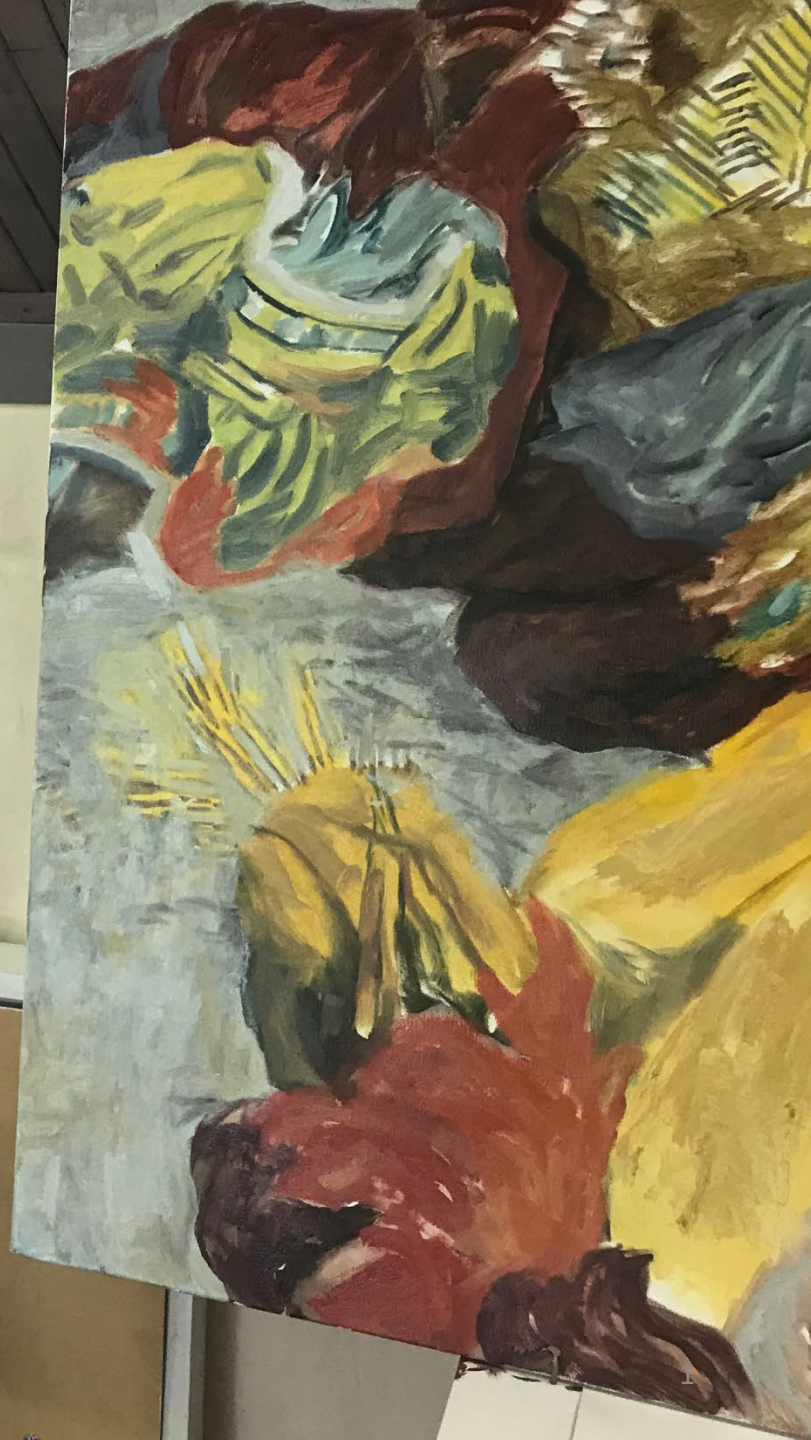


the making of
Folds
Gwenneth Miller



The making of Folds: an artist's process book

Self-published in 2020

Editing: Mandy Conidaris

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Introduction

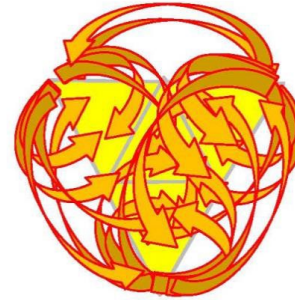
This artist's book intends to provide a reflection on my working processes, as well as a visualisation of my conceptual research choices and intuitive thinking in the making of the painting *Folds: Assumed Abundance* (2017-2018).

