

Page 2 – Floorwork on Wall, detail of process Wood ash, charcoal, acrylic pigment, wood glue, found muck, canvas



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Introduction

Critical theorist Julia Kristeva (1989) notes that “for those who are wracked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia” (Kristeva, 1989:3). Similarly, my body of work titled Melancholia is intended to be an expression emerging from a melancholic state. This body of work is a personal exploration and material translation of my experience of the melancholic disposition.

The work is an attempt to articulate deep-seated sadness and layered introversion, as well as the positive side of the true melancholic. Through an intuitive process of making, I intend to create an awareness on a social level of the strengths and weaknesses of this misunderstood temperament. This text serves to provide insight into the theoretical and art historical precedents of this exhibition.

It will consider the disposition of melancholia in more critical depth, particularly as it relates to the materiality and process involved in the making of this body of work.

Defining Melancholia

The definition of melancholia originated with the Greek physician Hippocrates (c. 460-370 BC), who incorporated into his medical practise the idea of the ‘four humours’: melancholic, sanguine, choleric and phlegmatic. Each humour was associated with a different colour. Hippocrates attributed the melancholic state to the excess of black bile (sanguine was red blood, choleric was yellow bile and phlegmatic was seen as white or clear) (Telles-Correia & Marques, 2015:1). According to Hippocrates, melancholia was a psychological disposition prone to fear and sadness.



Page 6 – Albrecht Dürer – Melancholia 1 (1514) Engraving 24 x 18,8 cm

Perhaps because of this initial conception, historically, melancholia has been associated with artists, due to their propensity to dwell pensively on the world around them. Printmaker Albrecht Dürer provides an apt example of this idea of the melancholic artist in his engraving titled *Melancholia 1* (1514). The work is an illustration of a figure whose posture is an outward expression of the undefinable inner emotional landscape of melancholia. Visually evoking Hippocrates’ idea that melancholia “formed” in the body as a result of physiological imbalances, this figurative portrayal of the temperament is imbued with a sense of dejectedness. The figure’s gaze speaks of deep sadness and a longing for understanding. These emotional states have been used to describe melancholia; however, the melancholic condition has historically been, and still is, elusive to define.

Melancholia and Abjection

Post-critical thinker and psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan (1992) speaks about the melancholic state as a constant feeling of something lost and unreachable, but melancholia, despite its long-held link to the colour black and darkness, should not be mistaken for depression (Lacan, 1992:60). This distinction – the idea that melancholia may hold something other than darkness or depression, something compelling and vital – is significant in contemporary understandings of the disposition.

The abject may be considered as a fundamental component of melancholia. Kristeva (1982) describes abjection as “the repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck” (Kristeva, 1982:2). In this understanding of melancholia, there is a combined sense of attraction and repulsion towards objects and materials that are seen to have been cast off from the self (Kristeva, 1989:8). This duality between attraction and repulsion echoes Lacan’s assertion that the melancholic constitution is not solely negative, as is often assumed, but that the quiet depths of the melancholic experience are nuanced and potentially productive.

In this project, I have engaged with this conception of melancholia as a generative mental and emotional state. In an effort to visually and materially translate the inner experience of melancholia in a physical form, the materiality of this body of work hinges on the intuitive selection of mainly found materials that, through their abject qualities, embody my own experience of melancholia. This material interpretation of melancholia involves the dense layering of canvas, in different weights, placed close together and bound by a mixture of glue, paint and detritus swept up off the studio floor, such as hair, broken feathers, dust, ash, small found materials and other 'muck'. This layering of abject material upon abject material renders dense, yet nuanced forms that are compelling in that they are imbued with, not only darkness and weight but also a contradictory lightness and delicate complexity. The following investigation of this body of work will consider the binaries of darkness and lightness, weight and weightlessness, and inner and outer space in more detail as they relate to the experience of melancholia.



Installation

The installation comprises of a six metre wide central suspended work titled *Melancholia*, which is composed of many layers of canvas, bedding and other fabrics that are stitched and glued together to create a three-dimensional form. In addition to this central component of the exhibition are small suspended balls of compressed and bound fabric and a floor installation that was transformed into a work on the wall, which is titled *Floorwork on Wall*. In addition to these works are a collection of miniature sculptures or bound forms. The main installation is monumental in scale and is a grand gesture in contrast with the small, intimate scale of the other works. Ideally the installation is to be viewed from every angle to experience and engage with the totality of the work – depending on the viewer, this may be experienced on an intuitive and perhaps a visceral level.





