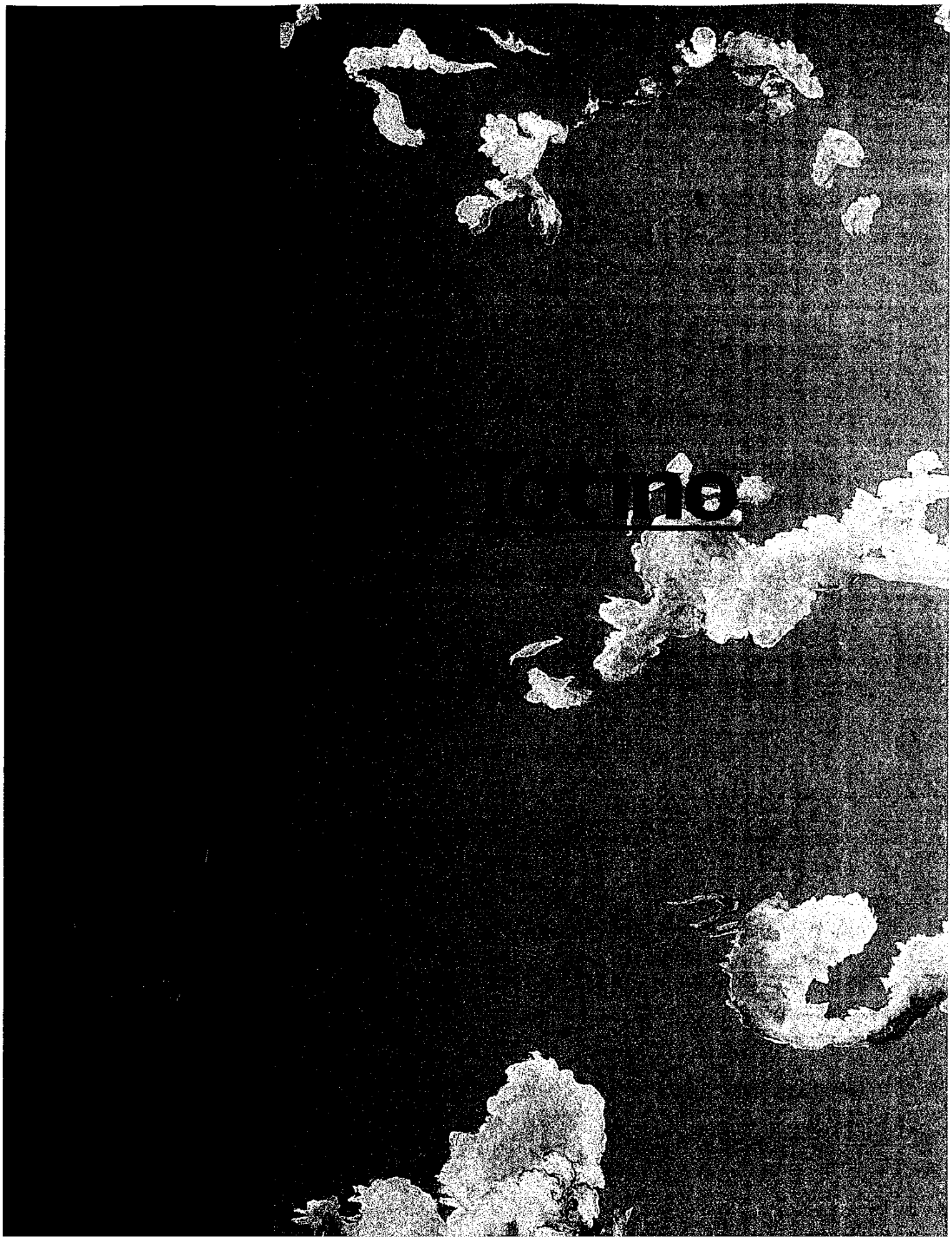

Judy Radul, Regina Kant, 'Body Paint', *Mina Totino*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada, 1996

Acknowledgements

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Previous Pages: *Maguffin* (detail, 1994) oil on canvas
Cover: *Deep Surface* (2 details, 1996) oil on PVC; and a snapshot of the cliffs at Rügen

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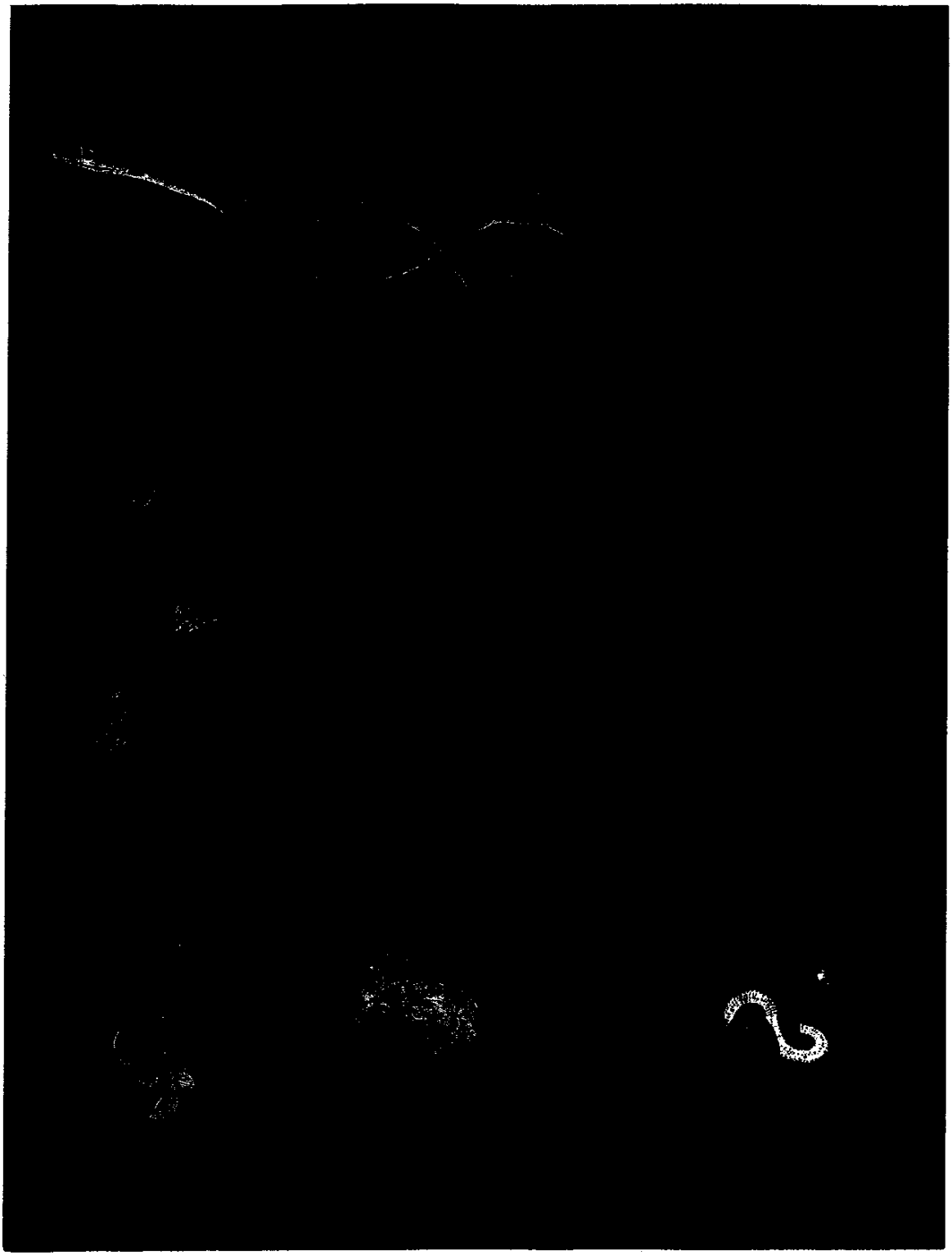

