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## Trying to Live Now

### Chronotopic Figures in Jenny Watson's *A Painted Page Series*

Chris McAuliffe

#### Abstract

Between late 1979 and early 1980, Australian artist Jenny Watson painted a sequence of six works, each with the title *A Painted Page*. Combining gridded, painted reproductions of photographs, newspapers and department store catalogues with roughly painted fields of color, the series brought together a range of recent styles and painterly idioms: pop, photorealism, and non-objective abstraction. Watson's evocation of styles considered dated, corrupted or redundant by contemporary critics was read as a sign of the decline of modernism and the emergence of a postmodernism inflected with irony and a cool, "new wave" sensibility. An examination of the *Painted Pages* in the context of Watson's interest in autobiography and her association with the women's art movement, however, reveals the works to be subjective, highly personal reflections on memory, self and artistic aspiration. Drawing on Bakhtin's model of the chronotope, this paper argues for a spatio-temporal reading of Watson's *Painted Pages* rather than the crude model of stylistic redundancy and succession. Watson's source images register temporal orders ranging across the daily, the seasonal and the epochal. Her paintings transpose Bakhtin's typology of quotidian, provincial and "adventuristic" time into autobiographical paintings of teenage memories, the vicissitudes of the art world and punk subcultures. Collectively, the *Painted Pages* established a chronotopic field; neither an aggregation of moments nor a collaged evocation of a period but a point at which Watson closed off one kind of time (an art critical time of currency and succession) and opened up another (of subjectivity and affective experience).

#### About the Author

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# Trying to Live Now

## Chronotopic Figures in Jenny Watson's *A Painted Page Series*

Chris McAuliffe

It's the end, the end of the seventies. It's the end, the end of the century.

The Ramones,

"Do You Remember Rock 'n' Roll Radio?" (1980)

Between December 1979 and June 1980, Australian artist Jenny Watson made a series of six paintings, each with the primary title *A Painted Page*. Based on printed pages from newspapers, books and department store catalogues, with sources and their dates of publication specified in subsidiary title components, Watson's *Painted Pages* offered a snapshot of life and events in the Southern Hemisphere summer of 1979/80. Newspaper headlines reported Cold War tension (U.S. President Carter's response to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan), a transportation catastrophe (the death of 257 people in an aviation accident in Antarctica) and local politics (a municipal planning controversy in Brisbane). Reassuring seasonal activities also registered: there were Christmas gifts to purchase from the Myer store catalogue, bikini-clad women were visiting beaches and men were competing in cricket matches. In parallel, the artist's personal interests were revealed: she was reading books on mod and punk fashion.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In order of execution, the series consisted of:

*A Painted Page 1: Twiggy by Richard Avedon 1979*, oil on canvas, 105 x 153 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Michell Endowment, 1982, (fig. 4).

*A Painted Page: Pages 52 and 53 of "In the Gutter" (The Ears)*, 1979, oil on canvas, 163 x 178 cm. Collection of the University of Queensland. Purchased with the assistance of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, 1981. Identified in an inscription on rear of canvas as #2, (fig. 5).

*A Painted Page: Myer Christmas Catalogue 1979*, 1979, oil on canvas, 163 x 178 cm. Gold Coast City Art Gallery. Identified as #3 in Paul Taylor, "Jenny Watson's 'Mod'ernism," *Art International* 24, no.1-2 (September-October 1980), 216, (fig. 7).

*A Painted Page: The Herald 21/11/79*, 1979, oil on cotton duck, 60 x 76 cm, collection of the artist. Newspaper source published November 29, 1979, (fig. 1).

*A Painted Page: The Sun Jezza Will Stay, Blues*, [1980], oil on cotton duck, 58 x 67.6 cm. Collection of the artist. Newspaper source published 25 January 1980. (fig. 3).

*A Painted Page: The Telegraph*, [1980], oil on cotton duck, 66 x 52 cm. Private collection, Brisbane. Newspaper source published April 9, 1980, (fig. 2).

In the past, all the works Watson's *A Painted Page* series have typically been dated to 1979. However, the identification of a publication date of 1980 for some printed sources means that later works must have been made later than 1979. In these cases, an amended date of 1980 is given in square brackets.



**Figure 1**

Jenny Watson, *A Painted Page: The Herald 21/11/79*, 1979, oil on cotton duck, 60 x 76 cm. Collection of the artist, courtesy of Anna Schwartz Gallery. Copyright Jenny Watson.

Common structural elements established the format of each painting. A gridded, loosely-painted copy of a printed page was butted into a corner of the canvas, anchoring two of its sides to a vertical and horizontal perimeter of the support. Across the series, each of the four possible corners of a canvas was used, implying a systematic exploration of positional options. The space between the remaining two edges of the painted page and the limit of the canvas—which Watson termed the “off border”—was filled with thick, vigorously applied paint, using a single color in all but two cases.<sup>2</sup>

In each case, the essential architecture of the painting schematised the deductive structure of high modernist painting. A master quadrilateral (the canvas itself), held a second within it (the copied page). Inside this was nested a further set (the square cells of the enlargement grid). While the L-shaped off border was a remnant space determined by the proportions of the source pages, it too stood as an internal echo of edges of the canvas.