My writing voice reveals an art maker who is equally an educator. I am conscious that my ongoing thinking is often invigorated by fellow artists, by my students and teaching, through the absorption of academic articles, and by everyday experience. Here, I share some of the influences that have informed this specific artwork, and search for ways to capture and translate the underlying reasons for my selections and deletions - all of which have driven the idea development, technical resolutions, and corresponding formal reciprocity.

The structure of this book is underpinned by discussions on certain key steps of the creative process. Accordingly, within the unfolding of this narrative, I offer my interpretation of the creative process, along with visual evidence of process coupled with research.



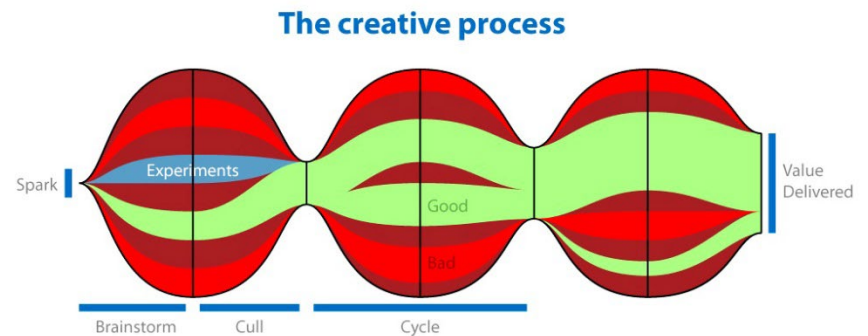
From the outside looking in, the artist's processes appear like a tangled but neatly tied knot, as in Miller's diagram on tacit thinking (2015: 44). But since the completed painting seldom reveals evidence of these processes, here, I attempt to *unravel* the tacit knowledge inherent in *Folds* (2017-2018), which is captured only through the mass of images and information gathered during its creation. Also, and although it is only one available tool among many, I considered that Daniel Cook's diagram on the creative process (2010) contained key ideas that were helpful and appropriate for the particular painting processes I adopted for *Folds*. Reading Cook's diagram from left to right:



Gwenneth Miller, 2015. An emergent method of tacit thinking (Miller 2015:44)

The Creative Process

- **The spark / identify data:** Research ideas for inspiration, gather possibilities to trigger one's own ideas. **Cull some ideas:** only follow one or two 'trails'
- **Analyse / compare / document:** Brainstorm, mind maps, critical analysis, experiments, comparison. **Cull some ideas**
- **Reflection:** comparison, flesh out in different media. **Cull some ideas**
- **Cycle:** repeat Steps
- **Synthesis:** the final painting becomes a conclusion of the research process
- **Reflection:** public exhibitions offer opportunity to distance oneself and to view the work critically.
- **Dissemination:** reviews, publish notes and reflections, websites



Daniel Cook, Visualizing the Creative Process. August 17, 2010. Blog entry <https://lostgarden.home.blog/page/5/>

I am particularly indebted to Emma Willemse, Colleen Alborough and Mandy Condaris for many conversations around the topic of the creative process.

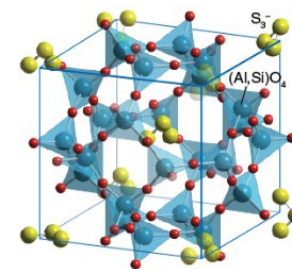
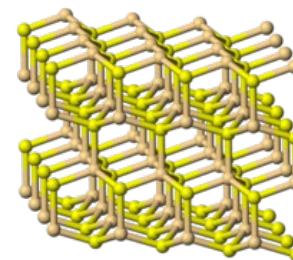
The spark

This project was triggered by observing the complexity of the reflection of light and reading about the way colour is generated.

I was reminded that the richness of colour is an illusion, and the energy which surrounds us all the time often remains unnoticed; and that the process of cellular observation combined with the interpretation of brain operation amidst layers of conditioning and cultural becoming will determine the impact of the wavelengths that penetrate our eyes.

Collecting data, analysing and comparing images of colour

Scan reading revealed the material presence of colour as pigment, as well as the visualisation of the intangible chemical models each with their own rhythmic sculptural characteristics. Fascinated by their lace-like beauty, I collected many of these models and pondered the possibility of artworks forming a world existing purely of these abstracted forms.



cadmium yellow. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Greenockite>
Ultramarine. <https://www.chemtube3d.com/ss-ultramarine/>

Comparison and association

Following this data path, I further researched the use of specific pigments in Renaissance and Late Renaissance painting. Whilst the themes and intentions of these works were grounded in religion, my sense was that, through their overwhelming fleshiness and material tactility, the painted draperies dominated over these themes.

