour on canvas, it remains.

My book of ideas smells of fixative fixated on what I envision at the end where I will be inside my dream. My being continues to combust and I recoup and will combust and recoup, tapping from a source sublime until I am empty. Empty, I will be free.

14 July 2016 - There was an anger brewing in me: what once held me as an object of adoration had become an enemy of my wellbeing. Not having been allowed to leave the cage into which I somehow flew, I became rebellious, less afraid of an undesirable response from an object of rage. I decided to do something for myself and went to see the Matisse exhibition on my own. The whole experience sparked something within me. It took courage to leave my home in a fragile state and it took courage to go alone. It was strangely empowering and the environment of the gallery felt familiar. I had space to breathe, and the luxury to absorb every piece without being rushed. I read

Figure 45: @everdreamy. #winter. Instagram. 14 July 2016. Johannesburg (photograph by author).
messages and saw signs. I could start to see my art on gallery walls somewhere someday. I remembered distant dreams. In a state of self-doubt that had become permanent, sparks of my potential seemed to become awake. I took what Matisse had to give and I felt full and grateful and inspired. I felt empowered.

15 July 2016 - The following day I again did something for myself. This time I was surrounded by hundreds of other people. I was deeply moved by an exhibition of Francisco Goya and Diane Victor prints titled There is Only Light and Shadow. I mark the cathartic experience of the exhibition as an important turning point, a return back to a world where my sensitivity wasn’t strange.

I allowed my instinctive self to be, alone I could be moved to weep in the moment, freely. It was a taste of who I was in solitude, it was a reminder of who I was without fear. It amplified the brewing anger at the object that casts shadows over the side of me that goes places that moves me to tears. I wished to be free.

24 July 2016 - The bell jar seemed to follow me everywhere, pointing out distortions and reflections in my surroundings and in my mind and heart. It was as though I had entered a new world, a different dimension from where I used to be, a strange in-between. Something in me had shifted, had awakened. Anger and despair were intertwined, killed my appetite, and diminished my tolerance for being tormented in shadows, in fear. Still, an angry outburst at home, or a threat at work would cause me to retreat in silence. The control rage
had over me was clear, and maybe the realisation was enough to start the breaking away. I didn’t shy away from the anger, it became clearer that I was not to blame. I finally gave the anger the response it deserved, if only in my mind.

29 July 2016 - I remember how cold I was. After work, I followed a faint spot of sunlight with music that restored me from an overwhelming day. I followed the sun to the very end of the yard, I lay on the paving next to a garage door. I considered how thin the door between me and the outside world, the outside filled with danger. I considered this, while living in a shadow, with an angry object that was mostly about to explode.

In August, four years ago, I hid on my own in a quaint mountain cottage. I had to run away from toxic darkness that lurked in shadow. I wanted to run away from it forever. Somehow, it lured me back. In my anguish, it was my responsibility to guide that which I considered broken into healing.

5 August 2016 - A soul-sister was finally by my side. We sat in similar shadows with similar wounds, we sat in similar shadows briefly touching light in our togetherness. The strange parallels we had had all our lives more apparent than ever. The similarity of our self-created cages. Our eagerness and need to please and keep peace, and our ungrounded responsibility for the happiness of the entire universe, even at the cost of our own. We
knew, we could see, we remembered, we united in spirit like we did when we were little. It marked the beginning of the end.

16 August 2016 - A soul-sister left while I lived in the shadow of anger in a constant state of fear. For a moment, the anger lay dormant, it became quiet and an object intoxicated most of the time. A strange sadness overcame the object of rage, which softened my heart, which momentarily made me forget.

21 August 2016 - I remembered a cruel spirit from long ago, as though it possessed with whomever I intertwined. It said that it was trying to intoxicate itself to death and that I had to accept that I was a witness. It said that life was meaningless. It spat that if I joined it, I too would have enjoyed it.

I lived with an object of anger, who was often an object of regret. Evenings grew increasingly disturbing and moments of calm in-between had disappeared. Cruelty became a constant state, devoid of apologies that in the past brought some relief from my confusion. It is disconcerting to live in the shadow of anger and intoxication; when day shed light, mornings were often filled with sadness. Intoxication became an excuse, it became an explanation for the cruel spirit that was out to torment me the previous night. Intoxication explained a life with Jekyll and Hyde. It’s impossible to know what the intoxicated remembers, and how situations are perceived. The cruelty becomes blameless. I needed the excuse, because without it, cruelty would have been directed, with intention, at me. How worthless would I then be?

The object of anger grew increasingly colder and more distant: it felt as though the moments where I saw a heart for me - a heart at all - had drifted into the distance. I wondered, as I do today, whether I had imagined a heart for me, whether it existed at all. It was hard to admit that the object of anger no longer apologised in the light, and was no longer mostly intoxicated when cruel. It was constant.
I have often recalled its words on a night a lifetime away from now. “You’re trash! You come from trash and you are trash and it’s all you’ll ever be!” I don’t think I believe in demons, but how do I explain that there was a darkness that followed me, as though it possessed with whomever I intertwined.

22 August 2016 - I’ve denied how many times we have crossed this point in the cycle over the past years.

The object of anger seemed to fall asleep for periods of time and I would lose any vein through which love might have reached. It had become more frequent and lasted for longer periods of times. The scales had shifted. The bad outweighed the good and continued to grow. During times of sleeping, a cruel spirit would take hostile control. It would be rude to innocent strangers, its hatred translated into terrifying rage. It antagonised and revelled in others’ misfortune. It would find irrational reasons to hate. It was revengeful. It was a spirit suspicious. It was arrogant and better than everyone, arrogance that reached beyond ego, which is often parallel to insecurity.

I considered how a loss of control could be the cause for an object to be possessive, yet the control had always, mostly in subtlety, been present. A lack of empathy was not a possibility I considered. In the wake of cruelty that was incomprehensible, in its sharp blind rage, nothing but conquering mattered in anger. A ticking bomb, a project of rejection, an innocent inner child. I wanted to see an object of trauma recover. An object humbled could redeem itself, an object of courage, an object of forgiveness, an object reset. I mistook anger for strength, and when I recognised raw rage, I still had hope.

I believed that trauma caused the slumber of the soul, and in sleeping, something so foreign, and something so bitter: a lack of empathy. I justified that I was easier to love when I was in love and in lightness loved. I recognised my depression as repulsive and the reason that I would become rejected. Through its distorted view, a cruel spirit would not tolerate an ultimatum. It became apparent that if light did not return and for a moment linger, I had to leave.
A soul sister had seen, long before me, that what I translated as strength was anger in disguise. Maybe I disguised the anger, draping in a passionate dance a delicate scarf around sharp edges I did not want to see, welcoming into my world a shape transformed into what I needed it to be. It was an irrational anger, yet convinced by what it perceived logical, from a landscape seemingly devoid of love. Every texture on its canvas was always there, but I seemed to have carefully selected on which corners a distorted lens would point my focus.

I considered it a good quality of mine, to find the diamonds in life, even on roads not meant for wandering, at times finding and polishing until glistening - a universal responsibility. The noble power of my positivity, to point out obstacles as stepping stones as I have been taught, to grow from that which hurt, to find that beauty is born from pain. It was naïveté, to assume that the cycle for others are as simple as mine: hurt, grow, hurt, grow. It was an arrogance, to believe that my love was more powerful than fear unknown to me. My hope was as blind as its rage.

It doesn’t matter anymore whether a layer of charm was a lie or what I singled out to see. It doesn’t matter anymore that I do not possess a power to transform all that is cold to warmth outside of myself. It doesn’t matter anymore that I was child-like, and may always be, that it was my nature to believe in love. Even when love wasn’t there, I blew life into the shadows and saw exactly what I thought I needed to see. I took tiny strips, glimpses of beauty, I braided them and created a room, for moments as blissful as it could be. I showed unconditional acceptance, I was not forced, I was not asked, and it was my choice.

I needed to be surrounded by beauty, the room was intimate, a yellow glow of candlelight. The songs of love and sandalwood, the space where for a moment, only strips that glistened raided in. There were enough of those, for moments, for an exquisite room.
I considered it a good quality of mine, to focus on the good, to avoid what is dark, to dance lightly, landing gracefully from smooth stone to stone, too swift in love to sense the swirling waters in-between. Slipping was simply not an option. Slimy, green water left a faint smell of something rotten, the always lingering abject. I was the lotus, it made sense in the story that this flower must be born from mud.

I’ve slipped on slimy surfaces before. I’ve landed in swamps on tangled, wet grass, clumsily trying to stand, anxiously seeking a hand, any hand, unable to see any stones on which to stand. I knew the grimy gutters well, from the times when I didn’t want to exist. The lingering smell of algae, the smell of rotting life, of compost, the abject, always looming at the border of what I wanted to be perfect.

Most recently, on slimy stone, I didn’t reach for a hand that would allow me grace. This time I allowed myself to be clumsy, I allowed myself to slip and stagger to my feet and slip and stagger to my feet and slip and crawl on bruised knees, learning to strengthen my core, learning, perhaps for the first time, in a new world, to stand on my feet. It’s quite something, this learning to dance alone, there is no one to catch me, but no one whose moves I need to follow. The two-step was magical for moments, similar to a movie I may have seen, someone else’s script I wanted to be my own. My own film however, is one where I dance what has not been seen before. It is the kind of interpretive ballet that one performs alone.