Watson also tabled constitutive elements of high modernist painting in the frontal orientation and spatial compression of the paintings.<sup>3</sup> The flatness of the support, along with its shape and edge, were declared insistently. The risk of spatial illusion, arising from the very application of paint to the support, was held in check. Each of the enlargement squares was treated as an isolated painterly unit rather than melding fluidly into an object, figure or scene. The newspaper page of *A Painted Page: The Herald 21/11/79*, for example, remains visibly the concatenation of 96 subsidiary squares (fig. 1). While the source page offered crude examples of painting's traditional genres (a landscape, a portrait, a still life), Watson refused to bring any of these to fruition in her copy.

But aspects of that high modernism were also resisted. Although Watson hardly delivered the meticulous illusionism of a *trompe l'oeil* rack painting, her pages were still readable as such. Her contained palette and restrained brush stroke prevented the total fragmentation of the enlargement squares into disconnected painterly elements. And with this came effects typically abandoned in high modernist painting, such as a distinction between figure and ground (the page before the surface of the canvas), figuration (the human forms on the pages) and narrative (the printed word).

As a result, the *Painted Pages* exemplify a version of contemporary art that was becoming increasingly common at the end of the 1970s. Here was an artist invoking, yet resisting, high modernism while also hinting at a nascent post-modernism. In the *Painted Pages*, Watson pursued what Leo Steinberg had recently identified as a harbinger of postmodernism: the flatbed effect—an emulation of the all-over textual and pictorial field of the printing plate. Her sources melded daily news and fashion photography, image and caption, and even included mastheads and page numbers. They corrupted the terrain of high modernist painting by introducing illusion, figuration and narrative text. Staging a confrontation between modernist autonomy and everyday print media, between abstraction and representation, between the painterly and the mechanically reproduced, the *Painted Pages* mapped the “shake-up” that, Steinberg suggested, “contaminates all purified categories.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Watson statement in Sally Brand, “Learning to Paint” (BA honours thesis, University of Sydney, 2005): 30–31.

<sup>3</sup> Here I use Michael Fried, “Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons,” *Artforum* 5, no.3 (November 1966): 18–27, as an archetypal definition of high modernist parameters. Reprinted in Michael Fried *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 77–99.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” *Artforum* 10, no.7 (March 1972): 49.



**Figure 2**

Jenny Watson, *A Painted Page: The Telegraph*, [1980], oil on cotton duck, 66 x 52 cm. Private collection, Brisbane, courtesy Josh Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Copyright Jenny Watson.

Watson, who had been active in the women's art movement since 1975, shook things up further by couching her challenge to high modernism in personal as well as formal terms. For her, the *Painted Pages* were a riposte to the monolithic, masculinist language of high modernism. The colors she chose for the off borders of the paintings (pinks, lavenders, ochres) were, she said, "girly" decorator's colours rather than "official serious art colours."<sup>5</sup> For Australian audiences, the "official serious" art Watson had in mind would have been obvious; her mottled fields of color, especially the ragged-edged shapes in *A Painted Page: The Telegraph*, [1980], were a clear allusion to the work of acclaimed abstract painter David Aspden, who had represented Australia at the Sao Paulo Biennale of 1971 (fig. 2).

<sup>5</sup> Jenny Watson statement in Sally Brand, "Learning to Paint," 30–31.

A further challenge to "official serious" art came in Watson's eclectic fusion of styles recently dominant in contemporary art: lyrical abstraction, pop and photorealism. This combined and contaminated categories whose merits were being questioned by Australian art critics. Watson's newspaper pages, alluding to Andy Warhol's tabloid headline works of 1961–62, must have appeared a little dated at the end of the 1970s. More to the point, it was a critical commonplace that pop art had not emerged, or had any real consequence, among Australian artists.<sup>6</sup> The patchwork fields of color in Watson's off borders evoked the so-called lyrical abstraction of the early 1970s, a style whose high status as the legitimate heir to hard-edge color painting fell dramatically as it was increasingly dismissed as the decorative last gasp of American-style formalist painting. While super realism or photorealism was, as late as 1977, identified as contemporary Australian art's strongest link with international developments,<sup>7</sup> it had never escaped the intimation that it was a faddish, even gimmicky, idiom.

Watson's multiple stylistic references within her *Painted Pages* hint at a 1970s mood. A skeptical regard towards a singular modernist narrative was manifested in figures of pluralism, redundancy, and illegitimacy. The sense that modernism was in decline was coupled with a concern that Australian art was not in a position to compel conviction (to use the high modernist yardstick). In 1974, surveying the state of play in a provincial art scene, Terry Smith noted the pluralism of the moment, remarking that "the stylistic diversity of international art during the past 15 years reverberates throughout recent Australian art."<sup>8</sup> But he added that the "last local movement of any strength" had been the color painting of the late 1960s. In the *Painted Pages*, Watson seemed to map both this diversity of idioms and a national inability to develop a forceful local voice. In a provincial context, her flatbed effect signalled a melancholic response to an imported, entropic modernism. This sense of impotence and lack of an emphatic forward momentum reflected the dominant biological metaphors through which art's temporality was articulated. This temporality was mapped in the narration of the germination, efflorescence and withering of styles. In fertile metropolitan soil, spores spread, flourished and engendered further growth. In a harsh provincial terrain, this momentum stalled; modernism's seed was spilled on barren soil.

