

University of Reading

**The contemporary relevance
of split portraiture**

Rereading Marlene Dumas and Francis Bacon

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Declaration

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Hoi Yee Chau

Abstract

This thesis starts from the premise that I consider there to be an increase in split portraiture, and that this is because it speaks to certain conditions in modern and contemporary art. 'Split portraiture' is a term I use throughout and it means an artwork created on more than one surface; the work could be on panels, screens or any other surfaces with its specificity. My objectives are to investigate the specificity of this particular type of art practice, to discuss modern and contemporary subjects revealed in it, and to study the change in identification and in the way aggressiveness is perceived in the light of Lacanian discourse.

I identify the specificity of split portraits including the discontinuity, split, the multiplication of certain elements and the repetition in the creation process. I also argue that vacillation, emptiness, the split, and the traumatic are present in contemporary subjectivity. In addition, I find an important element in my practice -- aggressiveness -- is concealed in the single-panel portraits whereas it manifests in split portraits.

The contribution of this thesis is four-fold. First, this thesis addresses the specificity of the split portrait which has been extensively discussed in the literature. Secondly, this thesis is among the first to enrich the understanding of split portraiture related to art practice in the light of Lacanian discourse. Thirdly, it reveals the contemporary subjectivity through the discussion of the instances of split portraiture. Finally, by using the new term 'split portraiture', I discover a new way to rethink about portraiture and reread the works of Marlene Dumas and Francis Bacon.

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Glossary

Aggressivity/ Aggressiveness	According to Dylan Evans, Lacan claims that aggressivity refers not only to violent acts but other phenomena also. Regarding analytic experience, Lacan claims that the analyst can measure the aggressiveness in the behaviors of the analysand such as demanding tones, hesitations, inflections, slips of the tongue, and calculated absences etc. He also relates it to the subject formation. When the subject identifies with the specular image, he experiences aggressive tension in the mirror stage. In particular, the wholes of the image seem to threaten the body with disintegration and fragmentation. Lacan's discourse distinguishes from Sigmund Freud's. Freud relates aggressiveness to the death instincts and which is expressed outwards or inwards by the subject.
Ego Ideal	Lacan's concepts of ideal ego, written as 'i(a)', is different from ego-ideal, written as 'I(A)'. Darian Leader interprets Lacan's concept that ego-ideal is a symbolic introjection which provides the subject a place from which she is looked at. In other words, when one assumes an ideal image, ego ideal is the point where she thinks someone is watching her.
Ideal ego	Ideal-ego, Lacan claims, is the image the subject constitutes herself in her imaginary reality. It, as Evan claims, is rooted in the mirror stage in which the specular image provides an illusion of unity and a promise of future coordination of the subject.
Mirror Stage	In mirror image, the human baby identifies with its mirror image imaginarily and symbolically, as the image provides a gestalt and unity which she lacks at a specific time of her life (aged 6-18 months). During the identification, the image also creates aggressive tension as the image threatens the body with fragmentation. A physical mirror is not necessary for carrying out identification but can be done outside the field of vision.
other/Other	Lacan distinguishes two others (other and Other) in his seminar. The little other, as Dylan Evans claims, is a reflection and projection of the ego whereas the big Other is the symbolic order and can be another subject only when the subject embodies Other for another subject. For example, the mother takes the position of the big Other as she responds to the message (e.g. cries or other needs expressed non-verbally) sent by the child at the very first place.
Punctum	A term used by Roland Barthes to refer to an incidental but personally poignant detail in a photograph which 'pierces' or 'pricks' a particular viewer, constituting a private meaning unrelated to any cultural code. The imaginary is one of the Lacan's three orders/registers. Lacan claims that however the imaginary is not equivalent to the illusory.

The Imaginary	The imaginary plays an important part in the mirror stage and the formation of the ego. It is the realm of image and imagination which captivates the subject. However, according to Leader, the imaginary is not the only register taking part during identification. Lacan revised his concept and added that the speech comes with images, so he later called it symbolic identification.
The Real	The real, as Bruce Fink claims, is before language. It is not yet symbolized or resists symbolization, or due to symbolized. Lacan regards it as one of the three registers. According to Evans, the real is beyond the symbolic, outside language and inassimilable to symbolization. The symbolic creates reality by cancelling out the real.
The Symbolic	The symbolic is one of the three registers. It is the linguistic dimension but does not simply equate to language. Lacan argues that the symbolic order is the crucial element of subjectivity. A human baby identifies with the specular image with the speech of the parents in mirror stage, which is called the symbolic identification. The reality is created by the symbolic and our body is overwritten by language.
Three registers/ orders	The terms 'real', 'symbolic' and 'imaginary' are used as 'the three orders (or registers)' by Lacan since 1953. A basic classification system consisting of these three registers can then be developed for distinguishing some Lacanian concepts and referring to analytic experience.
tuché	Lacan borrows the term tuché from Aristotle who uses it in his search for cause and translated it as "the encounter with the real"; he claims that the function of the tuché in psychoanalysis is to arouse the psychoanalyst's attention of the trauma existed in the patient. He also claims that the tuché could be the screen of the real and our phantasy.
Suture	Suture is a term used by Lacanian Jacques-Alain Miller in his essay. This concept is then used to analyse the relationship between the spectator and the camera/screen with regards to identification and narrative.

Introduction

Introduction

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Introduction

0.0 Introduction and the definition of 'split portrait'

This thesis starts from the premise that I consider there to be an increase in the making and exhibiting split portraits in modern and contemporary Western art.¹ In 2014 alone I saw ten exhibitions with split portraits from artists such as Marlene Dumas (plate 1), Giulio Paolini, and Ed Atkins (plate 2). I am using the term 'split portraiture' with some hesitation because defining the term is part of



Pl 1. Marlene Dumas, *Rejects*, 1994 – ongoing
Ink on paper, installation view



Pl 2. Ed Atkins, *Ribbons*, 2014
Three-channel HD video, installation view

¹ The artists who have worked with split portraits and whose work are more relevant to my discussion in the thesis are Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, Francis Bacon, Robert Longo, John Baldessari, Tony Oursler, Ed Atkins, Doug Aitken, Dryden Goodwin, Bill Viola, Ida Applebroog, Marlene Dumas, Georg Baselitz, Richard Philips, Stephen Finer, Guy Denning, Sam Dillemans, Chantal Joffe, Mickalene Thomas, Chris Ofili, Matthew Baner, Rineke Dijkstra, Eija-Liisa Ahtila and Arnulf Rainer.

the project. The growing number of split portraits leads me to question if split portraiture is of contemporary relevance. The instances of split portrait may offer new ways to think about the portrait and the relation between image and viewer. In particular, I argue that the repetition, multiplication, splitting of figures and panels speaks about the subjectivity of contemporary subjects. In addition, I claim that an important element in my practice -- aggressiveness² -- is perceived and manifested differently in the viewing of split portraits compared with that of single-panel portraits. I bring in case studies and Lacanian discourse³ to open a dialogue of what this particular kind of artwork tells us today.

The term 'Split portrait'

The term 'split portrait' is meant to be generic but not a definitional term to distinguish a certain kind of work. It is a tentative term which helps me to describe a particular type of portrait painting and leads me to explore the specificity of such works. Likewise, there was no specific term for triptychs (plates 3) in ancient Rome or Byzantine, and the triptych was only described as a 'small panel with its doors'.⁴ I will explain, in section 0.2, how scholars define the triptych works in terms of its practical functions and meanings.

² A detailed explanation of Lacan's 'aggressiveness', 'aggressivity' is included in the section 3.2 of chapter 3 on pp.95; the way Freud uses 'aggressiveness' is demonstrated in footnote #35 on p. 88 in the same section.

³ I will explain the rationale of using Lacanian discourse in section 0.3 Methodology, pp.6-10.

⁴ L. F. Jacobs, *Opening Doors: The Early Netherlandish Triptychs Reinterpreted*, 1st edn, University Park PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012, p. 3.



Pl 3. Anonymous Venetian artist, *Triptych with the Virgin and Child*
Ca. 1300 -1310, tempera on panel

There are several reasons why I use ‘split portrait’ in this research. First, the word ‘split’ is inspired by Lacan’s notion of subjectivity in which he claims split is in the subject.⁵ He also argues that ‘redoubling’ and ‘division’ are present in the structure of the subject with the effect of speech; especially, he attributes, language is what splits the subject so as to make her a subject.⁶ Therefore, I find the ‘split’ helpful in searching for new ways to look at and to create images. Secondly, ‘split’ indicates the physical breakdown of the traditional single panel portrait which is originally supposed to be created on a defined frame or surface and is regarded as a unity. Thirdly, ‘split’ may imply the final outcome as a multiple entity, which would help me question the singular reading and referent of a portrait work.

⁵ J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis*, ed. by Jacques Alain Miller, 1st edn, London, The Hogarth Press Ltd, 1977, pp. 31, 70 & 131.

⁶ J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English* / J. Lacan; translated by B. Fink in collaboration with H. Fink and R. Grigg, 1st edn, New York NY, W. W. Norton & Company, 2002, p. 708.

0.1 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the contemporary relevance of split portraiture and why I find it a compelling form to create artworks. The objectives are to identify the specificity of this particular type of portraiture, to discuss the subjectivities of contemporary subjects revealed in split portraits, and to investigate the implication of the changed identification and revealed aggressiveness.

0.2 The scope of the thesis and the history of triptychs

This thesis will focus on the practice and viewing of portraiture in the contemporary period. Although this thesis is not focusing on the modern or postmodern relevance (the contemporary relevance instead), some works I include in my discussion, such as those by Francis Bacon and Andy Warhol, are still relevant. In particular, they are still being widely viewed and discussed in exhibitions in this era.

In addition, split portraits are closely related to or developed from traditional triptychs which have their own history; therefore, an understanding of how various scholars have approached triptychs informs the methodology of this thesis. This section gives a brief introduction to how scholars analyse pre-modern triptychs.

The literature which discusses traditional triptychs has been acknowledged by Lynn F. Jacobs.⁷ She claims that the 'Netherlandish artists often extended

⁷ L. F. Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, p.1.

beyond one panel to inhabit three separate panels hinged together, a format that we today call the triptych'. She also lists the practical functions acknowledged by scholars. For example, the wings can protect the centre, the artists can change the imagery, a richer narrative can be delivered, and the donors can be included in the image. However, she also claims that the meaning of triptychs is under-discussed.⁸ Particularly, she claims that Shirley Neilsen Blum, author of the renowned book *Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage*, of 1969⁹, only regards triptychs 'as a means of re-creating experiences previously found in medieval architecture... -not as carrying its own distinctive meanings'.¹⁰ On the other hand, Jacobs claims that Klaus Lankheit establishes a theory of the meaning of triptychs. In particular, Lankheit sees that the triptych's emphasis on the centre is to increase 'affective power' and 'sacred effect'.¹¹ Furthermore, Karl Schade, as Jacobs argues, gives a new interpretation of Lankheit's argument by claiming that the centre of triptych is made for 'devotion and contemplative prayer'.¹² Similarly, Marius Rimmel claims that the structure of the triptych embodies meanings, 'the concepts of epiphany and revelation'.¹³

This thesis will discuss modern and contemporary split portraits but will not discuss pre-modern multi-panel artworks including triptychs, diptychs, polyptychs as those works are more relevant to this practice-based project.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp.1-2.

⁹ S. N. Blum, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage*, 1st edn, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, United States, 1970.

¹⁰ L. F. Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, p.1.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.2.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

0.3 Methodology

To answer my research question, I will discuss some modern and contemporary artworks as well as my own practice in order to identify the specificity of split portraits and some aspects in contemporary subjectivities. Throughout the discussion, I will use Lacanian theories to discuss the relevant case studies and my own practice so as to investigate and understand the contemporary relevance of this particular type of portrait. The reasons why Lacanian perspectives are helpful for me to discuss split portraits are three-fold.

