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Matter and Movement: Expression as Topological Continuity or A Return to Butades' Wall

Abstract

This paper aims to address the ways in which drawing can be understood as the becoming-expressive of materials, site, and body, over time. The discussion pivots around a series of studies that replace linear or causal relationships – in history, drawing and expression – with topological movement. My approach is largely through a speculative case study. In a rereading of the familiar Butades myth, I examine how a shadow tracing can variously be taken as the first mimetic art with its origins in the urge to “capture”, and, antithetically, as the originary expressive *folding* of matter, site and body.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first presents the Butades myth, identifying the representational problem that lies at the roots of its traditional telling. The next three sections outline a series of topologies that facilitate a discussion of the Butades myth from historical, disciplinary, and expressive perspectives. The final section aims to show the relevance of this discussion to a contemporary drawing practice, using my own drawing research as a case study.

The field of inquiry is that of representational critique. The fold, an image associated with a topological geometry, replaces the relational or signifying disjuncture of representational structures, and suggests a becoming-expressive of subject and object, form and matter.

Towards an open reading: Butades

There is a myth, cited frequently in drawing histories and critiques on representation whose purpose, at least at the time of its first inscription, was to establish an origin to the mimetic disciplines of both drawing and sculpture. The story, told by Pliny in his *Natural History*, recounts Butades, a potter of Corinth, 700 years earlier, whose daughter had the ingenuity to trace a simple contour around the shadow, cast onto the wall, of her lover's profile, on the eve of his departure. Butades, seizing the potential of this technology, took some clay and pressed it into the vacated lasso of the young man's profile, thus putting him into the business of decorative roof tiles¹ and simultaneously crediting him with both the sculpted image and its repetition. In this story drawing is given as an intermediary step toward the sculpted form and we

¹ Williams and Bookind, 2003, p. 5.

might assume that it is on account of this minor role, that it is assigned to Butades' daughter, referred to, wherever this story is cited, by her father's name.

Why not give her a name? *Helene*. Her story bears the weight of a history built downwards from the nineteenth century when Pliny's origin story provided just the setting for stylistic development that supported the art historical narrative. If the eighteenth century thought about art as an ideal, for which individual works were, at best, exemplars, the nineteenth century upheld individual works as testimony to stylistic progress.² Depictions of the myth in both these centuries played openly to these agendas, *Helene* becoming a circulating image with no moment of origin that she could call her own, and no voice, no alternative reason but to provide the context for visual representation. As Victor Stoichita has observed: 'From the Renaissance on Western painting was quite clearly to be the product of the love of the same'.³

First topology: The picture falls out of history

The linear structure of art history, as a succession of style began to turn inward in the twentieth century, and the primacy of the narrative gradually gave way to the voice of the individual work. Despite the efforts of Greenbergian modernism, where 'abstract art emerged as an ultimate triumph of form'⁴ it became less relevant to refer the individual work to an external structure or ideal. As Belting observes, works were no longer interpretations of structures, but structures open to the free flow of interpretation, thus closing the gap between the external reality of the world and the reality of the art object.⁵

As individual artworks began to fold in a complex of passing narratives, linear progression was outmoded by a more topological plane upon which past folded onto the present, style onto style, high culture onto low. While it would be naïve to assume that there are no more "narratives" mediating the individual work – the art museum remains, largely, the cultural arbiter for visual arts, despite being out paced by a post-historical culture – post-modernity has at least made them apparent. I would argue that where these narratives begin to lose opacity, the silent obedience of pictures, at least, is shattered by a cacophony of whispers and mumblings, images waking from a cryogenic trance, to begin to assert what *they* might want. Amongst these images, is that of *Helene*, the artist.

Affording the picture an agency—an alert to animism that W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) raises before setting about the task—requires the peeling away of framing structures, stylistic categories, especially art historical ones, in order to give voice to the particular. Mitchell likens pictures to the marginalized voice of the *other*, and assigns them a gender, pointing to a perceived opposition

² Belting, 2003, p.148.

³ Stoichita, 1997, p.38.

⁴ Belting, 2003, p.27.