A Bit of Strange (1996)
oil on PVC
168cm x 127cm

Judy Radul, Regina Kant, 'Body Paint', *Mina Totino*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada, 1996

Body Paint

by Regina Kant

Chapter 1

> It is an oft-repeated art myth that Schwarzkogler died through piece by piece self-castration. In fact he fell or jumped out a window. The original disseminator of the myth, Robert Hughes, recently remarked, "The idea of anybody unmanning himself in this way is so horrendous and weird that I think it developed a kind of credibility. Who on earth would want to make that up? . . . I just thought, Well, here is this ultranut taking to the final extreme the gesture of van Gogh with his ear. . . ."
>
> *The New Yorker*

Could a painting at once be the murderer, the grave, *and* the murder weapon? The caller's garbled invective indicated that that is what he believed. He mumbled a few other names, but he spelled out T-O-T-I-N-O and even described where her studio was. He insisted that they would find human remains in the painting.

Ruth Kohl was called in by the curator of the gallery. She was a friend of a friend. She had gone to art school in the early 1980s, but hadn't thought much about art since. The curator asked whether she could look into the case, quietly check around a bit. (A funding drive was on, and he didn't want a scandal to ruin the opening of Totino's upcoming exhibition.) Ruth, who had lately been thinking of trying her hand at crime writing, immediately saw the case as a possible story line. She didn't see much in the real facts, but she knew the reading public was willing to believe in the coupling of art and crime. In the mind of the populace, art is concerned with acts of concealment and perversion anyway.

Ruth was always interested in being able to solve a puzzle by staring at it long enough to find a pattern. She decided to keep an open mind as to what the crime

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was. But . . . that sad feeling behind her eyes usually indicated death in the air. She jotted down some notes. It was her habit to note her scattered thoughts. She was always noting this or that: the names of songs, books people said were worth reading, and movies that she wanted to rent.

Clues: human remains found in heavy impasto on canvas – the painting tested positive for liver, gall bladder, intestines. Bone and blood cells were also identified – as were feathers, piss, chalk, zinc, lead, copper, silver, and a variety of animal remains all ground up so fine as to be noticeable only at the cellular level. Prime suspect: the painter. Claims only to have attempted a simulation of the Chanel lipstick colour Pretty in Pink.

Death can certainly be in the air. In the air between your eyes and the object. In the leaded air, thick with the way everybody else sees, breaking and making your reception with a parallax effect.

Ruth read the quote she had entered into her notebook only that morning:

> Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and authorship of "objective knowledge." . . . A corollary of the insistence that ethics and politics covertly or overtly provide the basis for objectivity in the sciences as a heterogeneous whole, and not just in the social sciences, is granting the status of agent/actor to the "objects" of the world. Actors come in many and wonderful forms. Accounts of a "real" world do not, then, depend on a logic of "discovery," but on a power-charged social relation of "conversation." The world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favour of a master decoder. The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read.

The quote was from an essay by Donna Haraway, entitled "Situated Knowledges." Ruth hadn't completely given up on the kind of critical analysis that art school had encouraged, but when she jotted the quote down it was meant as a challenge to herself, to her profession. Could she be a detective without assuming a position of superiority, the master decoder? Wouldn't it be wise not to see the "answer" to any crime as fixed outside of herself? . . . But now the quote seemed to relate to her way of looking at art. The painting was not something dead, outside herself, to be objectively decoded; rather, it called her into a conversation.

In the interrogation room: Totino insisted someone was playing a macabre joke, some figurative painter thwarted by going to the wrong art school in the wrong era, no doubt. She had given a talk the week before and had discussed her early work, which in keeping with feminist inquiry in the late 1980s, had posed questions about media images of women. Checking her notes she confirmed that she had also spoken of the objectifying gaze of the painter, the feminization, the domination of the subject. She conjectured that someone had taken her at her word when she mentioned the violence of vision. She admitted that the painting was hers, but she swore she used the paint right out of the tube! Investigators were dispatched to the Tintoretto manufacturing plant. They didn't turn up anything of interest except that it is not unusual for pigment to come from natural sources, primarily mineral.

Note: Was the white "chalk" in another work actually calcium from human bones? Negative. Note: It is usually *black* paint that may contain carbonized bone.

Ruth met Mina Totino the day after her questioning at the police station. Totino took Ruth up to her studio and graciously showed her through several years of painting. She didn't offer interpretations. But the range of materials used and the names of the pieces gave Ruth something to think about. The room was thick with turpentine vapours, bringing Ruth's art school years nostalgically to mind. The chemical smell also made her dizzy and thirsty. It certainly would be enough to knock someone out, she thought. Her head throbbed as she traced her way back down through the maze of wooden stairs to exit the gigantic warehouse where Totino had one of hundreds of studios.

Private Eye Ruth Kohl lives in an apartment on Great Northern Way. She bought it several years ago before the prices in Vancouver really skyrocketed. The building looked like a bunker nestled in a not-very-auspicious hill. It had a nice view of the mountains, even though one of the major trucking and commuter routes in the city ran by her doorstep. The sign that advertised the suites for sale had said "If you lived here – you'd be home by now." With a slogan like that, Ruth thought, the apartments must be pretty bad; but every time she drove by that sign, she did wish she was already home. When the real-estate agent showed her around the plain suite, Ruth realized that while being outside a bunker can be intimidating, being inside can be quite calming.

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A recent sojourn in Toronto, complete with false accusations of professional misconduct, had blackened the name Ruth Kohl within the industry. Now the only P.I. jobs she was able to land bordered on entrapment. She went from store to store, watching for employees who were pocketing spare change from the till. Sometimes she had to go to bars and do the same thing. The next day, it was often hard to reconstruct what had happened from her notes. Ruth had faith that things would pick up.

Although Toronto was Canada's biggest city, Vancouver had more crime per capita. The money from primary industries trickled in from around the province and by the time it slid into the till at some downtown watering hole, it was hot and dirty. The anxious climate was made worse by the fact that these brutal industries were dying and the only growth fields were cancer research, sushi chefs, environmental protection, and digital industries. But what logger really wanted to get retrained for desktop publishing? And what fisherman really wanted to watch tires spin at the AirCare testing facility? Their "retraining" had made the citizens even more prone to anger and crime. The price of cigarettes had to be rolled back because competition from the black market just got too big. When pushed, most people will tell you most crime is just the government getting cut out of the food chain.

Except murder. Murder is a different kind of crime.

Ruth got a catalogue from Totino's previous exhibition and started to read the first essay. The exhibition had been of an earlier body of work, some of which was included in the current exhibit. The show consisted of paintings on stretched canvas, on silk veils (hung from floor to ceiling), and several small paintings on gyprock. The works were called *Vulture Love* and *Dress to Kill.* The essay was by Judy Radul, a local poet who occasionally tried her hand at writing about the visual arts. Ruth scanned Radul:

> To start from anything other than paint, you might choose a specific font. . . . I imagine the paintings as protagonists in a film, a not so innocent part of the *mise en scene;* like the portrait in *Vertigo*. . . . Things happen *in* the paintings but also in front of and around them. . . . How does Totino catch up to flesh, achieve fleshiness, become fleshed out, *real material body*. Flesh tone is represented by paint; face paint and oil paint. Painting becomes a cosmetic, decorative activity. "Truth to materials" is reduced to a masquerade. . . . of Dutch genre painting, Hegel writes:

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But what at once claims our attention in matters of this kind when art displays it to us, is precisely this pure shining and appearing of objects as something produced by the spirit which transforms in its innermost being the external and sensuous side of all this material. For instead of real wool and silk, instead of real hair, glass, flesh, and metal, we see only colours; instead of all the dimensions requisite for appearance in nature, we have just a surface, and yet we get the same impression which reality affords.[1]

In *Dress To Kill,* Totino is acting explicitly against the metamorphosis described above. She adds a number of real, feminine, objects to the painting's surface, refusing to engage in the "transformation of the so-called insignificant object into an art object . . . this transformation relies on the superiority of the spiritual to the natural."[2] She insists on the power of the female and material against the regime of the abstract, heroic, masculinized, unified "surface."