But other temporal figures in the *Painted Pages* suggest that Watson wanted to do more than simply declare, with the Ramones, that 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism was grinding to a halt two decades early. In the copied daily newspapers, she introduced solar time, with its diurnal and seasonal rhythms, and social-historical time, with its news events and political crises. Book pages presented a variant of social-historical time: the recent past of sixties fashion and the looming present of seventies punk style. These were linked to the fluid, synthetic temporalities of memory and desire, central motifs in the Australian women's art movement of the second half of the 1970s. Exploring these modes of the temporal—from the ground zero of the quotidian through the unanchored time of memory—Watson was able to break

<sup>6</sup> The first edition of Bernard Smith's standard survey *Australian Painting* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962, reprinted 1965) made no mention of pop art; later editions declared that "Pop art did not make ground readily in Australia," where it "lacked an important *raison d'être*," 2001 edition, 87–88. Gary Catalano's *The Years of Hope: Australian Art and Criticism 1959–68* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981), addressed pop in a chapter headed "The Absence of Pop."

<sup>7</sup> A claim made by curator John Stringer in his introduction the exhibition catalogue of a global survey exhibition of super realism, which included Watson's *Yellow Painting: John*, 1974. Australian Gallery Directors Council (AGDC), *Illusion and Reality*, AGDC, North Sydney, 1977.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Smith, "The Provincialism Problem," *Artforum* 13, no.1, (September 1974): 54–9, reprinted in *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970–1980*, ed. Paul Taylor (South Yarra: Art & Text, 1984), 49.



**Figure 3**

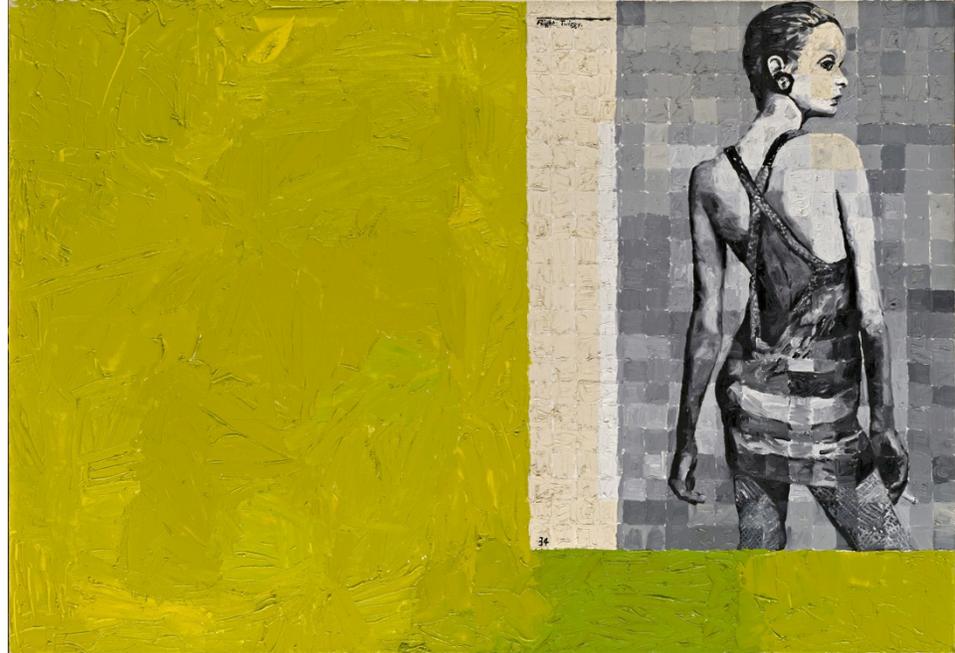
Jenny Watson, *A Painted Page: The Sun Jezza Will Stay, Blues*, [1980], oil on cotton duck, 58 x 67.6 cm. Collection of the artist, courtesy of Anna Schwartz Gallery. Copyright Jenny Watson.

out of art critical time, with its biological metaphors of evolution and succession, and establish affective time as the foundation of her practice.

The principal temporal figures in the *Painted Pages* are these:

i) The Daily

The newspapers in *A Painted Page: The Herald 21/11/79* (1979), *A Painted Page: The Sun Jezza Will Stay, Blues*, [1980] and *A Painted Page: The Telegraph*, [1980] chronicle 24-hour event cycles (fig. 3). Aside from being evident in the declared date of a newspaper, this immediacy is reinforced in the identification in bold red type of the updated editions issued over the course of a day: *The Sun* was a morning newspaper, *The Herald* copied was the afternoon “City” edition, while the selected edition of *The Telegraph* was an evening “Final”.



**Figure 4**

Jenny Watson, *A Painted Page 1: Twiggy by Richard Avedon*, 1979, oil on canvas, 105 x 153 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Michell Endowment, 1982. Copyright Jenny Watson.

ii) The Seasonal

Embodied in social and cultural behaviours structured around summer (bathing, sport) and Christmas (shopping, holidaying, gift-giving, Watson's selected newspapers and department store catalogue were typical of the seasonal format. Daily newspapers featured page after page of gift advertising as well as seasonal foods for both the traditional Christmas dinner and summer feasting. A heat wave in the summer of 1979–80 was the pretext for numerous photographs of young female bathers, of the kind adjacent to the front-page headline of *A Painted Page: The Sun*.