Page 11 – Melancholia Oil, acrylic, wood ash, industrial enamel, found muck, wood glue, resin, bedding, felt, canvas 250 x 600 x 36 cm

Page 12 – Melancholia details Oil, acrylic, wood ash, industrial enamel, found muck, wood glue, resin, bedding, felt, canvas



The contrasting use of immersive and intimate scales in the exhibition is intended to draw the viewer into an experiential investigation of melancholia. For instance, the inconspicuous miniature balls suspended randomly from the ceiling, not visible at first glance, may evoke surprise or irritation as the viewer encounters them while viewing the larger works. As you have dealt with one tiny ball, another one might brush against your face as you move through the space. In this somewhat interactive process, the viewer becomes conscious of her own body, and perhaps frustration, as she negotiates the geography of the space. This process is intended to serve as a metaphor for the irritating, obsessive, analytical thought process of the melancholic disposition. Additionally, the contrast between the small-scale, intimate works and the immersive installation draw attention to the melancholic's negotiation of the tension between inner and outer space. This tension that is evoked by the scale and installation of the works is reiterated in the materials employed in the works, which allude to seemingly contradictory qualities such as inner and outer space, weight and weightlessness, dark and light.

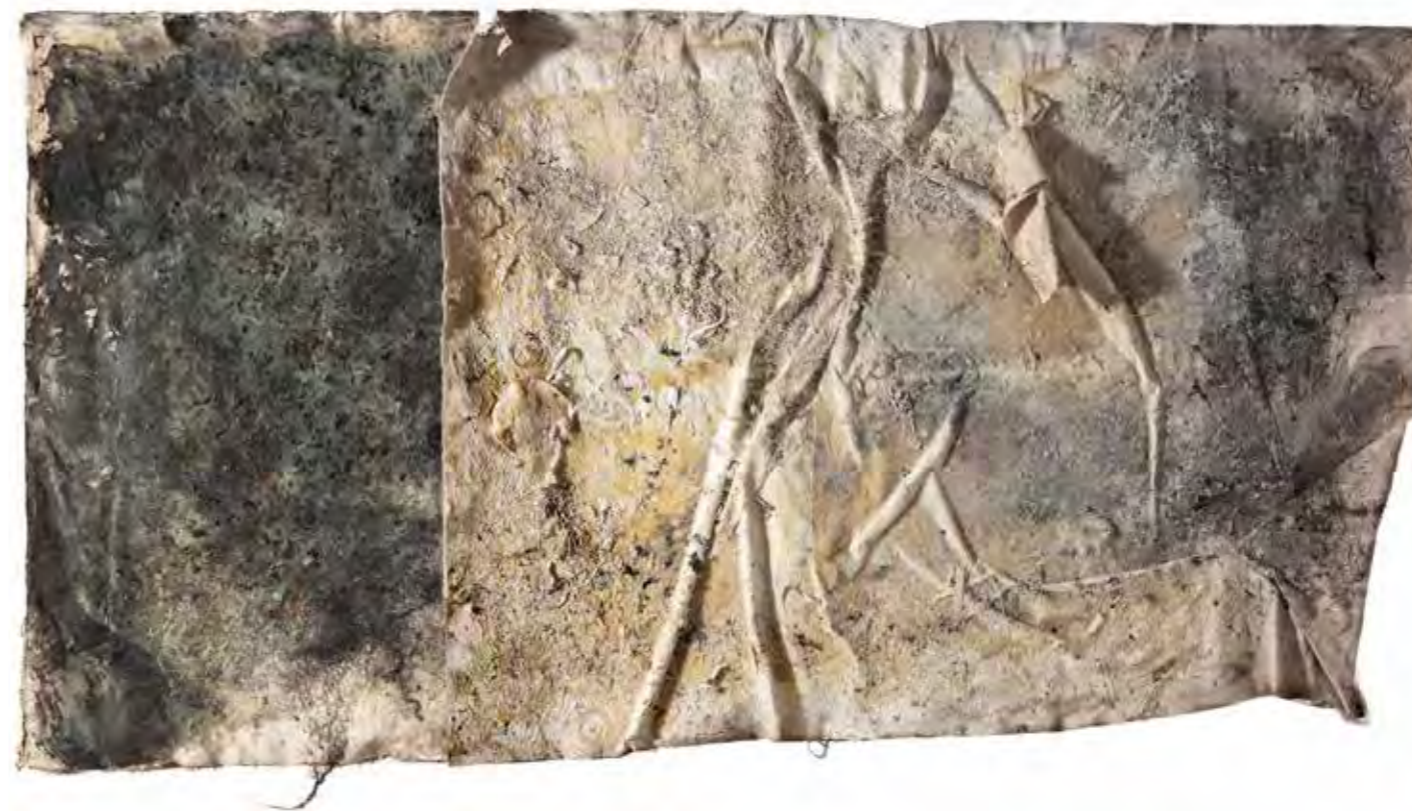
Page 13 – Melancholia details Oil, acrylic, wood ash, industrial enamel, found muck, wood glue, resin, bedding, felt, canvas