The objects in *Dress to Kill* impede physical penetration while intimating visual access to the female figure which lurks behind the richly textured surface. The fetishist materials affixed to the plaster block or constrict various points of entrance and exit to this body.

While she waited for her laundry to finish the spin cycle, Ruth read on. (Even in her bathrobe she felt quite comfortable in the laundry room of the apartment complex. The sardine-can ashtrays reminded her of a simpler time.)

In her series *Vulture Love*, silk-screens on eight sheer silk veils, Totino favours the veil over a purified "veil-less nakedness."[3] The dual and duplicitous over the true. She again manages to refer to, yet sidestep, a representation of the sublime as nonornamented form. Totino plays a game of presence and absence with this body which is beyond the image. Historically, the form of the female body has certainly not been beyond image but rather as matter for endless representation. Replacing the female body in this work are the veils on which are screened what Totino describes as an "aggressive desiring language" and diagrammatic images of the organs of speech: the larynx, lungs, and throat. Feminine desire is therefore insinuated through the antimatter of the female body: the female voice. Like drag queens, the veils "sing" to show their incongruity, the frustrations of incompatible interior and exterior. The brutal and disjunctive female voices become incredulous as they emanate from these pliant, diaphanous, ghostly forms.

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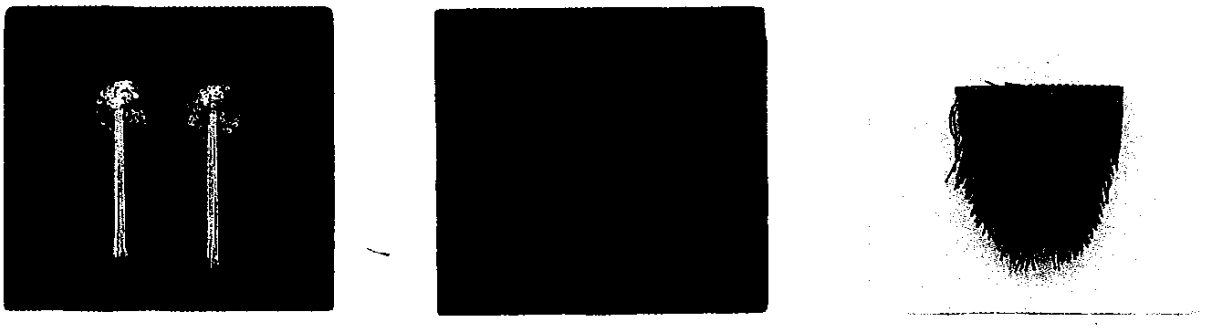
Ruth was a little intrigued, a little baffled, but not by the writing. She'd thought she'd left art behind; yet she drifted into an occupation that also relied on observation and fantasy. Matching the colour of lipstick on the butt of a cigarette at the scene of the crime to . . . . Of course, the police were the ones who really dealt with hard evidence. The private investigator usually had to rely on written affidavits or interviews. She was left to piece it together from words, the layout of the landscape, and the relationships between the individuals involved. The connection between disparate events was what Ruth enjoyed discerning. She appreciated her mind's ability to move from the abstract to the specific, the lofty to the base. What frustrated her was the gap, the in-between. She was never able to grasp the sensation of moving between the two states of mind. She found her own mind exciting but unreliable. She never knew which pole she would find herself at when she went to think or speak.

Very little was happening with the case. Totino hadn't been charged, due to lack of evidence. The police had put the facts of the case into their computer but until someone reported a body missing, the crime didn't exist. Furthermore, the budget cutbacks to the Vancouver City Police meant that the cops were almost continually occupied with their own type of fund-raising. Everyone was on traffic patrol.



Dress to Kill (1992/93)
oil, etc., on drywall
six sections, 31cm x 33cm each

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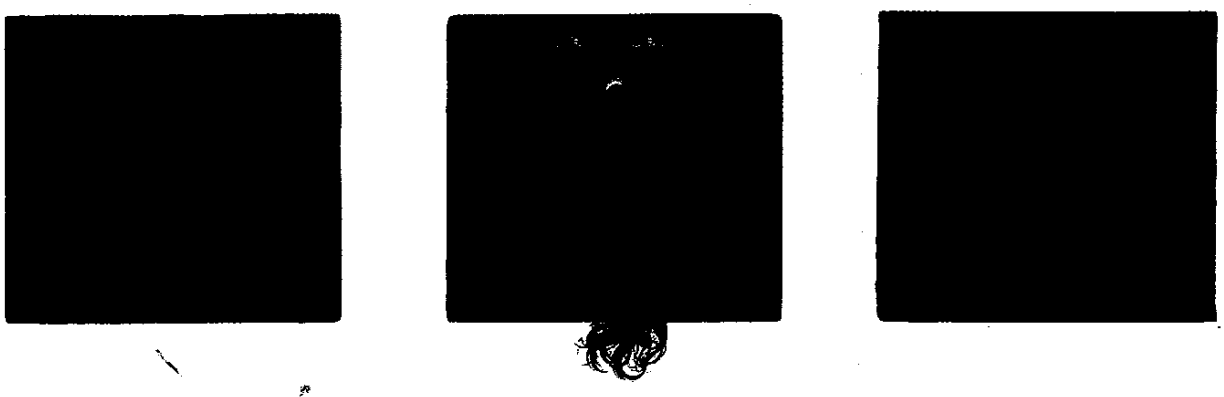
Photo radar and drinking-driving "counter attacks" had upped the amount of fine money received in the last month by 30 per cent.

The exhibition received slightly more press that the average exhibition, but no scandal erupted. Some animal-rights activists claimed to have poisoned the Thanksgiving turkeys, so, in an absurd and futuristic turn, armed security guards were guarding the meat sections of supermarkets. The abortion pill, long in use in Britain and France, was making headlines as its testing for the Canadian market was about to begin. Human and animal flesh *was* at issue. But the flesh paint case hadn't caught the media's imagination. Perhaps the gallery's well-known association with one of the city's top-gun criminal lawyers (a patron of the arts) made them wary of libel. A few extra viewers were drawn in through a sense of the macabre. They asked about the painting and were disappointed to learn that it belonged to a body of work that was not represented in this exhibition.

Ruth received a modest cheque in the mail and a thank you for her report. (The report had ruled out any artists who had been at the talk as possible perpetrators of this "hoax.") But as her mind was still at work – and she wasn't, for she had been fired over a sexual entanglement with one of the bartenders she was supposed to be spying on – Ruth decided to go see the Totino exhibition. Maybe she could find something to use in her novel.