I had danced a two-step in my shadow while a soul-sister danced a tango in her own. We were always interpretive ballerinas, deep down. Wrapped in false security, had the sacrifice of not dancing alone. It is a nagging feeling, an urge, a distant calling, to freedom, to dance fearlessly, on your own.

The feeling I had that a soul-sister and I would one day end up living in the same space still haunted me, although it didn’t make sense then. The feeling that we would create art together, perform music together and flourish together, didn’t make sense then. I remember how trapped I felt. We accepted the control we accepted in shadow – in similarity perhaps it seemed more sane. The parallel of its irrationality and our inherent flexibility may have made it seem okay. I can find an excuse for almost any unacceptable behaviour. I saw a soul-sister struggling in a shadow. It was a reflection of my own.
11 September 2016 - There was an ideal visual art teaching position for which I applied.

Figure 52: @everdreamy #ascending. Instagram. 11 September 2016. Rosebank, Johannesburg (photograph by author).

12 September 2016 - It had been 7 years since I first succumbed to the mystery of an object of anger. In the lack of celebration, for the first time since me and it became one. I began to see how increasingly cruel it had become since I started seeing glimpses of light. It was as though I was climbing, finding my way out of some sort of tunnel, and it would find ways of pushing me right back, casting shadows over fingertips that had started to feel the sun.

16 September 2016 - I had said that I needed a glass bell jar on Facebook. That night, in exchange for the bell jar it seems, an object of desperation danced with an object of anger and cast a shadow of infidelity on my home.
17 September 2016

I crochet the doilies I believe to belong to charity shops.  
I am my dead grandmother whose simple, gold wedding band I wear. 
My genes hold memories of witches at Salem, Rotterdam destroyed 
and rag dolls gifted when I was too young to remember.

21 September 2016 - The art room became my haven, my safe space. I could paint and slowly sip wine and dance until I collapsed exhausted, exorcised of that which kept me a prisoner. Until the next day. As things grew clearer in my art room, my life outside seemed more absurd. As forgotten parts of myself started to emerge on canvas, my surroundings became more abject, my self-loathing, the venom to which I had grown accustomed, became clearly repulsive. Living in a state of fear, in fight-or-flight, abuse allowed and absorbed from multiple angles stood between the parts of me yet to emerge from that room of possibility. I could see visions of who I used to be when my dreams seemed near, and who I was to become. Yet with no idea where the key was, where I could find the way out of a prison seemingly impossible to escape. I was still searching for signs of self-worth, of being worthy of the freedom for which I yearned, and signs of being worthy of love. With every mark of creating, memories returned, more and more, while the beast at the gate of the cage grew angrier and angrier and yet angrier and when I threatened to leave, it grew sad. Its deep sadness was more powerful than its anger could ever be. While I believed that it was sad, I was trapped.

25 September 2016 - Insomniac thoughts float. I am an artist, I am a link between the universe in its entirety and the earth, between the earth and its humans. I am a link that taps from a source pure in its intensity. I am an artist, I feel everything. I am an artist, one who translates on canvas that which cannot be expressed in words. I am an artist, one who combines multi-layered honest expression to create a new perspective, a glimpse into that which cannot be
described. I am an artist, one who accepts being perceived as unstable, yet the balance I maintain is beyond the comprehension of this world. I am an artist, I swing between self-loathing and self-love. I am an artist, who recognises fear as a primal driving force and freedom as moments of celebration of what I have achieved, until I embark again, on a journey into the unknown, which becomes a knowing, a remembrance of home.

I remember starting a personal journal when I was 17. It was thick and black and I used it until I was 19. I think I burnt it when I was 21. I think I danced around a fire. I think I remember bits of what I wrote. I think I remember bits of what I experienced. Bits, before I became bipolar.

30 September 2016 - I am meant to have long, wild hair. With long hair I am at my happiest and I always feel a sense of loss when I have a haircut. Maybe similar to not eating, I wanted to be lighter, I wanted change. I had a haircut, long locks fell away and what remained a bob – a haircut for an interview. I bought expensive perfume and my first lipstick since my picture perfect party. I sensed a new beginning.

1 October 2016 - It was a sense of relief, the object of anger had left for a while and on the courtyard steps I felt the shadow disappear. I looked at the sky with such joy and relief. I smelt good and my hair was light and I was free. I could listen to Zbigniew Preisner. I would often have to carefully consider how to explain that at certain times of the day, especially around sunset and suppertime, I could not tolerate punk or new wave. I would explain, again and again, that certain rhythms caused me anxiety. I need harmony when day dissolves into night. I need to be restored. I was, for a few days, safe from anger, safe from criticism, safe from uncertainty, safe from acts of violence assaulting my senses through loud television speakers. It was safe to Skype a soul-sister, to have a fearless and honest conversation. I loved being alone.
3 October 2016 - My long awaited freedom was interrupted by a scooter accident on my way back from a Masters pre-proposal workshop. I handled it in an awkward way. The driver who suddenly stopped in front of me, causing me to suddenly brake and fall and hurt my knee badly, asked if I was all right and if there was someone at home who could help me. I said yes. The person who stopped in front of them, did the same, and again I said yes. A man who lived across the road from the place I fell, hurried over and helped me to the side of the road where I sat on the kerb. I couldn’t stand on my right leg. He lifted the scooter and placed it on its stand. Again, he asked whether there was someone who could help me. I assured him that there was, despite there being no one, despite my being alone. I thought of whom I could call, but decided that I didn’t want to inconvenience anyone. I didn’t have many friends in the city, but there were people who would have been there in no time. I had become a burden, I didn’t want to cause more of that. I don’t know how I managed, but somehow, in excruciating pain, I got onto the scooter and drove myself home. The only person who knew everything about me was a soul-sister, and she was very far away and the time difference was badly timed. The object of anger was enraged by what it considered avoidable stupidity and unnecessary cost. I was worth so little, that I only consulted an orthopaedic surgeon a year later at independent expense. My knee surgery a year later became one of many symbols of a new beginning, symbols of my ability to heal and repair, symbols of being safe.

8 October 2016 – My brother came to visit and over Margarita pizza and over-priced craft beer reminded me, that somewhere, away from my distorted word, I was loved.
11 October 2016 - And then my mind turns against me once again. What if the world wants me dead? What if they are conspiring? What if I never succeed? What if the failure is plotted against me so I may be forced to my death? At times I am just so tired of fighting. Why? What for? Why keep trying if this world is not where I am meant to be? Is my family, yet again, enough of a reason to stay alive? Will they even know if I had died in what I suspect to be a simulation? I haven't heard from the university. Is it because they think that what I presented is pathetic? What if my references deny my capability to teach? What if it's all a game? A movie, a sick play? I need a break. I'm so tired of this state of shards of shapes scattered all over the place. I'm so lonely. I have lived with this discomfort for too long. I have lived with this unexplained force for too long.

Please, in the light of my energy so low let it not depend on my power of positive thought for things to fall into place for me. Let it be that the heart's desire may light the way. May the higher self finally shine through and grant me my chance to live as brightly as I know I can, to vibrate comfortably, to create, to love. I can no longer dance with demons in dark tunnels. They have sapped me of my energy, my confidence, my joy. I want to be an artist: one who teaches, one who studies, one who paints, and one who is free. I pray to be accepted for a masters. I am ready. I pray to teach the gentle how to create. I am ready, I have paid my dues in darkness. Please, soon. I pray for everything I need for that to become my reality. I need the distorted to become clarity. Please.

12 October 2016 - Anxiety seemed to have infiltrated everything. Sending an e-mail I am nervous of, in desperate anticipation of a response, momentarily allows me a sense of accomplishment. And then I wait, in uncertainty once again. Self-doubt is the darkness blocking out the light:

did I sound too formal, too eager, are there grammar mistakes, was it an inconvenient time, did I send the mail too soon, do I sound desperate, am I annoying, do I sound as though I am nagging, do they feel too bad to tell me that I have been rejected and that I didn’t get accepted and that I didn’t get the job, was there too much fixative on my sketches and they had thought I was a fool from the start, did I answer the questions correctly, did I wear the right clothes, did I smell of cigarettes, did I say something wrong, did I offend anyone?

I look at my new medicine box. It had two boxes for each day of the week, am and pm. I wonder how intense these dark thoughts might have been without my tiny crutches. I momentarily suspect them of being placebos.
And then the response. A positive one. And I am yet again saved, wondering how the futile worry could have been prevented.

3 November 2016 - I poured my heart's desire into every affectionate thought of a universal love unexplainable. I expressed gratitude with every gift of sound by inhaling and experiencing every vibration. My doors were wide open.

