

KristyGormanGlimpse



"Born to see. . ."

I take this picture of myself
and with my sewing scissors
cut out the face.

Now it is more accurate:

where my eyes were,
every -
thing appears.

Margaret Atwood

If it is true that we live in the age of the spectacle it is equally true that now is an age that demands instant gratification. I want whatever intrigues and dazzles me, whatever lures me into surrendering my desire. The object must be immediate, available, a one-hit burst of satisfaction. And what of the images that persuade me to linger before them for a moment, to look but not to touch? They too must be in your face, bold, insistent, reflecting parochial stridencies. Kristy Gorman resists the phenomenon of the saturated, shallow image as much as she resists the canvas that draws attention to its painter's smock, to the moody rain of brush strokes from the painter's hand. When we look at her paintings we have to *work* at looking. For Gorman teaches us how to look at what we see. Because there are complex levels in front of us that demand intense and prolonged engagement, we experience a profound visual, intellectual, and emotional concentration. To the point of labour.

It is well-known that Gorman's signature lies in an intense attention to detail. What is less recognised is that a similar attention to detail is demanded of the viewer. Gorman requires that we 'dwell' with the work; that we 'attend' to it. In so doing we come closer to sharing the artist's painstaking vision and her attention to process.

Glimpse is Gorman's most recent offering.³ On the one hand, it reflects a subtle development of the debates rehearsed in earlier shows. The main collection of paintings shows quiet incremental refinements on those in the 1998 *Filter* and *Filament* series. Ephemeral stains and embossed shapes continue to emerge from and disappear under other forms and surfaces. A ground supports the emergence and disappearance of a figure that suggests the fading of the subject. In the earlier exhibitions *Lumen*, *Surfacing* and *Residuum* (1995–6), these evanescent figures had been recognisable in the fragments of plant, bird,

body, flower, ribbon, ruffle, honeycomb and butterfly, and in the suggestion of a face.⁴ However, Gorman has been slowly moving away from anthropomorphism. Last year's *Filter* series revealed a staining that is more like an obstruction on the lens.

Impediments, water marks, and cloudy precipitates gather against a mobile ground.

Invading the active grid pattern, they produce a dialogue between the potentially natural and between marks reminiscent of computer circuitry or braille. *Filament* continued to make use of rectangles formally arranged but showed lighted objects suspended in depthless space like holographic hallucinations. Here too Gorman used light extremities, in this case fluorescence, to produce the strange markings and mottlings visible sometimes on the surface of the painting, at others in its depths. In both series, the process of layering, alongside the volatility of figure and ground, nature and supernature, invited us to consider the archaeological qualities

of memory. The vanishing point of the painting embodied the vanishing point of human memory — a flashing glimpse, a fragment of sound, a tactile warmth, all ultimately irretrievable.

In this exhibition, Gorman's restraint and subtlety are still apparent. Her work is fine and meticulous, and form has to do a lot. There are gestures still towards haberdashery: towards stitching and needlework, cloth, mirrors and hair.

There is the same inclination towards tinting and leaching of colour and to old photographic techniques. Gorman's new paintings exemplify the discipline of the daguerrotype's observation, its appetite for the minute; and show the same care for surface that led early images, easily scratched, to be protected by velvet covers.

Unlike the daguerrotype however, with its deadening exposures, her work has always resisted the fixity of the object in exchange for preserving the trace of the object's

disappearance. Contra Roland Barthes who argues that photography mummifies the world of objects, Gorman keeps the world of objects enigmatically present through reiterating the moment of looking.⁵

And the enigma is increasing, her use of imagery becoming more fragmented.

The paintings in *Glimpse* have an almost imperceptible negative quality in common which demands an oblique approach.

The viewer must frequently gaze up or down but not directly at the work. What emerges from this moment of tricky looking is a field of aberrant marks. All the pieces on display feature out of focus, non-uniform dots, apparent as shiny residues under layers of paint. The traces of inscription remain, one laid on top of another.

Nothing goes away. Areas of density, these marks resemble bead curtains, pearl drops, rain or pinpoint of light. In 'Slide (lightly)' they become the corrosions of age in different stages of deterioration.