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Chapter 2

> To value the sublimities of the rugged and/or the small is not to valorize the detail, whose distinctive feature from the perspective of the sublime is not its wondrous "minuteness," but rather its uncanny tendency to introduce eye-catching differences within the mind-expanding spectacle of perfect uniformity and proportion. By dividing and dispersing the spectator's attention – and if the argument according to the Ideal is focused on the Artist, the argument according to the Sublime is a reception aesthetics, focused on the pole of the receiver, the decoder – the detail blocks the dynamic rush of the Imagination, fatigues the eye and in the end induces anxiety rather than the elevating pleasure of the Sublime.
>
> Naomi Schor

Ruth went to the gallery. She imagined watching the paintings like old men watch the ocean's waves endlessly approach the shore. You never got the feeling that the ocean was watching back, that it expected anything. Ruth wanted to feel just a little deadened, muffled, disconnected. The big, dark, foggy, abstract chalk landscapes she had seen in Totino's studio made her think of this. The downpour of westcoast rain on her windshield brought it back as she searched for a parking spot near the gallery's entrance.

Ruth smoked a cigarette in the car. The fact that you can look out a window reminds you that you look out of your own body. The apparent movement from inner to outer feels fertile. She butted out her cigarette and went in.

The first thing Ruth did was make a quick tour of the gallery. Out of habit, she decided on an emergency exit. Totino's work took up the three rooms of the gallery. Two of the rooms were varied in their content, but one room was full of works that were primarily white marks on black ground. The only spots of colour in this room were a red-beaded vertical rectangle and a large horizontal rectangle made of purple feathers. The only other colour came from a slim young woman wearing tight pink vinyl pants and chunky platforms. She was standing in front of one of the paintings. To her own chagrin, Ruth noticed that the fabric was so form-fitting as to give the girl a small cleft between her legs. She quickly tore her sly eyes away from this sexual outline.

Totino's work spanned a number of years. The pieces loosely corresponded to different genres – still life, landscape – and earlier there had been some portraiture.

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Traditionally, genres reflect a social hierarchy: historical themes being the most valued, worthwhile topics, and still life at the bottom of the heap. This system was institutionalized in the French Academy. But it still persists. There is a sense that "flower paintings" are bourgeois, banal, feminine, and amateurish. Totino capitalized on all these negative connotations and even flaunted them.

The Radul essay had mentioned interruption as a strategy in Totino's earlier work. Her use of monochrome had been discussed as disruptive:

> The eye of the cowboy rides the range of the monochrome. He buys it like a vast prairie. No lines of perspective confirm his presence. But that kind of open space a cowboy knows is his. His ability to roam confirms his mastery, the rightness of his place within it all. The barmaid seeing the same painting might equate it with anorexia, restraint, or the results of a "cleansing." As one who has played the role of decorative surface, been pictured as carnal, unclean, and untrue, she sees not an empty space of infinite possibility but the obliterated feminine stretched tight in front of her.
>
> Totino's paintings sometimes *include* monochromes. She creates a background for the monochrome to be seen against. In Totino's work the monochrome represents barred female pleasure rather than "unspeakable" historical condensation. The monochromes appear as interruptions, rather than endless expanse. The monochrome once posed as the final resting place for painting, a pinnacle from which any other gesture would mark a retreat. But beyond the end there was "the ending" – which doesn't end but halts us at the last moment with tiny bars that we hold onto as we look into the painted set that forms a ground, a context, for *the end.*

Ruth agreed that there was a vertiginous feeling to being surrounded by Totino's works. Her "painting" was presently even more full of interruptions: gulps, guts, jizz shots, stuck shutters, white blobs, black bars, thousands of tiny beads, millions of garish feathers, and oxidized piss. Ruth understood the impulse. She remembered as a little kid in Montessori kindergarten she had been encouraged to colour very neatly inside geometric templates, all the lines going in the same direction. One day, after a perfect bout of "colouring in," she scratched an angry horizontal across all

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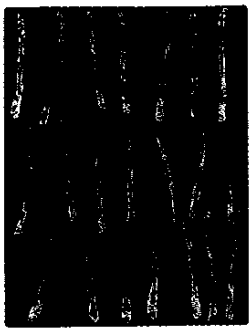

Deep Surface (1996)
oil on PVC
eight sections 70cm x 53cm each

the vertical strokes. She took it to show Mrs. George. Typically, the response was "That's nice, dear, too bad you ruined it." She thought her deliberate gesture was obvious; but Mrs. George only saw it as a mistake. Satisfaction and disappointment commingled in this new, ruined image. So Ruth understood the bad attitude that makes someone piss on their own paintings or blob a big cum shot of white zinc onto the pretty flowers *or* make a purposely awkward arrangement of images that jump cut between each other. She knew these gestures were more reasoned than a childish outburst; but at the same time, they validated angry refusals of order and nicety. A female voice interrupted Ruth's reverie: "In the more recent series, such as *Deep Surface*, paintings interrupt *each other* as well as having interruptions within them. In *Lisa Simpson's Pearls*, cell-phones and beepers rhythmically interrupt *and* construct an identity for the body that responds to their call."

A very beautiful woman, evidently a professor, was touring her class of university students around the gallery. She was speaking about the paintings with eloquent authority. Ruth tuned in as the woman continued: "This interruptive logic has roots in photography and film – in between images the shutter comes down. But as in film, the shuttering, or stuttering of these images is the defining action by which a

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sense of the whole is produced. The moving images are made manifest only through their rhythmic flickering, which binds binary presence and absence into an apparent continuum."

Note: Has interruption replaced refusal? Is this depressing?

"Many of Totino's paintings from the early 1990s depict tongues, intestinal tracts, and internal organs. The paintings tend to have a parchment-coloured ground reminiscent of both flesh and paper. The images thus have a correlation with words and tattoos." In fact, Ruth knew Totino *had* sometimes used words and tattoo imagery in her paintings. "Interestingly, much tattoo imagery is a contemporary manifestation of iconography inherited from still-life painting. Snakes, lizards, frogs, flies, flowers, and skulls are part of the symbology of good and evil, salvation and mortality, which encoded still-life painting in the seventeenth century.

"The snake, the toad, and the lizard, etc., are the 'unclean animals' mentioned in Leviticus. . . . Because of God's curse, which rested on the serpent ever since the Fall of Man (Genesis 3:14), it had negative connotations and was regarded as an incarnation of evil and, as such, was a favourite subject for depicting evil."[4] Ruth had jotted down a few notes at the public library. The book had said that in

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Dutch still lifes from the seventeenth century, salvation was present in the form of the colourful, the lively, flowers, butterflies, and the lilies, which "had been a fixed attribute of the Mother of God since the late Middle Ages." Basically our attitudes toward the imagery haven't changed, thought Ruth. Recalling her art-school days, she remembered heated discussions about the shifting relation of figure to ground in modernist painting as a kind of battle between good and evil, between the abstract and the literal, the material and the illusionistic. Discussions of the flatness of the canvas vs. the decadent, coercive illusion of the image weren't something Ruth felt passionate over, then or now.

The woman continued to speak. Her students regarded her with rapt attention. "The imagery in Totino's paintings – references to the flesh (taking the form of internal organs, reptiles, amphibians, decorative elements) and references to minimalism and the monochrome – have endured for the last several years. What has shifted is the actual material that Totino uses to paint on. Previously she has worked on drywall, silk, and canvas. The current works are primarily on canvas and polyvinyl chloride (PVC). Canvas is a soft, woven surface – a surface that if not handmade is at least possible to make by hand. The absolutely smooth, poured surface of the polyvinyl chloride is machine made, undifferentiated. Stretched, this material provides a very taut surface, the kind of surface often used to describe postmodernism itself. It is like the surface of the screen, which can appear flat or deep according to whether it is on or off. From one angle or another, the PVC "sky" behind the clouds in *Deep Surface* is pearlescent or a grey so flat it becomes negative space. Canvas is a relative of denim and other densely woven cotton fabrics suited to durable garments for manual labour. PVC is a fetish fabric and difficult to work with. PVC is for unnatural bodies; it doesn't breathe or withstand repeated washing. The tightness produces a sexualized surface that invites touch but repels penetration. Its smooth, slippery, opaque, taut surface acts as a barrier. On this surface, Totino hangs organs. As if once excluded from the inside of this perfect body, they return to haunt its façade. Are there any questions?" Ruth realized she was staring at the woman in the same doe-eyed manner as her students.