Page 14 – Untitled – A collection of miniature balls or bound forms Gauze, ball bearings, cotton thread

Various sizes from 1 x 1 x 1 cm to 1 x 1,5 x 1 cm

Detritus

These tensions are perhaps most directly and materially embodied in ash, one of the recurring materials used in this body of work. As the almost non-existent physical detritus of something that once was, ash evokes a liminality between presence and absence that seems to mirror the attraction/repulsion dichotomy that defines the object. One work included in the exhibition is titled *Ash in a Box/Prolonged Sadness* and comprises of wood-fired ash from several fires that was sieved into a fine powder and contained in a steel box. In this piece, the ephemerality and lightness of the ash is countered by the permanence and weight of the steel box that 'fixes' and contains it. This interplay between the knowledge of the material's transience and the rigid structure of its container embodies something of the melancholic state – the weight and solidity of inward rumination is presented alongside its counterpart, a light and untethered quality that is imbued in the ephemerality of the ash.



In other works, such as *Floorwork on Wall*, a mixture of sieved wood ash, charcoal, black and white pigment and wood glue is intentionally used to create a grey tone on the surface of the paintings. The subtlety of the various tonal values of this colour evokes stillness. The grey ash used in this and other works is, for me, metaphoric of intense loneliness and prolonged sadness. However, it may also, contrastingly, be seen to symbolise renewal and potential for new growth.





Page 17 top – Anselm Kiefer – *Ash Flower (Aschenblume)* (1983-97) Oil, emulsion, acrylic, clay, ash, earth, dried sunflower, canvas 380 x 760 cm

Page 17 bottom – Anselm Kiefer – *For Paul Celan, Ash Flower (Für Paul Celan, Aschenblume)* (2006) Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, ash, burnt books, canvas 330 x 760 x 40 cm

The German contemporary neo-expressionist Anselm Kiefer uses ash to investigate and analyse humanitarian concerns, the human psyche and concepts of man's quest to make sense of the world (Yentob, 2017). Matthew Biro (2013) writes that Kiefer's monumental and expressive surfaces in his post-1973 paintings are encrusted with thick textures and innumerable found and mixed materials, including pigments, straw, clay, wire, sand, ash, earth, hair, lead, emulsion, steel, tin, sunflowers, shellac, charcoal, plaster, resin and conventional materials like acrylic and oil paint (Biro, 2013:48). *Ash Flower (Aschenblume)* (1983-97), comprised of oil, emulsion, acrylic, clay, ash, earth and dried sunflower on canvas, portrays a sunflower growing out of cracked earth in a large courtyard. The site seems to be enveloped in a cataclysmic dust storm and evokes conflated images of growth and decay. On the one hand, the image depicts a hopeful situation: new life emerging from an ancient ruin. On the other hand, closer inspection shows that the brown sunflower has been torn from the ground and hung upside down like a corpse or effigy (Biro, 2013:86).

Kiefer's works such as *Ash Flower (Aschenblume)* (1983-97) and *For Paul Celan, Ash Flower (Für Paul Celan, Aschenblume)* (2006), are drawn upon in my own body of work as a means by which to consider how ash and other detritus may imply the obliqueness of the melancholic state. Like ash, other studio detritus such as hair, slivers of canvas offcuts, rotten industrial paint and discarded turpentine, are mixed with glue and paint and used as a primary material throughout the body of work. This detritus is layered within the organic, bodily folds of the canvas and bed linen that appear in some places in the work, creating the uncomfortable visceral tension that is central to abjection.



