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Penny Siopis:

An Artist's Dance Through Medium and Vision

> Much of the sense and sensation in the paintings is embedded in the material itself: what floats, floods, flares, falls and fixes somewhere on the edge of form or formlessness. I am fascinated by the strangeness and openness of this process, which is intensified in the way I use my medium, viscous glue and liquid ink – a sort of *choreography of chance and control.*
> (Penny Siopis, emphasis added)

Interrogating the Limits of Perception.

In this opening section I discuss Siopis' most recent production, showing how she questions and overcomes her viewers' mental schemes and cognitive barriers through an ethics and poetics of vulnerability and openness. Her insistence on skin, frailty, bodily fluids or the liquid coexistence of different realms radically interrogates the threshold between public and private, between what is to be shown and what is not. I describe the artist's style as a kind of dance, a perpetual movement across borders, mediums and visions through which choreographies of colors emerge, and virtual, hitherto unknown possibilities are disclosed.

There is a taste for "unpredictability" in Siopis' paintings, which allows new possibilities to emerge from the artist's plans. A play with images which recall human experiences of excess, disorder, violence and grief is rendered through a skillful, almost erotic, sense-arousing and performative use of viscous materials. Her works appear elemental and mythological, personal and political at the same time, but they are also constantly uncertain, as if they were on the move: "What happens when ink and glue act on a surface is *unpredictable* and exciting. This unpredictability creates a vital *tension* or *energy* between form and formlessness, balancing them on *a knife edge*." The borderline is precarious: where anything might emerge, a patient suspension of disbelief is required in order to let oneiric images come into being and visibility in the space-time of the artistic process; Siopis waits for the glue to thicken and the colour to dry and set without intervening in the process of transformation: "the knife edge is a precarious condition where a slip and a split can happen", the artist declares, surrendering to her passion for turning points and surprise.

> The times seem to have made me hypersensitive to all sorts of imagery, especially that which marks *ambivalence* and the *imponderable.* In South Africa now we

> are confronted with the estrangement and dislocation that come with deep *uncertainty* about the stability of what we might call the social contract. At the same time, this instability can be an occasion for exhilarating change. It's a time of flux; a time which can congeal into sheer horror or open up to sheer ecstasy.[1]

Siopis' interest in the politics of reconciliation in South Africa is mediated and transfigured through a special kind of artistic sensitivity, which enables her not to think or represent, but to re-figure and re-imagine the social, intertwined with the psychical and the personal, and thereby to reveal the potentiality of becoming that as an artist and a woman she recognizes as a fundamental part of human experience. Her *modus operandi* translates the ethical into the aesthetical: two differently articulated dimensions of our perception that coexist without separation in her art. In the mundane world (not in an abstract realm of ideas), *ethos* and *aisthesis* coincide, in a perpetual translation of experiences and codification of stimuli. As Gregory Bateson suggests, a kind of dance interconnects all living forms; to the ecological mind the ethical gesture is always the most beautiful, implying neither moral metaphysical principles nor essence. The ethics of life thus becomes the stochastic process of the proliferation and articulation of difference through undecidable encounters, interactions and constant codifications.[2] This is precisely what "unpredictably" happens in Siopis' art. It too is made of undecidable encounters between imaginings *and* solid matter, free or nearly formless process *and* the inescapable, ultimate limits of the medium. The body of art becomes movement *and* arrest, process *and* form; more especially, it is virtual *and* material, dialectically intertwining intensive *and* extensive elements. The "wonder", here, to use Brian Massumi's words, is that "there can be stasis given the primacy of process, 'order out of chaos'",[3] that choreographies and images can emerge from bodily, mental and material flows and movements.

In fact, it is this insistence on the performative nature of painting that keeps it close to dance and movement, more similar to a choreography in progress than to an architecture. If, as the dancer, visual artist and scholar Erin Manning suggests, choreography emerges only as "a reaction to movement" and is never prior to it, in the same way an image or painting is the result of a potentially unending process, in constant relation to the reactions of its public. Movement is the force that consigns images to the future, to the not-yet that is momentarily hosted in the present. Movement "creates the potential for unthinking dichotomies that populate our worlds… [and] allows us to approach them from a different perspective: a shifting one".[4] Ethics and aesthetics become one relational science of interaction and contact, a dance through medium and vision (both the artist's vision, which must cope with the resistance of materials, and the public's vision and perception). Thus the public's encounter with the work of art becomes a sensorial experience where not only beauty but also change take place, while hermeneutics is substituted by participation and by the capability of being vulnerable to art.