⁵ Belting, 2003, p.148.

between woman as image and man as spectator.⁶ The question as to *what* images *want* replaces, as it would in redressing the gender stereotype, the question of what they *mean*. As Mitchell urges, this reversal means to 'question pictures about their desires instead of looking at them as vehicles of meaning or instruments of power'.⁷ Indeed, it is quite a different thing, to approach a work of art attentively, rather than with the conquering spirit of getting-to-grips with its meaning. Images are set in motion, as desire sets subjectivity in motion, freeing it of the chiasmus of identity.

Second Topology: To draw

While the Butades myth has been told often, the interpretations of visual accounts, which appear to have constituted a minor genre between the 17th and 19th centuries, have most often deferred to the mimetic, thus passing over an original act steeped in love and loss, as Hagi Kanaan has observed with both incision and tenderness. Kanaan's analysis stands in contrast to the cool matter-of-factness with which Pliny brushes off the story to get to the part where the potter does his work. *Helene's* gesture, suggests Kanaan, 'is twofold: it does not grow out of a single, self-identical origin, but develops instead from an intertwining of love and loss, *eros* and *thanatos*'.⁸ For Kanaan, *Helene* turns to art as a way of expressing the ineffable, the otherwise irreconcilable tension between love and abandonment, desire and loss. This tension, central to the human condition, therefore becomes the reason *and* the gesture that *Helene* spontaneously enacts under lamplight. In this reading, affect becomes central to the drawing response. It is not just a trigger but a physical constituent, inseparable from the contour that has been the sole focus of the canonical interpretation. The story, therefore, must be read in light of the performative, *methectic* act, to the extent that this drawing that *Helene* is doing – that *Helene* is *becoming* – topologically folds sense into matter, body into language. John Berger understands this transformative magic of drawing: 'The contours you are drawing are no longer marking the edges of what you have seen but what you have become'.⁹ Love is inscribed onto the wall, not as a declaration but as a *becoming declarative* of the site. *Helene* emerges, in the words of David Morris, as 'a body crossed over with place'.¹⁰

Helene's gesture, furthermore, invokes a temporal disruption that is not important to the first interpretation. As Kanaan explains: 'While desire is future oriented – fueled by the promise of the 'not yet' – loss carries the weight of the 'has been,' the past'.¹¹ *Helene's* drawing acts out, in the present, a future that is infused with a present past. While mimetic time might resemble more familiar narrative structures – a before, and an after of the drawing act – it is not through this clock that desire and loss stage their drama. Beyond the

⁶ Mitchell, 2005, p.35.

⁷ Mitchell, 2005, p.36.

⁸ Kanaan, 2013, p..13.

⁹ Berger, 2007, p.3

¹⁰ Morris, 2004, p.102.

¹¹ Kanaan, *ibid*.

inscriptive act, the line begins to dissolve beneath caresses. With love it is inscribed, with loss it is blurred into the wall and mortar takes on the warmth and responsiveness of flesh. We find a similar genesis of the drawing in W.J.T Mitchell's observation of an 11th Century image of Christ: 'Sometimes the disappearance of the object of visual desire in a picture is a direct trace of the activity of generations of viewers...wearing away its face to near oblivion'.¹² He sees this as a folding of the image and the viewer, '...a recirculation of the painted body in the body of the beholder'.¹³ In the way that affect folds world and sense within a topological "plane of consistency" so time gets folded into the same tissue.

It is this notion of folding time into substance that lies at the heart of Michel Serre's topological thinking. Insisting that physics and history both partake in the same time, Serres proposes the image of kneading dough, in which time and energy get bound up in matter and it is through this means that matter changes.¹⁴ Into this "implicate order", as David Bohm has called this non-linear conception of time, the body that acts – that draws – folds itself.¹⁵ In this topology there is no clear separation between the one who acts and the context of that action. In the Deleuzian conception of the fold, evoked through the Leibnizian Monad, there is 'the autonomy of the inside, an inside without an outside'.¹⁶ In the Butades story, we find just such a place. There is no opening onto an outside, from which the artist looks back onto her subject, stationed at a critical distance, for her drawing enacts a circulation, and a gathering, an intensifying.

The problem with the assumption of purpose made on *Helene's* behalf in the mimetic reading of the story is that it sets up the drawing act in deference to a prescribed purpose. The historical precedent it establishes is one that moves drawing and painting toward mimetic mastery, whether this is within the frame of the physical world, up to the twentieth century, or ideological frames after that. Placing sense and affect, love and loss as the central purposes of drawing does make the writing of its history problematic. The inadmissibility of 'any inquiry into the invariants, the historical and/or transhistorical constants' that Hubert Damisch identifies in pictorial *structure*¹⁷ could well be applied to the constancy of human *emotion*.