First, the concept of multiplication and split is the basis of, or very much related to the development of major concepts in Lacan's theory. For example, he develops the theory of the mirror stage¹⁴ to argue that the subject takes up an alienating identity in the mirror stage.¹⁵ In addition, Lacan uses three registers¹⁶, the

¹⁴ Lacan's theory of mirror stage had been changing throughout his career. The focus and the emphasis were different between his publications. From the outset, Lacan stated that the child recognized his image in the mirror after six months of age when the weaning complex occurred. The weaning complex develops as the mother withdraws her breast, the child oscillates between accepting or rejecting the withdrawal. Lacan argued that it is the moment the child develops a 'me' (moi). The child identifies with its mirror image, so as to distinguish itself as similar to or different from other human beings. Lacan also stresses, especially from the mid 1950s, the discourse of the Other is as vital as an external imago in identification. The identification could cover the child's fragmentation 'with a unitary, recognizable self-image'. Lacan finally emphasizes that the Other is that which 'regulates his or her assumption of a 'self-image'. As such, a physical mirror is not necessary in the mirror stage and self-image can be constructed outside 'the field of vision'. (See D. Nobus (Ed.), *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 1st edn., London, Rebus Press,, 1998, pp. 105-120.)

¹⁵ J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p.78.

¹⁶ The terms 'real', 'symbolic' and 'imaginary' are used as 'the three orders (or registers)' by Lacan since 1953. They 'comprise a basic classification system which allows important distinctions to be drawn between concepts'. (D Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London, Routledge, 1996, p.132).

imaginary¹⁷, the symbolic¹⁸ and the real¹⁹ in his discussion of human subjectivity.²⁰ He emphasizes it is necessary to use the three registers to understand the ego and the pleasure principle which are related to human subjectivity.²¹ William Carolina also that Lacan's subject 'is scattered across three registers'.²² In other words, no one is without division and the desire for singularity as represented in the single portrait might be seen to be just that: a desire. Other concepts such as repetition, unconsciousness and consciousness are also embedded in the concept of split and multiplication.²³ In split portraits, elements of split and multiplication may easily be found. For example, some split portraits are made up of more than one panel; each panel is no longer self-contained. Artists might have the compulsion to create and add extra panels repeatedly. For example, in Dumas's *Rejects* (1994- ongoing), the number of panels to be added are left open. Looking at the artwork, the

¹⁷ The imaginary is one of the Lacan's three order/registers. Lacan claims that 'the imaginary is not in any sense the illusory' (J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p.607). The imaginary plays an important part in the mirror stage and the formation of the ego. It 'exerts a captivating power over the subject...and rooted in the subject's relationship to his own body', in other words, 'the imaginary is the realm of image and imagination, deception and lure.((D. Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 82-83). It 'imprisons the subject in a series of static fixation' (ibid., p.83) Regarding identification, not only imaginary takes part but also the symbolic. Lacan also discusses the symbolic side in the identification, although he focuses on 'imaginary identification' in the first place. (D. Leader and J. Groves, *Introducing Lacan*, 2nd edition, London, Icon Books Ltd., 2000, p.43) The Imaginary has the symbolic dimension and Lacan claims that 'the imaginary relation has deviated'. (J. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, p.210)

¹⁸ 'The symbolic' is a linguistic dimension but does not simply equate to language. Lacan argues that the symbolic order is the 'determinant of subjectivity'. (D. Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p.203) The human baby identifies with the specular image with the speech of the parents in mirror stage, which is called the symbolic identification. (D. Leader and J. Groves, *Introducing Lacan*, p. 43). Reality is created by the symbolic and our body is overwritten by language. (B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, pp.12, 25).

¹⁹ The real is one of the three registers. It, Bruce Fink claims, is which is before language, not yet symbolized or resists symbolization, or due to symbolized. In addition, it is cancelled by the symbolic. (B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p.24). Lacan describes the real to have no absence within. it (J. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, p. 313).

²⁰ J. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 268-272.

²¹ ibid., p. 36.

²² C. Williams, *Contemporary French Philosophy: Modernity and the Persistence of the Subject*, 1st edn, London and New York NY, The Athlone Press, 2001, p. 88.

²³ E. Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, 1st edn, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 39.

figures, background, and techniques are also repetitive. For example, Francis Bacon's figure (for example, see plate 4) appears not on one panel but on three panels. Therefore, Lacan's theories will be useful to investigate the split elements in the split portraits.

Secondly, split portraits are of split/multiple panel formation. It is a different presentation of an image compared with the traditional single panel portrait, and hence requires a theory which is not assuming singularity and linearity in subjectivity. Otherwise, the ways to investigating split portraits will be limited. Lacanian perspective is based on the notion of 'the division of the subject'²⁴ and split in the subject²⁵, so it is less restrictive and also more productive in explaining the multiplication, repetition, and split in the creation and viewing process. If the previous research on triptych was restricted to only looking at triptychs from a practical perspective, triptychs would have been no more than a



Pl 4. Francis Bacon, *Study for Three Heads*, 1962, oil on canvas

²⁴ J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p. 307.

²⁵ J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis*, p. 131.

convenient form of painting. Likewise, the split portrait will be very likely to be regarded only as a new formation if the practical perspective assumed a complete and unified subject. Some of the contemporary relevance I propose might be lost with such a restricted perspective. As another example, Andy Warhol's artworks are usually viewed from the perspective of pop art. However, Hal Foster relates the works to Warhol's subjectivity. He argues that the traumatic side of Andy Warhol's work contributes to the repetition in the techniques and representation, which indeed offers us a new view to see repetition in his work.²⁶

Thirdly, Lacanian theories explain the fragmented subjectivity by elements such as language and others. For the subjectivity in the split portraits, the figures show us different facets, incompleteness, whereby the viewer infers incompleteness in the structure of multiplicity. Since this project is to investigate the contemporary relevance through the subjectivity of the viewer and artist, especially through the artist's intention and viewer's engagement, Lacan's work on fragmented subjectivity will be beneficial to the practicing portrait artists and those who would like to understand more about this particular kind of art practice. The subjectivity of the viewer and the artist is indeed the core aspect to be investigated, so as to see why the split portraits are more prevalent, and engage the viewers differently compared with single panel portraits.

²⁶ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real: Critical Models in Art and Theory Since 1960*, 5th edn, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996, pp. 130-134.

More importantly, I use Lacanian perspectives because of my background in psychology. I am very interested in and convinced by Lacanian theories regarding the construction of a subject. However, I do not suggest that Lacan's theories are the only ones which can explain the contemporary relevance or subjectivity. Nevertheless, Lacanian discourse is my starting point to look at split portraits and serves as a useful framework for me to think about my art practice.

The selection of the key artists in case studies

Francis Bacon and Marlene Dumas are the key artists in my discussion. Their works are of relevance in this thesis as I find similarities between their and my practice. The major similarity is that we mainly create split portraits instead of single-panel portrait. In addition, we use accidents and chances in our practice which is very similar to my rationale in using ink as my main medium in painting. I believe that accidental marks can reveal more of the artist. The dates of their careers are not quite the same but they are indeed within the same era.

For Francis Bacon, although his works were produced in the 20th century, his work is still attracting more and more audience worldwide. To understand the contemporary subjects, I do not only look at the artists, but the audience as well. Therefore, investigating his works is still helpful to understand the contemporary audience. In addition, he is also among the first artists who revolutionized the traditional triptychs. He is the one people would think of when triptychs are being mentioned. He presents a very different subjectivity compared with the one in the traditional triptych.

For Marlene Dumas, her works are of this era and reflect her subjectivity and how she views this era. Her works have been attracting a lot of audience worldwide, I believe that the reasons behind the popularity can give us some hints about this era. She is also one of the first artists to push the multiple panel formation to the limit. There are also similarities in her and my practice. For example, she mainly uses ink in her practice and she explores themes such as identity and language which are my major concerns as well. As such, discussing their works can be beneficial in understanding my practice as well.

0.4 Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter includes a review of the literature discussing modern and contemporary subjectivity, artists' intention and the viewing experience of split portraits from a Lacanian perspective as well as a review of the artists who work on split portraits. In addition, it provides a discussion of what portraiture is today with reference to the split portraits of Francis Bacon, Marlene Dumas, and Ed Atkins.

The second chapter discusses various examples of split portraits to identify the modern and contemporary subjectivity in split portraits. The elements appearing in modern and contemporary subjectivity I propose are (1) vacillation; (2) emptiness; and (3) the split and the traumatic, which I discuss in the light of Lacanian discourse and related discourse of other writers.

In the third chapter, I again bring in case studies to investigate how identification changed in split portraits with reference to Lacanian theories. Furthermore, I discuss an important element in my practice -- aggressiveness -- as manifested and perceived differently in split portraits. I believe that the changed identification and revealed aggressiveness in split portraits tells us about today. In addition to comparing other artists' single panel and split portraits, I also discuss my works to offer a first-person perspective, my rationale for which I give in the following subsection.

The relevance of my practice in the discussion

From my own point of view as an artist, there are reasons for a split portrait to be produced. First, after painting a portrait, I might find that I have more to say. Secondly, I might want to explore the collective subjectivity of a group of people through multiplicity. Thirdly, I might want to cancel the narrative by destroying the unity of the painting and scattering the elements onto several panels. I believe viewers may find it less easy to make their own interpretation or identify with the figure, or are made busier in the viewing process as their gaze might jump from one panel to another. Based on some Lacanian discourses, I propose that split portraits tell us something about contemporary subjects.

The discussion of my own works (for example, 5) such as *Good Wife* (2015), *You See It Intimate, I See It Violent*. (2015) and *Study of Emmeline Pankhurst* (2018) is relevant in this thesis for two reasons. First, as this is a practice-based PhD, discussing my work is considered important in seeing how my practice situates

in the field and informs my discussion. Secondly, discussion of my works offers a first-person perspective in creating a split portrait on top of the secondary source, which is my discussion of other artists' split portraits. A first-person perspective means that as I am the artist who makes the split portrait, I know about the whole process of creation. A first-person perspective is vital as my thesis is very much related to the artists themselves (the contemporary subjects): I am to discuss the implication of contemporary relevance of split portraits through investigating both the artworks and the artists. A first-person perspective could offer me more insights as I can use such information as the artist intention, the choice of number of panels and the problems I (as the artist) encounter in my discussion. When I use secondary sources (other artists' works), I use a third-person perspective for discussion. I believe that the use of two perspectives can give me a clear picture of what the split portrait speaks about today. Indeed, a limitation of using the first-person perspective is that I might have my unconsciousness, or that I might not be as critical as when I analyse other artists' works. Nonetheless, my perspective can open a dialogue with other artists' work and be useful in my discussion.

0.5 Contribution

The contribution of this thesis is four-fold. First, this thesis addresses the specificity of the split portrait which has been extensively discussed in the literature.²⁷ Secondly, this thesis is among the first to enrich the understanding of

²⁷ The literature includes but is not limited to:

Ed Atkins's works:

- i. An essay addressing Atkins' practice: A. Russeth, 'An Artist Who Explores the Deep Creepiness of Facial-Recognition Technology', *The New Yorker*, 20 May 2016, <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/an-artist-who-explores-the-deep-creepiness-of-facial-recognition-technology>>, accessed 26 Oct 2018.

split portraiture related to art practice in the light of Lacanian discourse. Thirdly, it reveals the contemporary subjectivity through the discussion of the instances of split portraiture. Finally, by using the new term 'split portraiture', I discover a new way to rethink about portraiture and re-read the works of Marlene Dumas and Francis Bacon.

