

¹*Liquid Selves*:The fragmentary and multiple nature of self

Using different voices, *Liquid selves; the fragmentary and multiple nature of self* explores a body of work made by dripping bitumen paint onto canvas. Through the different texts including, the ‘personal’, the ‘poetic’, and the ‘pendantic’, Delpha Hudson explore the selfhood and gender and how these might be discursively understood in her practice.

Introduction

When I drip bitumen paint onto canvas patterns and characters appear, all of whom are myself, or ‘I’ in some way. They are an experimentation with my ‘self’ or selves, not one identity but the combination of all those that inhabit us; the multiplicities of the ‘I’, the ‘YOU’, the ‘SHE’.

Deleuze suggests that it might be possible to ‘trace a vocal or written line which will make language flow between duallisms’, the flow of the bitumen from the stick is a kind of writing, creating figures that do not ‘undo’ identity, they put differences together in complex wholes.

As Deleuze suggests, if we create co-existent multiplicities, it may be possible to overcome, however briefly, the dualisms created by the OTHER, and explore the politics of female identity, and the problematic process of ‘becoming’.

Delpha Hudson, 2013

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HER-IT, 2009

Introduction to *Liquid Selves*

I discovered bitumen paint in 2006 when in my studio in St Ives, I painted an old pram for an installation called *Loaded Object*. Since then I have been using bitumen paint and its 'liquid aesthetic', dripping it on to anything, writing with it and dripping it onto white gessoed canvases.

I began research and writing in order to understand a new visual imagery, where figures, patterns, and partial narratives began to emerge. The suspension of ordinary rules of painting and the potential to depict a 'fantasy of self', led to a visual imagery of many 'types,' (archetypes, rather than stereotypes) constructed in time and space. The created characters somehow both typified all women, and my own

personal experiences. When I began writing about them, the words like the images seemed to split my subjectivity into many voices. Three main voices emerged which could be described as 'the personal', 'the poetic', and the 'pendantic'.

I hope this text in some way reflects the perpetual conversation, and continual rumble that we all experience as we negotiate our voices, and who we are through the different selves.



ME-YOU-HER-IT, 2010

Voice 1: the personal

As a child I was told that my name Delpha meant ‘know thyself’, I was ignorant of the Delphic oracle, and classical traditions of self-knowledge. I accepted the notion that I was one person, and had to make the best of that it. This has often been a confusing endeavour, often leading to feelings of dismay and frustration. Dripping bitumen onto canvases has become part of a personal reflection on selfhood and identity, and an exploration of that performance and dream of self.

In performance works exploring gender and female identity, I have endeavoured to use Braidotti’s idea of ‘dissonant voices moving between positions in a nomadic quest for alternative representation of female feminist subjectivity’.¹ Playing with different subject positions, negotiating identity in different ways, often occurred by a ‘slippage’ between my performed self, and ‘I’, (‘me’ or ‘her’). I performed textual interventions including writing in different media. These included milk and honey, as well as more traditional media like red ink.



Written in Milk



Pieces of Scarlet



Written in Honey

In performance installations (or ‘installaction’ as Andre Stitt calls them), *Written in Milk*, (2001), and *Written in Honey* (2002) I was inspired by

Hélène Cixous's 'écriture féminine', and Luce Irigaray's project of 'writing the body.' In *Written in Milk*, I covered the floor of an exhibition space with white linen, and covered it in 'automatic writing' made with milk. The object was not the writing itself, but the process and performance of writing 'myself'. Leaving barely legible traces, an ephemeral fatty residue of text with, a sickly sour smell that permeated the space, reminiscent of the place of motherhood.

Written in Honey was a site-specific performance and installation, creating window hangings for a Tudor house at Helmsley Castle in Yorkshire. Using locally produced honey, I covered translucent cloth with historical symbols and writing, some invented by myself. The marks created by dripping honey were invisible until held up to the light, which was intended as a metaphor for the invisibility of women. The hangings in this space were made to evidence the day-to-day lives of ordinary women, as few records exist about their lives at this time. Women historically, or otherwise, are often invisible. Again, the performance was the process of combining image and text created in the hope of embodying gendered identities, then as for now.