So what, then, is this image, beyond that which is presented in the story? As I have noted, there are many of them, but I will, for the purposes of this discussion, focus briefly on just two. In Francois Chauveau's, *The Origin of Painting* (1668) we recognise the familiar story with *Helene*, her lover and a third character, a little cupid guiding the girl's right hand, while the left hand rests on the lover's shoulder, forming an open circle that concentrates on the wall. The attention lavished on the shadow – the gentle touch, the scrutiny,

¹² Mitchell, 2005, p.39.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Serres, 1991, p.267.

¹⁵ Bohm, 1980.

¹⁶ Deleuze, 1993, p.28.

¹⁷ Damisch, 2002, p.104.

the leaning towards – gives the appearance that the young man, from which all eyes are turned, has been physically drained of his shadow-soul, which now fuses with the wall as the object of affection.¹⁸ Reflecting on the opaque shadow pools in the paintings of Francis Bacon, Gilles Deleuze observes how the shadow 'escapes from the body like an animal we had been sheltering'.¹⁹ Investing that most elusive index of form with coiled up, latent agency, Deleuze acknowledges an independent force, rather than a silhouetted likeness, of the Protean mirage.

The inclusion of cupid further dissipates the authorial fixity of the drawing, for love is inter-subjective, and does not belong to *Helene* alone. Of a later engraving by Girodet-Trioson (1829) showing the same trio, Stoichita suggests that this love scene portrays a 'transfer of power'.²⁰ The poem appended to this later work ends with the words: '...and the faithful image / Accepted the troth she plighted the model'.²¹ Here Girodet-Trioson entertains the notion of the responsive, active, shadow, the image that desires and loves. If the purpose of drawing in this reading were the transference of power, an investment of Eros within the matter of architectural surfaces, as W.J.T. Mitchell has suggested,²² then it would seem reasonable to look for the story of expression in actions as much as images, in surfaces as much as their inscriptions.

The resistance to this reading can be found both in the canonical shift it implies and in the fact that it downplays the art "product" in favour of the invisible forces central to the methectic act. Rachel Jones describes methexis in referring to indigenous artists of the Australian desert: '...the hand marking of the body or canvas is itself marked by the rhythms of dotting, just as the body tracing patterns on the ground through dance is itself patterned by that movement...'.²³ There is a hierarchical shift here, as the marking moves both ways, relinquishing 'a top-down, hylomorphic model where malleable matter is marked or inscribed from above'.²⁴ It stands in clear contrast to the western framework of valuing art outside the movement of its making, and as a separation of subject from object. As Barbara Bolt has argued, '*methectic* production provides modes of resistance to the hegemony of the European gaze'.²⁵ The binary action implied by the mimetic gesture – subject facing object, or in the hegemonic relation of figure-ground, inscription-surface – expands, in the methectic act, into a topology that involves a folding, rather than a bridging of subject and object, of figure and ground. This is the purpose of drawing in the Butades story, a purpose that manifests in and as

¹⁸ The interconnectedness of shadow and soul is discussed in Stoichita, 1997, Chapter 5: *Man and his doubles*, pp. 153-186

¹⁹ Deleuze, 1993, p.20.

²⁰ Stoichita, 1997, p.155.

²¹ Stoichita, 1997, p.155.

²² Mitchell, 2007: <http://www.antonygormley.com/resources/essay-item/id/114>; accessed October 10, 2013.

²³ Jones, 2000, p.157.

²⁴ Jones, 2000, p.157.

²⁵ Bolt, 2004, p.142.

the body in movement. As David Morris has articulated: 'an inside is expressed in an outside...but the outside is equally expressed in the inside'.²⁶ If there is an origin story here it is the invention of folding, while mimesis, a tracing of the fold in a frozen moment of motility, remains the claim of Butades, the father.