Drawing on my broader research theme of complexity, I grappled with Gilles Deleuze's (1993) writings on the notion of the fold and how actual thought is seen in terms of being folded into itself. In the translator's forward, Tom Conley (in Deleuze 1993: ix) writes how styles "...sometimes fold vastly different sensibilities into each other". Although Deleuze's discussion ventures around historiography, my artist's mind translated the dense text into the potential for visual imagery – and how the imprint of surface, depth, and change in technical processes could help in developing a recurrent motif of the 'fold' which could be applied as both a conceptual and structural tool.

Reflect and cull

I abandoned the idea of the structures of molecules and visual data of chemical formulae to pursue this more tangible reference to the fold in imagery.



Sassoferrato, detail of *Jungfrun i bön* (1640-1650). Oil on canvas, 73 x 58 cm. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sassoferrato>



Analysing, describing and comparing

Isolating the draperies from their bodies using Adobe Photoshop brought forth their emptiness and oddness of shapes, presenting them in a new light. This resonated with my understanding of the indulgent political figures of the time and their pretentious moral high ground. Interestingly, Carracci (Dempsey 2000:52-53) is credited for the “regrounding of theory in experience and fresh observation...” in the early Baroque era, and in this I saw an acknowledgement of the artist being valued for thinking and testing ideas through practice, as well as critically reflecting on the status of principles.



Annibale Carracci, detail of *The Coronation of the Virgin*. 1595. Oil on canvas, 117.8 x 141.3 cm
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435853>



The fragments of isolated painted textile materials are devoid of physical human form, leaving behind just the hollow shapes where once were bodies. Even more disruptive, through the way that the drapery falls, the traces of the deleted figures suggest they had been somehow debilitated, even weakened. Each of these observations opened meaning associations that seemed aligned with a critical contemplation on society.



Hans Holbein, *Hermann von Wedigh III* (1532). Oil and gold on oak, 42.2 x 32.4 cm
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436658>



An example of how the cut-out process provided another level of meaning appears in my digital intervention of Gentileschi's *Esther before Ahasuerus*, where Esther's dress seems to reveal a support structure for her fainting figure. The question looms around whether these empty folds could be a metaphor for the hollow foundation of societal structures, and thus of values?



Artemisia Gentileschi, detail of *Esther before Ahasuerus*. 1628–1630. Oil on canvas, 208.3 x 273.7cm.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436453>



Details of cut-outs from the paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen and Jusepe de Ribera become strangely animated once removed from their context. As my reading of *The Fold* (Deleuze 1993:34, 35) progressed, I learned that the Baroque fold has been analysed by theorists for its solidity; and furthermore, that the fold is seen “not only in clothing, but includes the body, rocks, waters, earth, and line”. The sense of tension between solid and organic liveliness fascinated me and this idea invigorated my practice.



Hendrick ter Brugghen, Detail of *The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John*. 1624–25. Oil on canvas. 154.9 x 102.2 cm.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/en/art/collection/search/435817>



Jusepe de Ribera, Detail of *The Tears of Saint Peter*. 1612–13. Oil on canvas. 161.9 x 114.3 cm.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/441971>



Experimenting and manipulating variations

Selected fragments were layered, and colours desaturated or enhanced. When isolated from their original environments, the fragments started to transform, becoming strange entities with regenerated agency, and I became aware of a sense of plants and regrowth



Continuing with my research around textile, I began to look at Vlisco wax print cloth, wanting to pull in the rhythm and sanctity of structure that is closer to 'home', to our own African Renaissance, or rather African Baroque. Baroque characteristics belong to all cultures (Conley in Deleuze 1993:x), and in Vlisco cloth are expressed in the varied repetition of patterns. As the original digital image seemed flat, I experimented with transparency layers to add the illusion of depth.