Human encounters can be double, often ambiguous; a "poetics of vulnerability", as Siopis writes of her *Lasso* paintings, implies being weak and subjected to the

[1] Cit. in Sarah Nuttall, "On a Knife Edge: Penny Siopis in Conversation with Sarah Nuttall", *Nka, Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 25 (2009), 96, 105, emphases added.

[2] Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity. Advances in Systems Theory, Complexity, and the Human Sciences* (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1979), and *Steps To an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (New York: Ballantine, 1972).

[3] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 7-8.

[4] Erin Manning, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), 14, 15. For a more radical manifesto of dance as the "actual aesthetic act" and the "total act of being", see Hélio Oiticica, "Dance in my experience (Diary Entries)", in Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation* (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 105-109.

violence of others (or, conversely, seeking protection from it) and at the same time being more open to the world and its sufferings. This double side of perception is emphasized in the artist's works by her choice of medium: through layers of viscous glue, she is able to cover or reveal, binding images together and making them liquefy or thicken, or even appear to be decomposing. The material is in fact as thin as human skin, and can convey and play with the sense of both exposure and protection. "We live in turbulent times", the artist argues, writing about her choice of themes and materials:

> The integrity of our bodies and souls seems challenged at every turn. We are prey to violence, disease, global conflicts. We are so thin-skinned …. The poetics to which I am devoted emphasises as much the materiality of the image as its content or concept. Viscous glue can drip in a way that makes the image – or person depicted – appear decomposing, coming apart …. Glue can also cover the image like a protective second skin.[5]

[5] Penny Siopis, cit. in "Penny Siopis. Lasso, 20 September-20 October 2007", <http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/siopis/index2007.htm>, 12 March 2010.

As Judith Butler makes clear, especially in her recent writings about war, frailty, loss and mourning, it is vulnerability that makes living creatures' experience on Earth comprehensible and shareable, calling for a differently delicate and responsible approach to politics and ethics,[6] a call Siopis seems to make her own through art. Hardly any specific allusions to politics appear in her recent works; yet the focus on hybridity and the unpredictable and uncontrollable shapes assumed by life is itself a political theme. Energetic, shapeless streams of reddish, fleshy colors call for the loss of any sense of judgment: viewers are embraced by the carnal relationships that society so greatly fears and proscribes, and this turns into an open contestation of all hetero-normative and separatist rules of power. Nevertheless, by choosing fluidity as subject and medium, and waiting for the latter to thicken, the artist is enabled to give shape to formless suffering and emotions, thereby creating a new symbolic order. Enlivened by the beauty and sensuousness of the paintings, despite the contrast to the harshness of the floods of blood that they depict, carnal and symbiotic relations are rendered intelligible and enjoyable. Things unspeakable, such as menstrual blood, take form, deprived of their aura of taboo, and yet are never fixed or explained, but kept on the threshold of becoming. Through this "choreography of chance and control", the unseen is given materiality and visibility without being explained or fixed into schemes.[7] Conversely, it is enhanced through affects that stimulate response and the reformulation of old thoughts. We are not far from what feminist thought, as well as *écriture féminine*, have been bringing forth since Luce Irigaray's reply to Freud and Lacan in *Speculum. De l'autre femme* (1974), and Hélène Cixous' in "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975), making the abject and the secret visible, capable of stimulating thought through primordial emotions – including that of 'shame'.

[6] See Judith Butler, "Vulnerability and Survival. The 'Affective' Politics of War", paper given at the Sovranità, confini, vulnerabilità Conference, University of Rome La Sapienza (27 March 2008); and *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

[7] Penny Siopis, cit. in "Penny Siopis: Furies, 5 August-18 September 2010", <http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitionsbs/siopis/index2010.htm>, 31 January 2011.