Page 18 – *Melancholia details* Oil, acrylic, wood ash, industrial enamel, found muck, wood glue, resin, bedding, felt, canvas



In Kiefer's work and in my own, the aging of materials causes the paintings to change, discolour and decay over time. Biro (2013) notes that "alchemy also underlay Kiefer's emphasis on transformation in his citations and motifs: witness his selection and handling of materials, which often aged, weathered, worn or otherwise metamorphosed over time" (Biro, 2013:85). In various pieces in this body of work, a mixture of old, soon-to-be-discarded oil paint and turpentine were poured onto the surfaces of offcuts of canvas and left outside to dry, exposed to the elements for months. As a result, dust, leaves and other debris adhered to the works, causing them to take on an object quality.



Page 19 – Floorwork on Wall detail Wood ash, charcoal, acrylic pigment, wood glue, found muck, canvas

Page 20 – Floorwork on Wall detail Wood ash, charcoal, acrylic pigment, wood glue, found muck, canvas

Page 20 – Melancholia detail Oil, acrylic, wood ash, industrial enamel, found muck, wood glue, resin, bedding, felt, canvas



Also engaging with the abject nature of a specific debris material, human hair, contemporary video and installation artist Mona Hatoum's piece titled *Hair Necklace* (1995) comprises of human hair that is woven into filigree-like beads or balls to form a necklace. This unwearable necklace speaks of dejection, a form of abject beauty on display. Speaking about this piece, Hettie Judah (2017) writes:

[...] in Hatoum's work, hair is a human product, in the way that wool is the product of sheep, or silk the product of the pupating *Bombyx mori* moth. It is material evidence of the self: in its shed form, it announces the existence of its generating body (Judah, 2017).

In contrast with Hatoum's use of hair as evidence of the physical self, the detached use of human and dog hair in my body of work evokes a sense of fascination with the seemingly abject qualities of the emotional self, such as feelings of disgust, downheartedness, hopelessness and grief. However, in other works, the ephemerality and physicality of the human body is brought to the fore through the use of abject materiality and form. For example, in *Fragility*, oil, shoe polish and Podge were painted onto a surface and then peeled off to create a delicate, semi-transparent film.



The thin layers speak for me, of the metaphoric skin left behind after inner transformation, implying renewal and loss on a psychological level. This is also implied in some of the other works in the exhibition, such as *Layered Introversion*, described in detail later. Similarly, the work titled *Surface of Skin* appears to be a superficially enlarged view of a specific detail on the surface of the skin. This surface of this painting was aged over time; it was tainted and marked by the elements as a result of weathering and by the decaying substance of the industrial enamel paint. This work is still in progress and will continue to reveal itself over time.

Colour

Similar to the use of specific materials to explore the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of the object, a limited colour palette is used in this body of work in an attempt to visualise the inner landscape of melancholia. The neutral colour palette of the exhibition is also defining of the work of Kiefer and Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012). A minimal, monochromatic palette of white, grey and black serves as a metaphor for psychological loss of colour that is associated with the melancholic disposition. In some instances, white paint on a white surface creates a subtle, nuanced surface that necessitates in-depth visual engagement. In these instances, there is lightness despite the sometimes thick object. Similarly, dense layers of black on black oil paint and found detritus layered in-between the sheets of fabric are used to create a physical and visual density that is evocative of dense internal and mental spaces.



Adding to this tonal contrast between white and black, matt finishes contrast with glossy surfaces of paint and open spaces of raw fabric were intentionally left bare to allow light and the colour of the layers beneath to show through. Together, the colour, or lack thereof, of the large canvasses results in an installation that evokes a quiet stillness. In addition to the meditative quality rendered by the monochromatic palette of the exhibition, the gestural marks on the surfaces of the works serve to contribute to this sense of creating internal order out of an amalgamation of various textures and materials.





Gesture

The expressive, rapid, bold and gestural brushstrokes on primed and unprimed canvas used in this body of work draw upon Tàpies' slashes of paint and textural complexity of materials. For instance, Tàpies' abstract paintings, such as *Love, to Death (Amor, a Mort)* (1980), are made with expressive blends of layered and gestural brush strokes. In *Melancholia*, subtle reference is made to Tàpies' technique, which has been described as a "chance gesture with a hidden purpose" (Kuspit, 2000:140). It has been poetically noted that "even the artist's gestures, for all their energy, seem like soot from a dying flame" (Kuspit, 2000:140). Similarly, in *Melancholia*, uniformity and continuity are formed by the application of this expressive, wide and dense brushstroke, and thick, black substances, such as charcoal. For instance, an 'invisible' line guides the viewer's eye in the composition of the *Melancholia* installation. This line, seen as a subtle yet important gestural mark, orders and joins the various parts of the complex composition.