iii) The Event

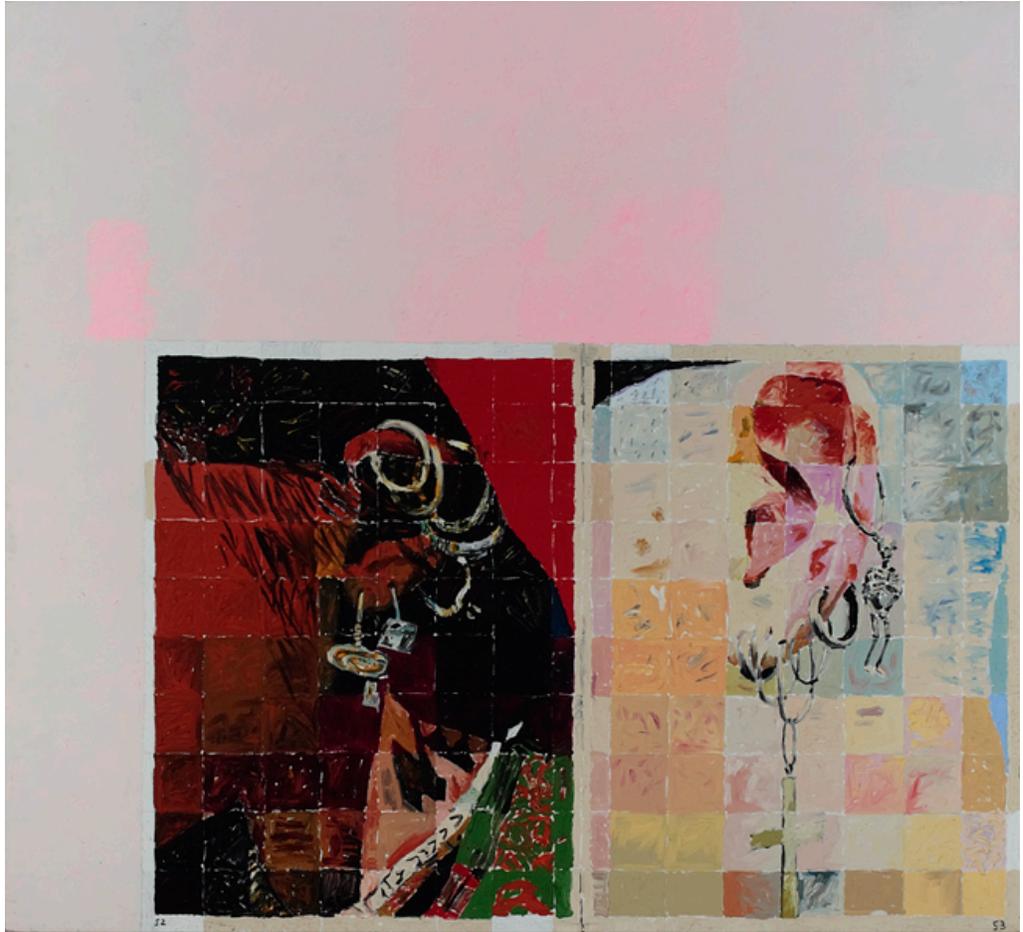
The event is manifest in the short-lived dramas of local news stories and scandals that begin on the front page, before their eventual resolution or exile into the back pages sees them disappear from view. In *A Painted Page: The Sun*, Watson entered mid-way through the unfolding of a boardroom scuffle at the Carlton Australian Rules Football Club (the "Blues") in which the over-throw of the club's chairman led to the resignation of champion coach Alex Jesaulenko ("Jezza").

iv) The Epochal

*The Sun's* report that "Carter Gets Tougher" (the U.S. President has reintroduced registration for the draft for the first time since the Vietnam War), reproduced in *A Painted Page: The Sun*, marked the latest chapter in the thirty-five-year Cold War.

v) The Recent Past

*A Painted Page 1: Twiggy by Richard Avedon (for Paul Taylor)* (1979), invokes the historical moment of Swinging London and American youthquakers, with a Richard Avedon photograph from a 1967 *Vogue* fashion spread (fig. 4). That past, of 12 years before, spoke of the artist's own youth (she was born in 1951) as well as of the fleeting cycles of fashion.



**Figure 5**

Jenny Watson, *A Painted Page: Pages 52 and 53 of "In the gutter" (The Ears)* 1979, oil on canvas, 163 x 187 cm, Collection of The University of Queensland. Purchased with the assistance of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, 1981. Copyright Jenny Watson.

## vi) The Transhistorical

*A Painted Page: Pages 52 and 53 of "In the Gutter" (The Ears)* bridged the present (the pages were from a 1978 publication on current punk fashion) and the deep past (the book compared punk body piercing with tribal body decoration), threading the two together with an anthropological universalism (fig. 5).

Watson's *Painted Pages* series thus constructed a typology of the temporal, from day, to season, to year, to era and beyond. Within all of these are embedded the figures of supersession and redundancy; the early newspaper edition is succeeded by the final, today's newspaper by tomorrow's; the current president by the next (1980 being an election year); yesterday's fashion by today's and then tomorrow's. The prevalent critical interpretation of the *Painted Page* series is shaped by these figures; stylistic eclecticism was read as evidence of a late-seventies art-world malaise, a disillusionment with modernism that heralded a nascent postmodernism. But rather than simply acting out the biological metaphor of generational succession, Watson plotted the multiple temporalities of Bakhtin's "chronotope."