VLISCO Hollandais African Wax print fabric: WHITE WEDDING FLOWERS.
<https://www.afrikrea.com/en/article/2-yards-vlisco-hollandais-african-wax-print-fabric-white-wedding-flowers-ankara-wax-print-white/DNEY8YN>



Detail of Fiona Rae, *Maybe you can live on the moon in the next century*, 2009. Oil and acrylic paint on canvas, 183.3 x 150 cm.
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/fiona-rae-2287>



Detail of Johannes Phokela, *Tender loving care* (one panel of a Triptych), 2006. Oil on canvas, 210 x 180 cm.
<https://wiki.uiowa.edu/display/1604724/Phokela%2C+Tender+Loving+Care+%28Triptych%29%2C+2006>

The cycle was repeated by returning to data cross-reference.

I identified structural use of movement in the work of other artists when I visited Tate Liverpool (2001), more specifically the *Hybrids* exhibition. This left a lasting impression on me and here I returned to the memories of this influence. At the time of viewing their works *in situ*, the experience of seeing how painters Fiona Rae (left) and Fabian Marcaccio play with digital and painterly materials to generate dynamic organic forms shifted my understanding of contemporary painting. Apart from the technical and formal elements, their notion of disruption resonated with my conceptual search.

My research was also influenced by the conceptual drama of Johannes Phokela's paintings (right) who uses satire to revise Baroque aesthetic and forces the viewer to do a double take. A work such as *Tender Loving Care* (2006) presents known allegories and reveals a layered critique of Western exploitation in its reflection. Phokela's strategy of using elements from different epochs is characteristic of many of his works but he finds a cohesive visual pictorial field even though he uses disparate images (Corrigall 2009: 85). There is a rewriting that "short-circuits" the previously formed stories in history to create counter-narratives to comment on problematic political relationships (O'Kane 2009:290, De Villiers-Human 2010:33).

Synthesis in stages

The following few pages set out examples of my explorations when starting to compile formal relationships between the generated digital fragments. In the first stage, I used the compositions to search for the sense of grouping or 'belonging', and the principle of proximity began to create some unity in the work.



In the second stage, the compilations of fragments experimented with setting and context to create drama and scale. A sense of land started to emerge. On reflection though, I found that the tension was insufficient at his stage.



In the third stage of the compilation process, I created tension by integrating negative space into the composition. 'Culling' involved further cropping, and then a visual dialogue began to evolve between vertical stacking, reminiscent of male (left) and female (right). Some of the blue Vlisco pattern, still present here (top left corner), was later discarded.



The final stages of the digital composition evolved here, as the negative spaces began to reveal sufficient tension. At this point, several shapes were reduced to help 'read' the flow of movement.



This example is one of several experiments with flat colour that I undertook. But although these colours are quite seductive, on reflection I felt that the flat colour had a Pop Art sensibility which was too removed from the intertextual meaning I was searching for.



In researching imagery to fill the painting's negative spaces, a sense of depth could best be achieved by applying cloudscapes. After considering a multitude of images, I chose the High Renaissance painting by Fra Bartolomeo (left) because of the atmosphere as a consequence of staining on the painting. In my subsequent digital process, after layering the cut-out sky details into the composition, it became clear to me that, instead of attempting to represent clouds, I should rather retain the evidence of cropping of the borrowed sky (below right) to acknowledge the sense of artifice.



Fra Bartolomeo, detail of *Vision of St. Bernard with Sts. Benedict and John the Evangelist* (1504). Oil on panel, 213 x 220 cm. Available at <https://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/b/bartolom/fra/bernard.html>

Synthesis of digital sketch

Conceptually this decision echoed the broader concept of being a fold within a fold – a repetition of an illusionary space folded into itself (Deleuze 1993:28). Here the digital composition is complete, as the cut-out skyscapes from Fra Bartolomeo's painting have been incorporated.



At this stage of the project I titled the work *Let them eat cake* (2017) in reference to the political theme of the group exhibition *Rethinking Kakotopia* (curated by Derek Zietsman), which would be the first time the painting would be shown. My first press release was compiled whilst I was still working on the painting:

A 'superabundant' world is a concept described by Simon O'Sullivan (2005:2) to be "like a lake teeming with fish, with smaller fish between these fish, and so on ad infinitum. There is no boundary between the organic and the inorganic here; each is folded into the other." This is a description of an inexhaustive or open-ended world. Contemplating Giles Deleuze writings on surface and depth, appearance or essence, O'Sullivan describes "the fold" amongst others, as an inside that is "nothing more than a fold of the outside". My painting considers some of these ideas of opulence and appearance.