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- ii. An interview reviewing three contemporary artists' works: D. Kidner, 'More Than a Feeling', *Frieze*, [online magazine], no. 142, October 2011, pp. 210-215, < <https://frieze.com/article/more-feeling>>, accessed 26 Oct 2018.
 - iii. A review on his work *Death Mask* (2010): K. Noble, 'Ed Atkins', *ArtReview*, [online magazine], no. 46, March 2011, p. 97, <https://artreview.com/features/2011_futuregreats_ed_atkins/>, accessed 26 Oct 2018.
 - iv. A review on his collaboration work. *An Echo Button* (2010) run alongside Performa 11 in New York's Times Square: O. Basciano, 'Ed Atkins and James Richards, in conversation', *ArtReview*, [online magazine], no. 64, December 2012, pp. 95-101, <https://artreview.com/features/december_2012_feature_ed_atkins_and_james_richards/>, accessed 26 Oct 2018.
- Francis Bacon:
- i. An essay addresses Francis Bacon's painting responding to the Nazi photography, violence, Fascism and contemporary issues of his time. M. Hammer and C. Stephens, 'Seeing the Story of One's Time: Appropriations from Nazi Photography in the Work of Francis Bacon', *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 10/no. 3, 2009, pp. 315-351.
 - ii. An essay addresses the significance of triptych in Bacon's work: D. Ambrose, 'Triptychs, Eternity and the Spirituality of the Body', *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, vol. 3, 2009, pp. 259-273.
 - iii. G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation (Continuum Impacts)*, 1st edn, London and New York NY, Continuum International Publishing Group, United Kingdom, 2005.
 - iv. E. van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, 1st edn, London, Reaktion Books, 2004.
- Marlene Dumas:
- i. A book with a collection of essays discussing Dumas' work comprehensively: D. Boogerd et al., *Marlene Dumas*, London, Phaidon Press, 2009.
 - ii. An essay reviews Dumas's exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles: J. Kantor, 'Marlene Dumas', *Artforum International*, vol. 47/no. 2, 2008, pp. 374.
 - iii. An essay discusses Dumas's unconventional art practice: L. Maltz-Leca, 'Body of Evidence', *Artforum International*, vol. 49/no. 3, 2010, p. 238.
 - iv. An essay addressing the impact Dumas's exhibition on Russia: N. Siegal, 'Art shapes a Debate in Russia', *International New York Times*, 18-06-2014, p. S5.

Chapter 1

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Chapter 1

Literature review and a brief overview on what portraiture is today

1.0 Literature Review

The literature review consists of two parts. Since this thesis is built on my practice-based research, I review not only the literature in the written format, but also the relevant artists' artworks. The first half of this chapter provides a review of the literature on single-panel portraits from the Lacanian perspective, and on the relevant issues such as modern and contemporary subjectivity, artists' intention and the viewing experience of split portraits from the Lacanian perspective. The second half consists of a review of artists who produce split portraits.

1.0.1 Review of literature: modern and contemporary subjectivity, artists' intention and viewing experience of split portraits

There is a rich literature on how viewers engage with the single-panel portraiture in the light of Lacanian discourse. James Elkins, the art historian, contends that seeing is undependable, inconsistent and unconscious based on psychoanalytical theories.¹ Darian Leader, a psychoanalyst, explores the psychology of looking at visual art in the book, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*.² In addition, Emma Chambers' essay 'Fragmented Identities: Reading subjectivity in Henry Tonks' Surgical Portraits'³ discusses viewers' experience by examining Henry Tonks' surgical

¹ J. Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*, 1st edn., New York NY Harcourt, Inc., 1997, p. 70.

² D. Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops Us From Seeing*, 1st edn, Berkeley CA, Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004.

³ E. Chambers, 'fragmented Identities: Reading Subjectivity in Henry Tonks' Surgical Portraits', *Art History*, vol. 32/no. 3, 2009, pp. 578-607.

portraits. She claims that there is an unusual form of spectatorship when viewers looked at Tonks' works. Similar discussion is also found in Ken Wilder's essay⁴, where he argues that painting cannot be self-contained. He argues that there are two ways for viewers to identify with the paintings: (i) the viewer identifies with a spectator who already occupies an unrepresented extension of the 'virtual' space'; (ii) 'the beholder enters that part of the fictive world depicted as being in front of the picture surface, the work thus drawing the 'real' space of the spectator into its domain'.

There is a limited literature on multi-panel portraiture; the existing literature mainly aims at analyzing specific artists and tangentially discusses multi-panel works. Dominic Van Den Boogerd discusses the subjectivity Marlene Dumas deals with in her multi-panel portraiture. He agrees with Ernst van Alphen's claims that 'the portrayed figures are not endowed with subjectivity in terms of original presence, but they acquire it in relations to one another' when he discusses Dumas's split portraits.⁵ There is also an essay from a round-table discussion on multi-panel artwork in the digital format.⁶ The authors discuss how contemporary art uses projected images nowadays. They review some projected images on single panel and multi panels in which artists use different approaches to engage the viewers in the exhibition space.

⁴ K. Wilder, 'The case for an external spectator', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 48, No. 3, July 2008, British Society of Aesthetics, Available from British Journal of Aesthetics, p. 261.

⁵ D. v. D Boogerd et al, *Marlene Dumas*, p. 68.

⁶ M. Turvey et al, 'Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art', *October*, vol. 104/ (2003), pp. 71-96.

Regarding the relevant issues in this thesis – subjectivity, my thinking on subjectivity in portraiture is drawn from Ernst van Alphen’s *Portraiture: Facing the Subject (Critical Introductions to Art)*⁷, where he argues that the notion of traditional portrait in an image is the entwinement of two subjectivities: the portrayer and the sitter. The artist gives the outer form of the sitter’s supposed interiority. However, van Alphen argues that in modern art, the conception of subjectivity in the image has changed. For instance, in Picasso’s portraits, the form of representation is exchangeable: a form can sometimes be seen as a mouth, sometimes as a nose. In the works of Andy Warhol, viewers cannot see the subjectivity of Andy Warhol or that of the sitter. The viewers do not see a unique self but a subject in the image of the star, which is modeled on the public fantasy of stardom.

In modern and contemporary subjectivities, a few scholars discuss how contemporary subjects read single and multiple images. Doug Aitken claims that we tend to read images in a non-linear way as people did before the twenty-first century.⁸ For example, we are used to reading fragmented information and communicating with others in a non-linear way. He claims that we experience nonlinearity and fragmentation in modern life.⁹ A ubiquitous everyday example is that many of my generation increasingly tend to write and read fragmented texts with our mobiles in a non-linear way. We might read half of a message and then jump to the other application; or we write a text to someone halfway and read

⁷ E. van Alphen, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject (Critical Introductions to Art)*, ed. by Joanna Woodall, 1st edn, Manchester, St. Martin’s Press, 1997, pp. 239-243.

⁸ D. Aitken and R. Altman, *The Broken Screen: Expanding the Image, Breaking the Narrative: 26 Conversations with Doug Aitken*, ed. by Noel Daniel, New York NY, Distributed Art Publishers, 2006, pp. 6-8.

⁹ *ibid.*

another friend's message in the mid of it. Moreover, many movies in the last twenty-five years such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Timecode* (2000) and *Love Actually* (2003), to name just a few, use dual and multiple narratives for enhancing viewers' sensations. In addition, the emptiness and insecurity in the subject is addressed by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. He claims that in modern life we escape existential fear and danger through 'locking ourselves behind walls, stuffing the approaches to our living quarters with TV cameras' or to 'focus on things we can, or believe we can, or are assured that we can influence'.¹⁰ The sense of insecurity in the contemporary subjects can be related to what Darian Leader describes the intention of art making. He claims that:

[I]n some cases, visual art functions as a screen to divert the evil eye, to disarm it. In the same way that a threatened animal will divest itself or a part of its own body to mollify its pursuer, the artist can divest him- or herself of an image.¹¹

I would further suggest the action of putting more panels into one work can reflect the urge of the artist of divesting the gaze of the viewers. Peggy Phelan also discusses contemporary subjectivity through looking at how the artist Robert Mapplethorpe constructs resemblance by the use of 'the Other'.¹² She claims that Mapplethorpe uses a detour to resemble himself in order to construct his subjectivity through the other.

¹⁰ Z. Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006, p. 11.

¹¹ D. Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, p. 39.

¹² P. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 1st edn, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 45.

Secondly, the artists' intention and the viewing experience of split portraits from a Lacanian perspective can be found in Hal Foster's landmark book, *The Return of the Real*¹³ in which he analyses Warhol's work and subjectivity as well as Walter Benjamin's discourse on the image and its reproduction.¹⁴ Foster claims that repetition in Warhol's works is related to the traumatic and the real; it screens the traumatic but also points to the traumatic.¹⁵ Regarding the contemporary viewing experience, Benjamin discusses how we see our surroundings in the contemporary world. Being aware or not, we might have changed the way of seeing through the use of a camera with 'its plunging and soaring, its interrupting and isolating, its stretching and condensing of the process, its close-ups and distance shots'.¹⁶ He argues that the camera changes the way we look and further claims that Dadaism attempt to create in painting the effects people looked for in films.¹⁷ I suggest that the artists who create split portraits do something similar in their practice. His discourse is of relevance because the feature of split in split portraits could be traced to the feature of a camera image: the camera splits the time and destroys the continuity of experience.¹⁸ For split portraits, the moment can even be fragmented by camera. The first split occurs in the use of the camera image as reference by the artist and the further split occurs when the artist breaks the fake continuity created by the panels.

¹³ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*.

¹⁴ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1st edn, London, Penguin Group, 2010.

¹⁵ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, pp. 131-134.

¹⁶ W. Benjamin, *The Work of*, p. 30.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁸ A. Conty, 'They Have Eyes That They Might not See: Walter Benjamin's Aura and the Optical Unconscious', *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory and Culture*, vol.27/no.4, 2013, p.474-486.

1.0.2 Review of the artists who have worked with split portraits

In this section, I review the artists who have made split portraits. The list of artists is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive. Rather, it shows a growing number of artists who have ever produced their portrait art in the sense of splitting or multiplication. I will also explain whose works in the list would be helpful in answering my question, but I do not cover all of those artists in this thesis.

Motivated by the need to define artworks relevant for my research question, I review a list of artists who create split portraits in their practice: Andy Warhol, Francis Bacon, Tony Oursler, Ed Atkins, Doug Aitken, Dryden Goodwin, Bill Viola, Ida Applebroog, Robert Longo, and Marlene Dumas.¹⁹ I choose these artists because their split portrait works have been widely discussed, especially those whose split portrait works are different from their single panel portraits. In addition, the split in the works is meaningful to the artists. For example, Bacon insists on showing his work in separated frames as a triptych in an exhibition in the Guggenheim, instead of putting the three panels in one frame without separation. He explains that his triptychs relate less to the tradition of triptych than to the images on film and can create a kind of rhythm to the development of images.²⁰ This provides evidence that he uses the split intentionally. My thesis makes some suppositions through Lacan as to why he does so.

¹⁹ This list is not intended to be definitive or exhaustive, but they are reviewed because of their active participation in modern and contemporary art.

²⁰ F. Bacon et al, *Francis Bacon: In conversation with Michel Archimbaud*, London, Phaidon Press, 1993, p. 165.