Fascinated by histories of text and image, *Pieces of Scarlet* (2000) was a performance in Birmingham city centre in which pieces of scarlet cloth with symbols and letters, which were believed to have magical properties if worn next to the skin, were placed between 25 layers of white underwear. As these layers were removed the 'pieces of scarlet' were handed to the public with no explanation. A crowd gathered to see what would happen when I got to the last layer of underwear. I left donning a white fur coat.

Using bitumen paint to 'write' and perform gender and multiple selves, has become part of a very personal practice to explore *identity* itself. I am exploring what it means to be not only one woman but many women, and the representation of selves, becomes part of 'knowing myselfes'.



Man Created the Word, performance stills, 1999

I am transformed by the thought that I am, and can be many people. One of my many selves has been 'mother'. My work has often focussed on the problematic of re-representing 'mother' beyond the stereotypical. The performance of motherhood is traditionally dependant upon the ideal of selfless mother-love. The Self is completely negated for the love and good of the child. This presumption of a good and natural mother, is deeply ironic as women appropriate a new Selves to succeed in this almost impossible role that subsumes any other Self, especially the Self-ish. Feminist art and theory applauds 'winning the right to mix and match stereotypes,'ⁱⁱ Personally I needed to

‘recover...from the degradation of being divided against myself’,ⁱⁱⁱ and retain a sanity and sense of other Selves.

My first performance *Man Created the Word* (1999), used clothing and ritual to explore gendered selves and in what I thought of as a ‘ritualized shedding of personae’, I worked through three stereotypes that were known to me in my experience of motherhood. I started in full waterproofs gutting fish, a symbol of the required, nasty, everyday menial tasks, then a man’s pinstriped suit, a working mother reading of patriarchal repression, I typed and read from the bible:

‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him;... and the word, the word was with God’.

For me, Patriarchy starts with religious belief and the control of language, and claims of creation. Underneath was a wedding dress, and putting on high heels and an apron, I crafted a baby out of lard. A messy, smelly performance revealing bitterness at a culture that gives only lip service to women for the role they play in creating life and mothering, whilst any chance of selfhood in the process is obliterated by expectation and faulty representation.

I find myself drawn towards visual image and text, without using one to illustrate the other; wanting to represent in some ways these ideas; endeavouring to find a language that ‘nudges’ and pulls the person standing in front of my work, into another world. A world of possibility in which each one of us is many, and each one of those people is not fixed, but ‘in process’.



Working in my studio, 2011

Liquid Selves start with the premise that visual material representation is one way that we can explore unstable and unfixed identities and, in so doing, represent gendered difference. I want my paintings to give a sense of being, so that a woman is aware of herself..., 'so that the on-looker knows that she is there'.^{iv}

Chemically and textually, I think of bitumen as a metaphor for the 'motherly' or slime that we emerged from. It becomes a birth of an idea, it is growth, change, and constant transformation. The instability of the

medium means that it is never fixed, there is a compulsive beauty in the way it stands out from the surface of the canvas, 'giv[ing] tactile values to retinal impressions'.^v



ME-HER-THEM, 2012

Using sticks to drip bitumen onto surfaces is an almost 'automatic' process as limited control means that whilst I am 'transferring' ideas onto the surface of the canvas or board, the accidental dripping or 'blotting', suggests further mark-making, and creates additional new forms and subconscious suggestion. The barely controlled drippings and droolings of the medium, link to Cixous's metaphor of woman as *la mer*, using wordplay on *mère*/mother, fluid/unknowable. Bitumen paint's inky darkness also links to woman as a 'dark continent'. Other and foreign, it is from this inky darkness that forms appear like phantoms.

The use of multiple combinations of pronouns as titles plays with the constraints of language. Working with pronouns and visual language, I want to negotiate meaning, and discard a dream of unity, in order to find metaphors for difference, gender and representation.