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Chapter 3

> Probably no aspect of the sensual and intellectual makeup of the human animal has led to more discovery of physical, biological, and chemical phenomena than the enjoyment of colour. . . . Protochemical writings such as the Egyptian papyrus in Leyden and the early ninth-century Mappae Clavicula tell of dyeing various materials, of colouring metals, glass and stones, of corroding copper and lead to make green and white pigments, and of reacting sulphur with mercury to yield vermilion. . . . The green of grass and the red of blood were behind the discoveries of the central roles played by chlorophyll and haemoglobin in the chemistry of life.
>
> Cyril Stanley Smith

Lola Donatta had to stand for long hours at the paint factory. When she got home she found it very hard to think about things. To think about things you need to care about them – and that takes energy. She had been too drunk to think about conception – or barring conception. She enjoyed red wine from the Burgundy region. It wasn't really an abortion. Mary had just told her where to massage around her knees if she didn't want the baby "to stick." Then, standing at her station, she felt a sharp pain. She went quickly to the staff washroom. But it was too late. Her red panties were overflowing with blood and clumps of tissue. Despite the pain, she was relieved. She sat on the toilet for a few minutes, then wadded up her soaked underwear and stuck it in the pocket of her smock. When she got back to the vat of red that she was mixing, almost without thinking, she quickly dumped the whole mess in. In a matter of seconds it was through the grinder and finely intermingled with the cadmium red and the oil. Although there had been talk of urine testing, the company had yet to install video surveillance.

Lola discovered through a friend in quality control that her boyfriend Robert, who had flown into an irrational rage when she told him about the incident, had tracked down the batch of paint she had dropped their spawn into. It wasn't hard to do. Because of colour matching, all the batches were carefully numbered and their distribution charted. He had apparently been making some crazy phone calls to painters in the area where the paint was sold. The paint had been sold in Canada, and Robert was traced through a stolen phone card he was using. Of course he wasn't fired, just moved to another department.

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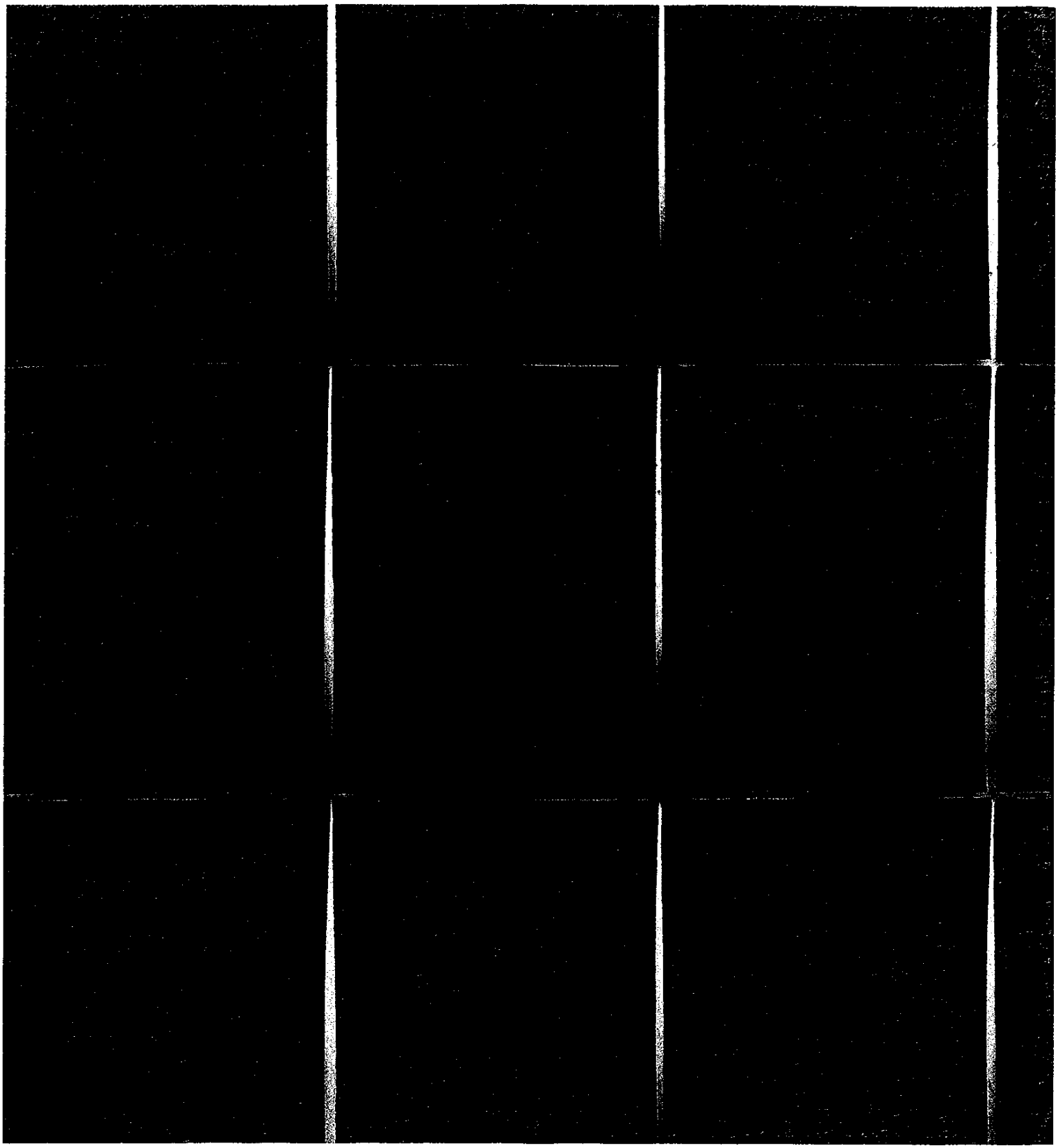

Detention (1996)

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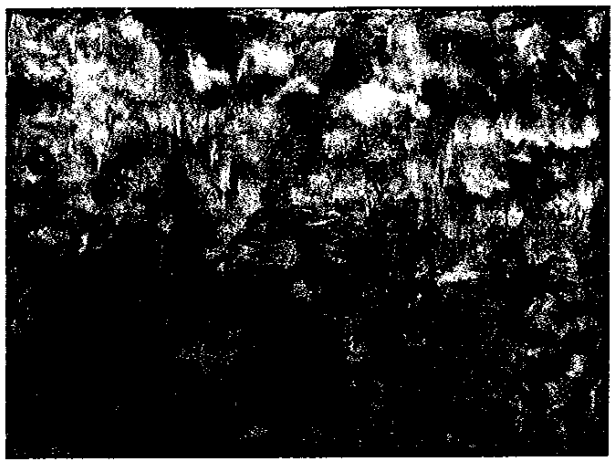
A few months later Lola heard about human remains being found in a painting, but she didn't think that could have had anything to do with her. Who knew *what* that was. They could never explain why the faecal count was so high in the average American hamburger. Perhaps the world is reaching a state of human saturation, she thought.

As Ruth came up to each painting, she read the title and then positioned herself squarely in front of it.



Untitled (1996)
Rügen chalk, poppyseed and stand oil on canvas
170cm x 229cm

White marks on a black ground described the two large bodies of work that were in the next room she entered. Through her conversation with the painter, Ruth knew that the abstract chalk paintings were made from chalk taken from a spot on the German coast favoured first by the Romantics and later by the Nazis. This connection made her consider a link between chalk, calcium, and human remains. But she knew forensics had already checked that out. These works were full of soft, brushy, indeterminate shapes. "On their own, they would seem to present an authentic abstract landscape, but in this configuration their companion pieces call their 'authenticity' into question." The class had filed in behind her.