The boundlessness of women's relations to their own bodies and to those of their dearest is also touched on in other paintings (*Twins, Wrest* and *Cling,* 2009; and *Bound* and *Mates* in 2007, for example) which display mothers and children, lovers

or twins clinging to each other, through images of limitless, undecidable figures immersed in flows of hot colors recalling blood and human fluids. Siopis does not invoke absolute symbiosis: a lack in the symbolic order (which is also exemplified in an excess of fusional relationships among women) is detrimental to female subjectivity and freedom. However, what the modern, white and western imaginary holds to be primitive and dangerous, "abject" (to quote Julia Kristeva), reacquires a quality of unlimited beauty in her art, even when these 'carnal documents' denounce conditions of sexual slavery or serious gender biases.

Fig. 1: Penny Siopis, *Three Trees*, 2009, ink and glue on canvas, courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson

In *Three Trees*, the use of glue, wet with deep fleshy pinks and reds, makes the images almost indistinct, merging characters and other objects together when everything should, logically and emotionally, keep them apart.

An extraordinarily tangible display of raw materials evokes an aura of visceral explosion, stemming from an unbounded experience of fluidity. Despite the horror of the scene, inspired by a Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock print she had found in a book on erotic art, the artist distills its profoundly ambiguous intertwining of eroticism and violence into a dreamlike atmosphere of distance.[8] Erotic form and traumatic content enter into collison; an image of rape painted in red and fleshy pink – a woman whose limbs are tied to the trees, her legs forced open by two satanic male figures – confounds the viewers' sense of reality, facing them with horror and with the sense of shame and perplexity that stems from their reactions to the incredible beauty of the painting. The work is in fact ambiguously exciting, evoking primordial sensuous responses and blurring the moral limit between social misfit, sense of justice and private, unlimited emotional potentiality: "painting is a particularly resonant way of embodying the imagination, the unconscious, fantasy. As a carnal medium in this sense, it is violent, erotic and beautiful."[9] Its passion eludes any attempt to control the aesthetic experience, while an unaffected but not unaffecting emotional distance bewilders and disturbs the viewer, even as it enhances the challenge of the artistic encounter. A confusion of spheres and psychic 'locations' becomes a challenge to the moralistic demand for a rigid separation between the realms of the *ethos* (the 'ideal', or the super-egoic structure) and the real (the world of drives and mere materiality); yet, I would argue, the painting also functions as a reminder of the lack of symbolic references in the erotic imaginary, a lack which should not exempt us from distinguishing violence from passion. The depersonalization of the emotions and feelings connected to violence opens new constellations of thought, and new associations and framing contexts. Crossing barriers and going beyond the limits of perception implies that trauma, deprived of individual features and psychological connotations, becomes an 'affect', able to

[8] Siopis in Nuttall, "On a Knife Edge", 101.

[9] Siopis in Sarah Nuttall, "On Painting", *Art South Africa*, 4.2 (2009), <http://www.artsouthafrica.com/?article=237>, 31 January 2011.

Fig. 2: Penny Siopis, *Flush*, 2007, ink, oil and glue on paper, courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson.

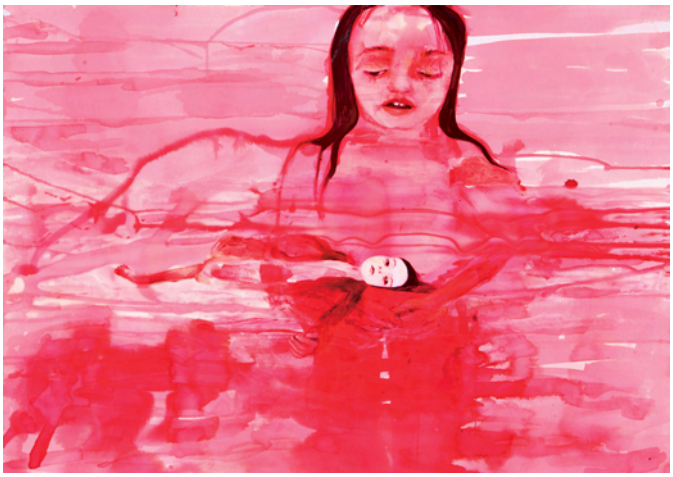

Fig. 3: Penny Siopis, *Melt,* 2007, ink, oil and glue on canvas, Cape Town, courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson.

give rise to different modalities of perception of – and relation to – reality. Viewers are thus enabled to investigate its social, imaginary, mental and 'discursive' structures, as well as the imaginary sexual archetypes within which the male erotic psyche is framed.[10]

Confusion and boundlessness are also part of the 2007 paintings, as for example *Flush* and *Melt*, which both evoke women's apparent lack of psychic and bodily limits, according to archetypical male or, more generally, social gender stereotypes and imagery and fear of losing control.