(i) Artists using fragmentation in split portraits to reflect on the contemporary

The subjectivity presented in the split portraits by Francis Bacon, Marlene Dumas, Tony Oursler, Ed Atkins, Giulio Paolini, and Robert Longo is different from the one in traditional single panel portraits. For example, Ed Atkins creates animated and virtual figures in his works and deals with subjectivity in new ways in his split portrait installation. As discussed by Luna Joe:

Atkins' work employs the latest technological means for atomizing subjectivity into the component grammars of commodity fetishism in order to sabotage those means with the very fallibility they would airbrush out of existence...²¹

The anonymity, the liquidized subjectivity I mentioned above, finds its audio-visual correlative in works' use of stock footage and sound...²²

Joe points out that Atkins fragments the subjects by means of technology so as to destroy the artificially-constructed 'human figure' and those technological means at the same time. He also uses HD video to tell us the anxiety of the digital age -- we are left alienated from 'corporeal affects, substances, bodies and sex' although we thought our virtual life is free from materials limitation.²³ Martha Horn also claims that, in Atkins's work, our real self is represented by a digital self remotely.

²¹ E. Atkins, L. Joe and B. Ruf, *Ed Atkins*, Zurich, JRP-Ringier, 2013, p. 8.

²² *ibid.*, p.11.

²³ L. Herman, 'dépendance, Brussels, Belgium', *Frieze London*, no. 177, Feb 2016, < <https://frieze.com/article/ed-atkins-0>>, accessed Nov 5, 2018.

The identity of the digital self is not authentic but is only made up from information.²⁴

On the other hand, a collective subjectivity sometimes appears in Robert Longo's split portraits. His art is 'addressing contemporary culture', 'advancing a conviction about art's mission in that culture' and about a human's living experience and existence in the contemporary world.²⁵ Longo creates multi-panel drawings and paintings, performances and sculptures corresponding to the subject matters in question. Regarding multi-panel drawings, he consciously turns his finished single-panel portraits into split ones for engaging and even manipulating viewers in a more intense manner.²⁶ For example, the central panel of his triptych *Men Trapped in Ice* (1979) (plate 5) is inspired from *The American Soldier* (1977), one of his single panel works. As Longo makes more works, the subjects gradually become a group of his urban contemporaries of collective identities.²⁷ At the same time, the figures are depicted as broken, 'failed caryatids, wobbling or even crushed...[by] the weight of a certain absence that defeats them'.²⁸ The artist himself claims that his figures are only 'abstract symbols...or logos', and do not have 'personalities and personal histories but functions'.²⁹ On the other hand, Fox believes that Longo's art reflects the urge for 'continuity, wholeness, and unity' rather than presenting 'discontinuity and fragmentation' only.³⁰

²⁴ M. Horn, 'Ed Atkins's Desperate Tale of Woe', *Elephant* [online magazine], 1 July 2018, < <https://elephant.art/ed-atkins-ribbons/>>, accessed Oct 23, 2018.

²⁵ H. Fox et al, *Robert Longo*, 1st edn, Los Angeles CA, Rizzoli International Publications, 1989, p. 11.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 41.

(ii) Artists use split portraits to engage viewers differently compared with single panel ones

The nature of referents in the split portraits of Dumas, Atkins, Paolini, Oursler, and Viola has radically changed compared with that in traditional single portraits. Viola and Aitken attempt to prevent viewers from referring the figures in their works to anything outside of the works. They use multiple screens to repeat the figure's postures and movements in a way to state that the identity of the referents is not important at all. In Aitken's work *Sleepwalkers* (2007) (see plate 6), the figures are carrying out similar daily activities. Viewers are not invited to refer those figures to anyone outside of the work, but only to the figures on other screens. Similar effects can be found in Viola's work *Dreamers* (2007) (see plate 7).

Some of Dumas' works such as *Black drawings* (1991-92) (plate 8), *Models* (1994) (plate 9) and *Chlorosis (Love sick)* (plate 10) do not refer to any group of people outside the paintings either. Instead, the portraits refer to stereotypes in the viewers' minds. What Dumas concerns is not the referents of the paintings, but the names, stereotypes, images and references. Her split portrait *Rejects* (1994) delivers this concept:



Pl 5. Robert Longo, *Men Trapped In Ice*, 1979, charcoal and graphite on paper



Pl 6. Doug Aitken. *Sleepwalkers*, 2007
Video projection, installation view



Pl 7. Bill Viola, *The Dreamers*, 2013
Video projection, installation view



Pl 8, Marlene Dumas, *Black Drawings*, 1991-92
Ink on paper and slate



Pl 9. Marlene Dumas, *Models*, 1994
Ink on paper



Pl 10. Marlene Dumas, *Chlorosis (Love sick)*, 1994
Ink, gouache, and synthetic polymer paint on paper

I [Dumas] am interested in seeing what people reject, what they accept, and why. I've made one group of images called *Rejects* (1994 - ongoing), the ones with their eyes torn or scratched out, and a series of more controlled, smooth works that I call *Models* (1994).³¹

She also mentions a similar idea in an interview:

Once, in North America, someone was interested in these smaller paintings of a naked young girl, and asked, 'What is the age of the child?' I said, 'It's not a child, it's a painting.'³²

³¹ D. v D Boogerd et al, *Marlene Dumas*, p. 16.

³² *ibid.*, p. 21.

Some scholars discuss the reference in Dumas' work. Van Alphen claims that Dumas is conscious of the impossibility of plain reference and fights against the conventional 'names' which are not given by her.³³ Cornelia Butler especially argues:

Dumas's paintings are products of the contemporary image world – that is, they are drawn directly from the events of our time, abstracted to resonate in content and form.³⁴

In addition, Dumas creates an internal referral within her work through the overwhelming effect made by a number of panels. Viewers are directed to compare and gaze across the panels instead of being referred to something outside the paintings. Regarding how her works engage viewers, the edges of the panels in *Black Drawings* (1992-2), *Chlorosis (Love sick)* (1994) and *Models* (1994) make my gaze jump from one panel to another. Such viewing experience is different from that of traditional single portraits where I move along the formal elements such as lines and tonal changes of color. This is how van Den Boogerd describes Dumas's diptych *The Space Age* (1984):

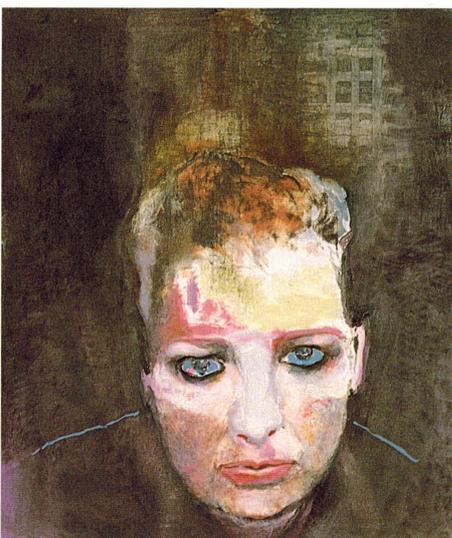
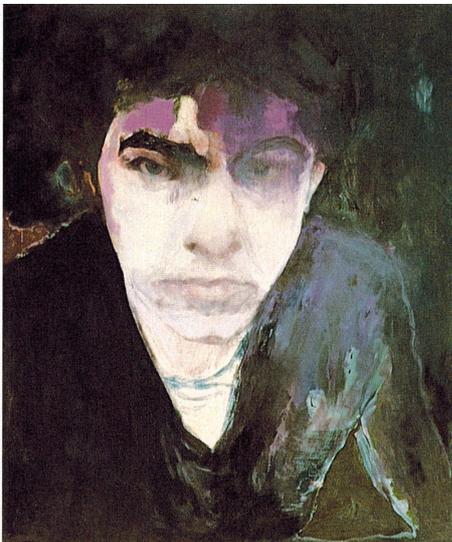
These paintings of faces are not portraits in the usual sense of the word. They are more about Dumas' ideas, associations and experiences in relation to the depicted figures. The relationship itself is the subject of *The Space Age* (1984), which involves us, as in a cinematographic

³³ E. van Alphen, *Portraiture*, p. 250.

³⁴ M. Dumas et al, *Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave*, ed. by Lisa Mark, 2nd edn, Los Angeles CA, The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008, p. 55.

montage, in the exchange of glances between the artist and her boyfriend of that time.³⁵

It invites viewers to shift their viewpoints between the two panels and to draw viewers into the work as if they are the witnesses of the scene in the paintings. The subjectivity of the figure cannot be found in the figure himself/herself, but through an agent and an other. No subject exists without the presence of the other.



Pl 11. Marlene Dumas, *The Space Age*, 1984
Oil on canvas

³⁵ D. v D Boogerd et al, *Marlene Dumas*, p. 44.

(iii) Artists whose works are less relevant in this thesis

First, I find that some split portraits made by some artists who attempt to engage the viewers in the same way as their single portraits do.³⁶ For example, Georg Baselitz presents a multi-panel portrait work *In London gewesen, niemand getroffen*, but his aim is to test compositional balance by painting on one half of the canvas only, leaving an expanse of white above or below the image. The split is not of his intention to engage viewers differently from what he does in his usual single panel portrait works. In addition, in his exhibition in New York, Guy Denning puts some of his works both in multi-panel and in single-panel formations, so it might reflect that the split is not of his consideration.

Secondly, some of the contemporary portrait artists' works may not say much about today as they operate in the way of the pre-modern triptychs. For instance, I read the narrative in Chantal Joffe's *Untitled* (1995) the same way I read traditional triptychs. As an example, when reading the traditional triptych *Triptych: Scenes from the Passion of Christ* (1510), I know that the focus is on the central panel in which Jesus is crucified. The event is depicted progressively from the left panel to the right one. To understand the narrative, I first read from the left to see what happens before Jesus is crucified on the cross, then I move my gaze to the central panel and finally I read the right panel to know the end of the narrative. I read the narratives presented in the snapshots of Joffe's work in the

³⁶ The artists include Georg Baselitz, Richard Philips, Guy Denning, Sam Dillemans, Chantal Joffe, Mickalene Thomas, Chris Ofili, Matthew Baner, Rineke Dijkstra, Eija-Liisa Ahtila and Arnulf Rainer.

same way as I read *Triptych: Scenes from the Passion of Christ* (1510). Finally, similar to traditional portraits, Joffe's figures in the works refer to people outside the painting and the work depicts the lives of the figures. In conclusion, looking at those artists may not be helpful to understand the contemporary relevance or the art practice of split portraits.

1.0.3 The literature gap

Despite the fact that a wide range of literature discusses certain elements of split portraiture, and that Foster's discussion on the repetition in Andy Warhol's split portraits tangentially reveals some aspects of subjectivity in split portraits, no literature directly addresses the contemporary relevance of split portraits.³⁷ My thesis aims to fill this literature gap as a way to understand the art practice of this particular kind of portrait art.

1.1 A brief overview: What portraiture is today with the emergence of split portraits

In this section, I analyse a few modern and contemporary split portraits as a way to identify what portraiture is today. I select three artists whose works are widely exhibited worldwide, and I believe this overview can make us aware of how portraiture is changing. In particular, I discuss Bacon's *Triptych May-June* (1973) (plate 12), Dumas' *Rejects* (1994-ongoing) and Atkins' *Ribbons* (2014). Some of these works will be discussed in terms of subjectivity, identification and aggressiveness in subsequent chapters.

³⁷ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*.

The choices of various artists and the difference between cases in this section

In this section, I choose three artists who create split portraits to explore what portraiture is today with this particular art practice. Since Bacon is among the first artists to break the practice of traditional triptych, it is worth looking at his works to investigate if such particular art practice makes a difference in portrait art so as to think about the portrait and the relation between image and viewer. Regarding the specificity in Bacon's works, he constructs a new subjectivity by breaking one figure into three facets, and at the same time using different ways to hide the subjectivity of the figure. Bacon's works offer us the transition from traditional triptychs to the modern ones. Studying his portraits might help us understand what a split portrait is telling us and what is beyond the usual way of looking at a triptych. Moreover, Bacon's works include single panel works, split portraits created by adding extra panels to an existing single panel works, and carefully structured triptychs, so I find them useful to investigate the specificity of split portraits.