The other chalk work was called *Detention*. In this work the artist had written out the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant's *Theory of the Analytic of the Sublime*. She had written on squares of black paper with white chalk. These pages took up one whole wall, and still there was a stack of pages piled on a table nearby. Nothing seemed farther from the sublime than this endless piece work, the repeating by rote of someone else's words. The lecturer was gaining steam as she spoke, her voice was clear and melodious: "The artist and the viewer are put in the position of naughty child, awed by the volume and authority of the text. In Totino's manifestation, the complex ranking of the 'faculties' that Kant attempts

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is equalized as an endless string of words, all of the same size and shape. This piece engages *and* contravenes some of the conventions of the sublime. Whether this text opens out in front of you as an infinity chased by your enabling imagination or whether in the face of this magnificent inflation you snap shut depends upon a power relation." Yes, are you the hand that writes or the mind that overcomes? Ruth wondered. She focused on some of the neat white handwriting:

> Bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like, make our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with their might. But, provided our own position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.

> In the immeasurableness of nature and the incompetence of our faculty for adopting a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its realm, we found our own limitation. *But with this we also found in our rational faculty another non-sensuous standard, one which has that infinity itself under it as a unit, and in comparison with which everything in nature is small, and so found in our minds a pre-eminence over nature even in its immeasurability.* (Kant, §28)

In this writing, Ruth was surprised to recognize the blatant struggle between the natural, so readily identified with the feminine, and the imagination or mind, so often identified with the immaterial and masculine. This struggle for big, but not too big, put Ruth in mind of a kind of philosophical Goldilocks: too hot, too cold, too hard, too soft. She really hated the way her mind worked. On another part of the wall the word "monstrous" caught Ruth's eye:

> For, in a representation of this kind, nature contains nothing monstrous (nor what is either magnificent or horrible) – the magnitude apprehended may be increased to any extent provided imagination is able to grasp it all in one whole. *An object is monstrous where by its size it defeats the end that forms its concept.* (Kant, §26)

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Words like "vulgar," "commonplace," and "monstrous" belonged to an ancient vocabulary as far as Ruth was concerned. What size is proportionate to my concept, she wondered? Again, the image of Goldilocks. But this time with monstrously big thighs. She banished the thought.

The only other works in the room, the two colourful "anti-paintings" made of red beads and purple feathers, mitigated the reductive drama of black and white, sublimity and subjugation, which *Detention* and *Theory of the Analytic of the Sublime* played at. Their teacher continued, her eyes bright. "The beaded work is titled *A Class Act.* This title references both the labour involved in beading and the class politics of fashion. 'Classy' is an adjective often used to pitch glamorous clothes to middle- and lower-class women, as if by wearing them one could jump social rank." Despite these references, the beads made Ruth think of blood. She thought their colour added something vital to the bloodlessness of the black-and-white images. As they moved toward the diptych *Boogie Wonderland,* Ruth noticed several of the students reach out to run their hands along the swaying feathers. The woman continued, smoothing down the front of her grey silk jacket as she spoke: "The purple boa consolidates the image of the unclean snake and the redemptive bird into one campy fashion accessory. There is something about the manifold nature of the beads and the feathers . . . they present an alternate sublime, feminized, multitudinous, and bawdy. 'Unnatural' if nature is removed from the interests of gender, class, and money. Even the sombre chalk works are more than a tongue-in-cheek conceptual version of an overdetermined sublime. Via the use of real chalk from a real landscape to represent this highly abstract imaginary vista, Totino has condensed and complicated signification. Again, the reference to work and the deliberate confounding of matter and image belies an *interest* and an *intentionality* that the traditional sublime is supposed to eschew. The lowly labour of beading can't match the heroics of marking the canvas; yet, through opposition, it calls those gestural 'strokes' into question. The beads and the feathers hold together fragile dichotomous invitations – to the heterogeneous as well as the unified, to beauty and truth as well as a superficial, mass-marketed glamour." Ruth felt stretched between awe and seduction.

Oh, Mrs. Detail, you dressed for sex; oh, Mr. Vast, you dressed for death. Ruth's mind continued its literal narratives. She felt a growing emptiness in her stomach. She remembered she had invited her neighbour, Monica, a digital designer, over

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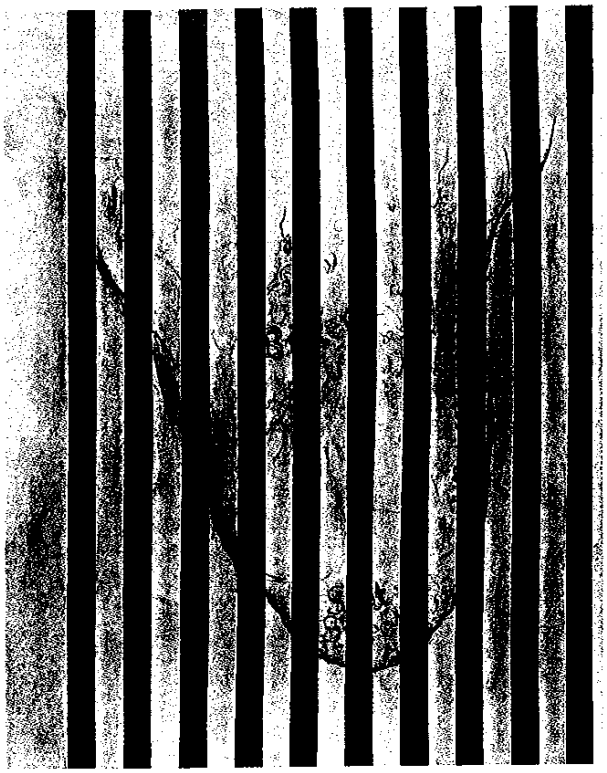
for dinner; they could watch *Law & Order* if it wasn't pre-empted by the World Series again.

Bonething. An upside down skull with an impossibly complex, frothy wave of water bursting out of the lower half of the jaw. The confrontation of different, almost incompatible textures appeared repeatedly in Totino's pictures. "This theme reiterates the body's difficult relationship to representation. Drywall and flesh, bone and water, fringe and canvas. In *Bonething*, the hard form of bone, which although inside oneself remains largely unavailable to experience, contrasts with the frothy, lively, decorative burst of water. Water itself presents a kind of inseparable totality." Ruth remembered the saying "Water can't wash water," which refers to the fact that as much as the definition of an object comes from the object's comparison to what surrounds it, water cannot be defined in relation to water, because water is known by its ability to wash over and around things. It only becomes itself when it comes in contact with what it is not. Ruth really doubted that Totino was thinking along these lines. She saw another possible reading: Death as delineated form, life as ornamental *foam*. Surf breaking the surface.



Languish (1994)
oil on canvas
244cm x 193cm

The class moved off into another part of the gallery for a discussion period. Ruth was again alone. She remembered another pair of works that she had seen in the artist's studio. She wondered why they hadn't made it into the exhibition. Was it due to an aesthetic squeamishness on the part of the curator? They were works that used real urine and very unreal ejaculate. Ruth looked back in her notes to check their titles. She closed her eyes and pictured the works. She had an excellent visual memory.