I-IT, 2009

Depending on the temperature and viscosity of the bitumen, it 'spins' like treacle off a spoon, like the creation of self is made by 'spinning and being spun by stories'.^{vi} We create ourselves by the stories and narratives that we select from our histories. Just as I have created myself from the constructs of my past, I create patterns as narratives of subjectivities spun from bitumen paint. The process of chance and intention plays with harmonies and dissonance are created in our stories of Self. I can't completely control the bitumen dripping from the stick,

any more than I completely control Subjectivities; they are split as I transform the surface of the canvas. Some marks flow delicately, creating natural forms around figures, then lack of control deforms and destroys any harmony.

'I-IT', started as the idea of *garni* (gathering), like Van Gogh's figure of a woman working in a field, gathering the harvest. Yet she becomes like an illustrated figure in a fairytale, with one interpretation of this image that she is the witch in the story of Hansel and Gretel. I enjoy the possibility that these works could be interpreted as fairytales with dark, haunting possibilities.

The process of working with bitumen paint positions myself in relation to language, and I have begun to use layers of text and pattern underneath, as well as dripping bitumen paint onto smooth canvas.



Bitumen pattern work for me is an aesthetic form to transform thought, a beautiful language for 'becoming', to know oneself, ^{vii} and becomes part of my practice of 'writing difference'. I am exploring the 'enigmas of self, not-self, and other',

creating new selves as well as old.

Voice 2: poetic

Mermaid's Rest

The children loved the countryside

They would run and hide

They loved the seaside

They would all play and ride

The waves, until it was time to go back to the city.

One day they went far way to a little village by the sea.

Their great-grandpa (who always said 'bless my buttons!')
lived in a little cottage by the harbour.

They loved jumping from the old stonewalls into the
smooth green water,

Their mother seemed especially happy,

She sat for hours watching the bright water,

She loved the salt smell and felt at home.

The children watched her and felt a little lonely, but they
played their games and bought their treasures to her.

One day she swam out to sea. The water was bright and
fresh and green.

All the way to the island, climbed up to the highest rock,
then back to the water's edge.....

Lapping around her ankles, her legs grew together in the water, her long, thin feet became fins.

Now at one with the water she swam free

A mermaid was what she was destined to be

Her children cried to her but all she could hear were the gulls.

She went on swimming past Merlin Rock, past Lamorna Cove, past the fishing boats. Beyond.

The children were so sad. They tried to understand. They were left looking out to sea.

Saddest of all was their mother who looked but couldn't find what she was looking for.

She was at one with the sea, yet all alone.

The children waited on the shore everyday, searching the horizon, waiting for their mother to return.

Their mermaid-mother had many adventures.

The dolphins made her heart fly, the seals made her laugh, the fish made her smile, but nothing made the ache in her heart disappear.

Their mother was far away when she found the bottle. It made her heart ache more

She knew then why she was so heart sore

So she swam night and day back to the little village...past fishing boats, past Lamorna Cove, past Merlin rock, past the Island to the shore.

She looked everywhere

The children weren't there

Her tail hindered her task and she knew she must wait for them to come back looking for her.

She knew they would come with the sun.

She waited learning and yearning to be human again, knowing they loved her and would find her.

She called the place she waited 'Mermaid's Rest'.

Voice 3: the pendantic (concerned with minute details or formalisms)

In Feminist thought and theory the project of unfixing identity is important to dispelling myths about sex and gender stereotypes. Identity is performed by the subject, enacted and negotiated through social and cultural roles. Gender is constructed, not biologically determined. The performance of identity for women has been one of a performance of 'femininity', weighted with expectation and confined to stereotypes. The notion of fixed identity remains a founding stone of Western society and thought. It supports an ordering of society in which everyone is fixed, and should not exceed their position.



Feminist theorists: Simone De Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, have used theories of embodied and sexually differentiated subjectivity ^{viii} to invent ways of overcoming fixity, loosening the ties between gender, sex, essentialism, and difference through new kinds of writing. Their writing about sexual difference tampers with theoretical constructs. Re-interpreting the psycho-social development of a child based around its body and conditioning, examines the tension and struggle between circumstances and individuation. Writing of sexual difference goes beyond the material and social factors affecting self.