In 'Linger (darkly)' they are visible in one half of the painting as clustered surface irruptions, painted in ink with the tip of a fine brush against a gleaming Van Dyck brown. Our gaze is caught and held by them; meaning gathers around them.

A similar suggestiveness is at work in 'Slide (darkly)'. Blurry dots stroked over with paint feature in the matt brown left-hand panel while on the cooler-toned right of blue-grey we are lured by vertical slashes. These marks produced with fine masking tape give the impression of a variety of embroidery techniques: counted thread, hardanger, bargello. We have the space here too to range more widely, to see more formal registers at work. Seismic indicators, digital markings, the discipline of the bar graph, all correlate with the precise nature of the disruption to the painting's surface. At the base of each slash is what looks like a trail of vapour. Here I think the actual process of work is being foregrounded: the cutting, the

opening of the gap and the resulting tension of the cloth or surface are evidence of the artist's gaze, remnants of an earlier time. With the slash which is also present in all seven paintings, Gorman nicely splits off product from process. What we get is a finished product and a work in the making; time past and time present.

Since the '98 Filter and 'Slip' series the diptych has become a dominant form.

Two non-oppositional tonalities and textures invoke the reversibility of time, of depth and surface, presence and absence. Gorman has completed large works before, but the sizeable diptych, 'Glimpse', is still a risky venture. One of her largest pieces, it departs from the small scale of most of her paintings, although rejoining them in its composite quality, since each smaller segment informs the other. In fact, one of the reasons why this work succeeds so well is because the eye is kept busy moving around the length of the panels,

engaging with the arrangement of rectangles and marks. With this narrow but long screen-like painting, we see just how good Gorman is at placing rectangles and grids to create a distinctive atmosphere. It's probably because the exhibition uses previous images and the narratives attached to them that Gorman can now afford to be increasingly playful. Because less time is needed to establish a context for these, her new work is correspondingly more minimal, more abstracted, less literal. It takes a lot of pleasure in conceptual plays. In 'Album', a series of five portrait-sized paintings, the artist's notebook and/or photograph album is formatted and aligned horizontally. Except this kind of horizontal arrangement is as much an alternative statement on depth as it is on parallel or sequential narratives. Like the language of dreams where contiguity stands in for cause and effect and for different levels of intensity and opposites, through abutting preserved

depths alongside the surface receptor, depth and presence become interchangeable. Freud's mystic writing pad compressed the process of perception and memory into a three-dimensional wax slab. Gorman on the other hand, turns time into a screen, stretching process out in order to examine it more closely. The strengths of 'Album' lie in its wit and inventiveness. It is a compendium of images; the story of a process (a personal narrative; the development of a style); the past transformed by and informing the present; a Derridean in-joke. Equally, it is a conceptualisation which prefigures sculpture. Julia Kristeva might see in its logic the spatialisation of an idea.

Speaking of space, the major new development in *Glimpse* is the wire objects, ovals hung at head height and arranged in different groups to reflect a variability in number and format. Gorman calls these 'three dimensional drawings'. Undoubtedly

they represent the culmination of previous attempts to problematise the relation between figure and ground. Made from galvanised wire and finer pieces of fuse wire, sanded, soldered and painted white, they are an unexpected combination of delicacy and durability. Each white painted oval supports drops, loops and runs of finer wire; from above, falling like fragments of lace curtains. Front-on the objects take on a strong vertical feel as if we are looking at ancient scroll painting or lines of cryptic script. From one angle, the wire is white; from another, grey. Under some lights the wire shapes disappear into the white wall behind, leaving the viewer lost in a misty haze. With direct lighting, the object's shadows cast lines as sharp as graphite on the wall. Shadows make visible what seems invisible. The eye strains myopically. Is this some new kind of braille? How to make sense of what we see, *how* to see, is what is at stake here. Gorman is Goethe's watchman on the tower: one who

is born to see, employed to watch out.