Composed of collaged images of cloth details from Late Renaissance paintings and Vlisco wax print designs, this painting evokes a sense of earthly opulence and an energetic play of order and disorder. The work also evokes a melancholic grandeur of religious paintings – anticipating godliness but offering only second-hand draperies.

A system is held together in compositions of approximation. Fragments of textile are devoid of bodies, leaving hollow shapes and traces of figures that once filled these shapes. Remnants of radiating forms reminds of halos that are scattered around, strengthening a feeling of movement and turbulence. The work affirms delight taken in the spectacle in neo-baroque aesthetics.

My fascination with complexity and dissipation hope to bring contradictions to the fore in the work. Like the carnival that allows a riotous atmosphere, this work borrows fragments from unrelated art sources to create this trancelike reconstructed world.

Capture and analyse

The beginning of the painting process in oil on canvas (see right). The directional flow of energy in linear pattern and colour-blocking settles the structure of the painting.

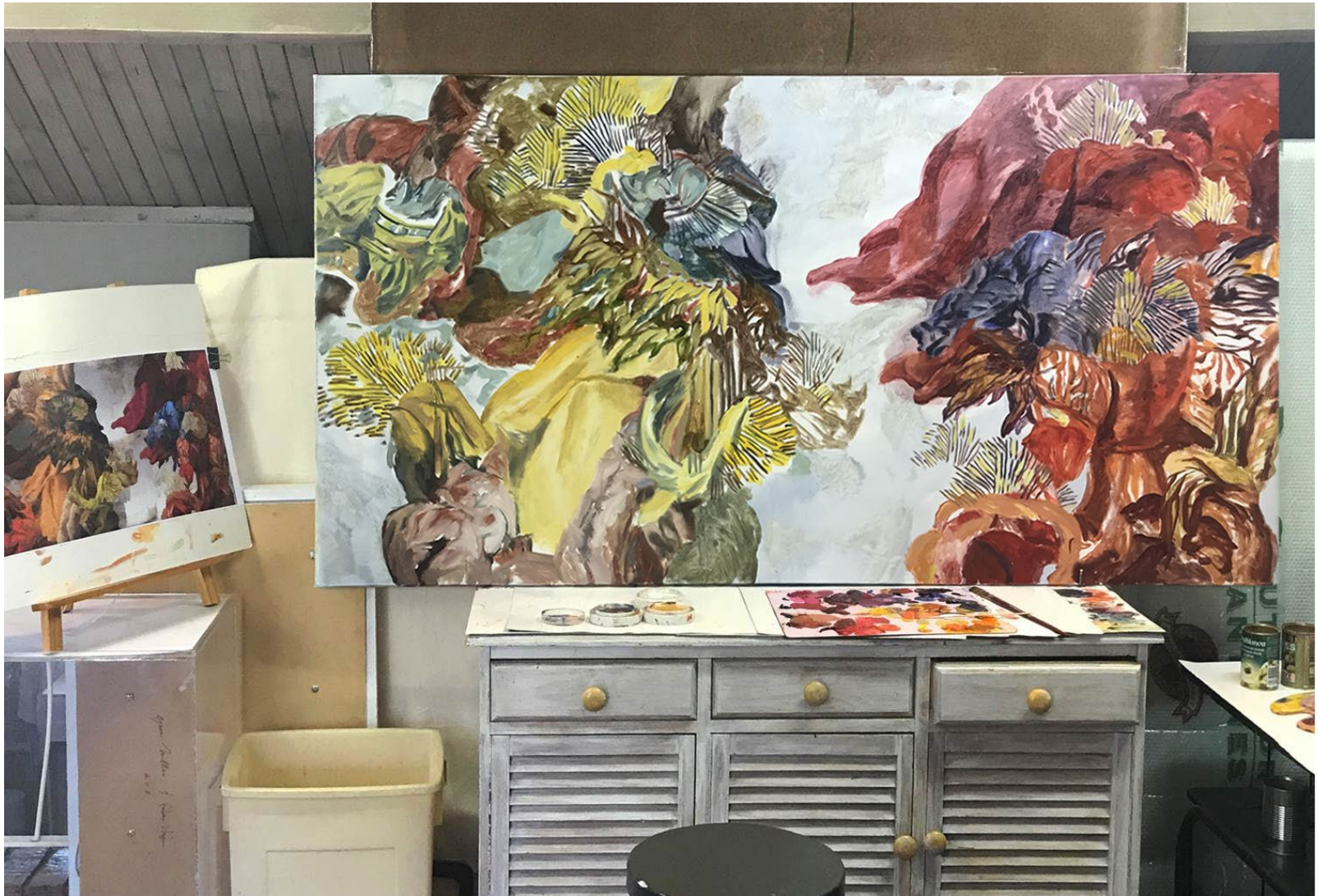


Reflection

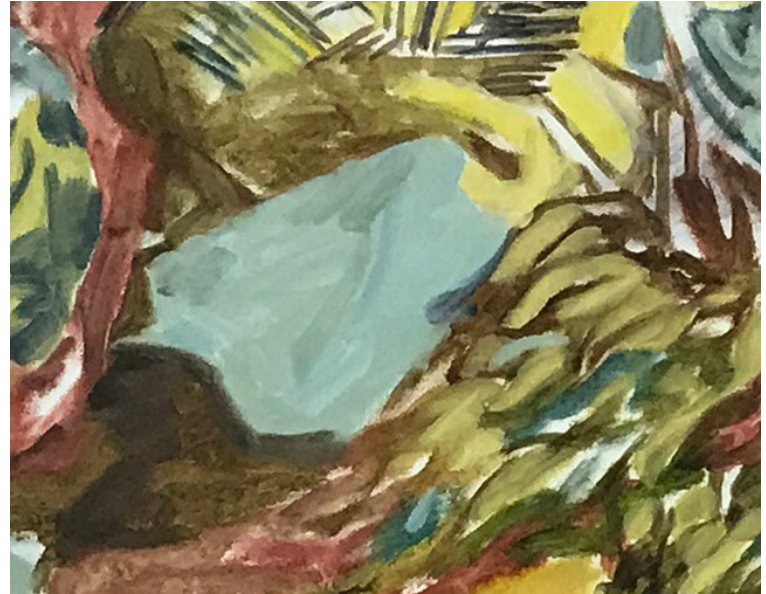
After starting the detail modelling in red, I realised that the drama of the work demanded a larger canvas. This smaller canvas (61 X 122 cm) was abandoned.



The final larger canvas (91.5cm x 183 cm) at the start of the painting process. The colour mixing was guided through constant, intense study of a large print of the digital collage that stood beside me, aided by close-up views on my computer. As I paid meticulous attention to the variations in techniques of the individual artists, each fragment presented me with the challenge to mix a different viscosity of oil paint. The following pages contain details of the progressing work.







A section of the painting at two different stages (left). First as an example of sketching in painterly line and flat colour, and then its progress to modelling the illusion of form.