One of the shrouds of conditioning is the conformity of belief that as individuals we have only one Self, one identity. This is the 'dream of unity,' ^{ix} a myth of a unitary 'I' that must be shattered in order to re-negotiate subjectivity. ' Humans believe they make themselves what, and who they are, yet 'man is not a natural species, he is an historical idea. Woman is not a fixed reality, but rather a becoming'. ^x

De Beauvoir unfixes the stereotype of woman with the concept of 'becoming woman'. Exceeding traditional notions of identity and subjectivity, opens a crack in discourse which acknowledges the possibility of liberating multiplicities, and fragmenting single representations of female stereotypes. 'Becoming' infers a continual process, it is not and cannot be fixed. Feminist theory incites the 'I' to a 'new relation with herself, others and symbolic order,' ^{xi} and allows the transformation of the structure and images of thought. In this flux, the individual faces contradictions whatever she does, whoever she believes herself to be, negotiating identity and subjectivity, through 'plurality, overlap, and manoeuvre' ^{xii}.



WE-ME-THEM-ALL, 2012

Discovering SHE has a freedom to use nomadic contingency, and gently nudge ideas that proffer alternative modes of being, and alternative ways of representing self and gender. The idea of identity becomes a discursive premise, where there can always be movement.

Speaking or representing difference in order to play with semiotic apparatus of traditional images, symbolisation and the symbolic, can change how we think and what we think.^{xiii} Dr Ryya Bread's PhD (Falmouth, 2001), explored visual material representation and how it operates within the linguistic realm of symbolic order in the formation of subjectivity.^{xiv} Image and materiality have a specific position to each other, and can embody, and create differing signifying values with regard to representation of a subject. Cixous's project of 'writing difference' inspires the possibility of creating difference using image, symbols in addition to the written word.



The ancient symbol of the mermaid has an interesting history of change, and in many ways could be a 'type' for how women are viewed at anytime in history. An ancient symbol of power and fertility, the mermaid became a symbol of

vanity and evil from the 17th century, with her comb and mirror. The stories about her start to change and she becomes more a siren destroying men. Victorian Pre-Raphaelites used the mermaid as a lascivious man-eater. Surrealism used the mermaid as a sexual hybrid, with much additional lore and humour in films like 'Miranda' [1948], and 'Splash', [1990]. Yet at the end of the 20th century, the Mermaid Trust, a charity for breast cancer awareness, chose the mermaid symbol as one for all women. Symbols have the potential to transmute ideas, and re-structure assumptions.

Like language, the power of image and symbol has been used through out history to control, and equally to subvert thought. Both ancient and Communist China consistently used beautiful and poetic symbols to control the thinking of huge populations. The same is true in the West as advertising appropriates image and symbols, changing their meaning

almost daily, creating a situation in which theorists conclude such Signs become meaningless. Artists may use such materials in a *diabolic* way, to corrupt and scatter, or a *symbolic* way, which etymologically can mean to *join*. Joining old and new symbology, and using such Signs in personal and poetic ways can re-represent ideas, and engender change.

Bitumen paint is a mixture of organic liquids that are highly viscous, black, and sticky. The pitch drop experiment is a long-term experiment measuring the flow of a piece of pitch over many years. Pitch is the name for any of a number of highly viscous liquids which appear solid, most commonly bitumen. Tar pitch flows at room temperature, albeit very, very slowly, eventually forming a drop.

The qualities of bitumen affect the sense the lines convey. Unlike other black inks and paints, the viscosity of the material creates delicate patterns through spinning. It sets very quickly creating a shiny surface that only becomes dull and flat when it is exposed to heat or direct sunlight. There is lack of control and abstraction, but the intention to create symbolic forms make it a very different project from Modernist 'dripping' works, like those of Jackson Pollock.