The Body

The presence of the artist's hand in many pieces in this body of work reveals an awareness of the physical body that is implied in the materiality and form of various works. For instance, a bodily quality and the simultaneous experience of attraction and repulsion that defines abjection is present in *Ash in a Box/Prolonged Sadness*. The work includes a stand, which is itself part of the artwork. The construction of the metal stand does not imply strength nor sturdiness. While it remains upright, it seems precarious and unbalanced, as if it could topple over and the ash could spill if mistakenly touched by a viewer. However, the seemingly unbalanced legs stand strong in a quiet and unassuming way. The paradox of stability and instability that is imbued in the work is strengthened by the tension between the seemingly fragile form of the stand and one's knowledge of the durability of the steel of which it is made.



Reference to bodily form is implied in many of the works in an effort to explore the ineffable inner experience of melancholia that is not easily represented. For instance, in a work titled *Inner Constriction*, the materiality and form of the work imply bodily associations that may evoke the experience of abjection. These so-called 'balls of constriction' comprise of tightly bound balls of canvas offcuts and a variety of materials that are used to form the centre of these objects, like gauze, plastic netting, inner tubes, cotton thread, wool, rope, old clothing and felt. A mixture of acrylic pigment and glue was painted or poured onto these objects and, in some instances, partly 'floods' the differently textured fabric objects. These balls are suspended from the layered installation and the ceiling so as to add three-dimensionality to the installation. These forms were quickly but sensitively made in what I term a state of emotional constriction, and draw witness to the psychological, inner world. Given this, the work may be thought to visualise the interiority and introversion of the melancholic temperament.



Page 27 and 28 – Inner Constriction Plastic netting, recycled clothing, gauze, felt, cotton thread, rubber inner tubes, wool, rope, acrylic pigment, wood glue
Various sizes from 5,4 x 5,4 x 4 cm to 60 x 60 x 15 cm

Page 31 row 1 left – Layered Introversion 3 Recycled clothing, cotton thread, pins 18 x 10 x 8 cm

Page 31 row 1 middle – Layered Introversion 7 Recycled shirt pocket, linen, ribbon, previously used canvas, cotton thread 13 x 9 cm

Page 31 row 1 right – Layered Introversion 3 Recycled clothing, cotton thread, pins 18 x 10 x 8 cm

Page 31 row 2 left – Layered Introversion 4 Plastic netting, ribbon, previously used canvas, cotton fabric, cotton thread 17 x 11 cm

Page 31 row 2 middle – Layered Introversion 6 Recycled clothing, cotton fabric, cotton thread 17 x 10 cm

Page 31 row 2 right – Layered Introversion 8 Linen, plastic netting, ribbon, previously used canvas, felt, gauze, cotton thread 18,5 x 14 cm

Page 31 row 3 left – Layered Introversion 5 Linen, cotton fabric, cotton thread 13,5 x 8,5 cm

Page 31 row 3 middle – Layered Introversion 1 Plastic netting, recycled clothing, gauze, felt, cotton thread, pins 22 x 20 cm

Page 31 row 3 right – Layered Introversion 5 Linen, cotton fabric, cotton thread 13,5 x 8,5 cm



The layered, hand-stitched ‘miniatures’, titled *Layered Introversion*, are comprised of textural materials such as plastic netting, shreds of delicate clothing, previously painted on and used canvas, gauze and felt, and are carefully placed together to form dense layers of mostly monochrome colours with strong hints of orange in certain places. This work echoes the private, quiet space of a shirt pocket, that also has a bodily resonance. These objects can fit or be hidden away in the personal, intimate space of a pocket. They maintain a similar use of scale to that of artist Janine Antoni’s work titled *Grope* (1990), which comprises of eighty-four pockets from men’s trousers that are sewn together (Berkoviech, 2002:142). By virtue of the layering of found, used clothing, *Grope* draws on the bodily qualities of abjection in a similar way to my own pocket work titled *Layered Introversion*.