Pl 12. Francis Bacon, *Triptych, May-June 1973, 1973*
Oil on canvas

Marlene Dumas is one of the artists who further push the use of multi-panel formation unprecedentedly, as manifested by the techniques she uses or the numbers of panels she employs. In particular, she has created many works which consist of more than three panels. As a female artist, studying her works can make this review more comprehensive as well. In contrast to Bacon, Dumas constructs subjectivity by adding many 'others' in the work. In addition, most of Dumas' works do not contain much narrative content but faces and gazes only. It would be helpful to study her works so as to understand if the number of panels matters in a split portrait and how the number of splits changes our looking and reflects the contemporary relevance of split portraits.

Ed Atkins is among the first artists who develop this multi-panel formation by the use of new technology. For example, in his work he uses an avatar which represents one's subjectivity in the Internet era, so it would be useful to discuss his work when it comes to discussing contemporary subjectivity. He also constructs subjectivity by the use of the appearing and disappearing of the figure as well as the technology to create human and avatar-like subjects. The medium and creation method in his works are totally different from those of Dumas and Bacon. The subject is generated by computer and then presented as animated images. It would lead us to understand the significance of the subjectivity of split portrait without a real-person referent. Furthermore, his work offers us a more up-to-date portraiture and within a context of how we look at images in our daily life.

1.1.1 Case study I: Francis Bacon's *Triptych May-June, 1973*

(i) The pseudo triptych

The title of Francis Bacon's *Triptych May-June, 1973* does not tell me anything about the theme or the subject except that it might tell me when Bacon created the painting. As the title says that it is a triptych, I read the work as a traditional triptych. When paintings are set up as triptychs within a traditional genre which are usually related to biblical stories, I cannot stop myself from expecting a narrative in my viewing. The central panel is supposed to be the most important one and the side panels are supposed to support the central one, much in the way of a traditional Church triptych pieta where the side panels support the main one.³⁸ The side panels suggest that the figure is in a bathroom, however, the space is not like a bathroom when I look at the doorframes and the arrows on the floor. The two 'supporting' panels do not do their job, as they do not tell me anything about my expected narrative in central panel. Obviously, the light bulb on the central panel tells me that the figure is situating in a space that is different from the side panels. The work does not fulfill the promise that I can read it as a traditional triptych suggested in the title. As a matter of fact, I wonder if Bacon misleads us intentionally. But no matter what, I have already had my expectation unfulfilled. Bacon presents a subject to me but, at the same time, hides the subjectivity by scattering bits of bits across the panel. The thing I expect, which should be present in a triptych, is not there. The triptych is of an emptiness, which I propose, captivates me to look at. Leader claims that when an image

³⁸ Examples of the traditional church triptychs are *The Pietà with St. Catherine and St. Sebastian* by Master of the Louis XII Triptych (c. late 15th-16th century), *Icon Triptych: Pietà with Sts Francis and Mary Magdalen* by Nikolaos Tzafouris (c. 1489-1501) and *The Miraflores Altarpiece* by Rogier van der Weyden (c.1442-5).

does not give something which is promised, it captivates the viewer more. He also quotes courtly love as an example to explain the effect of emptiness in works:

the courtly love tradition has elevated woman from being an object of exchange into a sublime and inaccessible figure...³⁹ Mona Lisa demonstrated the true function of the work of art: to evoke the empty place of the Thing, the gap between the artwork and the place it occupies.⁴⁰

Slavoj Žižek also argues that, in Lacanian theories, the object of desire can never be accessed; like in the dream, the fugitive is never be caught up by the pursuer.⁴¹ Likewise, Bacon's *Triptych May-June, 1973* situates itself in the genre of traditional triptych, escapes from the expected triptych formation and avoids being read as such. I propose that the unfulfilled promise captivates viewers and am going to explain in detail how Bacon makes the traditional triptych reading impossible.

With historical significance, a triptych symbolizes a religious object which has something to reveal. However, its original symbolic meaning is abandoned by the repetition in *Triptych May-June, 1973*. It is similar to what repetition in pop art does: Roland Barthes claims that in Andy Warhol's and some works of pop art, repetition desymbolizes the object and removes the soul of the figure which is supposed to be present in the portrait, but leaves only the viewers in the work.⁴²

³⁹ D. Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 66.

⁴¹ S. Žižek, *Looking Awry- An introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, 1st edn, Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, 1992, p. 4.

⁴² R. Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms : Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans by Richard Howard, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 1991, pp. 198-206.

The repetition makes the triptych lose its original function or aim, and cancels out the narrative. As such, Bacon's triptych only carries the superficial formation of a traditional triptych – a three-part painting. But, then, what is repetition doing in triptychs? Let us think about Warhol's *Ambulance Disaster* (Plate 13) (1963). A punctum⁴³ or a tuché ('the encounter with the real')⁴⁴, as Foster claims, can be created by techniques such as slipping and streaking, blanching and blanking, and repeating and coloring of the images.⁴⁵ Similarly, the repetition in this triptych does something in the same way. Repetition happens everywhere across the panels, including the repeated deformation of the body, the blurring brushstrokes on the faces, the shadows, the arrows, the blacks in the background and the space between the panels. Apparently, a triptych gives a space for Bacon to repeat and the repetitions say something. I relate it to Lacan's claim that 'what is repeated is always something that occurs – the expression tells us quite a lot about its relation to the tuché – as if by chance'.⁴⁶ In other words, repetition tells

⁴³ A term used by Roland Barthes to refer to an incidental but personally poignant detail in a photograph which 'pierces' or 'pricks' a particular viewer, constituting a private meaning unrelated to any cultural code (D. Chandler, and R. Munday. "punctum", *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* [website], 2016, <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/abstract/10.1093/acref/9780191800986.001.0001/acref-9780191800986-e-2210?rskey=gWPZSs&result=2511>>2016, accessed 12 Nov 2018).

⁴⁴ Lacan borrowed the term "tuché" from Aristotle who used it in his search for cause, and translated it as "the encounter with the real"; he claims that the function of the tuché in psychoanalysis is to arouse the psychoanalyst's attention of the trauma existed in the patient. He also claims that the tuché could be the screen of the real and our phantasy.(J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 53.).

⁴⁵ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 134.

⁴⁶ J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 54.

something about the subject and treats it as an entrance to look at the subject. Bacon claims that he simply does not know in the end what he is doing⁴⁷ and accidents have to enter into the activity of painting.⁴⁸ He also lets the involuntary marks overpower himself during the process of painting.⁴⁹ In this sense, I propose a punctum emerges similarly in a triptych although Bacon might carry out the repetition intentionally or unintentionally. I also propose that it says something about the viewer too as looking is a two-way process. In other words, if this kind of work can very much engage viewers and makes the viewer identify with the subject, it might reflect the punctum is present in the viewer as well.



Pl 13. Andy Warhol, Ambulance Disaster, 1964
Silkscreen on linen

⁴⁷ D. Sylvester and F. Bacon, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 3rd edn, New York NY, Thames and Hudson, 1987, p. 17.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 56.

(ii) Fragmentations of the figure

Two types of fragmentations are perceived in *Triptych May-June, 1973*. First, the figures show the heaviness of the body which apparently carries heavy muscles that are fluid, deforming, and amoebic. This unusual representation of the body splits the body and makes the figure look fragmented in the painting. Indeed, the first thing drawing my attention is the shadow on the central panel, which seems to be eating or dismantling the figure. It has a strange shape which does not seem to belong to the figure. I start to think that there is an 'other' in the painting. Regarding the body, the ground and the shadow are dragging the figures' muscles downwards. At the same time, the arrows pointing upwards are lifting the deformed body a bit. However, the faces show that the figures are unaware of the changes of their bodies.

Secondly, the subject is fragmented in a suggestive way. On the left panel, the small head and the body emerge, and the limbs are hardly seen. On the central panel, the shadow absorbs part of the body. On the right panel, the body looks quite complete and clear, but the weight of the body leaning on the basin suggests that the figure is at the point of breakdown. The fragmentation here happens again but is visualized in a suggestive way. Although it is yet to happen, it has already happened in my mind. I hence propose it as the second fragmentation of the figure in the painting. This work is painted after the death of George Dyer, Bacon's lover.⁵⁰ These fragmentations and multiplications of figures reflect how

⁵⁰ Bacon created images of George Dyer after his death. Dyer died as he sat on the lavatory in his hotel room during the trip accompanying Bacon for his retrospective exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris. Bacon mentioned that '*although one's never exorcized, because people say you forget about death, but you don't...time doesn't heal. But you would have put into your obsession with the physical act you put into your work.*' (D. Sylvester, *Looking Back at Francis Bacon*, New York NY, Thames & Hudson, 2000, pp. 135–136.)

Bacon responds to the trauma in a paradoxical way that Hal Foster discusses how repetition relates to the trauma in Warhol's work. Foster argues that repetition is doing seemingly contradictory things: it 'serves to screen the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also points to the real.'⁵¹ His idea is rooted in Lacan's claims that 'the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real' and 'the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated'.⁵² In this work, Bacon recreates the death of Dyer. He not only repeats the tragic experience on the individual panel, but also repeats it throughout the three panels. I propose the repetition in the triptych is where Bacon deals with the trauma. Furthermore, the triptych captivates me to identify with it; it shows the traumatic side of me as a viewer.

(iii) The fragmentation and the identification

Regarding identification, I wonder if the fragmented subjectivity in Bacon's painting engages me differently compared with the way single panel portrait does. Lacan claims that 'the ego is made up of the series of identifications' which happens throughout one's life.⁵³ The process of looking at portraits can be regarded as a way of identifying the ideal-ego as well.⁵⁴ I would argue this is what gives portraiture its continuing relevance. That is to say, a viewer identifies

⁵¹ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 134.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ J. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's*, p.165.

⁵⁴ The concepts of ideal ego (written as 'i(a)' (D Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p.52) is different from ego-ideal (written as 'I(A)' (*ibid.*, p. 52) in Lacanian theories. Ideal-ego is the image the subject constitute himself in his imaginary reality (*The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 144) and 'originates in the specular image of the mirror stage', 'the illusion of unity on which the ego is built' (D Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 52); whereas ego-ideal is 'a symbolic introjection', 'the signifier operating as ideal' (*ibid.*) In other words, Ego ideal is 'the symbolic point which gives you a place and supplies the point from which you are looked at' whereas Ideal ego is 'the image you assume' imaginarily. (D. Leader and J. Groves, *Introducing Lacan*, 2nd edition, London, Icon Books Ltd., 2000, p. 48).

with a portrait in the same way as she does to other ideal images. However, if a viewer identifies with a single-panel portrait and gains a sense of a unified self, what would happen when she is standing in front of a split portrait consisting of fragmented subjectivity? I propose that the viewer's unconscious memory of a fragmented self and the urge to recollect herself as a unified individual are present in the viewing process. The figure looks like a desperate and fragmented human; logically, it certainly does not attract me to become him. The subjectivity is veiled, broken and inaccessible in the three panels, but I still attempt to identify with him. Being captivated to go back to the fragmented self can explain this viewing experience, as the fragmented subject reminds me of the wound or gap or in my own being and awakes my primordial being.⁵⁵ I doubt that gaining a unified self from ideal images is still what a contemporary subject does. As my fragmented self returns in a form of a portrait, I am very captivated by it. All in all, the looking gives new experience to me compared with the one I search for in a unified self at the mirror stage.

On the artist's side, Bacon intentionally paints the figures on three panels, thus it suggests that the singly imagined figure on one panel is neither self-contained nor complete.

⁵⁵ C. Williams, *Contemporary French Philosophy*, p. 79.