Third Topology: Expression

What is at issue here is a 'difference between mechanical translation and expression'.²⁷ David Morris develops his topology of expression, not specifically through reference to art but in the ways that body-world movement topologically *fold* into new "sens", a term he borrows from Merleau-Ponty, and distinguishes this from translation, the *shifting* of content across different forms; that is, representation. *Helene*, for example, is not translating, or shifting, her lover's image onto the wall, but folding affect and world, inside and out, internal turmoil and external sense: a topological movement of state. In his rigorous inquiry into the topology of expression, David Morris establishes that while expression is *different* from what it expresses it is not *other* than what it expresses.²⁸ He concludes that the difference is to be found in '*the time of movement. What is expressed becomes its expression*'.²⁹ In *Helene's* case, the movement triggered by love, is precisely that love, and movement cannot be unhinged from body. It is in this recognition that we can claim for expression a genuinely creative dimension.

As an artist the implications of this are profound. For one thing, the objects that I create are no longer seen to be *pulled* toward a form existing externally as an idea, the right idea. Rather the very movement and specific qualities of relations through which materials change and through which ideas fall in and out of place, are precisely the forces that propel expressive creative practice. Creative work at least for me, becomes "right"—that *just-so* sense one gets—through achieving an access to movement away from the familiar—language, form, meaning—and not by satisfying an external evaluation.³⁰ If, as Simon O'Sullivan has observed 'a transformation in how we think about art will necessarily alter the topology of how we think ourselves and *vice versa*'³¹ then the work that folds rather than reflects, will suggest subjectivity as a body-world continuity, expressed as a topological movement. The Butades story, as I have extemporised it in this paper, has indicated, to the extent that a myth has the power to indicate, a moment that can account for this occlusion of the topological shape of expression establishing instead a canonical framework for that which can by no means be contained.

²⁶ Morris, 2004, p.100.

²⁷ Morris, 2004, p.83.

²⁸ Morris, 2004. p.84

²⁹ Morris, 2004, p. 84.

³⁰ These ideas about the difference between an external model of evaluation and an internally generative process have an ethical basis developed in Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical philosophy*, (1988).

³¹ O'Sullivan, 2006, p.16.

At stake is the economy of signification that typically shapes our social – and subjective – order. Perhaps the difficulty in breaking through this regime lies in O'Sullivan's observation: 'To invent a language for / of affect is to bring the latter into representation'.³² Michael Taussig recognises the same negating capacity in writing: 'It is as if writing, the epitome of consciousness – obliterates reality, pushing it further...out of reach'.³³ So the difficulty in critiquing, let alone moving beyond this framework lies in the topologically incommensurate languages of representation and affect. It is for this reason that images must be understood as structures of knowing and of desire and be apprehended as such. Drawing, which is where we began, slips effortlessly into the signifying structure of representation through the very system that defines its discipline, that is, the operation of figure-ground. When we view the drawing, we read the marks while the ground into which they extend remains passive, silent, a nowhere place.

While a full exploration of the significance of figure and ground is the subject for another paper, I mention it here in the sense that its disruption forms the premise for a new topology. If the almost polar forces that hold these two operations at bay were to give way, the collapse would yield both different kinds of images and different ways of reading them. The drawing, as a thing in the world, would now be given not only to the internal forces of the composition, but also to external forces to which this paper / mortar / earth are exposed. This idea is not new. Kandinsky proposed the two operations of the drawing as an internal arrangement of parts—a composition—and an external "element" that is the drawing as an object.³⁴ While he rejected this conception of the drawing in favour of the internally reasoned image it gained an appreciation particularly in the 1970s, with artists such as Dorothea Rockburne, Sol Lewitt, Jack Whitten and Marcia Hafif. Claes Oldenberg's earlier *Flag to fold in the pocket*, (1960) is a powerful example of a drawing that insists upon its material body, suggested in its outer form and, indeed, in its name. The topology here is one that stretches and compresses inscription and surface, giving continuity where once there was separation. In Oldenberg's flag, the possibility of folding is given in the title. It is not destined for the wall. It is malleable and its meaning becomes strange and mutable as its body undergoes the forces of intermittent abuse and care.

My current drawing practice and research is strongly encouraged by these observations, which, in turn, have led to my intrigue with the Butades myth. Several years ago, I was making drawings in which the markings wove a complex and tangled abstraction and that looked, in some ways, garden-like, but gardens both from high above and deep within. While I could not deny this association, at the same time I was sure they were not of gardens or any objects of nature for that matter. So how could I understand the way the world "got in" – into my body, which became the expressive instrument – and from there "got into" the drawings?

³² O'Sullivan, 2001, p.131.

³³ Taussig, 2011, p.19

³⁴ Kandinsky, 1979, p.33.