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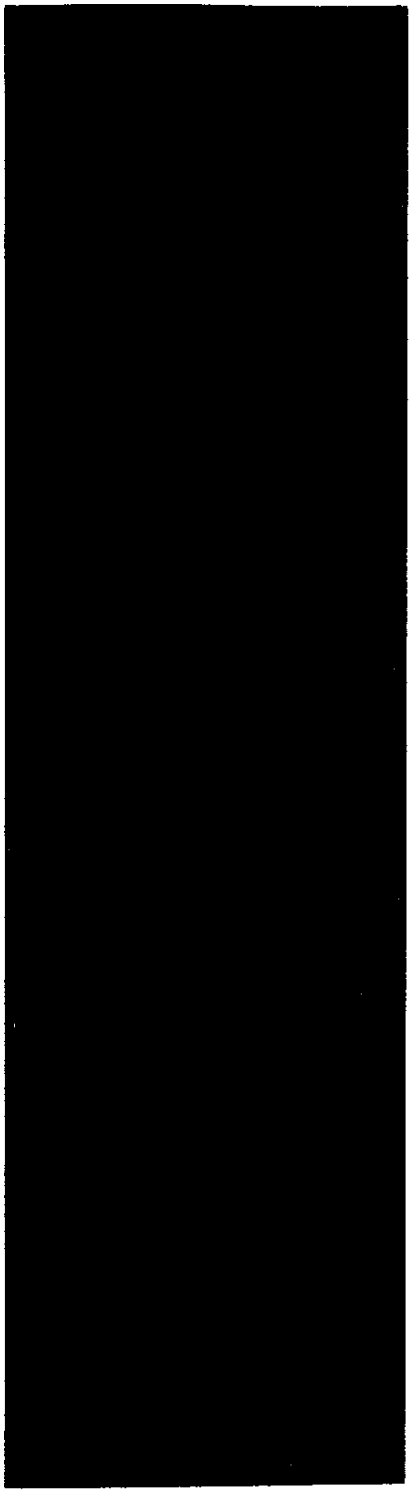
Festooned was one of a number of paintings in which Totino had used piss to oxidize bronze paint. Corrosion is usually considered a form of decay, but it also has associations of transmutation. These green-brown, billowing shapes were framed by a painted floral surround. The piss marks substitute for the image of the Madonna that might exist within such a wreath. The desexualized, dephysicalized virgin is replaced by a female grotesque of indeterminate shape and image but with a very material physicality. Her ghost-like form is made manifest through the chemical reaction of the surface with feminine physical properties. Ruth's mind provided some flickering pictures. The image of Jackson Pollock grandly flinging paint dissolved into one of herself in the feminine crouch, relieving herself in a gravity-fed stream behind a parked car.

Etc. is a vertical canvas, with human jaw parts and telephone pagers floating on an explosion of white goo. A couple of small lizards perch on the technological detritus and look inquisitively out at the viewer. The buckets of cum posited a male counterpart to the female shape-shifter pictured in the urine works. But unlike urine, ejaculate is a response to desire and imagination. Ruth thought of this copious whiteness as a hyperbolic overflowing of the masculine imagination. The famous white on white of Malevich brought to baser ends. But whereas the piss was surrounded by withering blossoms, the cum was linked to human death and mortality. Jaw parts hearken back to another still-life convention, that of disengaging the jaw from the skull to stress the body's decomposition in death. The jaw parts and telecommunications devices indicate that technologies of speech share unconsciously in bodily desire.

Ruth felt a little self-satisfied with her readings, then remembered: Aren't I trying not to read?



A Class Act (1994/95)
hand-stitched red bugle beads on linen
122.5cm x 33.5cm

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Chapter 4

> Stretched to the limit, the limit (the contour of the figure) is stretched to the breaking point, as one says, and in fact it does break, dividing itself in the instant between two borders, the border of the figure and its unlimited unbordering. Sublime presentation is the feeling of this striving at the instant of rupture, the imagination still for an instant sensible to itself although no longer itself, in extreme tension and distension ("overflowing" or "abyss").
>
> Jean-Luc Nancy

> For though Reynolds never explicitly links details and femininity, by taking over a metaphorics grounded in metaphysics . . . he implicitly reinscribes the sexual stereotypes of Western philosophy which has, since its origins, mapped gender onto the form-matter paradigm, forging a durable link between maleness and form (edios), femaleness and formless matter.
>
> Naomi Schor

Ruth felt her mind moving like those nervous birds outside her window every morning. Her eyes and her brain pecked at the art, then flew back. Her body felt much more dissolute than these tightly delimited rectangles. She looked back to the first note she had written. She wondered how relevant Haraway's critique of traditional scientific objectivity really was to art. Haraway demanded not an interrogation but a rebounding, rhythmic, syncopated, "power charged" conversation with the object under observation. Ruth felt singularly unevolved in the face of this task. One thing she did know about conversation was that it really did matter *who* you were talking to. People would tell Ruth things they wouldn't tell a man. How she dressed, spoke, and the colour of lipstick she wore all affected what they said. Her complicity was not only in getting the pictures to talk but also in becoming part of their conversation, her own shabby womanhood a connective tissue in their staged dialogue. The paintings were objects of inquiry *and* objects that were making an enquiry of her. It was more operatic, polyphonic, than the word "conversation" usually implied.

Ruth thought back to her original question. No. She decided Totino did not want to kill. She just wanted skin. Skin *was* the limit the painter had reached. Flesh was the material that couldn't actually be applied to the canvas to stoke reality and

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representation's mutual unbinding. Flesh remained resolutely real. But . . . this status was slipping. Metaphorically, the skin of women has been worn away through reproduction. Recently, men too have fallen between the wringers. Simultaneously, however, flesh is fermenting. No longer a paranoid dream, flesh can be generated. The world had been shocked by pictures of a laboratory mouse growing a human ear on its back. The door between reality and representation was being shut in the most brutal manner. Ruth momentarily pictured a futuristic "skin" painting pulsing on the wall.

Stretched, pierced, fringed, made-up, dressed up, referenced through images of mortality and materiality – Totino's work had a lot of skin but no bodies. Ruth thought of the girl in the tight pink pants. There was an ambivalence in this banishment of the figure. She was unrepresentable but *there*. Her dressing, her detritus, her accoutrements littered the canvas, but she escaped the spectator's inquiring eye. What remained were the scenes, skins, and sequins she had shed.

When Ruth went outside for a smoke, she found a photocopied essay sitting on the concrete ledge that provided a seat for those who still chose to defy the logic of the Surgeon General. The University's grounds were no doubt full of this type of academic detritus. It was titled "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," by Norman Bryson. A wave of disillusionment made her laugh a little at this beleaguered document, cross-hatched with comments and arcane shorthand; evidence of an intrepid effort at understanding. Ruth read some of the passages highlighted with orange marker.

She finished her cigarette, blew her nose, and went back in.

Of all the organs that littered these paintings, there was only one brain. The brain in *The Medusa Drift* was as close as Totino came to a figure. The brain stands in for the gaping, grotesque, severed Medusa head, whose hair is a nest of vipers. How much more reviled could female flesh be? *Of course* the woman who can't be looked at, whose very look interrupts the male gaze, turns him to stone, is the star of these empty stages. Medusa produces a petrified gaze: the look that can't look away. She is a trope for seeing what you don't want to see, seeing what has been repressed. "Made you look," thought Ruth. In this painting Medusa is not represented by her frightening face, but by her frightening mind. The red, dissected brain holds twisted thoughts of feminine flesh, science's medicalization of the female body, and patriarchal fears of feminine knowledge.