(iv) Various facets of the broken subjectivity of the figures

Moreover, in *Triptych May-June, 1973*, I can see different stages of the broken subject which can be also related to the extent of split in the subjectivity. This triptych shows a different degree of brokenness: I would see that the trauma is repeated by Bacon when he creates the work and then it is repeated in my looking. If the work reveals the trauma in the real inside me, is it the reason which keeps me looking at? ⁵⁶

Last, Bacon's works are always glazed, as he insists. As the image of the viewer is more or less reflected, the painting is both a portrait and a mirror: the viewer sees herself at the same time as she sees the image. Bacon claims that the glass could create a distance between the artwork and the viewer; this idea matches Lacan's claim that the human subject 'knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which is the gaze.' and use it as a mediation.⁵⁷ The tension is created as Bacon pushes me away from looking while I am very keen to figure out the fragmentation in the painting. It also suggests that gazing on the figures should not end here and now; instead, there are possibilities that more facets of the figure have to be collected to form a unity, and that the subject is made up of a multiplicity of moments.

⁵⁶ J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 55.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 107

1.1.2 Case study II: Marlene Dumas's *Rejects* (1994 - ongoing)

(i) My jumping gaze

Most of Marlene Dumas's works consist of more than one panel. *Rejects* (1994 - ongoing) arrests my gaze by the strangeness and ugliness of the figures. First, I look at this work as a whole and then realize that almost all gazes are looking back at me. No story seems to be present in this work; my gaze cannot stop jumping from one panel to another. Even when my gaze stops at one panel, I cannot get rid of the feelings that I am being looked at by the other panels. Therefore I move my gaze to other panels constantly. This viewing experience is new to me compared with that in the single-panel portraits. I wonder why I do not have such experience when I look at group portraits created on single-panel works. Clearly, there are several gazes in such single panel works, but they do not make my gaze jump from one figure to another involuntarily. For example, although there are a number of figures in the painting and almost all gazes look directly to the viewer (me) in Dumas's work, in *The (sub a)* (1987) (plate 14) I do not have the pressure that I am being looked at or that my gaze has to move from one figure to another one or outside of the painting.

(ii) My passiveness in the looking

The composition and the narrative in the usual group portraits on a single panel makes me more comfortable to look. In general, I can put my own interpretation onto the work and the relationship between the figures. However, in *Rejects* (1994 -- ongoing), it is not possible for me to interpret the relationship among the panels or the figures because the visual is overwhelming. I become more



Pl 14. Francis Bacon, *Triptych, May-June 1973, 1973*
Oil on canvas

passive in the viewing process. What are the elements in the painting that overwhelm me? Are they from the paintings or from my inner self? According to Lacan, our perception is infected by the 'bits and pieces of the real'.⁵⁸ We might assume that paintings are just the objects of our gaze; however, they could be the agent for the Other to speak to the viewer. Painting could be 'the residue of memory and unconscious traces of the artist';⁵⁹ and then, it could then communicate with 'the residues of memory and unconscious traces of the viewers'.⁶⁰ Leader suggests that the Other invasively uses the artist's own

⁵⁸ The phrase 'bits and pieces of the real' is used by C. Williams in her book *Contemporary French Philosophy*, p.89." I interpret her term 'bits and pieces' as fragments, rendering her discussion relevant in my context.

⁵⁹ C. Williams, *Contemporary French Philosophy*, p. 81.

⁶⁰ D. Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, p. 81.

body to make inscriptions in their creative practices.⁶¹ In the creative process of split portraits, I would suggest that the Other could overpower the artist throughout the process of art making. If so, what the artist expresses in her artwork is not solely from her ego, but also from the Other. Leader quotes Paul Klee's experience in which he feels like being looked at and submerged when he creates his artwork. If it is the case, on the viewer's side, I can hardly say I am the driver in the viewing process. Instead, the Other is working on me (the viewer), after having worked on the artist at some point. It is not surprising that I feel vulnerable, overwhelmed, and caught up by the painting, especially because I can neither refer the figures to anyone outside of the work nor make up a story between the figures to avoid identifying with the fragmented subject. Finally, in the process of looking, I can do nothing but feel like being looked at by the Other while my gaze jumps from one panel to another.

(iii) The construction of subjectivity

The title, *Rejects*, gives me a rough idea about the theme of this work: the 'rejected' panels come from another work *Models* (1994). That means these panels are not supposed to make up a complete or a self-contained work. It even troubles me more as I try to understand the subjectivity of the figures by reading the title. I then try to relate the figures between panels. It seems to me that Dumas has problems in constructing the subjectivity of the figures in the work on one panel, so she chooses to construct it in the relationship of many 'others'.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 45.

As Phelan claims that:

identity cannot, then, reside in the name you can say or the body you can see[...]. Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other—which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other; declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other.⁶²

First looking at individual panels and then the work as a whole, the subjectivity of the figures seems to have changed. This process is as if I am about to identify with an image, but the promise is not there. In the end, I do not successfully identify with any figures. The split pushes me back in the viewing process.

1.1.3 Case study III: Ed Atkins' *Ribbons* (2014)

Ed Atkins' three-channeled high-definition moving images are projected onto the walls in the gallery. One of them is projected onto the wall in a room while another is projected onto a relatively more open space in the gallery. Viewers can see two videos at the same time in some areas of the gallery. The third channel of moving image is projected in another room, which cannot be viewed together with those two videos at the same time. However, when I focus on one of the two first channels of moving images, I can still hear the sound from the third channel. The two channels are set in a closed space offering sound and visuals to the viewers.

⁶² P. Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 13.

The sound from the projected images is alternately in phase and out of phase. When the projected images are in phase, the volume is then doubled.

The figure, Dave, is represented as between a real human and an avatar. His singing with an electronic human voice is very unsettling. The avatar attempts to invite me to identify with, but the change of scenes makes me hesitate. I compare this avatar with the construction of subject in light of the concept of the imaginary and the Lacanian discourse.⁶³ The breakdown of the subject seems to reflect how an imaginary body is destroyed by the return of the real.⁶⁴ The multiple facets of Dave and the break of time and space correspond to the fact that it is not possible 'in the goal of maintaining consistency' and 'the idea of Oneness itself is an illusion'.⁶⁵

Atkins makes the figure appear and disappear, complete and destroyed continuously. He also repeatedly presents the figures in several projections, giving us 'different viewpoints, different versions of Dave'.⁶⁶ He seems to imply that something is behind this body. In addition, the figure is an avatar which is subject to change. The subjectivity Atkins constructed through the avatar is empty and inhuman. On the other hand, the figure's autonomous and unexpected behavior tells me that he is not only an avatar. The emptiness in subjectivity

⁶³ D. Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 82–84.

⁶⁴ E. Ragland, 'An Overview of the Real, with examples from Seminar I' in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's return to Freud*, ed. by R. Feldstein, B. Fink and M. Jaanus, 1st edn, Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 198.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ A. Searle, 'Dave's off his head: Meet Ed Atkins's disembodied, drinking, smoking avatar', *The Guardian UK*, Art, 10 June 2014, para.12, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/10/ed-atkins-serpentine-sackler-gallery-cgi-avatar>>, accessed 13 Nov 2018.

is represented by an avatar-like figure but shocks viewers by his human-like behaviors. I would argue that the subject created by Atkins reflects the artist's subjectivity as well as viewers'. It also reflects that the real is behind the work.

Moreover, Atkins constructs a virtual subjectivity by the use of technology, repeats it all over the galleries, and forces the viewers to grasp it bit by bit, but the process seems to never end. Adrian Searle describes my feelings as a viewer: 'You can't catch all the words or all the visual nuances. Atkins's virtual protagonist keeps escaping us.'⁶⁷ Looking at the double projection is totally different from looking at a diptych. A diptych allows me to compare the figures and move my gaze across two surfaces. But in this work, bit by bit the figures appear randomly, not letting my gaze move to another screen easily. This work requires me not only to move my gaze, but also to walk in the maze-like gallery. Is it possible for a viewer like me to collect the various facets of the figure, or the fragments from the unified figure? It again corresponds to Lacan's idea of 'impossibility in the goal of maintaining consistency and the imaginary belief of Oneness.'⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ E. Ragland, 'An Overview of the Real', p. 198.

Chapter 2

The Split portraits and the modern and contemporary subjectivity

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Chapter 2

The Split portraits and the modern and contemporary subjectivity

Introduction

Through looking at the specificity of split portraits, I argue that the modern and contemporary subjectivity can be revealed. Sigmund Freud claims that the break or split of one's speech reveals something hidden in her mind.¹ It implies that the split is not simply out of an error occurred within our cognitive process or coordination of the body. Lacan argues that the repeated acts can reflect the trauma in the subject.² Hal Foster also employs Lacan's theory and argues that repetition reflects a defense made by the shocked subject and repetition screens the first order of shock.³

This chapter aims at discussing modern and contemporary subjectivity revealed by split portraiture in the light of Lacanian discourse as a way to investigate the contemporary relevance of split portraits. There are two assumptions underneath my discussion. First, the split portrait can tell us the artist's subjectivity no matter whether the act of destroying or splitting is made intentionally. Secondly, the subjectivity of the artist is woven into the creation process and this concept has been widely discussed by the use of psychoanalytical discourse.

¹ S. Freud, *A general introduction to psychoanalysis*, trans. by Joan Riviere; with preface by Ernest Jones and G. Stanley Hall, New York: Garden City, 1943, pp.51-53

² J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 62-63.

³ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, pp. 132-136.

The three aspects of the subject revealed in split portraits I propose here are:

1) the vacillation in modern and contemporary subjectivity, 2) the emptiness in the subjectivity of modern and contemporary subjects, and 3) the split and the traumatic in modern and contemporary subjectivity.

2.1 The vacillation in modern and contemporary subjectivity

My use of the term vacillation to discuss split portraits comes from the way in which Freud discusses discontinuity in language. According to Freud, the phenomenon of vacillation emerges in the form of discontinuity.⁴ He argues that the discontinuity says about something of the subject. I propose that vacillation in creating artwork includes, but is not limited to, the inability of the artists to decide the number of panels, or to fully control the creation process, or to decide the degree of multiplication, or to decide how much of herself she projects onto the work, or to decide which facet of herself she would like to show to the viewers. I will use some artists' work to elaborate what I mean.

In *Rejects* (1994 - ongoing), Marlene Dumas keeps adding panels. She puts some rejected panels from another work, *Model* (1994), to form an open-end (ongoing) artwork. It might reflect vacillation emerging in her creation process. It could be regarded as an isolated case; however, when I look at more of her split portraits, for example, In *Model* (1994) and *Chlorosis (Love sick)* (1994), the numbers of panels seem random and I could not see the definite number of panels needed to

⁴ J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 25.

finish a work. There is no way to know if Dumas knows exactly when to stop or how many panels she sees as sufficient to complete a work.

Regarding the vacillation in her techniques, how Dumas uses ink wash and applies paints shows that she hands part of her power to chance and to her passiveness in the creation process. Adrian Searle describes Dumas' accidents in her works:

There are quite a few accidents in Dumas's work, especially since she works quickly, trying to keep things fresh and immediate, but often getting into the mire and wading her way out again through reworking and overpainting.⁵

Her works are mainly produced by ink on paper. Unlike other mediums such as oil painting and pencil drawing through which artists can well calculate and construct, ink is more fluid, especially in ink wash, and as such, artists might easily and unavoidably create accidental marks. In Dumas' *Chlorosis (Love sick)* (1994) and *Jesus Serene* (1994), accidental marks appear on almost all of the panels. Indeed, Dumas is not the only artist who works with accidents in the work. Francis Bacon sometimes uses his instinct to search for a way among those involuntary marks or the accidental marks to develop an image.⁶ *Three Studies for a Self-Portrait* (1975) (plate 15) and *Three Studies for Self-Portrait* (1979-80) (plate 16) reveal many marks of scratching and reworking. In *Triptych (inspired by T.S. Eliot's poem 'Sweeney Agonistes')* (1967) (plate 17), he said:

⁵ A. Searle, 'Fatal Attraction', *The Guardian UK*, Culture, 23rd Nov 2004, para.11, < <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2004/nov/23/1>>, accessed 13 Nov 2018.