She asks us to attend to what has historically been overlooked: ostensibly the gaze of a female subject whose 'hand-held' objects connote the old hand mirrors that sat on women's dressing-tables. I will return to the idea of the head later, but I think Gorman is making larger, more playful claims alongside those of a revisionist feminist history. She is just as attracted to the possibilities of dissolving the differences between one form of art and another. The problem of teetering on the edge of genre distinctions and literal and non-representational figures is on-going, and has featured in her work from the beginning. Here, what we see is a new formal development of that problem. The three-dimensional object proper recedes into its ground to be superseded by the subtlety of a shadow that is as distinct as a drawing. Drawing, sculpture and painting converge and dissolve in a trick of the light.

For the most distinctive quality of these

truly mysterious objects is their evocative, incomplete nature. If they had been more representational their borderline aspect would have been less apparent. One theorist highly attuned to the borderline is Kristeva. In a recent catalogue essay to accompany an exhibition of drawings of the head, *Visions capitales*, she recollects how the power of the drawing can render the abstract in a few strokes. Drawing, she says, is evocative. It speaks to the heart and the imagination, especially where like iconography, rather than representing an object, it tends towards an inscription we are invited to contemplate. What Kristeva is emphasising here is that because of its tenuous qualities — the accumulation of lines on paper — drawing illustrates how abstraction joins with the sensible, but it does so in such a way that the viewer feels intimately connected to the artist's vision.

Faced with this field of traces and emptiness, the viewer is drawn into its suggestiveness, recognising that together

with the artist, 'they are creating the invisible'. When we look along the lines of Gorman's vision, we can't avoid its ephemeral, incomplete nature. This is its seductiveness, its lure. Its pleasures, rather than being ready-made like a packed lunch, have to be extracted carefully. They take time to surface. Lines on paper, or wire on wall? Gorman's is a crafty border art.

Kristeva's commentary in *Visions capitales* led her to comment on the relation between the head in Western art and dismemberment. One of the most dominant images of our vitality, the head for Kristeva is by the same token the symptom of our obsession with death, despair and the limits of vitality. It's a sign of a moment of truth ('un moment capital dans l'histoire du visible') when the agony and ecstasy of the soul are summoned to appear and illumine the human face. She puts forward the head as 'a necessary castrated remnant

against nothingness which through its representation, challenges nothingness.' Gorman is not attracted to the violence of castration; nor is she morbidly fascinated with our mortality. Nevertheless she recognises the implications of loss behind the incomplete wire objects that recall the dimensions of the face. The narcissism of the mirror, the cameo, and the portrait are present, as are the shadows of the Lady of Shalott who could live only if she looked at the world through her mirror, and Perseus who cuts off Medusa's head with the help of the fractured image reflected in his shield. We are surrounded by dismembered ghosts, a fact endorsed by the sole painting that accompanies the wire works, 'Linger'. People who see eidetically create an image mentally and project it onto the environment. It is common to speak of visual objects being caught in the retina. A similar effect is the after-image still present on the retina when a new one is forming. Through a series of ovals

strategically placed and coloured, 'Linger' plays with these anomalies of sight to produce a disarming confusion on the part of the viewer. These ovals may or may not resemble faces. Either way, we enter into the field of the gaze. Do we own the look, or is the painting looking at us? And are the 'faces' and their after-images a form of *momento mori* on a par with Holbein's hidden skull in 'The Ambassadors'? We need Gorman's vision to allow us to acknowledge our own blind-spots: our unwillingness to look, eyes open, and our confusion at what we see when we do begin to remain in attendance, in front of the work, waiting for meaning to appear.

In conclusion, I want to turn to the poetry fragment from 'The Journal of Susanna Moodie' by Margaret Atwood. Atwood is another artist aware of the dismembering imperatives behind representation, of the costs involved in dwelling in the field of vision. She takes a picture of herself and