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Organs w/o Body (1994)
oil on canvas
244cm x 153cm

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Ruth had seen bunches of dried flowers at the painter's studio and learned that the flowers Totino uses for her paintings are dead. This is not explicit in the painted images, except that there is little fullness to their shape or detail in their petals. This strategy reflects a reality of "still lifes," which are never really still at all. Fruit and flowers die and decompose in a matter of days. The painter traditionally paints them at their peak, but alludes to the menace of death through an iconography of dark spots, bugs, mice, and rodents that nibble at the contents of the painting. Ruth knew that the stratification represented in seventeenth-century canvas alluded to hierarchies of religion, natural history, commerce, and daily life. This stability is markedly absent in Totino's masses of withered blooms. Ruth was reminded of something she had just read. She pulled the photocopy back out of her bag. On page ninety-seven, she found the quote:

> Stabilizing the entity as a fixed Form, with a bounded outline, is possible only if the universe surrounding the entity is screened out and the entity withdrawn from the universal field of transformations. . . . If the object is, say, a flower, its existence is only as a *phase* of incremental transformations between seed and dust, in a continuous exfoliation or perturbation of matter: at no point does the object come under an arrest that would immobilize it as Form or *edios*.

By strange coincidence, this description of the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani's "dismantling of the anthropocentric subject" through "radical impermanence" seemed to have relevance to Totino's works, which resisted creating static "forms" through allusions to change, complex or formless forms, and empty, vertiginous grounds.

Ruth saw that the paintings, undeniably entities in themselves, were placed deliberately in the "field" of each other. Their opposition tended to decentre their authenticity. In *Deep Surface*, depth and surface, the general and the particular, and their attendant values, oscillate between the canvases. The correct form for the sublime has been figured as vast and unornamented. This series of paintings on pearlescent PVC littered the iridescent heavens with an array of white and blue cumulus clouds. These clouds were not fluffy generalities: rather, the complexity of their shape had been fervently rendered. At the same time as they pictured a luminescent *beyond*, they purposefully disorder the sky, curtailing the imagination's limitless extension of its vastness with detail. Ruth sensed she used clouds to picture

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something familiar in the enormity of nature. Rather than a sublime infinitude, she tended to project familiar images onto these shifting condensations of water and ice. Instead of a "limitless limit," Ruth usually saw *horses, pigs, and chickens* in the clouds. Totino's beautiful but laboured clusters reflected this narrative activity, and one could see in them a variety of shapes. They were very different from the abstract strokes of the Rügen works.

Interspersed between the cloud paintings were paintings of identical size and shape, on which rows of asparagus line up against a black ground. Ruth recognized the reference: Manet and his famous still lifes. Like a primitive phallic counting system, the asparagus marked out a bourgeois quotidian order. Beside them floated the impossibly complex clouds. Similar to the disruptions offered by *A Class Act* and *Boogie Wonderland*, *Deep Surface* figured together the little individual vegetables beside the vast luminescent sky. But in this work the asparagus seemed to represent a masculine detail turgidly asserting its ability to make the feminine sublime contingent.

A rattling in her stomach reminded Ruth of her growing hunger. She had had enough art for one day. As she went to sign the comments book on her way out of the gallery, she read the previous entry:

> I'm sorry my crazy boyfriend is making trouble for you. He has also caused me a lot of trouble. When I saw your paintings, I knew why he chose you. He liked the way I dress – like a bull likes a red flag. I like going out dancing and I have a pretty flashy wardrobe . . . like your paintings, vinyl, beads, feathers. . . . Anyway, that guy is gone, he won't bother you any more
>
> *Lola*

Ruth looked back over her shoulder. She saw the paintings as a crowd scene, a riot of analysis. A theatrical set for a story that really couldn't be written. The works offer up such different paradigms that they catcall back and forth. Each is paired with its radical "other." Monochromes and painted images interrupt each other's claims to absolute identity, being. The labour of beading and writing grounds the take-off of the sublime. References to feminine flesh provide a stumbling block for the immaterial. Piss and ejaculate, two of the body's celebratedly partial objects, vie with clouds and misty landscapes for "true" formlessness. The brain, the seat of the mind/body dichotomy, meatily thinks its surround. The pictures are full of

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objects that are not ideal but transitory, mortal. Interruption is a constructive force and what *is*, is only what is not, not now. Totino's pictures refuse a hierarchy that subordinates detail. The theme *is* detail, what surfaces *is* surface. The works are by turns desiring, aggressive, bad tempered, and good natured. They are populated by the bottom feeders of painting's history, floating through the sunken galleons of a modernist fleet: abstraction, minimalism, and conceptualism. The sublime offers a kind of meniscus or surface analogous to the picture plane: one and all slip across this infinite vex, catching a foothold now and again on an ornamental flourish, occasionally bouncing off a skin-tight barrier. This rhythm, by definition both beat and silence, presence and absence, is what the viewer's imagination extends into the beyond.

As she wrote all this down, Ruth was rather surprised at herself, but sensed she had just written the first paragraph of her novel. Ruth paused for a moment as she wondered what to write in the comments book. Remembering a Wordsworth quote from her detective's almanac, she wrote:

> We murder to dissect . . .

Impulsively, she added her own line:

> . . . and vivisect to figure.

Just outside the window she could see her car being towed away.

Peter Paul Rubens,
Head of Medusa (ca. 1617/18)

Afterword: Ruth Kohl is the popular character of the late writer Regina Kant. The Ruth Kohl mystery series includes *Death by Destiny*, *Sudden Seizure*, *The Dotted Eye*, and *Sculpture Garden*.

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Notes

1. Quoted in Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 36.

2. Ibid.

3. Jean-Luc Nancy quotes Benjamin, who evokes the image of the veil thus: "For the sake of the unity which the veil and that which is veiled comprise in it, the Idea can be essentially valid only where the duality of nakedness and veiling does not yet obtain: in art and in the appearances of mere nature. On the other hand, the more distinctly this duality expresses itself, in order finally in man to reach its greatest force, the more this becomes clear: in veil-less nakedness the essentially beautiful has withdrawn and in the naked body of the human being a Being beyond all beauty is attained – the sublime, and a work beyond all image (*Gebilden*) – the work of the creator." Walter Benjamin, from *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I:1, quoted in Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Sublime Offering," in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 26.

4. Norbert Schneider, *Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1994), pp. 94–95.

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Bibliography

In this piece I have taken ideas from the sources below and worked them into the narrative content. As indicated, I have quoted some of these sources in the chapter headings.

Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), pp. 87–114. The saying "water does not wash water" is from the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, whom Bryson writes about in his article. He puts it thus, in describing Nishitani's illustrative examples of a mode of "constitutive negativity or emptiness, *śūnyatā* . . . . Yet the one thing water cannot wash is water: it cannot exist inside the self-enclosure of the entity, circumscribed by a boundary or outline, in a single location that excludes the surrounding field. For water to be water it must percolate through that boundary and infiltrate the entity's dry surround, enter into the surrounding field across the porous filters of irrigation: only when it does so, when it leaves the self-enclosure of water, can it become water. Its existence comes to it when it has left water behind it and entered what is not itself. Its being is interpenetrated by what it is not: which is to say that things exist in the ways they do exist, under a mode of constitutive negativity or emptiness, *sūnyatā*."

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). I appropriated their description of the body without organs to describe Totino's PVC canvas in the last paragraph of Chapter 2: "In order to resist organ-machines, the body without organs presents its smooth, slippery, opaque, taut surface as a barrier," p. 9. Also the idea of organs returning to hang on the outside of this body: "The organ-machines now cling to the body without organs as though it were a fencer's padded jacket, or as though these organ-machines were medals pinned onto the jersey of a wrestler who makes them jingle as he starts toward his opponent," p. 11.

Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 198.

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Ralph Mayer, *The Painter's Craft: An Introduction to Artists' Methods and Materials* (Penguin, 1979).

Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Sublime Offering," in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 46.

"Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, 11 November 1996, p. 36.

Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987). First quote is from p. 19; second quote is from p. 16.

Cyril Stanley Smith, *A Search for Structure: Selected Essays on Science, Art and History* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1981).

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