In instability in search of something that makes sense, I seem to find infatuation. Infatuation seems to be a part of my transition, my reminder that beyond abjection lies freedom. It was similar to what I had briefly felt with the artist, a few years ago. When I stood alone on my stone, the two-step abandoned, I reached for a hand. This was prior to finding the courage to stand on my own. I think it was important to the hand to which I reached; some feel strong when they feel needed. Life seems to repeat the lessons from which I never learnt. It spoke to me of music and philosophy, it spoke to me in a way that made me yearn to be free. A tiny universe of words, something that ignited excitement, an object of admiration, and object of kindness. And as I did, I braided together slivers of what I needed to believe exists. I took gulps of unknown air outside of my self-created cage. I felt excited, I felt impulsive, and I felt brave. It was innocent in my flesh yet ravished in my head.

Umbilical cord cut as well as I could. It was very strange and will continue to be so in trying to explain. Understanding it is important, as the primal need for freedom is something I have experienced before. It wasn't an umbilical cord of the nurturing type, I didn't need it for my body to survive, but I did it for my spirit, for the reminder of a world of possibility. Often, when I turned to the object I draped with a cloth I decided stability, in muddled thought and desperation, it would leave me embarrassed, embarrassed not only by my need for a connection, but by my fragility, and recognising how I see, selectively, what I need. It was an umbilical cord, a connection to a dimension other than my strangely foreign own. It might have been a connection to a world I have temporarily forgotten, a world where I never fully learnt to walk, a world in which I was an infant, connected to a cord. I felt helpless, at times, as I disconnected from our plane of words, already disconnected from what once was the love of my life, all of which a part of what I had allowed to become my unstable stability.

And then reappears the existential crisis. Is infatuation a creative cord linked to the real world I am yet to discover? Am I holding on to a chaotic simulation I should let go of, or am I yet to organise the dumps of damage I depended on into a pleasing composition, a multi-layered expression of everything that exists? A pattern? A map? I see signs and I hear messages. Can
I trust what may be the opposite of paranoid delusion? I want it to be a message to me, I want to believe in otherworldly connections, I want to trust that the aural message is accurately deciphered by the way it makes me feel. I want the otherworldly connection to be equal to me. I want to trust, in the absence of the limited world of words, that what I feel is real and true, not just in my mind. I accept that the inexplicable should not be explained in words. I am the infant of the universe, learning to walk. I am nothing, I am everything.

It's a cord that may not be breakable. A cord I will accept is otherworldly of nature that I tried to understand in lower vibrational thought. A cord I will fuel only with love, in thought and energy that flows with such boundless joy towards that which the soul is attracted to in its highest vibrations. If it exists.

6 November 2016 - I've been depressed for more than a year, a low-level buzz like an insect light trap. I fall into that, both flying and terrestrial. It is ironic that I grow healthy rosemary and lavender from cuttings and rejoice at the sign of roots. The spiritual see it as a sign of strength. I'm simply too nervous to venture out to a plant nursery, alternatively the childless woman needs something to nurse. Clumsy memory-stuffed bell jar upon memory-stuffed bell jar trying to remember how to paint. Keep me, screams the rose that marks the last time I felt loved. Keep me, begs the gardenia gifted to save the child from sadness. Keep me. Keep me. Keep me. Keep me. I cannot. I continue to cover it with layers of paint.

Strange that I briefly found the nature of a cord that communicated the most discordant parts of me. I usually manage to keep them to myself. It was as though I was stripped of all beauty, all pride, all I am admired for, I was, in universal nudity, revealed as the broken girl I had become. The strange energy of infatuation, made what I saw in the mirror more bearable. I was beyond defeated as it was. I was stripped to a blank page. I had to walk in a world now stripped of ego and shiny panther fur. In what I felt like nudity, I now walk in a golden glow allowed by fragility, even if it occasionally falls back into a crawl. I choose to rise from the bundle of brokenness and stand tall with arms strong from walking on crutches.

30 November 2016 - After weeks of waiting and years of hoping the responses read yes, this received by unbelievable relief. I had received a letter of acceptance into the Master’s programme, and an offer for the teaching position of which I dreamt. I still didn’t believe that I was good enough. I still didn’t believe that I deserved it, but it had started to become more believable. Things changed when I walked into the building as a registered student, and things changed when I entered the gates at school. The sense of belonging I experienced at work and
university that was undeniable, shed light on just how absurd the abuse I endured had been. People entered my life that were in line with who I was meant to become. My life, as I knew it, was not mine any longer. It had become repulsive, abject.

4 January 2017

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 56:** @everdreamy. Day 3 & 4 #drawsomethingeveryday. Instagram. 4 January 2017. Johannesburg (photograph by author).

6 February 2017 - It was an important event in my new world of work when the little car that was my wings wouldn’t start. There was a fault with the alarm, the symbolism now absurd. It was the first time in a while when I sought help from the shadow, when I reached for a hand I no longer could hold. I felt abandoned and let down. It was embarrassing to be stranded, while still strangely intertwined, expected to figure out a solution that without anger would have been so easy, on my own. I felt resentful for a cage without nourishment, without warmth, without safety and how I had grown accustomed to staying without being lured. I arrived late at my event, embarrassed and apologetic as I had become. I was, and still sometimes am, so afraid of being in trouble. When I returned by taxi the car park was dark, it was night. The little car that wouldn’t start stood in the furthest lot. I felt fragile in the abandoned car park. I remember wondering whether I was exaggerating, was it really unsafe for me to try and figure out how to start the car with an alarm code on my own, or was I seeking too much attention? Was I being a little princess? I was promised that I would always be protected, perhaps the little car, my wings, wanted me to see that it was a false sense of security and a loyalty no longer mine.

7 February 2017 - I have been easily controlled by anger in my life. I avoid conflict as I dislike the disharmony it causes. I want to avoid how unsafe anger makes me feel. I learnt how to shun
the frustration of being misunderstood, exhausted by the way one tip-toes on shells. I became quiet. On a night when my simmering frustration exploded, confrontation did not end well. A cruel spirit drove me out of my home late that night with nowhere to go.

When I think of that night, I feel ashamed. I had run out of airtime, yet I had no one to call. No one, except for a soul-sister, knew how unacceptable things had become. I was chased from my own home, the indescribable panic of having nowhere to go. The surreality of it was so extreme, a fairy-tale reality still lingering somewhere in my mind while here and now quite contrary to that. I was stripped of my dignity, its actions made me worthless. My sketch book torn to pieces yet, had I simply not said anything, I and my book would have been whole and safe at home. From self-loathing, the desire to die and a disregard for the value of myself, I grew to standing on my own feet. The journey was extreme.

**10 February 2017** - The spirit that had followed me, that had possessed with whom I intertwined, spat in anger. I had purposely tried to provoke it, to get it to lash out, it hissed, and if I didn’t do as it commanded, if I didn’t return home, I would be guilty of undoing all the good. If I didn’t give in to its demands it threatened, that would mean that I was no longer chased away, but rather choosing to stay away.

*Figure 57: @everdreamy. A view from a friend’s apartment #distortion to #reflection. Instagram. 10 February 2017. Greenside, Johannesburg (photograph by author).*
12 February 2017 - Zooming out in solitude, I am in a place of peace protected by The Wilds. I am in a place of peace protected by something bigger than myself. Most things look bigger when you are small. While scratching the surface in search of a foundation that once carried a pattern of brief symmetrical beauty, the patterns fall into place. Cycles, patterns, characters, mistakes. Flawless patters of my flaws (Reflection by author).

My film was supposed to be an art film. I think in art film, and I see in art film. It is an art film, but perhaps because of how un-art film-like it has at times been. I seem to get my genres a little mixed up. As the leading role affecting the genre, I suppose it is to be expected that it would at times be bizarre if one is diagnosed as bipolar. I wonder when I (fiercely independent and unique as a being unaffected by society’s idea of beauty, success and love) for moments in a grocery store isle, while overwhelmed by my indecision as to what fabric softener to choose and I panic, and wish to be saved by a kind and brilliant professor of poetry who chooses for me - the right scent - and he asks me on a real, fairy-tale date and he loves dogs and nature and great red wine and jazz and he finds my flaws quirky and my personality delightful and my intellect intriguing and everything is perfect... I wonder to what extent I have been subconsciously affected by what was broadcasted by the SABC in the 80’s and early 90’s, by magazines and movies and books...

Lonely, desperate for affection and kindness, she falls in love at first sight of A Hero. She is aware of her own strength, while overcome by a desire to bask in the safety of A Hero for a little while longer - A Hero she wishes could hold her through the night when she's crying and overcome by a desire to not exist. The Hero can fulfil every need she ever had. She can never be disappointed or disillusioned by The Hero. The Hero is a warrior of integrity. The Hero would never allow her to be swallowed by the rabbit hole from which she is trying to escape. A safe nest for the fragile. In the light of The Hero’s kindness, patience, infinite wisdom and adoration, she sees herself, and her worth, through The Hero’s eyes.

Figure 58: @everdreamy. Finding home away from home #distortion to #reflection . Instagram. 12 February 2017. Johannesburg (photograph by author).
The yearning a girl has for A Hero might never go away. It’s a sickening thing: what it can turn into. It looms at the borders, threatening. It's a reminder.