Traumatic contents – like blood, but also birth – become a starting point for reflection. Glue, imbued with red and pink colors, recalls the blood and placenta through which women frame and are framed, give life and are given life. Glue, which evokes tightness, bond, boundlessness, shapes not only human or animal features, but whole landscapes. In *Melt*, the glue seems to stem and flow from a woman-goddess's hair, drawing the outlines of mountains and seas and giving birth to an entire world out of blood, love and chaos; in this carnal, bodily Genesis, a tiny female creature appears, like a new-born woman, reaching a hand to the viewers.

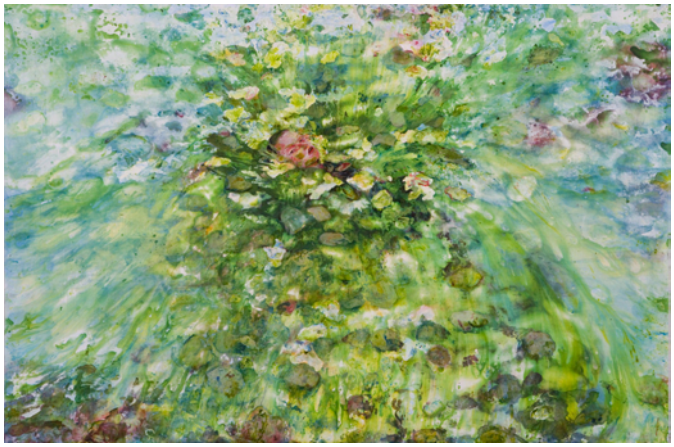

Fig. 4: Penny Siopis, 2009, *Still Waters*, ink and glue on canvas, courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson.

The coexistence of different spheres is also evident in *Still Waters*, where heritage is contaminated, rethought, and oriented to the emergence of the contemporary world.

The sight of a huge shoal of jellyfish invading Thessaloniki harbour had raised visions in the artist's mind of Ophelia, a traumatic, imagined scene of a migrant drowning in the Aegean and Monet's *Water lilies*. The flow of blues and greens, spotted by touches of yellow, recalls Monet, confounding his water lilies with the shapes of the jellyfish, mixing art history, dream and memory even as it addresses the question of migration and its calls for responsibility. At the centre of the image is the face of a

[10] For the relationship between trauma and affect, see Jill Bennet, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

woman, "a person who seems to be either swamped by the mass or emerging from it … coming up for breath", looking into our eyes and drawing us into the painting.[11] The imaginary, dreamlike atmosphere enhances the viewers' confrontation with this strange mix of contemporaneity and heritage, nature and vision, pushed beyond the 'discip-line' that separates genres.

[11] Siopis in Nuttall, "On a Knife Edge", 103.

Disorder in Freud's House: The Psychoanalytical Archive Exposed to Shame and Difference.

The works I have been discussing provide a useful introduction to a reconsideration of some of Siopis' previous collections. Here too there is an evident attempt to dismantle borders and categories of thought, but the artist is more involved in the psychic world of women than in the dance of colors and vision. In the paintings conceived around the beginning of the 2000s her "poetics of vulnerability" emerges around the ambivalences and ambiguities of the human condition and human feelings ("emotional states that exist on a 'knife-edge' between panic and passion, terror and tenderness.").[12] The works are already moving toward a suggestive encounter with their viewers. Rather than representing the artist's search for meaning as a cure for fragmentation and dismemberment, they force the public to project meanings onto the painting, questioning its search for answers without involvement or responsibility. Here the emotion of shame, inscribed on women's bodies and psyches as a social destiny that has become a carnal heritage, literally collides with the public, contaminating it and penetrating it with the affect generated by viewer-viewed relationship in the form of a shame-inducing spectacle. This emotion, though, emerges more from the act of looking from the outside at something private than from the content itself. As Zoë Wicomb has pointed out in a discussion of coloured identity in South Africa, the figure of the "Khoi/coloured woman Saartje Baartman, once known as the Hottentot Venus, who was exhibited in London and Paris from 1810 to her death in 1815" exemplifies the "inscription of power in scopic relations; the construction of woman as racialized and sexualized other; the colonization and violation of the body; the role of scientific discourse in bolstering both the modernist and the colonial projects".[13] With its focus on visibility, Siopis' work on shame – including her complex reconfiguration of Baartman in *Dora and the Other Woman* – is self-reflexively political, like much other contemporary artistic production from the so-called postcolonial zones.