Coined in Bakhtin's 1937–38 essay, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," the chronotope refers to "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature."<sup>9</sup> Reflection on the character, ratio and interdependence of time and space allowed Bakhtin to map the narrative components of the modern novel. Several of these forms emerged in the temporal elements of Watson's *Painted Pages*, especially those that Bakhtin associated with Stendahl, Balzac and Flaubert. At its most stolid, theirs was a provincial time in which "there are no events, only 'doings' that constantly repeat themselves." This is the seasonal space—the realm of "doings"—that Watson's newspapers documented; a space in which "A day is just a day, a year is just a year."<sup>10</sup>

It is a temporality that is also registered in the thickly painted grounds upon which Watson placed her pages. The chronotope of the parlor and salon, Bakhtin wrote, is "a viscous and sticky time that drags itself slowly through space . . . it often serves as the contrasting background for temporal sequences that are more charged with energy and event." A chronotopic reading of Watson's series, then, would begin by recognizing the abstract grounds of her paintings as a kind of spatio-temporal zero degree. Her echoes of the language of lyrical abstraction were not merely pastiches of a soon-to-be-redundant modernism but a painterly evocation of "commonplace, philistine cyclical everyday time."<sup>11</sup>

Upon this ground, the newspaper pages acted as what Bakhtin dubbed "the chronotope of *threshold* . . . a chronotope of the *crisis* or *break* in a life."<sup>12</sup> This was the trigger for the unfolding of what he called the "adventure novel."<sup>13</sup> The forms that Watson discovered can be found in *Painted Page: The Sun*: those of global conflict (the crisis in Afghanistan, triggered by the Soviet troop deployment of December 24, 1979, after she had commenced the series); boardroom drama (the quasi-operatic narrative of a football club's alienation of

<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in his *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 247–248.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.



**Figure 6**

Installation view, *Jenny Watson: Six Paintings 1979–80*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, June 1980. Left to right: *A Painted Page 3: Myer Christmas Catalogue*; *An Original Oil Painting*; *A Painted Page 1: Twiggy*; *A Painted Page: The Herald*.

its favored son); and even romance (in a photograph of a Carlton footballer embracing his wife before departing on a team trip). In *A Painted Page: Pages 52 and 53 of "In the Gutter" (The Ears)*, the effect is more general; the sartorial antics of London punks could be considered "moments of adventuristic time," bohemian irruptions into the everyday.<sup>14</sup>

In themselves, Watson's reproduced pages appear to be found chronotopes; incidental, perhaps even random material excerpted from the flow of the quotidian and inserted into paintings. However the series as a whole established a chronotopic field; not an aggregation of moments, nor even a collaged evocation of the summer but a point at which Watson closed off one kind of time (an art critical time of currency and succession) and opened up another (a subjective and affective autobiographical time). This transition was made clear in the artist's June 1980 exhibition of the *Painted Pages*. Sandwiched between two of the *Painted Pages* was a work entitled *An Original Oil Painting* (1980). As its generic title suggested, the painting was just that; a canvas board divided into a black rectangle and an abutting white off border, across which the title/caption was painted (fig. 6). The rhetoric of high modernism—flatness, deductive structure and the self-presence of painting—was rendered as a generic convention. Adjacent to it, the first of the *Painted Page* series, *A Painted Page 1: Twiggy*, announced an art that was propelled by Watson's memories of teenage fandom, her love of fashion and her ongoing passion for youth culture.

Watson's fusion of sixties pop culture, a moribund high modernism and stylistic iconoclasm appealed to emerging critics and curators determined to narrate Australian art's transition out of the entropic moment of the seventies and into the new, postmodern eighties. While Watson was making *A Painted Page 1: Twiggy*, Paul Taylor, a young critic, visited her studio. He was so enamored with the painting that he asked her to dedicate it to him.<sup>15</sup> It was a remarkably bold request given his brief acquaintance with the artist but one

<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," 94.

<sup>15</sup> Jenny Watson recalls the visit and request in "Personality Portraits: Jenny Watson Interviewed by Kelly Fliedner," in *Impresario: Paul Taylor, the Melbourne Years, 1981–1984*, eds. Helen Hughes and Nicholas Crogan (Melbourne: Surpluss/Monash University Museum of Art, 2013), 250.

that suggested that the painting was so significant for him that he desired a public and permanent affiliation with it. Taylor identified the work as a pivotal registration of a new sensibility in Australian art, that of a younger generation "born during the Fifties and matured alongside television and the expansion of the mass-media."<sup>16</sup> As Taylor carved out a niche as *the* Young Turk of the Australian art scene, *A Painted Page 1: Twiggy*, figured in his first published art criticism, in the inaugural issue of his journal *Art & Text*, and in his provocative 1982 exhibition *Popism* at the National Gallery of Victoria.

For Taylor, the *Painted Page* series embodied the classical figures of stylistic and generational succession. Watson, he suggested, left behind the impasse of seventies pluralism by reflecting "lightheartedly on her background, and that of her contemporaries, remembering the authoritative procession of 'mainstream' styles of pop, 'op', hard-edge, minimal, conceptual, photorealist . . . into Australia."<sup>17</sup> In Taylor's reading, paintings such as *Twiggy* were meta-discursive reflections on a visual field encompassing received art styles and consumed mass media imagery. *Twiggy*, "a feature of the 60s pop culture,"<sup>18</sup> represented the ideas of mass media reproduction and pop cultural convention; this "is not a painting of a figure, it is a painting of a photograph."<sup>19</sup> In his position piece in the first issue of *Art & Text*, entitled "Australian New Wave and the 'Second Degree,'" Taylor saw the *Painted Pages* as essays in textual play, they were "wryly sophisticated" quotations from "the recent past,"<sup>20</sup> making for a subjectivity highly attuned to the multivalent pleasures of connotation rather than the putative transparency of denotation. For Taylor, Watson's citations heralded a Barthesian "aesthetic of the second degree."<sup>21</sup> The pleasure of the second degree was a sophisticated "pleasure in dislocation;"<sup>22</sup> a critical ploy separating younger artists from the parent generation and making a virtue of Australian artists' isolation from the metropolitan mainstream.