**The Giant Landscape**

The landscape grew from three A3 sketches which I started on the coast in April 2017. The first sketch was born when I saw patterns water made in the sand, and it reminded me of flames. I had a similar feeling in the aeroplane on my way to Egypt, when looking through the window, above the clouds, the sky became like a body of water. I had a similar feeling, floating on my back in the Mediterranean Sea of Alexandria, looking up at the sky: the sky is an ocean, and the sea is like the sky. I subsequently added to the A3 pages and it grew into a massive landscape of stark contrast. I tore the pages apart to separate fire from water, a few months later.

**26 July 2017** - I had brought three sketches from the sea. I stuck them to my sacred art room wall. I sat and drew until late at night and the landscape grew larger and larger. Led by intuition I added bits of my sketchbook of important moments when the creative spark momentarily emerged in drawings. I found a crystal in a silver sugar bowl inherited from my great aunt. I took it as a sign. It connected me to the memory of the dream I had of moving paintings. It stirred during my mountain years already, and I contacted a glassblower to whom I tried to explain the three dimensional star-like shape. The object he made was fragile, but too flat. I wondered if my father could create it with a three-dimensional printer, or whether I should build it from balsa wood. If I managed to create the shape, creating a glass-like reflection would be tricky. I considered ways of mounting the crystal to paint it from various angles. I remember the moment of playing around, drawing the crystal, when I tapped into the source. The crystal, the geometric shapes, the stars, would later become universes inside bell jars.

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**Figure 59**: @everdreamy. It could be branches. It could be fire. It could be patterns created by the sea. *Instagram, 26 April 2017, Salt Rock (photograph by author).*
The crystal drawings became a part of my landscape. Two unfinished paintings of the slightly flattened glass star might still be hanging under a lapa which I hated in suburbia someplace distant and surreal it seems. I recall the brief moment when I felt proud of those panels, after which came the agony of seeing the unfinished. The continuous state of becoming: I have never completed a painting.

6 August 2017 - I realised that the sunbirds lacked a certain subtlety. During the winter of 2013, I spent three weeks in a psychiatric hospital and it is where the sunbirds were born. I cut them out and placed them in the landscape. Even if I could eventually not see them, I needed them there. They were my symbols of freedom as was the bird in bright colour tattooed onto my shoulder later that year. The song I wrote on 16 May 2012, was a year before I was admitted to the sunbird ward. I sang of honeysuckle before I knew I was a sunbird. I love these puzzles of life when they do not cause me existential crisis.
16 August 2017 - The landscape became deeper and wider, powerful like fire, and cold. I continued to layer on pencil and charcoal: also pastel, watercolour and acrylic paint. I played with acrylic gel-medium and layered drawings of glass bell jars with images of moments I remembered. My pencil markings were aggressive; also soft and gentle, subtle and stark in places in contrast between light and dark, cold and very warm. I was beckoned by Indian yellow oil. No other colour quite like it in non-oil mediums exists.

**Figure 61:** Jana van Schalkwyk, *The Landscape, in progress*, 2017. Mixed media on paper, multiple A3 pages. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).

**Figure 62:** Jana van Schalkwyk, *The Landscape, in progress*, 2017. Mixed media on paper, multiple A3 pages. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).
22 August 2017 – One of many Fabriano panels of blue and deep green beckoned the first bell jar I had painted, the first one with which I felt pleased. The freedom to cut through what felt like precious canvas opened a new door to me. I had the freedom to mix and layer whatever I liked – perhaps symbolic to finding personal freedom and of the child-like rebellion that had brewed in me. I could see my multiple universes of emotion, affect and feeling in microscopic detail and from a macroscopic view. I delved and cut and pasted and layered without fear. My actions became automatic as thoughts and feelings flooded my studio space. Powerful energy dictated my actions and movement. Instinctual. A sacred studio it seemed, where there were no shadows, in the rightful place I allowed my expression to be.

28 August 2017 - While on the wall the giant landscape a sheet of Fabriano paper was spread out on the yellowwood table. I went into a strange place within myself where I faced my sadness, Alizarin Crimson between my nails as they cut through thick paint. I was wrestling, attacking the page, crying, in a furious fiery dance. I felt a deep sadness, a sense of loss, but energised by an unusual rage that had been lying dormant in me for a very long time.

A day later I finally pulled myself away from the object of anger, a bloody and painful breaking away, the last strings of sinew leaving me raw but free– my flesh, my fat and bones and blood exposed. In the moment of dancing in red, my anger had become stronger than my fear, an emotion that was foreign to me but made possible in the honesty of painting. For a moment I was not forgiving, I could no longer justify the injustice. The truth was clear in my catharsis, and in the light of life and death I became fearless. I abjected myself to be reborn: my art sublimated the anger that I could otherwise not express.

5 September 2017 - The darkness had grown in the landscape, a looming typhoon about to shake the macrocosm made up of emotion, affect and feeling, bit-by-bit in multiple layers of

![Figure 63: Jana van Schalkwyk, Abjection, in progress, 2017. Oil on Fabriano, 800 mm x 2000 mm. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).](image)
medium. It was a sub-conscious expression of my life. The expulsion in Alizarin Crimson was a microscopic view of what was happening inside me. I left it hanging on the wall for a while.

11 September 2017 – The green Fabriano panel may have been a yearning for hope. I used leaves from my garden to print scumbles over which I glazed. I remember the urge for fresh air, the feeling of damp soil under bare feet, the lush green of fern I had planted, and it had grown, it had survived, yet in the morning sun it never flourished, the ferns that thrive in the shade of trees, the ferns that belong in forests.

I added from my sketchbook from where the sunbirds came, and cut out the lotus that represented my rebirth. I had not known at the time that rebirth may take a very long time. I became a lotus when I was younger, when I was dancing, when I was confused. The time, when I was younger, where there were no answers to what I had experienced, the time when there was nothing to justify my truth. The time when I was younger, when I had dipped into the abyss - had I known where I had been, I may now not have existed on this plane, in this life, right here and right now.
Perhaps I died, perhaps I got lost in an abyss filled with figures from my very mind, symbols of what I had been fed, that which instilled guilt and fear, that which in universal background appeared so real. It is an abyss I cannot enter without my art.
Figure 66: @everdreamy. #distortion to #reflection #lotus. Instagram, 9 October 2017 Johannesburg (photograph by author).
7 October 2017 - It was the month of October. I had started packing up my life as I knew it up to that point. I was working towards a practical critique session, then, a month away. I was on some sort of auto-pilot, in grief, in survival, having to move from a space I loved but where I felt unloved into a space I had not yet found.

I cut the last two sheets of Fabriano from the precious roll to create two large panels; together it made one. Reaching across the two panels, I drew a massive jar. I went into a strange state, led by intuition. It was as though I simply followed directions. I ran out of white acrylic to prime the sheets and I ventured into the garage in search of more paint and found a sandy colour that was used to paint the house. Instead of finding a terracotta roof sealant that I was planning to use to fix leaks around the house. Instead I used the bandage-like fabric and paint as though imitating the patching up I had tried that could never fix the leaks.

Figure 67: @everdreamy. After the long awaited drying of the scumble, the glorious glaze. Instagram. 22 September 2017. Johannesburg (photograph by author).

Figure 68: @everdreamy. Microcosms I do not control. Instagram. 22 September 2017 Johannesburg (photograph by author).

Figure 69: Jana van Schalkwyk, Magnified, in progress, 2017. Mixed media on Fabriano, 800 mm x 2000 mm. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).
I started searching for the objects I knew I had to find. The voice led me to the kitchen, I took photos of a picture perfect party from frames, aware of how enraged an object of anger would become had it noticed. I grabbed a copy of the certificate that made me one with what is angry from the dresser. I rushed back to my painting haven, my safe space in a messed up madness and frantically glued ripped up photos and letters and documents to the panels, till the objects filled the massive jar. I saw myself smiling, looking up, one was lovingly looking down, a glass of *Cap Classique* in my hand: it was the only time in my life I ever had beautiful nails. I ran out of glue, out of Pritt, Ponal, packets of wallpaper glue and now had an empty glue gun. I rushed back to the kitchen to find, under the sink, something that could hold my shattered memories in place under glass. I found Polyfilla, rushing back to my place of safety, grabbing another framed photo from a shelf and embedded memories on the panels.

11 October 2017 - The dismantling of the giant landscape was similar to covering a piece of painting that had become precious. I knew I had to, I was aware of the way art often demands of me to destroy in order give birth to something new. I was aware of the way in which my art process opened doors. Still, it is always strange to sit on the edge, about to plunge into the unknown, knowing that the process can be trusted, yet wanting to hold on to the particular manifestation of the journey a little while longer. I may even ask an opinion. It’s usually no: “don’t do it!”

Something in me might hesitate for a moment, yet I already know, that there is only this way to the next plane, door, and understanding. It’s enigmatic. And then I dismantled it, page-by-page. I made three piles, one of pure blue, one of pure fire, and one that contained both.

*Figure 70:* Jana van Schalkwyk, *Magnified, in progress*, 2017. Mixed media on Fabriano, 800 mm x 2000 mm. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).
I created a yellow panel and I created a blue panel. I tore up the mixed pages into smaller bits and created, from the destruction, a panel with hints of grey. It’s a strange thing to see, but the process was powerful.

More layers were added to the yellow panel and the sunbirds returned. There simply was no other way I wanted to tell this part of my story. I was finally free, a deeper and higher and wider freedom than I could have imagined in 2013, when I had not yet accepted what was clearly a cage.