[12] Penny Siopis, cit. in press release for 2005 "Passions and Panics" exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg; *Kunstaspekte*, <http://www.kunstaspekte.de/index.php?id=20019&action=termin>, 1 June 2010.

[13] Zoë Wicomb, "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa", in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 91-105.

In her *Three Essays on Shame*, Siopis explores the emotions connected to exposure in a long-distance feminist and postcolonial dialogue with Sigmund Freud, one hundred years after the publication of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).[14] Freud invented his incomplete yet claustrophobic hermeneutic of female sexuality on the basis of a few therapeutic encounters he had had with Ida Bauer, the young girl he renamed Dora, laying the foundations of his theory of female hysteria and sexual passivity and reinforcing his theory of the Oedipus complex.[15]

[14] For the English version see Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 130-243.

[15] See in particular "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (1905 [1901]), in Freud, *SE*, 7-122.

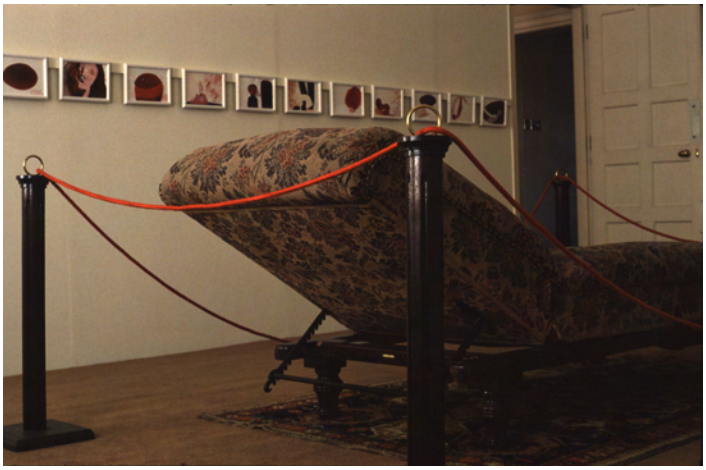

Fig. 5: Penny Siopis, *Three Essays on Shame*, 2005, London, Freud Museum, courtesy of the artist.

Three Essays on Shame is the title of Siopis' 2005 multi-media exhibition at the Freud Museum, in which, through interventions into three spaces of Freud's house, she re-inhabits and redesigns the home of the father of psychoanalysis, dismembering the completeness of both his furniture and his ideas and disseminating creative chaos as she brings his work and milieu into contact with South African culture and society. In audio recordings located in Freud's study, seven South African personalities express their feelings about the shame aroused by the horrors of apartheid and its complicities, the tragedy of AIDS and the difficulty of listening to the Truth and Reconciliation hearings.

The second intervention, in Freud's dining room, incorporates objects and artworks from Freud's collection of antiquities, together with films touching on shameful events and the use of shame as a weapon of resistance. A stylized terracotta figurine represents a woman, believed to be the Greek mythological figure, Baubo, exposing her genitalia and pointing at them with evident satisfaction. The installation articulates an association between the statuette's insistence on its 'site of exposure' and the resistance practice through which black South African women successfully opposed eviction by stripping and displaying their "shame" to the white policemen who were trying to bulldoze their homes, an episode narrated in the documentary *To Walk Naked*. By linking shame to socio-historical conditions of subalternity, rather than to the psychic individuation upon which early psychoanalysis insisted, Siopis re-discusses and reopens the psychological archive, contextualizing shame and female sexuality within the cultural and historical frame of colonial practices of exploitation.

In her essay on the exhibition, Siopis points out that "shame is arguably distinctive in being very visceral, a quality intensified by the fact that the feelings are often associated with bodily exposure and sexuality. Shame feels primary, primitive."[16] According to modern psychology, shame is prior to guilt, connected not only with the sensation of being exposed, but also, more subtly, to the fact of looking at what should not be displayed. In all Siopis' works on shame, what is immediately evident is the sense of being caught gazing, forcing the viewers into a more intense relation with the painting and its subject and thereby weakening the defensive barriers we put between ourselves and the rest of the world, caught on the other side of our 'scopic scenario'. "If the anxiety of being looked at is distinctive in shame, then the viewer is not a passive onlooker, but an uneasy

[16] Penny Siopis, "Shame in Three Parts at the Freud Museum", in Claire Pajaczkowska and Ivan Ward, eds., *Shame and Sexuality. Psychoanalysis and Visual Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 153.