Taylor had told Watson that "there's a bunch of you who are making images from your experience having grown up with television, which makes you different to generations before, and I'm going to do something about that."<sup>23</sup> What he did—in his criticism, curating and editorship—reoriented the temporal and affective character of the *Painted Pages*. For Taylor, *Twiggy* became evidence of "pop nostalgia;"<sup>24</sup> not only an icon of a sixties childhood but also evidence that, as critic Adrian Martin declared in a lecture at the *Popism* exhibition,

<sup>16</sup> Paul Taylor, "Jenny Watson's 'Mod'ernism," *Art International* 24, no.1-2 (September-October 1980), 218, note 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Taylor, "Australian New Wave and the 'Second Degree,'" *Art & Text* 1 (Autumn 1981): 23-32, reprinted in Paul Taylor ed. *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980*, 159.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, "Jenny Watson's 'Mod'ernism," 216.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, "Australian New Wave and the 'Second Degree,'" 159.

<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), cited by Taylor in "Australian New Wave and the 'Second Degree,'" 159.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, "Australian New Wave and the 'Second Degree,'" 159.

<sup>23</sup> "Personality Portraits: Jenny Watson Interviewed by Kelly Flidner," 250. This is Watson's paraphrase of Taylor's remark. Note that television was introduced in Australia in 1956, the year Watson turned 5.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, "Jenny Watson's 'Mod'ernism," 216.

"we have learnt to love Warhol all over again."<sup>25</sup> Taylor's *Popism* trafficked in gestures associated with an emerging rhetoric of postmodernism in the visual arts. It was, as Martin observed, "about style, surface, appearance ... where *new* only ever means *different*, not original or unique."<sup>26</sup> Surface, Martin admitted, received bad press; it was shallow, flat, lacking in the depth of genuine culture. Nevertheless, he argued, the pop sensibility of the early 1980s entailed "Not only living *on* the surface, but living *as* a surface."<sup>27</sup>

In this art critical temporality, new generational sensibilities succeeded the old while new styles declared the redundancy of previously dominant practices. Elbowing aside Australia's powerful figurative and expressionist tradition, Martin declared affect—"minds, feelings, emotions, attachments"—*passé*; the time for expressionism, with its "touching inclusion in the artwork of autobiographical scraps," had passed.<sup>28</sup> Yet it is affect, and the autobiographical, that drove *A Painted Page 1: Twiggy*, in spite of efforts to make it a pin-up for life lived on the surface. There was far more to Twiggy than pop nostalgia.

For a moment, between 1966–67, Twiggy enjoyed global celebrity as the epitome of Swinging London. In the mass media and popular imagination, she represented not only youth, Mod fashion and English style but also brash entrepreneurship. Twiggy was admired as both this year's girl *and* as Twiggy Enterprises Ltd. Journalists were confused by her slight frame and boyish haircut, or disturbed by her fusion of the infantile and the commercial. However, for suburban girls like Jenny Watson, Twiggy was their point of engagement with the spirit of the 1960s. Reading about Twiggy in newspapers and magazines, buying her line of clothing and accessories, a teenager could experience a pop epiphany involving, as Linda Benn DeLibero suggested:

Fashion as a powerful mode of expression, style as a means to another life, the sense of possibility in a purchase—the connection between clothes and the politics of liberation hadn't been so pronounced since the twenties. For a girl on the verge of adolescence, that convergence proved heady. *Vogue* called it "youthquake."<sup>29</sup>

Twiggy's moment was one in which politics, especially gender politics, was transformed into something articulated through forms of symbolic consumption. The Twiggy story, told and re-told in the popular media, was one of the "transformative properties not of politics and of social consciousness, but of fashion and style."<sup>30</sup> It was also the story of a fashion model who repeatedly dismissed the ideas of beauty and an ideal female form: "With Twiggy, for a brief time, girls were free to invest in a spectatorial position which made a virtue of everything deemed undesirable in male eyes. Not only could you transcend your class and be a star, you could transcend the limitations of femininity itself."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Martin, "Living on the Surface," [Lecture, 23 June 1982, National Gallery of Victoria] reprinted in Hughes and Croggan, eds. *Impresario: Paul Taylor, the Melbourne Years, 1981–1984*, 168. Martin was a regular contributor to Taylor's *Art & Text*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>29</sup> Linda Benn DeLibero, "This Year's Girl: A Personal/Critical History of Twiggy," in *On Fashion*, ed. Shari Benstock (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 43.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 55–56.

In August 1967, Twiggy and Richard Avedon came together in *Vogue*, a magazine edited by the legendary Diana Vreeland and dedicated to fashionable contemporaneity. Avedon, then regarded as the world's greatest fashion photographer, had been poached from *Harper's Bazaar* by Vreeland in 1966. His role, in chronotopic terms, was to compress time and space into utter contemporaneity. He was the guru of "Nowness"; as guest editor of the April 1965 issue of *Bazaar*, he had offered readers a "partial passport to the off-beat side of Now."<sup>32</sup> *Vogue* was explicit about the temporal imperatives of fashion; the cover of the August 1967 issue promised "55 new looks to own right now." The only thing better was being ahead of the game; the cover of the July 1967 issue offered a "Fashion forecast: your next best looks."