Drawing through continuity, as it is impossible to completely control the flow of bitumen paint from the stick, creates frequent deteriorations of the very patterns it simultaneously creates. There are rhythms of change, and a tension of balance, as space becomes tangible, creating atmosphere and boundaries.

Figures energize the space around them, becoming empathizing traces, with fleeting qualities of description and nuances of narrative. These

'types', are internalized figures, and, in relation to pattern work, become symbols in relationship to each other, almost like writing.

'Language takes on a meaning for the child when it establishes a situation for him. A story is told in a children's book of the disappointment of a small boy who put on his grandmother's spectacles, and took her book in the expectation of being able himself to find the stories which she used to tell him. The tale ends with these words: 'Well, what a fraud! Where's the story? I can see nothing but black and white'.^{xv}

The black and white patterns of *Liquid Selves*, and the use of single or multiple figures encourages identification or the production of narrative, which in turn produces allegory, which is not explicit. The patterns are sometimes orderly and natural, at other times they are dreadful overgrown areas which impart a sense of skewed beauty. They are not Edenic scenes, beautiful in symmetry or regularity, they split the canvas into areas of chaos and emptiness. In this distorted nature characters emerge as inky clumsy marks that can be transformed by permeable interpretative frames.

Writing, drawing and painting is not a process of innocence and passivity, emptying the 'prospect of meaning' in order to re-fill it with another. The process of applying bitumen with a stick uses chance, and happenstance, 'almost as if the eye knows something of which the mind knows nothing.'^{xvi} The patterns and blank spaces in *Liquid Selves* do not seem like an imitation of nature. Pattern, image and text become

'iconographic utterance,....the dream as a fiction constructed by a unique aesthetic; the transformation of the subject into [her] thoughts,

specifically the placing of the self into an allegory of desire and dread that is fashioned by the ego'.^{xvii}