27 October 2017 - I lived my life in fear; I packed in fear – looming terror had been a part of my life for a long time. There is always the possibility of something breaking. There is always the possibility of something exploding. There is always the possibility of something forgotten. I had come to a point where I had very little left to lose. Whatever could break, I decided, could be mended or done without. Auto-pilot-fight-or-flight.

28 October 2017 - I moved and nothing broke. Nothing exploded within a radius that could hurt me anymore.

6 November 2017

Figure 71: @everdreamy. #distortion to #reflection #janavanschalkwyk #sunbird. Instagram. 9 October 2017. Johannesburg (photograph by author).

Figure 72: Jana van Schalkwyk, A Critique Session: Fabriano panels in progress, 2017. Mixed media on Fabriano, each panel 800 mm x 2000 mm. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).
28 November 2017 - Dark are the spaces I dwell in as dawn breaks with clouded clarity and the abject. Light are the shapes that are born from abjection, green to blush pink to magenta until it dies once again, and again, and again. #distortion to #reflection

Figure 73: @Corven79. New Meaning. Instagram. 28 November 2017. Johannesburg (Venter 2017:[sp]).

1 December 2017 - New hair that had not lived in a shadow.

Figure 74: @everdreamy #lotusflower. Instagram. 24 December 2017. Rietkuil, Mpumalanga (photograph by Mia van Schalkwyk).
8 January 2018 - I drape tinsel on my laceration on occasions I imagine it called upon, when Weltschmerz is not welcome, when thoughts of winter wear down, when I yearn for hibernation in a season of happiness. Thin and flimsy fake eventually fades and is merely an impurity, gossamer gauze, that delays the unavoidable on the path of authentic: to be who we are even if that you is an absolute mess, a festering wound, a beautiful new beginning.

24 January 2018 – I spent December drinking and thinking. I couldn’t read, I couldn’t write. I couldn’t think straight. My psychiatrist referred to it as self-medication, and under the circumstances understandable. The loss, such great loss. Loss of an incredible love that may have been an illusion. The loss of dreams of a house in the mountains. The loss of my children. The loss of my home. The loss of movement.

“No you are how you were when you were real” Conor Oberst sang. It is as though the me I was desperately seeking but seemingly had lost was there all along, processing subconsciously,
through fumes of Merlot. Through the songs that heal in my ears, through headphones that came to life and eventually broke again. I wasted time, yet I didn’t.

9 February 2018  -  The improbability of describing poles of dichotomies intertwined. Thoughts in rapid flight into dark vessels streamlined and justified bounce back to the light. And into the night and into the light. And into the light and into the night and into the white and into the absence of colour where nothing exists. Dancing on a chessboard continuously sinking and levitating as though simultaneously the ballet becomes a blur, a brushstroke, an apprehension, a thing of beauty. A heartbeat. Being.

27 February 2018  –  Temporary fillings are not filling the hole. Reflecting on the day, quiet appreciation for the night. Maybe tomorrow will be different. Maybe tomorrow I’ll be free.

Figure 77: @everdreamy. The Joy-trip. Instagram. 10 February 2018. Johannesburg (photograph by author).

Figure 78: @everdreamy Reflecting on the day, quiet appreciation for the night. Maybe tomorrow will be different. Maybe tomorrow I’ll be free. #reflection #distortion #contemplation #solitude. Instagram. 27 February 2018. Riviera, Johannesburg (photograph by author).
Figure 79: @everdreamy. #weregonnarise #thebreeders #songoftheday #brandnewday #magic. Instagram. 8 March 2018. Riviera, Johannesburg (photograph by author).

Figure 80: @everdreamy #longing. Instagram. 16 March 2018. Johannesburg (photograph by author).

Figure 81: @everdreamy Spitting soil from a place once desolate and dreary without love. #light #healing. Instagram. 19 March 2018. Parktown, Johannesburg (photograph by author).
20 March 2018 - If what we share with the world is worth a piece of poetry. If what our moments are worth is a piece of handwritten poetry in black ink that flows. If what we become is a piece of handwritten poetry in black ink that flows, drenched in linseed. And there is no way of knowing whether the drenching will leave the page exquisitely transparent with lyrical waxing exposed, or chaos that cannot be deciphered.

4 April 2018 - The derangement of disentanglement moves in cycles - sometimes slowly, sometimes accelerated absurdity - intensity of pain bordering on demented. Visions of what once was reflecting in everything, and nothing, a mirror, an abyss. I’ve made my bed three days in a row. I sleep in it, finally more frequently soundly than bereaved. The unbearable lightness of being, the unbearable weight. Separation is a sickening sojourn, a journey of becoming the vile, the abject, the disgraceful, to once again, when futile skin is diffused, maybe someday soon, being revived.
Figure 83: @everdreamy. This is the dawning of the age of self love. Instagram. 5 April 2018. Riviera, Johannesburg (photograph by author).

Figure 84: @everdreamy. The sky is an ocean, I remember. #doingtheunstuck. Instagram. 12 April 2018. The sky over Africa (photograph by the author).
15 April 2018

The sky is an ocean, I remember,
and the sea is a glorious sky.
And floating, like flying is how I forget
and floating, like flying is how I forgive
and flying, like floating is how I discard the parts of me that never were to once again become one.

The sky is an ocean, I remember that the sky is free.
Washed clean,
healed by the salt of the Mediterranean Sea
by floating on gentle water
by diving for stones the colour of jewels
by being soaked with sun.

Figure 85: @Everdreamy. Healed by the salt of the Mediterranean Sea. #doingtheunstuck
#powerofintention #powerofritual
#powerofthesea #leavewhatsheavybehind
#rebirth. Instagram. 15 April 2018. Alexandria, Egypt (photograph by author).
Ode to The Light of Alexandria

You are a bridge from one world to another
The paradigmatic magic carpet soaring I
thought to exist but ceased to see
Until immersed in the breeze of the
Alexandrian sea.
Were our journey to continue
Inshallah
I cannot even begin to imagine what might
await.

24 April 2018 - Finally fitting into my skin, my
hair a millimetre closer to the blueprint I am to
become as a scarf shadows in soil, my shame
dissolved and blown into the desert somewhere
to never again be seen, it seems. White feet
covered in sacred sand, soul the colour of
caramel. I am white as cream as rose petal
pink, I am African, I’m Egyptian, I’m
European, I’m from the middle and the furthest
East. I’m a human on a planet with magic and

Figure 86: @everdreamy. Beautiful, magical
Alexandria #alexandria #magiceverywhere.
Instagram. 17 April 2018. Alexandria, Egypt.
(photograph by author).

Figure 87: @everdreamy. #Pyramids of Giza
#doingtheunstuck. Instagram. 24 April 2018.
Cairo, Egypt (photograph by author).
**miracles unexplained for a while to remain, I am free (Reflection by author, 2018).**

5 May 2018 - Cycles of seven from pain to pleasure it certainly seems. The scooter accident happened in 2016, seven years after I flew into confusion. When I was in the abyss of recovering from chaos, a few weeks before my scheduled knee surgery, I was introduced by a friend to a spiritual soul at an art exhibition. I mentioned my accident and the surgery scheduled. The spiritual soul had pointed out that many things work in sacred seven-year cycles.

I arrived back from Egypt energised and inspired. The MRI scans of my knee had been waiting to be transformed. The insides of knees are things of strange beauty. I tore the scans into strips and following the voice of intuition arranged them on a sheet of Fabriano. Lotus flowers emerged from strips and in front of me an experience with connotations to feeling abandoned and hospitals had transformed into something that made me feel hopeful, something powerful and beautiful. And it was within my own power, I was able to survive all of that, and be devoid of bitterness, and shift the injury into growth.

28 May 2018 - I felt more brave and delved into my memory box, feeling invigorated still, from Egypt. I discovered my planning of a significant party many years ago. I drew a plan of the space where the party would take place and planned every seat and every table and every cosy corner for conversation. It was really well planned, and it was a really

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**Figure 88:** Jana van Schalkwyk, *Cycles of Seven, in progress.* 2018. MRI scans on Fabriano, 80cm x 200cm. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).

**Figure 89:** Jana van Schalkwyk, *Picture Perfect Party, in progress,* 2018. Paper on Fabriano, 800 mm x 2000 mm. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).
beautiful party. There were small things that I preferred to keep out of my picture-perfect party, that later became undeniable.

1 June 2018 – It was wonderful to have time in the studio with space with which to play. I added a glaze to the *Magnified* (2018) (Figure 70) panels and had become almost repulsed by the excessive layers and that which the work represented to me. I found the sight of the panels sickening. The work entered a new phase when I hung the *Magnified* (2018) (Figure 70) panels with *Picture Perfect Party* (2018) (Figure 89) and *Cycles of Seven* (2018) (Figure 88) in between with *Abjection* (2017) (Figure 63). The new phase became a pentaptych, titled *Alchemy* (2018) (Figure 90).