Within this strategically manufactured environment of hyper-contemporaneity, Twiggy was the embodiment of Now. *Life* magazine reported that she had been declared the "face of 1967."<sup>33</sup> For *Vogue*, Twiggy was "a heroine for her time, which is now."<sup>34</sup> In April 1967 she blitzed New York with all the trappings of Mod celebrity—airport press conferences, a Cockney bodyguard, a wide-boy manager and spreads in *Look*, *Newsweek* and the *New Yorker*. It was during this visit that the Avedon shoot took place, the "Now" in fashion terms being a breathless declaration masking some six months of media pre-production.<sup>35</sup> Avedon's photographs of Twiggy for *Vogue* accompanied an article declaring a new look, a new physicality and a new spirit for young women: "delicious-looking creatures, healthy, well-dressed, living at the top of their zest. They're the romantic young girls of today."<sup>36</sup>

In Watson's painting, Richard Avedon's Twiggy is an historical artifact; a visual document of a recent Mod past since over-written by a succession of fashions and subcultures. In just over a decade, the face of 1967 had been superseded by the hippies, glam rock, disco, punk and new wave. But Twiggy also represented powerful memories of the artist's own youth. Watson still owns a work made when she was a teenager, in which news clippings of the Rolling Stones are interwoven with hand drawn Mary Quant-style dolly birds (with flowers painted on their cheeks, in emulation of Avedon's cover image of Twiggy for *Vogue* July 1967). Given Watson's involvement with the women's art movement, it is likely that Twiggy remained for her, in the 1970s, an empowering figure, representing confidence, independence and professional acumen to an artist conscious that, in the Australian art world, such attributes were resented by the male old guard.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Magazine copy cited by Vince Aletti, "In Vogue and After," in Richard Avedon, *Avedon Fashion* (New York: Abrams, 2009), 263.

<sup>33</sup> Anon., "The Arrival of Twiggy," *Life*, February 3, 1967, 33.

<sup>34</sup> Anon., "The Daring Young Romantics," *Vogue* [American edition], August 1967, not pag.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Avedon, *Avedon: Photographs 1947-77* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 107.

<sup>36</sup> Anon., "The Daring Young Romantics," not pag.

<sup>37</sup> In an August 1975 interview, Watson identified herself as a feminist artist and wryly noted that a woman artist's role was constituted as "nurturing a man's ego by not threatening him." Geoffrey de Groen, *Interviews with Australian Artists* (Melbourne: Quartet, 1978), 25.





**Figure 8**

Jenny Watson, *Yellow Painting: John*, 1974, synthetic polymer on canvas, 182.5 x 380.5 cm. Monash University Collection, Melbourne. Copyright Jenny Watson.

Dominating the first painting of the *Painted Pages* series, Watson's copy of Avedon's Twiggy is neither a quotidian news image nor a superficial exercise in nostalgia, but a recovered memory, a totemic image of youth, ambition, and vitality. The source is historicized and canonical; Watson's page was unearthed from a coffee table book surveying fashion photography rather than the original *Vogue* magazine. But Twiggy's presence is visceral; she remained the embodiment of the transformative properties of fashion and style. Here, in the meeting of the artist's teenage years and her professional adulthood, "Time becomes," as Bakhtin remarked, "palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, cause blood to flow in their veins."<sup>38</sup>

The chronotopy of autobiography is more fleshy and less stable than that of the novel. Bakhtin noted that the author of fiction "does his observing from his own unresolved and still evolving contemporaneity, in all its complexity and fullness, insofar as he himself is located as it were tangentially to the reality he describes."<sup>39</sup> In the case of autobiography, the irresolution of the authorial position is even more pronounced; the author is not tangential to the reality represented but thoroughly and subjectively invested in it. In *A Painted Page 1: Twiggy*, Watson introduced a suite of variables that could only result in a wild chronotopy—memory, youth and fashion—all of which orbit around fantasy. In a preface to a 1978 monograph on Avedon's fashion photography, Harold Brodkey grasped the richness and threat of these variables. "No one can tell us what time is," he said, "each of us is born into a private envelope of time."<sup>40</sup> The time of a life story, he suggested, was one invented by "our dreaming minds," its duration "has only to do with stories we tell ourselves." The time of fashion, its contemporaneity, was of a piece with this private, dreamed time; "Fashion, as a noun, means things that have been made for us to use as we try to live now. Fashion is us—trying to live."

<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," 250.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>40</sup> Harold Brodkey, [Introduction], in Richard Avedon, *Avedon: Photographs 1947–1977*, not pag.



### Figure 9

Jenny Watson, *Self Portrait: Tiger Lounge Version*, 1979, gouache and pencil on paper, 56.2 x 76cm. Maryvale Art Foundation Collection, Latrobe Regional Gallery, Morwell, Victoria. Copyright Jenny Watson.

It was this mercurial goal—trying to live now—that distinguished the *Painted Pages* from the autobiographical elements of Watson’s earlier work. In a 1974 series of portraits of friends, Watson had used a deadpan, photorealist approach to mute the affective element of personal imagery. Figures were clinically pinned down on uninflected fields of color, as if mimicking Barnett Newman’s “zips” and Morris Louis’s “pours” (fig. 8). Watson’s subsequent 1975–77 “House painting” series was a sequence of diptychs portraying each of the houses in which she had lived to date. While each pair could be read as a chapter in a life story, the paired representations of her homes—one a small photorealist image, the other a larger, disintegrated painterly grid—suggested that what was being hunted down was the margin between abstraction and representation rather than autobiography. In the *Painted Page* series, the autobiographical references were less directly stated although the temporal registers became overt. Watson coupled what Bakhtin called “socio-public” time (the events of the newspaper pages), and affective, autobiographical time (memories of Twiggy, an affiliation with punk). The former, as the world of “doings,” was objective and material in character. The latter, a fantasy of “adventuristic” time, was the realm of dreaming and becoming.