The first real shift in my thinking about drawing, and what it could be to make a drawing, came with this curiosity about the relationship of the expressive work to the world. If I was not making a drawing *of* the world, then perhaps I was making it *with* the world, an inventive rather than a representational intent. This marked a shift in the topology of the work in that the separation of the expression and the expressed began to close. Topologies change with new ruptures and new connections, and this was what had happened when the relationship between drawing and world altered such that they were no longer separated through representational interpretation. The preposition seemed to be the issue: to draw *of* or *with* the world; to draw *on* or *into* the surface. The difference in each set of terms was that which placed "meaning" equal to the ground upon which the drawing was performed.

Thus the reality or body of surface became increasingly present. It was no longer given as a background to be overwritten and given meaning from above, but as the source of meaning, as its own sufficient reason. Graphic marks and lines were soon replaced entirely with the scars extracted through forces applied – creases, crumples, sanding, tears and mendings - according to the material nature of the surfaces (Fig. 1). The physical interaction involved in these processes replaced the intensity of vision that had directed the previous drawings, and in some cases I would work with eyes either closed or averted, bringing to mind Butades daughter, whose senses were heightened in turning away from the object of her devotion, toward the surface of the wall that received, by proxy, her affection. With the same kind of continuity, as opposed to resemblance, that made, in the Butades story, wall become beloved, these drawings seemed to be continuous, rather than resemblant of both skin and earth surface. Perhaps this begins to explain why the touch of skin on the earth yields the sensation, simultaneously and irresolvably, of both skin and earth. The sensation, rather, is externalised in the creative work. Such is the topology that extends between body and world, the folds of which are expressive.

When I first sanded straight through a drawing to the other side, I felt that I had found a hole in the world (Fig. 2). The paper seemed surprisingly deep when this unintentional rift let the light pass. Its "other side" blinked into daylight, and reached through to the upper surface. These drawings are blind and mute if hung against a wall. Light must come through, like an x-ray, revealing the internal organs and the density of substance.

If the two faces of mute surface are alienated by irresolvable difference – the side that faces outward and which is inscribed, and the "other" side – the two faces of these drawings rub up against each other and share a common light, merging at a core that had erstwhile been hidden. There is no longer an action taking place *on* the surface, but an activity *of* and *within* the body of the paper. Given these observations, I would suggest that the topological exercise in my creative practice is one of continuities and ruptures. It is to test the limits of one topology, until, unable to hold out, there is a spill – like the hole in the drawing, or when a wall, foregrounding its inscription, suddenly becomes present. The moment that comes at the brink of this change might

be called a threshold, and the change itself, a line of flight, in which opens a new topology and possibility for movement.

Conclusion

Recognising the topological dimensions of expressive practice, and indeed an expressive life, has implications for the ways in which I imagine, enact and reflect on art – and life – as a process of research, an affirmation of the possibility for something new to happen and to become known. In this paper, I have concentrated on the transformation of mute matter into expression through a body, moved by love, and argued that this transformation is topological: the movement of state, rather than movement through translation. Topology is presented as a geometry through which the image can move beyond the representational. The Butades myth has provided a pretext for these two ways of apprehending the image. One of these views demands a reading of the marks, and the other of the surface.

In my drawing practice, questions about the movement of the world through the body and into the drawing, have led me to consider the practice as a topological rather than a representational one, where surfaces can be bodies that fold and change, beyond being the recipients of images.

If there is a logic to expressive practice it must be a topo-logic. Topology is, after all, the only geometry that, by definition, is enacted in time and through change. To imagine a practice topologically, is to imagine subject and world woven together in space and changing through the involution of time, within a movement that we call expression. As such, drawing can be seen as much the becoming of the subject “who draws” as the becoming expressive of the surface that is drawn.

Biographical Statement

Sharon Jewell is currently undertaking research as a practice-led PhD Candidate at QUT, Brisbane. Her thesis explores the possibilities of expression within surfaces, developing a theoretical and poetic interface between the drawing surface, geographical and architectural surfaces and the skin. Her creative practice is thus a merging of drawing and sculpture. Sharon completed her Masters at QUT in 2011, where she developed her thesis around emergence principles in creative practice. Sharon also teaches in Visual Arts at QUT. Her studio and home are based on Russell Island on Southern Moreton Bay.