2 June 2018 - My Bijou came for a dinner party and I asked him, after supper, to change my party dress into a new creation: the kind of party for which one wears a picture-perfect dress. It was our intention, on the day when I, on crutches, pranced around, in a state of emotional and physical pain, and a mixture of opioids and cider. On this night I wore the skirt of tulle with healthy knees on a coffee table, while Bijou cropped it into a skirt, I might well
wear it for my exhibition, we discussed. Fine mesh net fabric floated through the lounge and months later I still find small bits hidden in flowerpots or dusty corners of my apartment.

**4 June 2018** - It was cathartic to rip to pieces my picture-perfect party dress tulle, but I had not known the sadness shaking loose these memories of happy times would bring with the winter cold. I had delayed feeling the sadness of loss in its entirety, I had slowly digested tiny bits. The sadness loomed while I was dancing in days of summer and now I had no choice: it was not going to leave.

**18 June 2018** - Painting the glass bell jar started in May 2016, as a clumsy technical challenge. I was remembering how to paint, as I called it, by obsessive repetition of an image, the autumn leaves, and by trying to capture a glass bell jar using photographic references from the internet. I was consumed by what was for me the secret to painting glass and I think the technical challenge was an important step in reaching a place where I was able to capture the essence thereof in abstracted form. I find it to be a most enigmatic experience to have centimetres away from me an abstract arrangement of colour and then, when standing back, to see a universe take shape.

I find an equilibrium between the logic required for accurate drawing, and the raw emotion when creating abstract expressionistic work to be powerful. For me, therein lies a balance between the semiotic and symbolic realms. I need a certain logic to organise the chaos of my emotion. There lies a discipline in the chora, without which the chaos may not be possible to articulate in a comprehensible way. I dwell in both realms, they form the world in which I create.
23 June 2018 - I had a mid-term break during the university winter break. I had days to paint without a curfew or dress code or interaction with other humans. I was alone in the studio with my paintings, and my mind. And my mind was unkind, it was cruel. It was a relentless psychotherapy session that didn’t stop after an hour or two. It was after the sunshine of summer that temporarily kept my sadness at bay, after the nights of dancing, a celebration of my new found freedom from a life of fear. The safety of the flat had settled and I was simply cold. My need for external validation became painfully apparent.

25 June 2018 - I was alone in the studio, most of my time, during the school holiday. My sister had been away. I was alone with my thoughts and I was cold and the rebound romance of Egypt had dissipated. I was overwhelmed by an emptiness, a sadness that had grown into hopelessness. I didn’t want to live. It was too painful. I remember going outside for a cigarette, standing on the balcony outside the sculpture studio, feeling winter rain, harshly uncomfortable. It was, as it always is, at this point of the cycle, as I wrote around this time, three years ago. It was the first time that I had the courage to share on my blog what it feels like at times to be me.
And then it happens. As it does. I talk a bit more, I think a bit more, I take on more and more projects, I drink faster, I wake up in the morning thinking that I talk too much, I'm overbearing, I'm annoying, I'm too much, I'm in the way, I try to sleep but my thoughts race, ideas and plans muddled with self-doubt, which turns into indescribable self-loathing and more ideas and more plans. I get out of bed, take a strong dose of melatonin and rescue remedy on top of my melatonin-laced anti-depressant, but still I can't sleep. I get out of bed and drink warm milk with honey, but still I can't sleep. I want to study Mandarin, I want to write a book, I should be painting, I should be gardening, the house is untidy, I should mend the pile of torn clothes, I should dye the curtains bright orange, I want to study French, I want to do my Masters, I should write more poetry, I don't do enough, I should practise guitar, I should write more songs. It's 4am. I want to sleep but I can't.

It feels like my head will explode when pots are banged or music is disharmonious and irritation becomes intense frustration and the colours are so bright that I don't feel safe to walk or drive alone in this surreal space my world has turned into. Still I can't sleep, it's been days, every snore or alarm or dog barking or child crying or student laughing in the street outside or soft lamplight cuts through my being like a blade. Paranoid thoughts cloud my once clear mind, what if people can feel what I feel and I'm causing the world great discomfort, what if I'm an experiment, what if they are laughing at me while poisoning my water with drugs that will drive me insane. What if I am a planet that failed in my universal mission and they are waiting for me to explode, to make an end to the failure that has been dragging on for way too long. Voices whisper: "We wish she wasn't here". Everybody hates me, I'm too much, I'm in the way, I'm an annoyance, a burden, a failure, it would be better if I didn't exist.

My thoughts exceed the speed of light. The strange, physical pain of depression becomes unbearable. The exhaustion becomes unbearable. The confusion becomes unbearable. The anxiety becomes unbearable. The irritation becomes unbearable. I want to disappear. I want to evaporate. I want to spontaneously combust into nothingness, where I will feel nothing, think nothing, be nothing. The only relief lies in a drink. A drink that makes me manic, that swoops me away fast and furiously. I fly higher than ever before, I have wings, I have special powers, and I have the answer to the question. I am the answer. The pain is numbed. I am unstoppable. I wake up broken. I am nothing. Less than nothing. I have evaporated.
The Bell Jars

Photographing the bell jars for the purpose of a painting reference added an unexpected layer of expression. I printed selected Instagram images and placed them inside bell jars. I used the Fabriano Panels as background. I placed the photographs of the jars containing photos inside jars and photographed those. The results were photographs that seemed to become artworks in their own right, worlds within worlds: mise-en-abyme.

Figure 94: *The Green Dance, reference*, 2018. Photograph. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).

*The journey into the inner world is one of many mirrors, one of many dimensions, one of many avenues without a map to redirect. It is one where I continuously lose and find myself. Lose and find. Mise-en-abyme.*

Figure 95: @everdreamy. The journey into the inner world is one of many mirrors, one of many dimensions, one of many avenues without a map to redirect. It is one where I continuously lose and find myself. Lose and find. Mise-en-abyme. #becoming #ujdova #distortiontoreflection #distortion #reflection. *Instagram.* 1 July 2018. Johannesburg (photograph by author).
The Yellow Panels

My trip to Egypt was a liberating experience after months of trauma and recovering from knee surgery during which time I was immobile for 6 weeks. The trip to Egypt was invigorating, I fell in love with the strange world I explored and it temporarily shook me out of my depression. I love the unknown, I love the strange and different. I arrived back in Johannesburg with days getting shorter and the seasonal sadness slowly set in. I wanted to remember.

The image of the dog was a moment in Cairo in front of the Mohammed Ali Mosque. Being barefoot in a sacred space had drawn me into a reflective place. I had fallen, outside the mosque, three times. My knees simply collapsed, phone flying and feeling emotional and filled with gratitude. The dog sat at my feet, smelling blood on my knees and feet yet it felt significant to me. I remembering thinking that Allah had brought me to my knees. It was a moment of great humility and fragility, while the overwhelming surreal beauty of Cairo lay in front of me. In Egypt, I appreciated for who I was, in moments of solitude, fascinated by the world around me, and free.
The Blue Panels

*The Blue Panels* started as a single panel of Prussian blue in contrast with the *Reminder of Egypt*. Where on the latter I selected moments that made me feel alive after what felt like deadness of the psyche, I selected, as a continuation on the first blue panel, memories linked to rejection. I found, in powerful and ambiguous contrast, in the *Reminder of Egypt* a reminder of rejection, and in the *Blue Panel* a reminder of hope. What happened spontaneously in selecting images and colour, was similar to my experience of mixed episodes, where conflicting emotions, affects and feelings intertwine at once.
The Red Panels

The Red Panels grew from a panel of black and white, and what appeared like pieces of blood-smearred tulle arranged subconsciously in shapes similar to strands of DNA. A dance between light and shadow, increasing in depth and contrast. The Red Panels were the first to embrace the bell jar as abstract shape of distortion and reflection, its shape changing into that which forms a part of the maternal, a sickening source of nourishment in the embrace of the vigorously dancing other.

The immersive experience of working on panels 2400mm high and 2800mm wide, was one of claustrophobia and disgust. It evoked the reminder of warm blood, sickening and somehow familiar. The shape of the bell jar became an object of contrast which, like molecules, made up shapes intertwined with those created from tulle.
The Green Dance

The panels stood in front of me, combined creating a surface of 2400mm x 2800mm, primed and splattered with paint in hues of blue and green. A universe I was to enter, each mark I made allowing me to go deeper. On the table next to me I laid tubes of oil from dark to light, from yellow to green to blue. And white. And despair. I felt on the verge of crying as I had been for a while. This specific feeling is different from my usual need to cry, this is an insatiable need to cry, and crying as cathartic as it is, cannot make this feeling disappear. The Green Dance however, did.

As I painted my movements became a dance and as the dance twisted and turned my human form it no longer required brushes, this dance was a detailed one that trickled down into my

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**Figure 104:** Jana van Schalkwyk, *The Red Panels in progress, detail*, 2018. Tulle and oil on wood, 1200 mm x 2400 mm. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).

**Figure 105:** Jana van Schalkwyk. *The Green Dance, in progress, detail*. 2018. Oil on wood, 1200 mm x 2400 mm. Johannesburg, South Africa (photograph by author).
fingertips. As paint dipped fingers moved across the universe of green the built-up sadness in me subsided in moss, in algae, in light and dark and texture. I felt linseed seep into my skin, my body felt light and balanced and as though following a very specific pattern, a pattern for which I thought myself too clumsy to dance so lightly yet all the frail versions of myself I believed I had been embedded in the forest in front of me. The me of yesterday a mere layer forming a part of a greater whole, some discarded like shed skin, some shaped and perfected, if perfection can exist.