But the chronotopic strategies within the *Painted Page* series suggest that Watson was seeking a way out of such conventions. *A Painted Page 1: Twiggy* was not, as Taylor

would have it, a disinterested "painting of a photograph" nor an exercise in "dislocation."<sup>41</sup> Instead, Watson was reinvesting in the stories that she had told herself in her youth. Twiggy was a powerful evocation of an exciting, entrepreneurial young woman, made by an artist who had just completed her first decade of professional practice in a masculinist art world. Watson's new wave sensibility was more about Brodkey's dreaming mind than Barthes's second degree. It had something of the desire for self-invention, independent of classical stylistic narratives, identified by music critic Simon Reynolds, "there'll be no more Next Big Things, just an ever-after of pick'n'mix plundering from the past ... instead, on each of us descends the freedom (or burden?) of being the author of our own identity, making stylistic choices to express not so much our inner selves as our allegiances and our fantasies about who we'd *rather* be."<sup>42</sup>

With the completion of her *Painted Page* series, emerging postmodern criticism offered Watson a lead role in a new version of the narrative of Australian contemporary art. In the eyes of critics like Taylor and Martin, she represented a new, post-pop generation dispensing with modernist notions of expression, depth and originality. But for Watson, the series marked out a different, very personal narrative. It commenced with a talismanic figure, Twiggy, anchored in the artist's formative teenage fantasies. The second painting, invoking punk style and dedicated to Melbourne post-punk band The Ears, declared Watson's affiliation with Melbourne's inner-city underground.<sup>43</sup> The next three works (*Myer Christmas catalogue*, *The Herald* and *The Sun*) were rooted in concerns that Watson had earlier articulated in the context of the women's art movement; the pages charted the popular articulation of conventional gender roles (dolls for girls and trucks for boys, sunbathing for women and athleticism for men), and alluded to the dominance of a masculinist abstraction in late modernist art (fig. 7). The final work, which marked Watson's relocation from Melbourne to Brisbane when her then-partner John Nixon took up the directorship of the Institute of Modern Art, combined both the themes of youth subculture (an English skinhead) and the status of women (the nomination of the first female member of Queensland's state cabinet).

Far from being coolly ironic, the *Painted Pages* are insistently affective in character, with the figures of memory, subjectivity and autobiography dominating. The paintings show Watson considering who she'd rather be, a representative of a new, postmodern style (New Wave, the "second degree," "Popism") or an inheritor of the legacy of Twiggy, who had transcended the limitations of femininity with style, energy and independence. Twiggy—the epitome of the "Dolly Bird"—represented, for Watson, not merely memories of Swinging London but also a persona still relevant to the Melbourne art and music scenes of the late 1970s. Beginning in the mid-1950s, fashion designer Mary Quant had expertly promoted a look combining Chelsea bohemianism—"finely-judged stylizations of Art Student outrage,"<sup>44</sup> in Christopher Breward's evocative phrase—with the go-ahead, confident mobility of young women. The Dolly Bird, according to contemporary observer Colin MacInnes, had a "general

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, "Australian New Wave and the 'Second Degree'," 159-60.

<sup>42</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Melody Maker*, (September 1986). Cited in Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art Into Pop* (London: Methuen, 1987), 177.

<sup>43</sup> Watson also made portraits of members of Melbourne band, the Boys Next Door; a portrait of Sam Sejavka, singer for the Ears; followed by portraits of members of Brisbane's Go-Betweens between 1979–80. Her *An original oil painting* was used by the Boys Next Door in a 1979 performance at Melbourne's Crystal Ballroom. For more on Watson's post-punk connections see my "Let's Talk About Art: Art and Punk in Melbourne," *Art and Australia* 34 no. 4 (1997), 502–12.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Breward, *Fashioning London* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 154.



**Figure 10**

Jenny Watson, *60s Dolly Bird*, 2014, Japanese pigment tinted gesso and acrylic on 10gsm cotton duck, 160 × 95cm. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley Gallery. Copyright: Jenny Watson.

air . . . of formidable self-possession."<sup>45</sup> In her, Breward identified "youthful energy, emotional independence, economic self-sufficiency and especially unfettered mobility."<sup>46</sup> Like the Dolly Birds she dressed, Quant was "innocent and tough," exhibiting "chaotic creativity underpinned by a steely acumen."<sup>47</sup> All of these were qualities Watson sought in her professional practice, initially in a male-dominated art scene within which the conjunction of "woman" and "professional practice" was oxymoronic at best, threatening at worst.

Watson's subsequent oeuvre would focus almost exclusively on autobiography and allegorical self-portraiture, charting a determined woman's passage through the institutional and discursive territories of contemporary art. A modest self-portrait, also made in 1979, marks the beginning of this trajectory. *Self portrait: Tiger Lounge Version* (1979) shows the artist as a denizen of one of Melbourne's earliest punk venues at the Royal Oak Hotel, Richmond (fig. 9). A painting from Watson's most recent exhibition, *60s Dolly Bird* (2014) once again declares the model of the worldly, confident woman rooted in teenage fantasies of Swinging London (fig. 10). In the figures of Twiggy, the Dolly Bird and the new wave fan, we find Watson tracing the process within which time—as moment, memory and life history—"thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible."<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Colin MacInnes, *England, Half English* cited in Breward, *Fashioning London*, 168.

<sup>46</sup> Breward, *Fashioning London*, 172.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 155 and 159.

<sup>48</sup> Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," 84.



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