Page 32 – Layered Introversion 2 Plastic netting, recycled clothing, gauze, felt, cotton thread 17 x 9,5 cm

Page 32 – Janine Antoni – Grope (1990) Clothing, cotton thread Dimensions variable (small version)

Process and Interaction

This awareness of the physical body was present in the processes that I employed throughout the making of this body of work, particularly those that were labour-intensive and meditative in nature, such as layering. For example, in *Slivered Ball of Constriction and Bounded Implosion*, an organic, spherical shape was formed through the use of time-intensive layering and binding of canvas, glue and other substances on a daily basis. After creating the form, an incision was made through the densely layered materials. The procedure of severing the ball made space for new possibilities. By sawing halfway into the mass, the inner fleshiness of the compounded layers revealed itself. By cutting right through the exterior of the form, the materials came to resemble splintered bone and internal cavities. To me, this severed oval ball reveals the inwardness and concealed nature of the melancholic temperament. The separation of the layers that occurred when the object was sliced open exposed the innards of the work, thus revealing the daily, purposeful and time-consuming process of its making. This process seems obsessive but it also reveals the careful, mindful, planning of the artwork as an expression of the melancholic state.



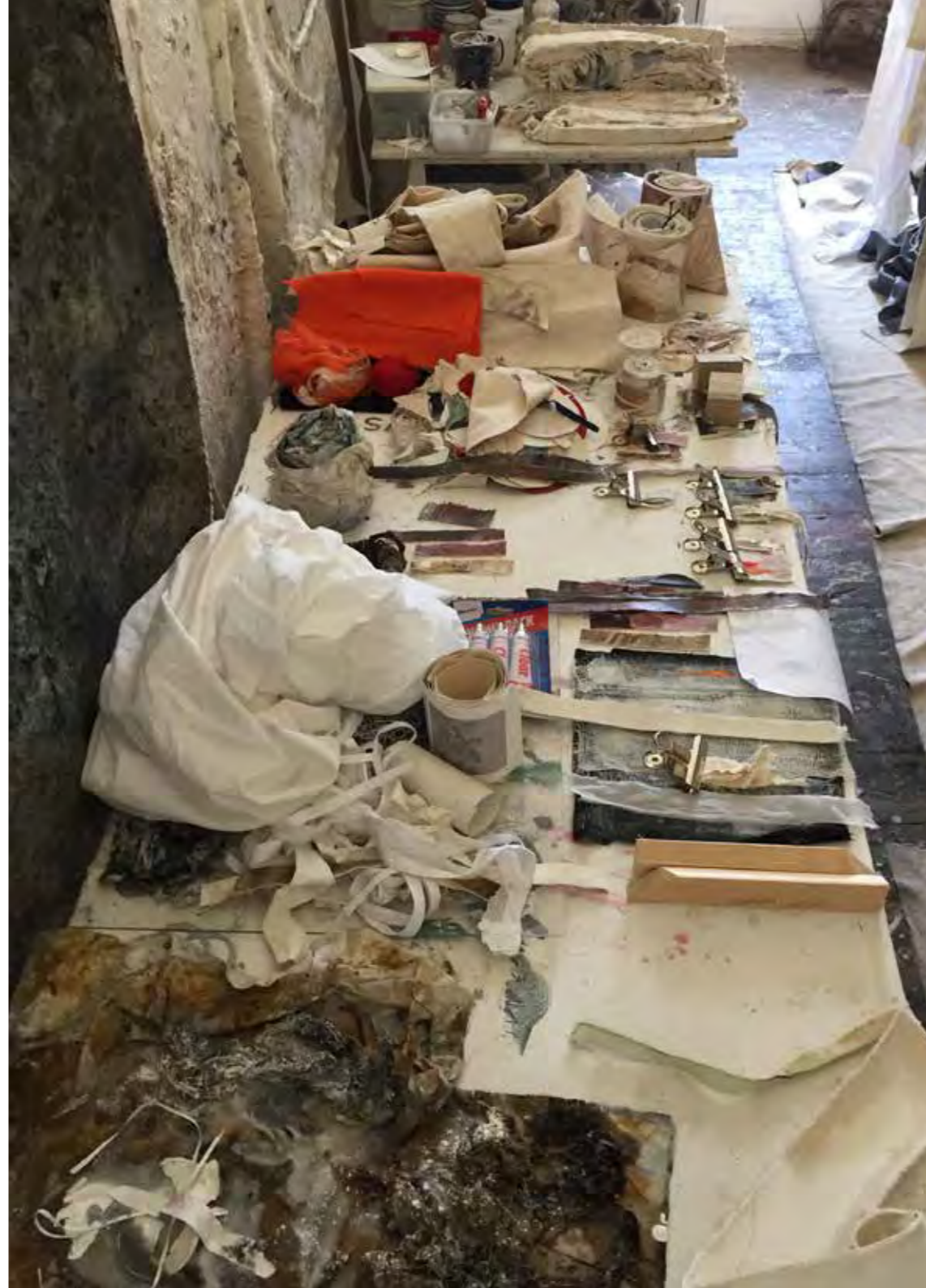


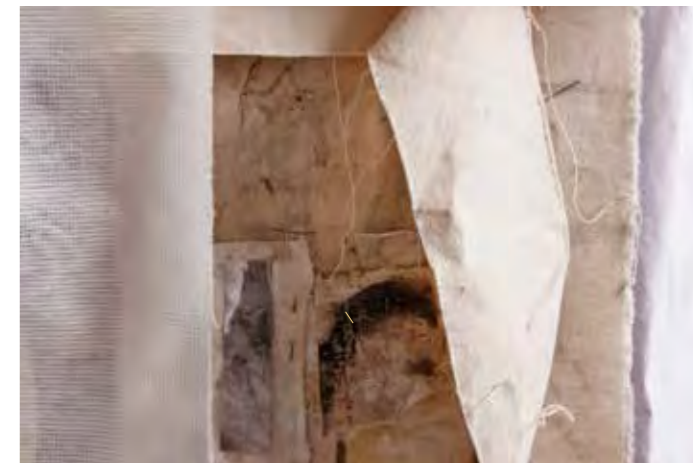
The layered qualities of *Slivered Ball of Constriction and Bounded Implosion* reflect the work of South African contemporary artist Paul Edmunds. Edmunds' three-dimensional mixed media work titled *Cumulate* (1998), is made of shredded and layered pages of National Geographic magazines that are compressed and hardened with wood glue. The monochromatic palette, layerdness and time-intensive production of this work is echoed in my own and speaks to the introversion and meditative nature of process-based practice.

Artist Fabian Saptouw (2015) writes that labour intensive work seems mundane and repetitive but has a purpose (Saptouw, 2015:1189). This awareness of the artist's labour is presented in my work to articulate that the process of making the work is part of the artwork itself. Saptouw notes that "there is an intensity in the crafting process that should not be undervalued, nor negated using terms like 'obsessive' or 'absurd'" as this "discounts [that] labour as a compulsion as opposed to an action taken with specific intent" (Saptouw, 2015:1186).

In Barbara Bolt's (2004) text *Art Beyond Representation*, the author notes:

[...] a materialist account of creative practice questions both representational theories of art and the contemporary pre-occupation with the understanding of art as a sign system. I suggest that attention to the productive materiality of the 'performative act' enables us to reconfigure our understandings of the work of art (Bolt, 2004:149).





Saptouw (2015) notes that this “is a significant shift from the previously stated position of theorising about the work from a distance. This way of thinking about artistic production is also central to the argument about the intellectual value of process” (Saptouw, 2015:1188). In keeping with the idea of materiality as a performative act that occurs both in the making and the viewing of a work, the viewer might become challenged with his or her considerations about how process reveals itself here, which is only properly visible when the layered works are viewed in person. As such, it is important that the works are seen in situ in the gallery space and not via photographic documentation. By viewing the central *Melancholia* installation from different angles, hidden, otherwise unnoticed layers reveal themselves to the viewer.





The primacy of viewer interaction is also reflected in my process of making for the work titled *Scrolls in a Box*, which comprises of miniature scrolls stored in a canvas box. Tightly rolled and bound painted canvases, what I refer to as 'private scrolls', given that the information contained within them cannot be read, were painted daily with layers of glue. Glue and detritus were applied to the surface of the box and in the cavities in between the rolled-up canvasses. Thus, the surface reveals layers of substances, which mimics the layered, concealed nature of the melancholic state. The melancholic temperament occasionally wants to be seen, to reveal something or to be acknowledged, but is most comfortable when introverted and out of sight. Viewing *Scrolls in a Box* alludes to a voyeuristic experience, as the lid of the box can be opened and the box's interior can be viewed, but the scrolls cannot be read. The intimacy of the box and the veiling quality of the glue conveys the dichotomy of the melancholic, of one that seeks to both hide and be seen.

As is evidenced by this and many other works in *Melancholia*, process-based practice enabled an experimental manner of making that allowed me to engage on an intuitive level with the internal psychological experience of melancholia while I was making. Ideally, viewing the body of work with a similar explorative demeanour might result in a revealing and rewarding experience for the viewer.