Fig. 6: Penny Siopis, "Shame Painting", 2005, glue, ink, and lacquer paint on paper, *Three Essays on Shame*, courtesy of the artist.

witness; the feeling of embarrassment rises from a sense of complicity in the act of seeing: "'*I should not be seeing this.*'"[17]

The primordial emotion of shame depends then on its always being located on the site of exposure, and its frailty in relation to others' eyes. Nevertheless, what makes people – especially women – ashamed is the feeling they are causing shame to those watching, *creating* shame, not only *experiencing* it. The feeling is thus more intricate than might appear; the emotion might be defined as simultaneously social and anti-social, public and profoundly individual. It reminds us

> how history manifests not in dated and dotted timelines, but in the myths that shape our imagination and nightmares. Siopis' work addresses complex emotional landscapes that emerge through fear, shame and passion, … intersect[ing] with the ways society is constantly being shaped through shifting power relations.[18]

Overlooked by Freud, who simply considered it a form of positive super-egoic morality, repressing carnal, affective primal relationships, shame is the emotion that seems, like skin, to connect the most intimate parts of human nature with society. If Freud's hysterics are rendered dumb, in that they are spoken *for* and not listened *to*, and if shame is connected, for them as for other minorities, with the uneasiness of not owning or mastering language (that is, of remaining inarticulate in the 'discourse' through which they are articulated), Siopis' display of invocations of forgiveness or apologies written on canvas around images of silenced women with hands on their mouths or throwing up the suffering and trauma caused by their abuse, is not a way of speaking for them, but, conversely, of showing and responding to their request to be listened to and to have the right to exist. Thus, a connection between silence and trauma on one side, and structured public speech on the other – the orthodoxy of the discourse of early psychoanalysis – allows for new modes of listening and looking. As Siopis concludes, "shame is a form of human relation",[19] and as such it is investigated in her paintings, in the attempt to modify our perceptions of limits, of what is eligible as 'trauma' and what is not, to make us more conscious of the gender biases that early psychoanalysis neglected.

By extending vision to the unknown and the invisible, whether historical, social, psychological or pertaining to the subtlest realms of the imaginary depth of the soul – Siopis pushes the limits of psychoanalysis further. Reaching beyond the orthodoxy of the discipline, she reveals the blindness that scotomized both the early pioneers and later scholars, offering a compassionate cure or remedy to the psychoanalytic archive. As she

[17] Ibid., 156.

[18] Rike Sitas, "Red. The Iconography of Colour in the Work of Penny Siopis. Penny Siopis at KZNSA", *Artthrob*, (2010), <http://www.artthrob.co.za/Reviews/Review-of-Red-The-Iconography-of-Colour-in-the-Work-of-Penny-Siopis-by-Rike-Sitas-at-KZNSA.aspx>, 30 November 2010.

[19] Siopis, "Shame in Three Parts", 157.

Fig. 7: Penny Siopis, "Shame Painting", 2005, glue, ink, and lacquer paint on paper, *Three Essays on Shame*, courtesy of the artist .

plays and dances with colors and body fluids, she unveils a world that is neither mysterious nor violable, but alive, different and somehow unfamiliarly distant, especially when the sad subject of her portraits is violence or rape. This sense of ambiguity between visibility and invisibility in their connections to shame links this issue with Siopis earlier pastel drawing, her 1987 *Dora and the Other Woman*, entirely conceived with reference to exposure and vulnerability. Its 'heroines' are Dora (Freud's hysteric), Sarah Baartman, and the artist herself.

In the Cut between Overexposure and Invisibility.