⁶ J. Berger, *About Looking*, 1st edn, London, Writers & Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1980, p. 119.



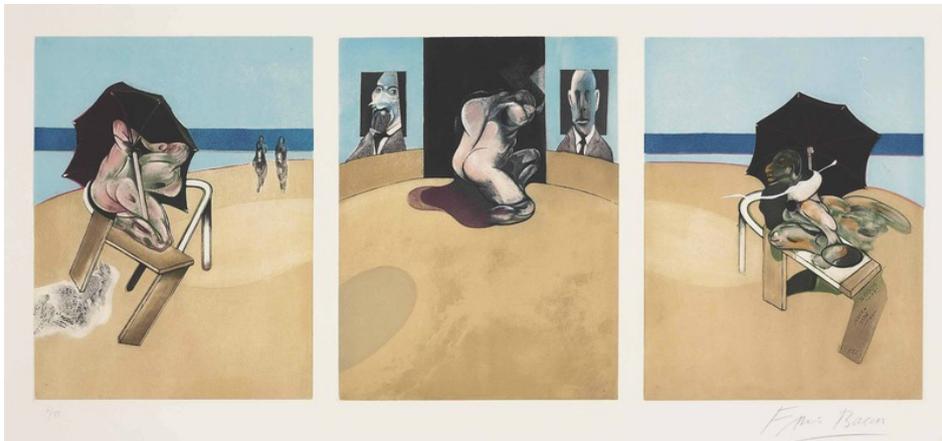
Pl 15. Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Self-Portrait*, 1975
Oil on canvas



Pl. 16 Francis Bacon, *Three Studies of the Human*, 1953
Oil on canvas



Pl 17. Francis Bacon, *Triptych, May-June 1973, 1973*
Oil on canvas



Pl 18. Francis Bacon, *Triptych 1974-77, 1974-77*
Oil on canvas

I don't really think my pictures out, you know; I think of the disposition of the forms and then I watch the forms form themselves.⁷

In his *Triptych 1974-77* (plate 18), the semi-human figure, the umbrella, and the central figure appear to be painted without planning. Bacon says it was a 'very unforeseen painting'.⁸ He also thinks himself as 'not so much as a painter but as a medium for accident and chance'.⁹ In an interview with David Sylvester, he talks about how he finds the triptych formation important in his creation. Surprisingly, it seems that three panels are not the definite number in his creation. In *Three Studies of the Human* (1953), he initially paints one panel as a self-sufficient work, but then adds two panels to form a triptych finally.¹⁰ During the creation process, he also keeps going back to the other panels for retouching.¹¹ Bacon claims that he finds the triptych a balanced unit in terms of composition, so he does not do a polyptych of four or five panels. But in the interview, he shows great interest when he is asked if he would be excited to create a series of six-panel work in a permanent space.¹² It seems that in the creation process Bacon is not fully certain about the number of panels for a self-sufficient work although he has worked mostly with triptychs.

Looking at the tension between being in control and being over-powered in Bacon's creation gives us some hints about the vacillation in his subjectivity.

⁷ D. Sylvester and F. Bacon, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 136.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 138.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 84.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

Bacon's work is painted with oil paint on canvas which should allow painters to have more calculations and corrections compared with the use of ink on paper by Dumas. However, the degree of autonomy of the paint in his works is very much like how Dumas uses ink on paper impulsively and expressively. In other words, the oil paint in Bacon's work can sometimes operate on its own, and the flow or 'happenstance' of the material's direction itself directs the artist to work towards the final outcome. Ernst van Alphen claims that the distorted body in Bacon's painting 'suffers the accident of involuntary marks being made upon it'.¹³ In *Three Studies for a Self-Portrait* (1975), the marks on one panel seem to inform the others. The marks show how the artist's hesitation in showing a unity or a definite representation. Furthermore, Bacon's vacillation reflects on the choice of a narrative and a non-narrative expression in the work. In fact, the choice appears to lie between both. Although his work appears to be in the setting of a narrative, if we look carefully at the figure, neither movement nor a temporal order is represented. In addition, the vacillation also reflects in the way that Bacon represents the multiple facets of the figure. He chooses to put various facets of the figure across three panels, instead of showing a unified subject. I argue that the vacillation of the artist can communicate well with indecisive viewers like me. On the viewer's side, I do enjoy looking at a split portrait as it allows me to vacillate.

Psychoanalysis relates vacillation (or hesitation) in our language to our subjectivity. Lacan brings the French word 'ne' and the subject's appearance together:¹⁴

¹³ E. van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, p. 41.

¹⁴ B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, 1st edn, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 38.

['ne' is] used in many cases alone, not as much to negate in a full-fledged way (though 'ne' alone suffices to signify negation when used with pouvoir) as to do something a bit vaguer[...]it ['ne'] seems to introduce a certain hesitation, ambiguity, or uncertainty into the utterance in which it appears, as if to suggest that the speaker is denying the very thing he is asserting, afraid of the very thing he claims to wish, or wishing for the very thing he seems to fear¹⁵.

Lacan claims that the effect of 'ne' is very much similar to 'but' in English language (where 'but' appears to be unnecessary in some expression such as 'I can't help but think that...' ¹⁶), whereas at the same time it also bears the connotation of negation in certain expressions.¹⁷ Lacan relates a slip of the tongue to this confusion in the use of language where one tries to express herself.¹⁸ He also imputes such usage of language to the split in subjectivity where she has two minds. In other words, from Lacan's perspective, the way the subject uses language in an indecisive way can show that vacillation is indeed embedded in our subjectivity. In the same way, the vacillation in the split portraits can reflect one's subjectivity.

Bacon's split portraits, which represent a subject with various facets on three panels, lead me to think less about the implication or deeper meaning of the work because the multiple panels make my gaze busy in moving from one panel

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

to another panel. I can then indulge myself in the looking. Can this experience happen in viewing the multi-panel works of expressionist painters such as Mark Rothko? What makes the looking different in these two genres of paintings is that split portraits involve identification. In the creation (or the looking) process of a split portrait, the portrait artist (or the viewer) sees herself through others or sees others through herself. In other words, split portraits engage viewer in the identification of the figures, which does not happen in viewing multi-paneled works without figures. As such, multi-paneled paintings without figures are less related to subjectivity, and the looking in the subject operates differently.

Another example to further investigate how an artist's vacillation offers the determination of her identity and how she sees herself through a detour of other subjects is Dumas' *Black people* (1994), which is related to the artist's birthplace and origin.¹⁹ In an interview, she discusses the struggle in determining her racial identity, as she is neither brought up in Africa nor in European traditions. In *Black people* (1994), Dumas uses almost one hundred panels in the work related to her identity. By portraying the sameness and difference of the figures, Dumas apparently searches for her own identity. The multi-paneled formation not only shows her never-ending search of a definite identity but also reflects her indecisiveness. In the creation process, one painting is made after one and this gesture has been repeated nearly one hundred times. In *Models* (1994), she also uses a number of panels to express the stereotype of 'models'. The term 'model' not only is read as a symbol of pretty girls, but also symbolizes an ideal female

¹⁹ P. Burmann, 'The Thread of the Story: Two South African Women Artists Talk about Their Work', *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 31/no. 4, 2000, p. 163.

figure. By portraying various female faces, Dumas also seems to be searching for her gender identity. Dumas' works show me a group of people with various traits and invites me to determine the identity of a certain group of people. Viewers are in the position of determining the identities. However, the more panels are added, the less understanding of female identity we can grasp in *Models* (1994). The indecisiveness of how Dumas searches for her gender identity is not dissimilar to what one questions about one's subjectivity in the extreme case of the neurosis – the hysteric, as Leader claims:

Neurosis itself, Lacan thinks, is a sort of question asked by the subject by means of the ego. The identification is used to ask a question. For the hysteric, this question is: what is it to be a woman?²⁰

The hysteric depends on the other to make a choice or to act and 'the subject in her discourse is always you'.²¹

Rejects (1994 - ongoing), another work proceeding *Models* (1994), further shows Dumas's vacillation. This work is formed by taking some of the panels from *Model* (1994). This gesture involves two actions: eliminating some panels from an 'identity' and adding some panels to form a new 'identity'. Dumas's vacillation appears in both of the actions. Dumas might be unable to establish the singularity of the identity, so she adds panels. However, at the same time, she

²⁰ D. Leader and J. Groves, *Introducing Lacan*, p. 66.

²¹ K. Daniel, *Dialogues Between Feminists and Jacques Lacan on Female Hysteria and Femininity*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009, p.88. See <<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/f570/c59fba34768d326cd1930d9f0f08ad569c1c.pdf>>



Pl 19. Francis Bacon, *Triptych Studies of the Human Body*, 1979
Oil on canvas

might not be very certain that some of the panels can contribute to that identity, thus, she gets rid of some of them. After such repeated gestures, she does not totally give up those panels but makes them into a new work. It very much reflects her vacillation in both making a work and establishing her own gender identity. A large number of panels reflect the artist's hope of having her identity derived and it is similar to a subject signified by a network of signifiers in Lacan's sense.²² This gesture of repetition is mentioned in Lacan's discourse:

The subject repeats an automatic and law-like chain of signifiers, but also circles around the cause of its symptoms...the subject aims to get at an early trauma, but it cannot find the words to say it.²³

In other words, the process of making split portraits is a process in search of what constitutes the subject and is getting closer to the real.

²² *ibid.*, p. 89.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 91.

2.2 The emptiness in modern and contemporary subjectivity

In Bacon's triptych works the main subject sometimes appears in two or three panels. The figure is interrelated to its mirror images in the other panels, although it is not easy to identify which figure is the original and which is the mirrored one. For example, in *Triptych Studies of the Human Body* (1979) (plate 19), the figure appears in all the three panels. On the left and right panels, their postures are very similar although they are from two different perspectives. The figure on the right is facing the viewer but his face is not, while the figure on the left is turning away from the viewer and Bacon shows the profile of the body. On the central panel, the body looks decomposed and is lying on the table, and his body parts are hardly distinguished. The left and the right figure seems to be mirroring each other while the central one looks more independent and mysterious. All in all, it is difficult to identify the original figure and the mirrored image. The figures look closely interrelated, but physically 'each figure is isolated within his own canvas, and it seems that each figure is unaware the presence of any other ones.'²⁴ Reading a triptych is never an easy task; I am always lost in this enigmatic three-image. I am very confused in the looking as I do not know where to start and where to end. The lack of narrative drive in the direction makes it difficult for me to make sense of the multiple figures. In particular, they look related to or mirroring each other, but at the same time they are in their own individual panel. Furthermore, it is hard to understand the artist's intention. Multiplication cancels the singularity of the figure, the artist putting the figure into three panels. It makes the one self lost in its purest form, as van Alphen claims 'the new self is produced by breaking the old self into two halves

²⁴ J. Berger, *About Looking*, pp. 121-123.

that confirm each other by their sameness'.²⁵ Van Alphen uses the example of homosexuality in a novel, *Nightwood*, to explain the relationship of splitting and loss of self:

Motherhood in this view in the first place splitting, cleaving, cloning [...]. motherhood, grounded in existential contiguity between mother and child, is not only a metaphorical relationship (of similarity) but also a metonymical one. The child, a clone of its mother, is thereby the lost self incarnated: the mother's identity is split.²⁶

Van Alphen also claims that identity gets blurred when the mirrored image is not stable in Bacon's *Triptych Inspired by T.S. Eliot's Poem "Sweeney Agonistes"* (1967), in which the stable mirror image in the left panel makes a demarcated identity while the unidentified mirror image on the right mirror makes a blurred identity. On top of it, the double makes the identity of the figures even more problematic.²⁷ More specifically, van Alphen uses 'loss of self' to explain why Bacon duplicates the figures and uses three panels in his work. He uses 'loss of self' not only to describe Bacon's mentality in making works, but also the state of viewers. 'For loss of self, van Alphen stresses the 'cloning' (which sounds similar to multiplication to me) of figures in Bacon's work to make the purest form of self-loss.²⁸ He also argues that in *Triptych – Two Figures Lying on a Bed with Attendants* (1968) (plate 20), Bacon uses panels and the elements duplicated in two panels to suggest that the

²⁵ E. van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, p. 141.