When shapes became lost in the painting process (blue-grey segment at top right), I constructed physical 3-D recreations in fabric (bottom right) to direct my understanding of the tangible folding.







After the *Rethinking Kakotopia* exhibition, the work was exhibited twice again, each time in exhibitions that I curated. These were *Sticky TIME, Rooftop IX* (2017) at St Lorient Gallery, Pretoria; and *Art as Destination: Co-creation of culture* (2018). The latter formed part of the 7th Biennial of The International Tourism Studies Association (ITSA) & 2nd International TESA Conference (6-8 August 2018). The event was attended by representatives from 22 countries, and I compiled a catalogue that was included in the programme booklet. Each time the painting was shown, my artist's statement changed slightly to relate the work to the focus of that specific exhibition - and the painting itself remained as a dynamic entity throughout this time: it continued to take on subtle new forms, as during 2017 and 2018 I added layers of semi-translucent glazes to enhance the depth and shift the tone.

My artist's statement in *Art as Destination: Co-creation of culture* (ITSA South Africa Conference Program 2018: 47):

My painting considers ideas of opulence and fallacious appearance. It was triggered by reflection on politicians' lifestyles and empty promises. Composed of collaged fragments of cloth details from Late Renaissance paintings and VLISCO wax prints, this painting also evokes a play of order and disorder. The work suggests a melancholic grandeur of religious paintings – anticipating godliness but offering only second-hand draperies. Fragments of textile are devoid of bodies, leaving hollow shapes and traces of figures that were meant to fill these draperies.

At the conference discussion and during walk-about, I spoke of environments of complexity and how one attempts to make sense of worlds through tacit thinking. Throughout these discussion platforms, several of the artists interacted with the various audiences and as a result, apart from my intended concepts, new meanings arose which recontextualised my work within that of the other exhibiting artists. This reciprocity extended reflections around artistic thinking in relation to systems within communities.