Illustrations



Fig. 1. Sharon Jewell, *Map 3*, 2013. Tracing paper, 210 X 210cm, Artist's studio, Russell Island, (Sharon Jewell.)

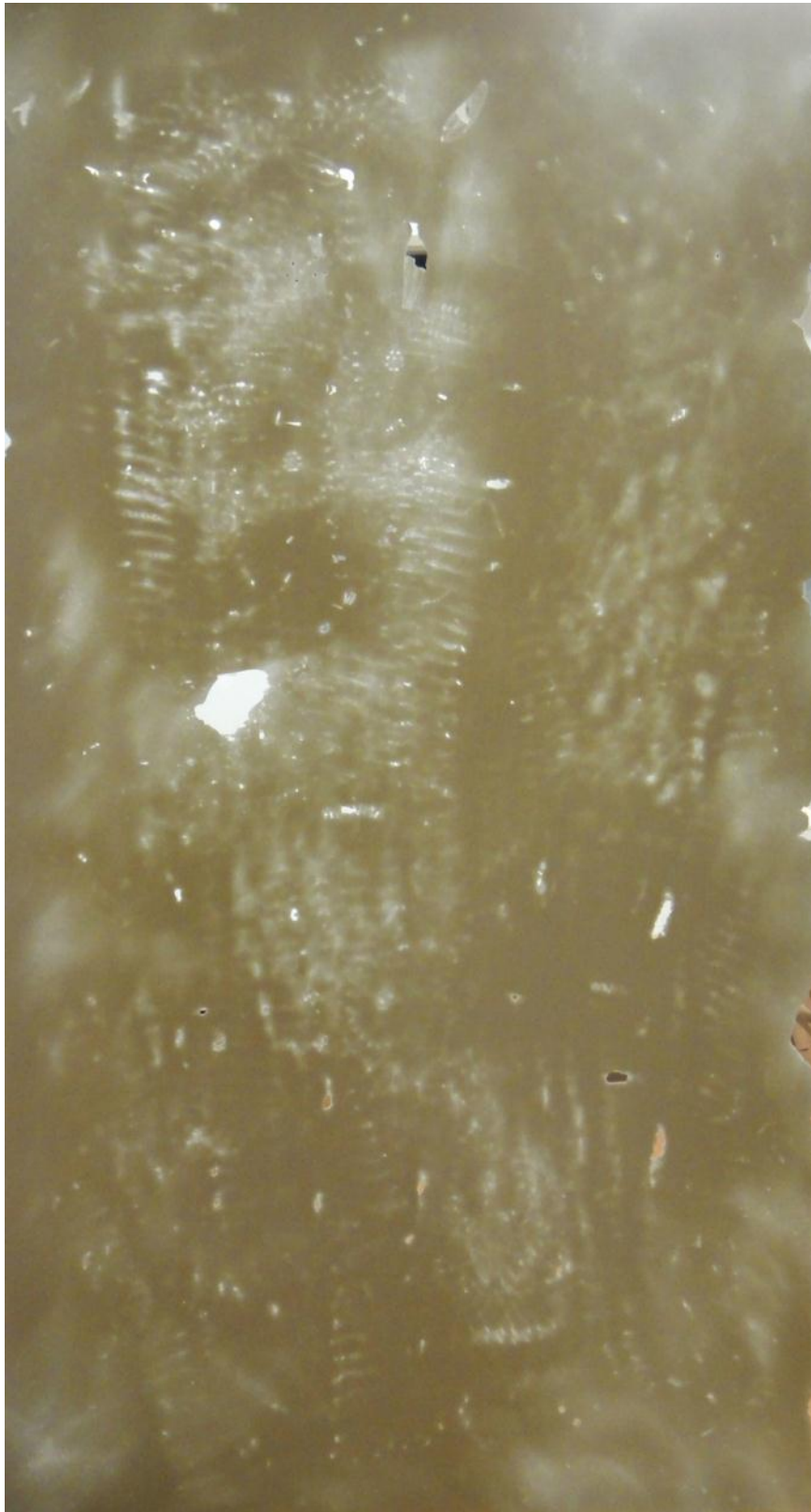


Fig. 2. Sharon Jewell, *Shallow Body Deep*, 2013. Fabriano paper, 150 X 75cm, Artist's studio, Russell Island, (Sharon Jewell.)

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