I felt myself become one with what I was creating, I was the rotting compost and the rainforest and the light through the trees: I had become the green. And now, as I contemplate articulating the verge of tears, an explosion, a release, an orgasm of sadness, a desperate need for relief, I understand that for someone outside of my universe to experience The Green Dance may be the only way to grasp what I do not have the vocabulary to express in words.

The memory I chose to include in The Green Dance (2018) was one from 6 July 2016. I had just claimed the spare bedroom as my painting space. Entering the room was exiting my life that had become unbearable. It was solitude, it was safety, for some reason the object of anger couldn’t enter the room. It signified my new reality, stepping into the room I had not known that I was taking steps in my new life: a life that was rich and safe and free.
2 August 2018 - I felt embarrassed on my way to see the most paramount soul I knew for giving guidance on this predicament, on my discomfort with myself, on my deep desire to escape a sadness I could no longer endure. She heard that I had been suicidal, and would not send an urgent script without an appointment. She heard it from my siblings, my siblings heard it elsewhere, she didn’t hear it from me. I realised, in my ungrounded embarrassment, just how good I had become at pretending. I don’t want anyone who cares too much to know when I struggle, I don’t want to cause them worry. I realised that I didn’t want to cause the most paramount soul I knew on giving guidance, to worry. I wanted her to continue trusting my judgement, my inner-voice, and my choices. It was as though I wanted to reassure myself, by reassuring her, that I had the darkness under control.

Perhaps I hoped that she would see through my lack of strength, to reach out, to call and urge me to find the will to live. Perhaps if my life mattered to those who do not love me, it would justify that I deserve to exist. I could see how that was absurd. The tunnels where shadow resides, the place of external validation from those who cannot love us it seems, the rebound lovers who were chosen perhaps for their lack of need to nurture and care for what is other. My need to be needed. My lesson that will lead to understanding self-love that I needed to learn again and again in the face of rejection.

I identified a new thread, one where I found, as always solace in music in my solitary state in the studio space. The thread was a rope of some subconscious sort. The thread mirrored my trust in ones who could parallel in song, the unbearable, the nothingness, the pain. My thread mirrored my trust in honest art. The thread was my first cry of help it seems, my first reaching out in despair, my first step in the face of darkness, when I did not drive deeper into the night with my intention to die. The thread was one that did not exist in the life I had left behind. The thread that I now see, is a will to live, in the face of my abject emotions, feelings and affects that turn against me, a thread perhaps stronger than the urge for death.
15 August 2018 - On my way to a gracious gift of two weeks at the coast, I stopped in the mountain village where I used to reside. It was the village at which I randomly arrived and got stuck for many years. I left for a brief year and a half to teach in Taiwan and returned when my study debt was paid. I fled back into the same toxic relationship. Distance used to make me remember only the good. Until recently I regarded my ability to forgive to be a virtue.

16 August 2018 - I considered myself to be independent, fearless even, considering the foolish and thoughtless things I had done without flinching. It’s a miracle that I survived. It’s a miracle that any of us survive anything at all, given the risk involved in simply crossing a street. I had lost track of time when I drove down to Southbroom to write Chapter Two and restore my damaged being. It felt as though I had been on my own for a very long time, I couldn’t image being with anyone. I forgot what it felt like to share a house, and a bed, and a car, and mealtimes and swim times and everything togetherness entails, yet it was less than a year.

I was aware of how long it had been since I last saw stars - a sky full of stars – and in the peaceful coastal village where I sat on a deck sublime, seeing bits of starlight from underneath a roof, from a garden surrounded by trees, I realised, that I c(sh)ouldn’t walk down to the beach to lie on the sand, on my back, to watch the stars. I was alone. I felt fragile. I became acutely aware of my limitations because of my physique. If I were in a situation where I had to protect myself against ones stronger than me, I couldn’t rely on my physical strength to protect me.
The thought terrified me. When will my time of stargazing arrive? Trying to fall asleep, away from my courtyard-facing third floor apartment with security and fingerprint recognition entrance I became acutely aware of my fragility as a person, alone in a big house in a quiet village. And it terrified me. Worst-case scenarios played off in my mind, and with no protection between me and that which is malicious, I accepted my fragility. I hugged both my teddy bears tightly, and took my sleeping tablets.

Sleeping tablets only work if you want to sleep. Fighting them causes great confusion. I remembered being a child at the age of reading *The Secret Seven* and fighting sleep. I was afraid that if I fell asleep I may not wake up. I remembered being a student of about 21, afraid that if I fell asleep I would not wake up. I wondered whether it was because my baby brother died in his sleep when I was two years old. It affected my parents, their behaviour affected me. I consider these things and countless other things in psychotherapy with my therapist, as I have, for many years with various therapists. Some were insightful, others seemed to simply take my side. My relationship with the latter never lasted very long. I want to grow, I want to face my flaws and become better. Everything affects us. We form a part of a large chain of broken children with broken parents and grandparents and generations before them, and we are all broken. Some remain broken while others are lucky enough to embark on the journey of healing. Life seems to me to be a journey of healing, more than anything. Maybe I’m just lonely. Maybe I’m just depressed.

My psychiatrist is practical about my problem with sleeping. “Take the tablet, close your eyes and sleep” she says. She’s right. But I take the tablet and I think, and I go outside and look at the night sky and I wonder, and I make a cup of tea and I smoke a cigarette and I worry.
27 August 2018 - Thoughts in rapid flight into dark vessels streamlined and justified bounce back to the light. And into the night and into the light. And into the light and into the night and into the white and into the absence of colour where nothing exists. Dancing on a chessboard continuously sinking and levitating as though simultaneously the ballet becomes a blur, a brushstroke, an apprehension, a thing of beauty. A heartbeat.

Figure 111: @everdreamy. Finding Peace. Instagram. 27 August 2018. Southbroom. (photograph by author).

Figure 112: Jana van Schalkwyk. I discovered the poetry of Hölderlin, shared by a kind soul. 2018. Photograph, 70 mm x 70 mm. Johannesburg, South Africa.
CONCLUSION: MY REFLECTION

Is there perhaps a way of suffering from the very fullness of life, a tempting courage of the keenest sight which demands what is terrible, like an enemy - a worthy enemy - against which it can test its power, from which it will learn what “to fear” means?

(Nietzsche 2003:2)

When I embarked on my study, I was not aware that I had embarked on a journey of personal transformation. It was something I felt compelled to do, and recognising the signposts that guided me, it was an intuitive process from the start.

In the past I thought that I had questioned the rules of my society, the things that to me did not make sense, the things that seemed wrong, yet that I accepted as right. Now it appears as though my questions merely scratched the surface in terms of understanding my truth. It was clear to me, that when one is led by a thirst for power and money, and not by the desires of the heart, materialism can threaten authenticity. I was aware of what brings me joy and I was aware of what caused me discomfort. I had not yet realised the power I had to eliminate discomfort, and to not compromise joy in my life. Accepting the former and neglecting the latter had become a way of life.

I was aware of the freedom I had in not seeking status or wealth, and I was aware of the power of my creativity. I had not yet learnt that creativity was my lifeline, and what I should trust. I identified and strongly opposed all forms of violence and the various shapes of hate and discrimination that go against the grain of life. I have, through my study, become aware of the disrespect I allowed, and the ways in which I created a toxic world around me.

My naivety, my dislike of disharmony and my empathy, made me fragile in a villainous world that I made out to be righteous. I awarded thrones where it was not deserved but admired, because the now seemingly shallow questioning of society that some displayed, was “proof” to me then of empathy. I have become aware that not everyone who were united with me in the depth to which I questioned society were kind. I was guilty of stereotyping, the very thing to which I believed I was opposed. In my world in the mountains, and a background of growing up in a conservative Afrikaner society, I translated people who were liberal, as good. People who were against racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and violence, were to me immediately against all forms of hate and discrimination that go against the grain of life.
What I learnt through my reflection, is that I have always had more freedom than I realised. The freedom was always there for me to take, with creativity my vehicle and my dreams forming the map. There were so many factors that played a role in my not seeing the freedom to live a life in which I can flourish. My capacity for unconditional love allowed me to forgive unacceptable behaviour. I could justify the core and the cause of most crimes. I failed myself: although there is embedded in me gracious love, I accepted what went against love for myself. There may have been traces of believing that life is temporary and that a place where things make perfect sense is beyond this realm, beyond my life.

I had accepted, for many years, that certain toxic situations in my life were unavoidable: certain situations were uncomfortable, because I found fault in myself first. In situations that were in retrospect unacceptable, I questioned what I had done that was seemingly wrong. The world could not be wrong, and me right: hence I tried to abide by the rules of a patriarchal society: a world in which my amplified emotion, affect and feeling were considered a weakness. Perhaps I was Nietzsche’s (1978:54) camel, proving my strength, as in his first phase of three metamorphoses23: “[w]hat is heavy? thus asks the weight-bearing spirit, thus it kneels down like the camel and wants to be well laden.” Nietzsche’s (1978:54) explanation I find strangely appropriate to my own tale:

Or is it this: to love those who despise us and to offer our hand to the ghost when it wants to frighten us? The weight-bearing spirit takes upon itself all these heaviest things: like a camel hurrying laden into the desert, thus it hurries into its desert.