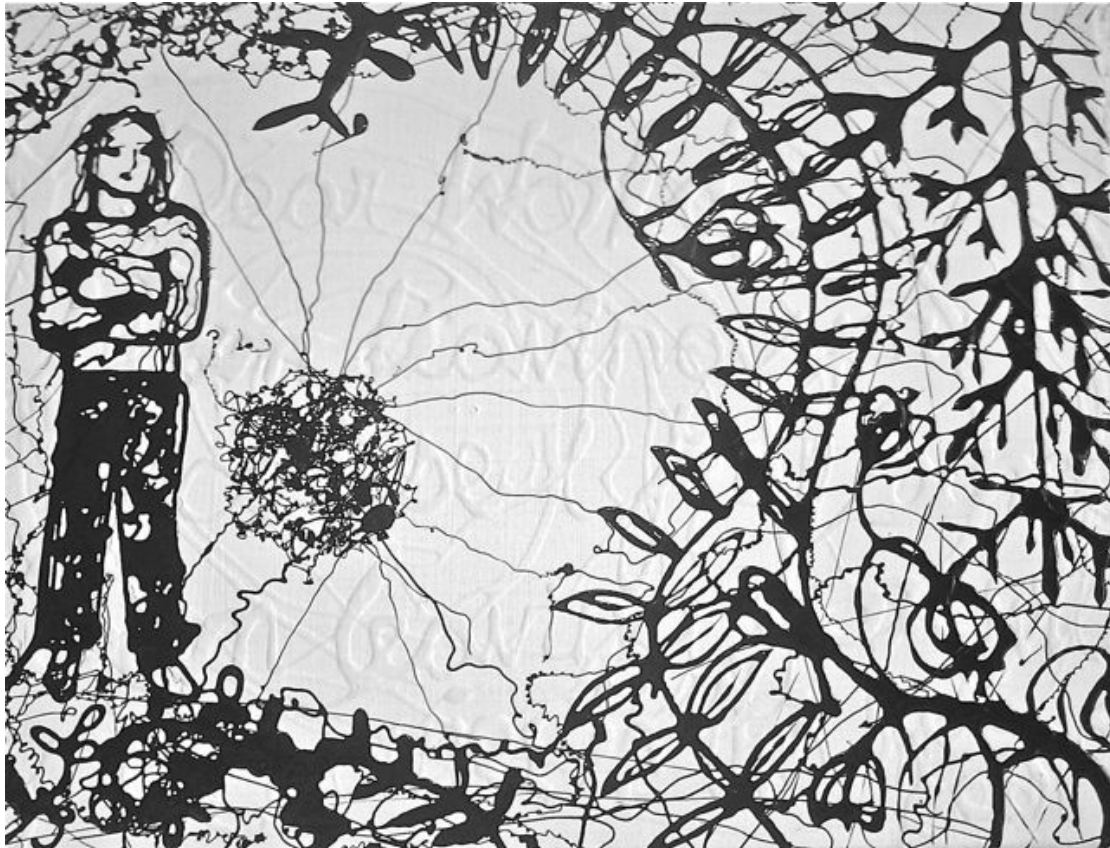


ME-THEM, 2012

Capitalized pronouns are combined and fused together as titles for *Liquid Selves*. They give no indication of the subject or hope of a narrative. As they are the part of language that fixes subject position, the use of pronouns seems to put in doubt the subject or 'who' of the work.

De Beauvoir starts her classic *The Second Sex* with 'I' / 'je' , a statement of existence, selfhood and the personal. In English 'I' is 'eye', writers have played with the intimation of the role of the visual in the understanding and representation of the self. Yet, 'I' is a fragment, a slippery word as it is always part of 'we'.^{xviii} Feminist strategies use

language to play with and de-construct gender. It is this 'I', de-constructed and robbed of its historical specificity, that is used to question gendered identity, and explore the possibility of multiple selves, as the construction and maintenance of 'I' and 'self' is only possible both with, and through others (YOU,, THEY, WE.....).



ME-YOU-I, 2012

The complexity of 'self', with its psychoanalytic theories of self, non-self and other, reveal problematic processes of 'becoming' for women, yet remain a pre-condition for 'self-transformation'.^{xix} The contrast of using only dark bitumen paint on white is a reference to writing but also as text and subjectivity, which can be split between thought, and transformation. The production or invention of personal narrative in forms around us, takes us outside of ourselves, transporting us through

identification to the time and place of another, aiding the 'transcendence of the prison of the limitations of the self',^{xx}



Empathy, imitation, assimilation and projection produce shared dreams and fictions that have transformative potential. Narrative offers the interplay of multiple ideas and without offering a fixed position. The surface lines of the bitumen paint create a frame or discussion about the fragmentation of Selves, yet inserting and asserting the possibility of transformation. Part of the process of 'becoming' is to play with writing, texts and visual media, exploring the enigma of 'self, not-self and other', and finding new ways of re-representing THEM, HER, WE, and I. *Liquid Selves* are a performance of *selves*, endeavouring to know ourselves, by constant creation, and re-creation. We play with all positions.

End notes & references

ⁱ (Braitdotti, p.134)

ⁱⁱ (Moi, p. 28).

ⁱⁱⁱ (Patricia Williams describes herself in Griffiths, p. 89).

^{iv}(reference to Donald Judd's writing about his own conceptual work from Alex Potts in Wood, p.176)

^v Gombrich, Hildebrand's 893 edict).

^{vi} (Griffiths, p.4).

^{vii} (Rorty quoted in Griffiths, p125).

^{viii} (Moi, p. 30)

^{ix} (Griffiths,p.64),

^x(Simone De Beauvoir in Moi, p.63

^{xi} (Cixous, p.49)

^{xii} (Griffiths, p.91).

^{xiii} (Miller, p. 164).

^{xiv} (Bread, p7).

^{xv} (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Moi, p. 50)

^{xvi} (Gombrich, 2002, p. 24)

^{xvii} Mieke Bal in Pollock, G. p.32)

^{xviii} (Griffiths, p16).

^{xix} (Griffiths, p.183).

^{xx} (Griffiths, p102-3).

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