Conclusion

In concluding this project, one might consider Saptouw's (2015) ideas about how process-based work relates to the viewer's mind. He notes: "we have to take the labour into account when viewing and critiquing the work. The time invested in the project is physically manifested in the actual material object but also in the viewer's mind when they view the artworks" (Saptouw, 2015:1191). It is this physical manifestation of time and my own mental and emotional experience of melancholia that I aim to convey to the viewer through the material investigations of this project. The body of work represents a personal narrative and portrayal of a life characterised by this temperament.



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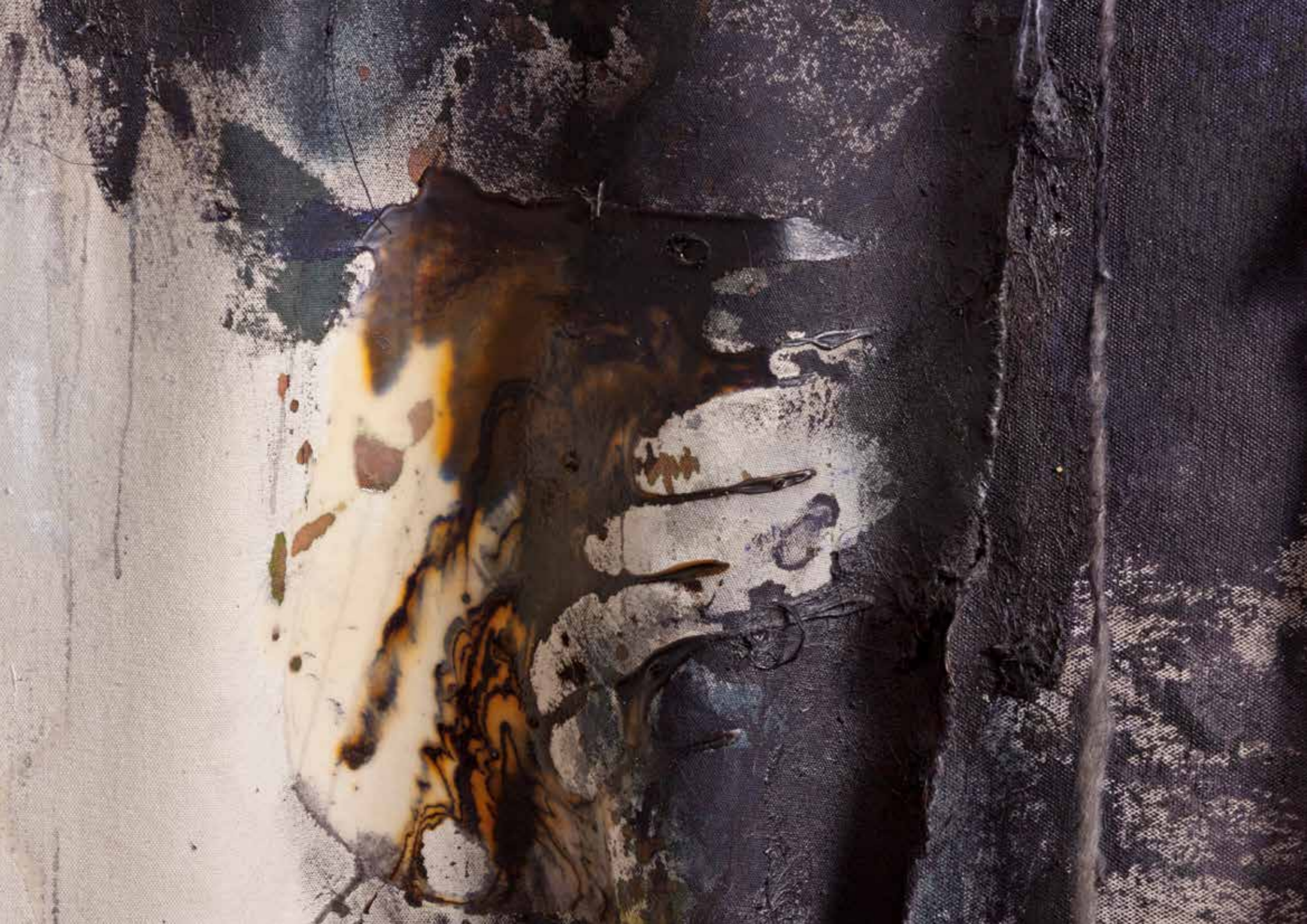
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Page 45 – **Melancholia detail** Oil, acrylic, wood ash, industrial enamel, found muck, wood glue, resin, bedding, felt, canvas