I understand now, that there was something wrong with the world: it was not the world, but my world, a distorted place I had created through my choices, my weight-bearing spirit. It is a world I could only change through the awareness I gained from emotions, affects and feelings that had turned abject. Was the courage to leave the distorted place of permanent panic perhaps the bravery of a lioness? As Nietzsche (1978:54) suggests: “[b]ut in the loneliest desert the second metamorphosis occurs: the spirit here becomes a lion; it wants to capture freedom and be lord in its own desert”. I am consciously changing my world: the deeper my reflection allows, the further away the distortion.

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23 Nietzsche’s (1978:54) three metamorphoses of spirit are: “how the spirit shall become a camel, and the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child.”
Occasions where I felt comfortable enough to ask for what I needed were rare in the past not because the world was mostly unkind and unaccommodating, but rather because I did not have the courage to ask. Because I was afraid and ashamed I occasionally asked cautiously, in various shadows of anger, and unpleasant responses made me retreat deep within myself, perpetuating a cycle of shame and fear. I concluded that there was something inherently wrong with me, in the light of my needs provoking such cruelty, and accepted that responses devoid of empathy were what I deserved. I was, in Nietzsche’s (1978:54) words with my laden spirit: “sick and … sen[t] away comforters and ma[d]e friends with the deaf, who never hear[d] what [I] ask[ed]?”

My auto-ethnographic approach has allowed me space for reflection; it has unearthed the evidence that could withstand years of false belief: proof that I am good enough for life. My study required of me to delve into memories that were painful; it required self-awareness and it demanded honesty for the work to flow. Technology and social media provided powerful research tools. Through tracing WhatsApp conversations, e-mails, Facebook memories, iPhone notes and voice notes, I could recall moments I may have kept in my subconscious. I captured songs and sadness that I couldn’t disclose on social media in hand-written journals and sketches. I embraced the experiences and allowed this to connect me to more memories which formed a clear pattern. I danced with, battled with, and immersed myself in what I had felt. The multiple layers of my creative process allowed me to articulate certain emotions, affects and feelings I had not previously been able to manage.

I know that my journey continues, a continuous state of growth, as I plunge deeper into the abyss of knowledge and wider into the essence of my experiences. My theoretical and personal exploration during this study has guided me towards deeper insights and a greater understanding, appreciation and acceptance of my existence. However, I still have many fears to overcome, and my journey to self-acceptance continuous as I grow, yet the reflection of fighting through distortion has made the cause of these fears very clear. In my awareness of the source of my fear, it no longer dictates how I behave.

I see a pattern that from a distance forms, through stark contrast, a composition: a beautiful balance. It is a balance far removed from that which demands that I should suppress my moods. It is a balance achieved in honesty, in fragility, in living my truth. It is accepting my emotions, affects and feelings as an integral part of me: abjection warned me, it haunted me, it destroyed me, and it brought me back to myself. Creativity proved stronger than medication, and stronger
than the deeply embedded rules of a patriarchal society. Creativity cut through all the masks and fears and lies and things that kept me from the light. Abject emotions emerged, despite dopamine and serotonin and oxytocin and all the chemical forms of numbing or enhancement in my life. I left the roaring lioness on these pages: she claimed her freedom. As Nietzsche (1978:55) suggests, the lioness was a vital transformative phase: [t]o create freedom for itself and a sacred No even to duty: the lion is needed for that…” However, Nietzsche (1978:55) points out that the lion can alone claim freedom, but is incapable of creating new values. I abandoned the distorted and toxic world in which I lived, and I am creating my world via my return to what feels like innocence. Perhaps this is Nietzsche’s (1978:55) third and final phase, the child:

The child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes. Yes, a sacred Yes is needed, my brothers, for the sport of creation: the spirit now wills its own will, the spirit sundered from the world now wins its own world.
“Lebenslauf”

“You wanted greater still, but love forces
All of us to the ground; suffering bends powerfully,
Still our arc does not for nothing
Bring us back to the starting point.

Whether up or downwards, does not prevail in the Holy Night
Where quietly Nature contemplates the days to come,
Does not prevail in the crookedest Orcus
One straightness, one Law?

This I experienced. For never, in the manner of mortal masters,
Have you Divine Ones, you who sustain our world,
Yet led me on the straight path,
Not with intent, not that I knew it.

A man must test all that comes his way, say the Divine Ones,
In order that he, powerfully nourished, give thanks for what he learns,
That he understand the freedom,
To move hence, where he wishes”

(Hölderlin 1800: 285).
Winter arrived sometime during summer at the end of last year. It's not new to me and probably not unknown to you. The first plunge into the calamitous chaos of the unquiet mind left me breathless just before Christmas. I adapted and became almost accustomed to the discomfort and dragged the nagging voice, saying that something was not right, with me into the New Year.

“I, I feel, feel like, I am, in a burning building
And I gotta go
Cause I, I feel, feel like, I am, In a burning building
And I gotta go” (Laurie Anderson, 1982).

In May the winter that had arrived in summer brought about an avalanche. I dissolved into the colour young children discover when they mix all the hues on a pallet together. What once was bright becomes the muddiest of green-brown. Some children paint away with this swamp-like disarray. Others lament, learning what hues they yearn for.

“You're walking, and you don't always realise it
But you're always falling
With each step, you fall forward slightly
And then catch yourself from falling

Over and over, you're falling

And then catching yourself from falling

And this is how you can be walking and falling

At the same time” (Laurie Anderson, 1982).

I descended into daunting detail, painting my way out of chaos, continuously comparing and adjusting, from shame to love. The winter solstice promised summer and brought with it some breath. I remembered to build my paintings slowly with thin layers until the composition is complete. I remembered to take a few steps back.

I submerged myself in an array of uncomfortable emotions, to emerge free from their grip. I know that emotions do not disappear, but at least for now, I seem free from debilitating hurt.

On a Friday night I wept in my wake while painting a cloud on a chaotic canvas. It balanced the scales. The dark night of the soul was now momentarily poetically complete.

On a Saturday morning I was nothing.

“It was a large room full of people, all kinds, and they had all arrived at the same building at more or less the same time, and they were all free, and they were all asking themselves the same question: what is behind that curtain? You were born. And so you're free. So happy birthday” (Laurie Anderson, 1982).

On a Saturday night I went to a party, and being anthropophobic without Ativan, an old friend kindly walked me around the edges of a bright room.

On a Saturday night my discomfort disappeared. Withstanding that music beckons me, I had for a while been unable to dance dauntlessly.
On a Saturday night I spoke to strangers. They were sitting in the shadows on the outer edges of a white room. Like a coven of mystical healers, dressed in black and filled with light. A band started playing and I became the fearless black panther I wish to be.

And then I danced.

“You know, I could write a book
And this book would be thick enough to stun an ox
Cause I can see the future and it’s a place
About 70 miles east of here. Where it’s lighter
Linger on over here. Got the time? Let X = X” (Laurie Anderson, 1982).

Quoted lyrics by Laurie Anderson from the song “Let X=X” - from the album, Big Science, produced in 1982.
CODA

Postliminary to the submission of this dissertation, it was identified that my study has potential to be framed in, and contribute to, the field of Mad Theory. Richard Ingram (2008:1) in “Mapping ‘Mad Studies’: the Birth of an In/discipline” writes that the idiosyncrasies of mental illness as a disability in a person are not sufficiently reflected by the general definition thereof. Mad Studies, similar to Deaf Studies, require a rightful place in academia as a field of research. Ingram (2006:3) writes:

We crazies can heal ourselves of the destructive side of madness. We need others to understand that we are the primary victims of this destructive side, while acknowledging that others are too often subjected to its effects. We can heal ourselves when we have the space and time to learn how to bring forth the creative side of madness. Individually and collectively, we are working to acquire the skills required to shift from destruction to creation. Yet under the current regime of state-run and for-profit management of madness, the conditions for acquiring these skills arise all too rarely.

Ingram (2016:12) in “Doing Mad Studies: Making (Non)sense Together” recognises the longstanding existence of Mad Studies in examples such as the work of Nietzsche. Ingram (2016:12) identifies Nietzsche as a forerunner in the field, and as an author narrating his personal battle with madness in his work.

Ingram (2016:15) considers the discipline of psychiatry to be remarkably closed, and recognises potential criticism in the light of Mad Studies entering academia as a recognised field of research. Ingram (2016:15) writes:

Psychiatry assumes it has a fundamental right to pronounce on just about everything: on law, on sexuality, on school shootings, and so on. Psychiatrists appear on television talking about all of these issues, and yet soon as anyone wants to talk about psychiatry, the response is, “No, you’re not an expert.” That paradox has to be exposed, and is one of the core tasks that lie ahead for Mad Studies.

Auto-ethnography as research methodology could contribute to the wider acceptance of the academic validity of research in the field of Mad Studies.


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