Catalogues:

https://issuu.com/gwenmiller0/docs/catalogue_rooftop_ix-_sticky_time_2017_web.pptx

https://issuu.com/gwenmiller0/docs/art_as_destination_co_creation_of_culture_for_web.



On reflection, each exhibition added a layer of significance to the painting and provided the starting point to stimulate further works. Then following a traumatic event in my life (2019), the context of the 'fold' changed again, and the painting took on a new meaning for me. At this point, I changed the title to *Folds: assumed abundance*, and exhibited it again at the exhibition *Art in Process: An Interdisciplinary Staff Exhibition (2019)* (Unisa Art Gallery), along with some later works. This body of my work formed an installation titled *Loss and its remains*, and the press release stated:

This installation comprises three sections, each reflecting on the concept of remains as a refusal to relinquish the past, since the remains serve as a reminder of what is lost. Influenced by Kristeva's writings on despair and sorrow, and an investigation of certain complexities inherent in this terrain, Miller evokes the tensional relationships that underscore loss and its tangible residue. Influenced by the writings of Giles Deleuze on surface, depth and change, the works are linked conceptually with Miller's research concerning the complexity inherent in folds. She uses folds both as site specific indicators and as a recurrent motif of loss and bereavement, alluding to the absent body.

Catalogue for the exhibition *Art in Process: An Interdisciplinary Staff Exhibition (2019)*:
https://issuu.com/gwenmiller0/docs/2019_unisa_staff_exhibition_catalogue.pptx







Final painting

Folds: Assumed Abundance (2017-2018)

The research undertaken around this painting unlocked the theme for the series of works that followed in 2019 and 2020, under the exhibition title *Enfolding*.





Opium Miller 2017-18

Conclusion

Reflections around the practice of writing and compiling this artist's process book have enabled me to think about the intuitive decisions, active making, artistic methodologies, and selected discursive essays explored during this research. Now I realise how important it is to show an artwork in various spaces within different contexts over a period of time, as at each exhibition my particular understanding of the painting changed and this enabled me to shift the work further through making alterations. In turn, this triggered new questions of the nature of being enfolded in lived experience.

At the first spark of this research journey, I did not envision where it would lead. Although each material adjustment seemed to direct the next step, the original idea endured: that "energy surrounding us all the time often remains unnoticed" (page 5). The digital cut-out process allowed me to see painting details afresh; and while working with predominantly Baroque structures of folds and patterns, I gleaned insight in the rich intertextual meaning of images, both technical and conceptual. The reflection on humanity that offers conflicting messages, embellished emptiness, or simply less than we expect, is entrenched in history. In the last presentation of the work, the realisation that the remains of what is lost proposes that space be filled anew. This stands not only for my ongoing creative process, but also for the viewers and curators who will reread and recontextualise this work in future.



***Folds: Assumed Abundance (2017-2018)* was exhibited at the following venues at the time of compiling this publication:**

- [*Rethinking Kakotopia*](#) (2017), curated by Derek Zietsman at UJ Art Gallery, Johannesburg.
- [*Sticky TIME, Rooftop IX*](#) (2017), curated by Gwenneth Miller at St Lorient Gallery, Pretoria.
- [*Art as Destination: Co-creation of culture*](#) (2018) curated by Gwenneth Miller, Antoinette Odendaal and Jacob Lebeko, alongside the 7th Biennial Conference of ITSA, at CSIR, Pretoria.
- [*Loss and its remains*](#), part of *Art in Process: An Interdisciplinary Staff Exhibition* (2019), curated by Paul Cooper, Unisa Art Gallery. Pretoria.
- [*Unisa Art Collection Recent Acquisitions*](#) (2020), curated by Bongani Mkhonza, Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria.

The work was taken up in the UNISA Art Collection in 2019.



Owen Miller, Folds. Assumed abundance, Oil paint on canvas, 915 x 1830 cm

The UNISA Art Gallery invites you to the
UNISA Art Collection
Recent Acquisitions Exhibition

Opening date: Saturday 8 February 2020

Time: 12h00 for 12h30 noon

Venue: UNISA Art Gallery, Muckleneuk Campus,
Kgorong Building, Ground Floor,
311 Preller Street
Pretoria

This exhibition will run until Wednesday 26 February 2020

For more info: 012 4415681 / mkhonbw@unisa.ac.za

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Poster for the *UNISA Art Collection Recent Acquisitions* exhibition (2020)
Curated by Bongani Mkhonza,
Unisa Art Gallery

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