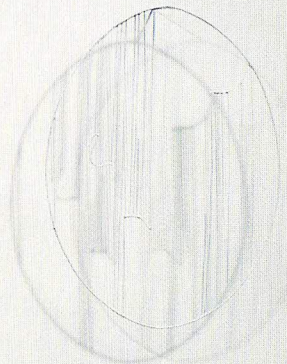
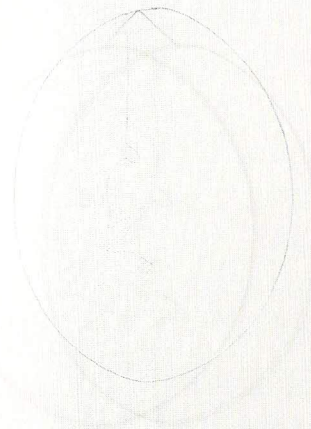
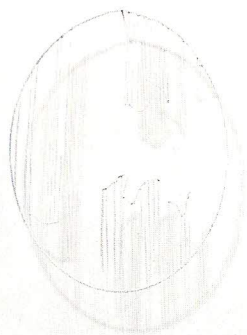
cuts out the face in order to let 'everything' appear. You could say that this is Kristeva's sacrificial imperative. I lose my most intimate, personal inscription so that my field of sight may enlarge. In so doing I lose my eyes, the light of my soul; in exchange for which things see (through) me. We move from the frozen stare of the photograph to that vivifying 'appears.' Life teems through the sightless space of the face, now a frame for everything that moves. The artist's vision has become a fecund bowl of light in which countless objects come into being and fade away. Sacrifice, rather than dwelling on the loss of sight, for Gorman becomes discipline and paying attention, a discipline which she invites us to share.

Anna Smith

- 1 I am indebted to conversations about the artist's work with Kristy Gorman, Kirsten Rennie and Jonathan Smart.
- 2 'The Journals of Susanna Moodie' in *Selected Poems*. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 79.
- 3 *Glimpse* opened in the Jonathan Smart Gallery in July 1999.
- 4 See Claire Regnault, 'Kristy Gorman: *Shadow Work*'. New Plymouth, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1996.
- 5 See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard. London: Flamingo, 1982.
- 6 Georg Goddeck uses the figure of Lynceus in *The Meaning of Illness*, trans. Gertrud Mauder. London: Hogarth press, 1977, p. 181.
- 7 Julia Kristeva, *Visions capitales*. Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1998, p. 12.
- 8 Kristeva 1998, p. 13.
- 9 Kristeva 1998, p. 14.

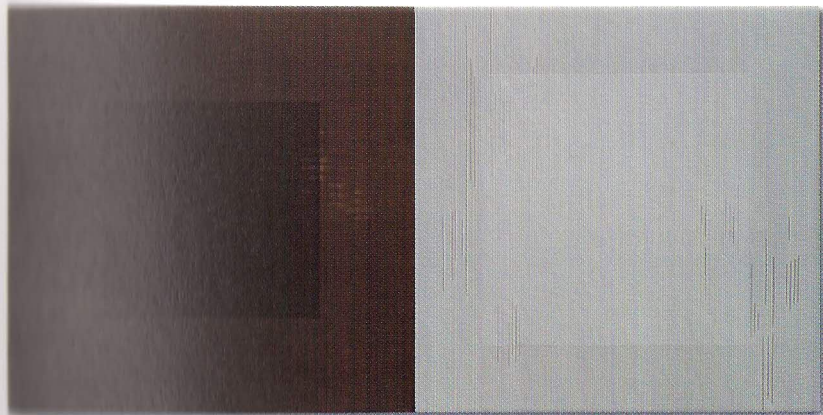
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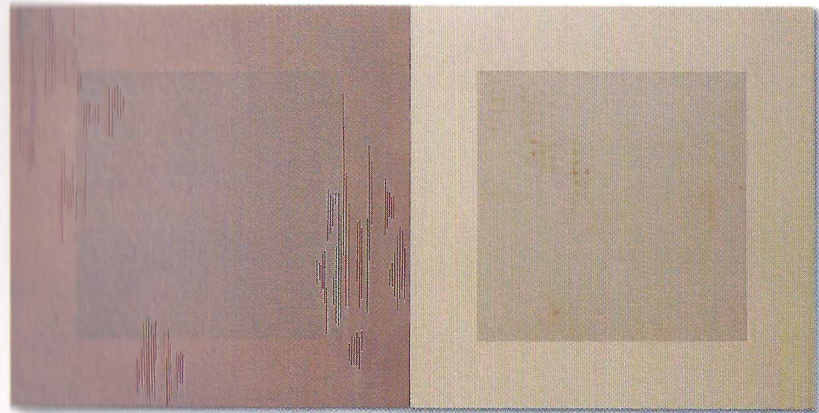