Dora and the Other Woman may be seen as the starting point for the artist's dismantling of the codified, stereotyped representations and prejudices against women's affectivity, mental health and sexuality exemplified by Freud's discussion of the Dora case, and her ongoing concern with gender biases eviscerated in their relations to racism. The protagonists of Siopis' drawing are the overexposed black 'indigenous' woman, the white hysteric and the artist, covering her eyes and turning her head away from a double disgrace: the spectacle she is herself portraying and the absence of women as agents of discourse. The bodies and psyches Siopis interpellates are stuck in a state of shame, a paradoxical mixture of invisibility and overexposure. The artist inscribes herself and her participation among these constellations, which include the voyeuristic creators of the discourse through which 'shame' is represented and women are constructed as the objects of representation.

Fig. 8: Penny Siopis, *Dora and the Other Woman*, 1987, pastel on paper, private collection, courtesy of the artist.

Before analyzing the work, I would like to underline how, in the scopic field of colonialism – which provides the historical and cultural background to this work –, black women (especially black 'Hottentot' women) have always been associated with shame. The black female body, entangled in a maze of discourses on essential differences and ethnic inferiority, was placed at the centre of the hegemonic spectacle of science and society, not too differently from Freud's hysteric. Intentionally exposed as the quintessential 'site of difference', it was also obliterated as a source of moral uneasiness for the white western onlooker, ashamed both by the sight and by the attraction he might feel for it. The body functioned as an inverted mirror, used to measure the distance between man and animal, but before which a man would never stand too long for fear of being swallowed into this obscure depth of the human species, the darkest of the continents, the epitome of bestial Africa.

In his widely published article on the iconography of female sexuality, Sander L. Gilman explains the relation between the West and the 'Hottentot' woman, considered the quintessence of the black simian African, underlining how she played the same role for Empire as the Jew had played and would continue dramatically to play for

European society.[20] At the time of British colonization of the Cape, Baartman was held to be the incarnation of pathological difference and animality. She died at the age of twenty-five in Paris, after being brought to Europe from the colony where she worked as a slave, to be displayed as an anatomical phenomenon. After her death, parts of her body were exposed in Paris, at the Musée de l'Homme, as samples of "Hottentot" female features, until 1974. Only in 2002 were the remains of her body – skeleton, genitals and brain – returned to Africa and given a belated state funeral. Her burial may be seen as a ceremony of national recomposition against the violence of colonialism and apartheid, a symbolic re-membering of the horrors and the fractures of the past, a tangible event marking the country's obsessive will to regain completeness and dignity through epic memories and grand gestures. Baartman's story is one of scopic obsession with racial identity: her journey across the ocean, intended to satisfy the curiosity of other peoples, served to enforce mental barriers and the technologies of modern scientific discourse. As Wicomb has made clear, Baartman, initially an icon of the sexual lasciviousness attributed to black women (as analyzed by Gilman), is now an easy icon of post-coloniality and the reconstruction of a national, indigenous cultural past. Although her story begins with the shame of her exposure to imperial and non-imperial eyes as an emblem of concupiscence,[21] the "project of recovery" is built around "injury, rather than shame". Yet, as Wicomb observes, "[m]iscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of 'race', concupiscence, and degeneracy, continues to be bound up with shame. … What the case of Baartman then shows is how shame, cross-eyed and shy, stalks the postcolonial world broken mirror in hand, reproducing itself in puzzling distortions." Exposure, as well as the fear of miscegenation have been bypassed but not cancelled: Baartman's body is now mostly a site of contested politics of location (of omissions and representations), connected with the construction of a nation.[22]

Dora and the Other Woman appears stylistically more conventional than Siopis' later works. As the artist declares, it was made to *represent*, to play not on proximity and the affectivity of aesthetic involvement, but on distance. What she seeks to reproduce and dismantle here is precisely the geometrical perspective, the distant yet invasive object-subject relation between white male society and black, but also white, women. This perspective is what the Dora of the (self)portrait, and thus the artist herself, seeks to escape by covering her eyes and appealing to her "right to opacity" in the relationship.[23] The work plays around her lack – her refusal to be seen, to unveil her face – and, conversely, around the overexposure of the "Hottentot Venus", whose pictures are pinned onto the cloth that Dora is using to protect her eyes and body from the others' sight. As Brenda Schmahmann observes, a denunciation is being made against the scopic violence of both eighteenth-century French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot's representation and objectification of hysteria, and Freud's later psychoanalytical interpretation. A series of objects chaotically disseminated in the scene, including two small golden frames on the floor, one containing a mirror, and a red and gold curtain, swept back as on a stage, evoke the scopic scene as a spectacle that casts both women as objectified otherness: the white bourgeois woman symbolizing an 'other' psycho-sexuality; the black indigenous woman 'the other' of the human species.[24] By hiding

[20] Sander L. Gilman, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality", in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76-108.

[21] For the ambiguous erotic relationship between black women and white society in the imaginary realm, see Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), and Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[22] Wicomb, "Shame and Identity", passim.

[23] For a discussion of the right to opacity, see Edouard Glissant (1990), *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189-194.

[24] Brenda Schmahmann, "Representing Regulation – Rendering Resistance: Female Bodies in the Art of Penny Siopis", in Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann, eds., *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 196-222.

her eyes, though, Schmahmann argues, Dora/Siopis is unveiling the histrionic gestures insisted on by Charcot, subverting and mimicking the discourse of early psychoanalysis, but also perhaps repeating Luce Irigaray's provocative act in *Speculum*. Siopis' work, then, might function as a re-writing of hysteria in terms of liberation, transgression, and active, bodily resistance against phallogocentrism, as in Hélène Cixous' drama *Portrait de Dora* (1976), or in later work by South African ceramic sculptor Wilma Cruise.[25]

Yet another play on visibility and invisibility, another denunciation of patriarchal scotomas, is at work in this drawing. What is lacking in the representations of Dora and Sarah is not only the woman's gaze or her subject position in the discourse, but something more subtle and ambiguous. In contemporary depictions of Sarah, but also in the plaster cast of her genitals in the Musée de l'homme, the genitals are covered by a cloth or "tablier" (apron), a term that refers to the shape of her genitals (but which, ironically, also evokes a spectacle, by suggesting Elizabethan apron stages). What is rendered opaque – though not in the sense of respecting her right to opacity – is the very act of cutting her body parts, performed at the time of her death. "What is interesting," Siopis observes,

> is that the cloth seems to function as a cover for the break, the edge of the cast where the leg would normally appear. … I'm interested in the idea that there was some kind of need to cover a break but leave the genitals truncated, sectioned and exposed. The impulse seems to have been to cover the sign of the objectification – of the object. …. It's as if they don't really want to show what's really happened, namely the cutting up of this person's body. So they disguise the cut.

What is lacking is the cut. The cloth, metonymically, stands for the cut, the dismemberment of the black woman's body operated by asymmetrical powers. A similar fate was encountered by Dora, whose "sexuality was fragmented, taken away from her, in a sense by Freud. She was made an object … and turned into a spectacle."[26] Her cutting was covered and simultaneously revealed by Freud's written words, a parallel to Sarah's cloth. This fragmentation, revelation and donning is precisely what Siopis makes visible and tangible, subverting the presumed neutrality of the gaze.

The common features of both women's vicissitudes are objectification and display, as Siopis suggests. The focal point of her spectacle is condensed around lack, the hole that is apparently hidden by the cloth and that, on the contrary, is rendered visible and mesmerizing by the fabric itself. There, where the viewers' eyes are stitched to the strength of the forbidden (or 'foreclosed', to use Lacan's term), the shame that affects both Dora and the white woman artist as she looks at the disgrace of a violent, hurtful epistemology, but also the apron that covers Sarah's genitals to hide her 'shame', meaning is all the same inferred. As a way of ordering reality and stemming the luminous, infinite power of becoming, meaning arises precisely around the assumed mystery of women and their 'lack', however powerless, over-intelligible, or impenetrable. Onto that hole the public actively projects meaning through images; "and imagination has its own way with horror, filling our minds with images that get under the skin of our most intimate relationships."[27]

[25] Cruise's *Venus after Dora* (1990) is an act of homage to Siopis' *Dora and the Other Woman*. In "Ceramic Sculptures by Wilma Cruise: Fragments and Feminist Transgressions", *Interpreting Ceramics*, 8 (2007), <http://www.uwic.ac.uk/icrc/issue008/articles/19.htm>, 1 November 2010, Schmahmann analyses the relation between Siopis' and Cruise's rendering of hysteria as a site of transgression through their fragmentation of the female body against the act of looking.

[26] Annie E. Coombes and Penny Siopis, "Gender, 'Race', Ethnicity in Art Practice in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Annie E. Coombes and Penny Siopis in Conversation", *Feminist Review*, 55 (Spring, 1997), 121-123.

[27] Siopis, *Lasso*.