Drawn
wire and enamel
1500 x 250mm

Slide
oil on board
300 x 600 x 20mm

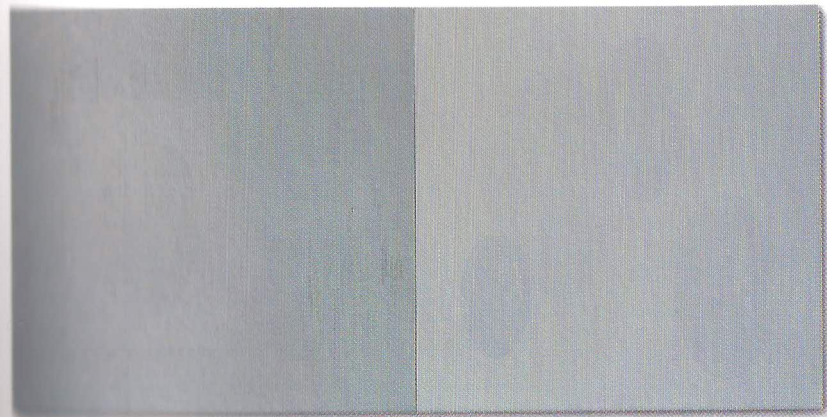


Slide (lightly)
oil on board
300 x 600 x 20mm

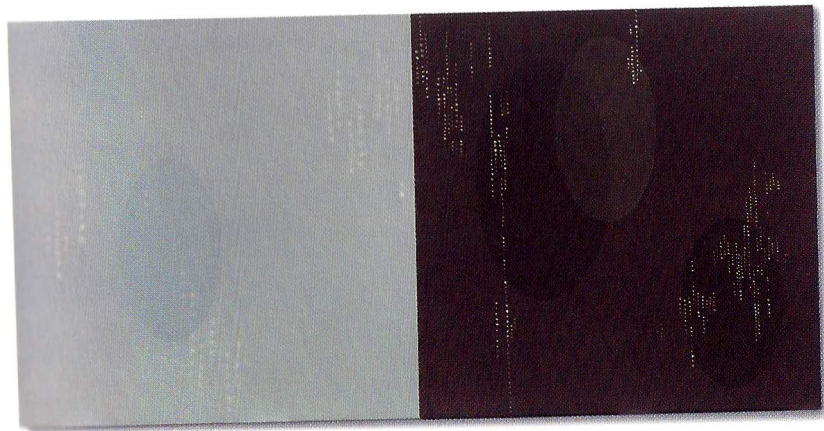


Linger

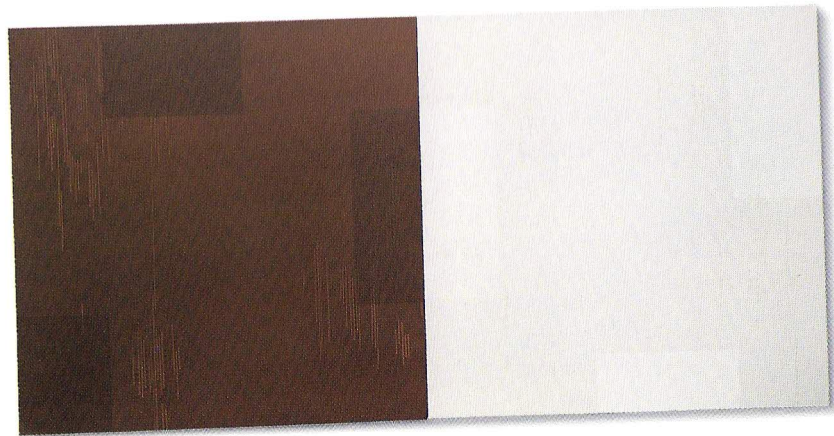
oil and ink on board
300 x 600 x 20mm



Linger (darkly)
oil and ink on board
300 x 600 x 20mm



Glimpse (darkly)
oil on board
300 x 600 x 20mm



Glimpse
oil on board
600mm x 2400mm