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 138–139.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁸ E. van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, p. 141.

unity of figures is impossible, that the relationship of the figures is more one of complementarity.²⁹

John Berger writes a similar description of Bacon's figures:

Bacon is the opposite of an apocalyptic painter who envisages the worst is likely. For Bacon, the worst has already happened. The worst that has happened has nothing to do with the blood, the stains, the viscera. The worst is that the man has come to be seen as mindlessness...

He continues:

Man is an unhappy ape without knowing it. It is not a brain but a perception which separates the two species.³⁰



Pl. 20 Francis Bacon, *Triptych – Two Figures Lying on a Bed with Attendants*, 1968
Oil on canvas

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ J. Berger, *About Looking*, p. 121.

Berger argues that Bacon's figures look haunting because they appear as an empty-cast with an absent consciousness.³¹ Indeed, the concept of 'loss of self' or 'mindless' can be related to beingless,³² which also describes my experience when I see Bacon's work. Each figure does not have a singular image of him or her, and he or she is always related to the one in other panels. The subject always locates his/her own image in an image of the other³³ and requires a projected image of the "Other" to let him/her see himself/herself.³⁴ In a way, in the process of making split portraits, I question if the modern and contemporary subjects are not sure about their subjectivity and it turns out that multiple facets of themselves are shown or even none of them are shown.

In conclusion, I propose that the split in the painting can be seen as a projection of emptiness in her subjectivity. The subject is beingless, nothing or has no being because he or she 'fails to come forth as a someone'³⁵. In the creation process and the artwork, the emptiness in the subjectivity is manifested.

We can also see the emptiness in subjectivity in other artists' split portraits.

Dumas tends to portray the figures' subjectivity collectively. For instance, in *The Blind folded* (2002) (plate 21), the figures lack individual identity but share

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 122.

³² Beingless: Fink translated and interpreted Lacan's concept of subject '*manque-a-être*'. In his book, he claims that 'the subject fails to come forth as a someone, as a particular being; in the most radical sense, he or she is not, he or she has no being.....The subject exists.....yet remains beingless.'; He also quoted 'it's the subject himself who is not there to begin with' from 'J. Lacan, *Seminar XIV La Logique du fantasme*, 1966-67, (unpublished). See B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, pp. 51-52.

³³ P. Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 18.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p.45.

³⁵ B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p.51.

a collective trait -- the eyes are blindfolded. The blindfolded eyes (in almost all panels) direct me to relate the figure to others in the work. In other words, the blindfold creates sameness which destroys the figure's individuality. As such, the subjects are of emptiness.

In her *Models* (1994), again, the women are not portrayed as individuals, but possess a collective identity. However, the collective identity is present only if I refer to the title. I would relate the title 'models' to the figures and collect all the fragments of the identity of models from the panels. In other words, none of the figures is self-sufficient in the name of 'model'. The identity seems to have been



Pl.21. Marlene Dumas, *The Blind Folded*, 2001
Ink of paper
Installation view

destroyed in the process by the multi-panel formation. Rosalind Krauss argues that singularity is destroyed 'through duplication, it opens the original to the effect of difference, of deferral, of one-thing-after-another, or within another of multiples burgeoning within the same.'³⁶ More examples of similar manifestation can be discovered in the repertoire of Dumas's works. They include but are not limited to works such as *Chlorosis (Love sick)* (1994), *Black Drawings* (1991-92), *(In Search of) the Perfect Lover* (1994) and *The Messengers* (1992).

In *The Space Age* (1984), again by Dumas, the subjectivity of the two figures -- a man and a woman -- is intertwined. When I look at the gaze of the woman, it seems that I am looking from the gaze of the other (the man). The artist herself (I assume the woman is the artist's self portrait) seems to be looking at herself in the eyes of the man. The exchange of gaze is formed when I become the agent of the two panels. More specifically, when I identify with the woman, I realize being looked at by the man, making my gaze turn to the woman again. Similarly, when I identify with the man, I realise being looked at by the woman, it making my gaze turn to the man. It seems that both of them are searching for an image reflected by the other. When I try to know about the identity of the figure, its image directs me to another panel. Also, both of them lack a self-sufficient identity in their own images. In this way, the subjectivity of the female figure, the male figure and me (the viewer) are entwined. The relationship seems to involve me.³⁷ It may also be related to Lacan's discourse, cited by Phelan, on seeing:

³⁶ R E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1986, p. 109.

³⁷ D. v D Boogerd et al, *Marlene Dumas*, p. 44.

In looking at the other (animate or inanimate) the subject seeks to see itself. Seeing is an exchange of gazes between a mirror (the image seen which reflects the looker looking) and a screen (the laws of the Symbolic which define subject and object positions within language). Looking, then, both obscures and reveals the looker. For Lacan, seeing is fundamentally social because it relies on an exchange of gazes: one looks and one is seen. The potential for a responding eye, like the hunger for a responsive voice, informs the desire to see the self through the image of the other which all Western representation exploits.³⁸

In *The Space Age* (1984) the identity of the woman relies on the man and vice versa. This work fits Phelan's claims that one has to see herself in the other.³⁹ Furthermore, it also corresponds to Lacan's concept of the object of desire in which he claims that the subject tries to be the object of the other's desire and at the same time she desires the way the other desires. He claims that 'man's desire is the desire of the Other'.⁴⁰ This work once again confirms the contemporary subjectivity of emptiness.

³⁸ P. Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 16.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁰ J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 158.



Pl. 22 Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for a Self-Portrait*, 1979-80
Oil on canvas

2.3 The split and the traumatic in modern and contemporary subjectivity

2.3.1 The split in the subjectivity

In *Three Studies for a Self-Portrait* (1979-80) (plate 22), Bacon does not show his face clearly to viewers. He presents us with a split and ambiguous image of himself. Half of his left face is shown on the left panel where half of his right face is shown on the right. However, the two halves cannot make up a clear portrait of his. In the central panel, although the face is more complete compared with the ones in the other two panels, it is obviously distorted. To me, it manifests the tension of the artist in revealing the true self of him and the represented self.⁴¹ Do the split faces and the repetition of faces represented on the three panels say something about the artist? Roland Barthes, cited by Hal Foster, claims that pop art wishes 'to de-symbolize the object' and 'to release the image from 'any deep

⁴¹ S. Žižek, *Looking Awry- An introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, 1st edn, Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, 1992, p. 4.

meaning into simulacral surface', and the artist 'does not stand behind his work'.⁴² In other words, the artwork can no longer reflect anything such as his subjectivity and intention of the artist. I propose that repetition in Bacon's work might bring the same effect. Through repetition, the triptych formation releases the artist from the image when an individual panel alone could depict a subject deeper. More specifically, in some of Bacon's works, those of multi-panel, intentionally or not, distract viewers from going deeper to see his self. Lacan's description of the split in the subjectivity may give us some insights. He argues that 'I' is split into ego (false self) and is unconscious, and it leads to two sides of the being – one side is exposed and one side is hidden.⁴³ Furthermore, the ego is alienated, always finds its reflection to confront itself, is forced to abandon its identity and always finds itself in the 'we'.⁴⁴ Lacan also explains this splitting subject with the use of Ronald Fairbairn's psychology of subject in which the subject, as far as he desires, splits himself into a series of characters.⁴⁵ Employing the idea of a split subject from Lacanian discourse, I can make more sense of why the split portrait artist presents an ambiguous image that does not show us a coherent subject. In other words, the split in the subjectivity of the figures leads to ambiguous representations of the figures.

Some split portraits not only speak about the subjectivity of the artist, but also the subjectivity of the viewers. Van Alphen suggests the figure and the viewer are

⁴² H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 128.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁴ J. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, p.266.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 269



Pl. 23 Francis Bacon, *Three Studies of Lucian Freud*, 1969
Oil on canvas

split in Bacon's *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* (1969) (plate 23).⁴⁶ He argues that there is a division of the figure's head that splits the direction of the figure's eyes. More specifically, the split gaze implies both narrative and non-narrative reading. If I focus on certain part of the figures, I can read the portraits in a narrative way. However, if I focus on the other part of the figures, I will then be engaged a non-narrative way of reading in which the figures address their own viewer. Van Alphen claims that it implies the viewer is split too. The triptych formation contributes to the split in the work.⁴⁷ Besides the split in the artist and the viewer, Foster also claims that in Warhol's work, the viewer and the artist are both split. Warhol claims that 'I never fall apart...because I never fall together.'⁴⁸

⁴⁶ E. van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, pp. 44–45.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.4 6.

⁴⁸ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 136.



Pl 24 Francis Bacon, *Study for a Self-Portrait-Triptych*, 1985-86
Oil on canvas

In *Study for a Self-Portrait-Triptych* (1985–86) (plate 24), the artist's face is again blurred. Half of the faces cannot be seen on both the left and the middle panel while a more complete but blurred face is shown on the right panel. Since the same three figures are shown on three panels without a progression of events or movement, I am not led to a narrative reading of the work. Instead, it shows the three facets of the figure. Again, Bacon repeatedly paints himself on the three panels while the figures' gaze addresses not a unified viewer, but a split viewer. This work is a self-portrait which implies that the artist is split as well.

In Dumas's *Space Age* (1984), the presence of two contrasting minds appears in two ways in this work, which is looking at or being looked at in a narrative way or non-narrative way. It can be read as a split experienced by the artist and as a way the work characterizes the inner world of her.⁴⁹ We can also see this effect in Bacon and Dumas as I have already argued here.

⁴⁹ E. van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, p. 46.

2.3.2 The traumatic in subjectivity

In Dumas's work *Chlorosis (Love sick)* (1994), the involuntary ink marks, the soft edges of the contour, and the facial features show the ambiguity in the representation of subjects. From the title, we can see that the artist is portraying a group of people who have suffered from an illness. Dumas makes a portrait of the victims one after one. This repetitive gesture might tell us something about the artist. Freud argues that 'repetitions in the same experiences' could be related to trauma.⁵⁰ With reference to Freud, Lacan argues that repetition is different from reproduction and it could imply the trauma lies behind the repeated acts.⁵¹ Furthermore, repetition is to screen the real and, however, points to the real where 'the real ruptures the screen of repetition'.⁵² More specifically, using Warhol's work as an example, Hal Foster argues that Lacan's traumatic point (*tuché*) or Barthes's *punctum* lies in the repetitive popping of the image rather than in the details of the work.⁵³

I propose that Dumas' repetitive gesture of portraying a group of victims shows us the *tuché* or *punctum* and indeed says something about the inner world of the artist. From Lacan's perspective, 'What is repeated, in fact, is always something that occurs – the expression tells us quite a lot about its relation to the *tuché* – as if by chance.'⁵⁴ As such, *tuché* is closely related to repetition; Lacan also discusses repetition with reference to the Freudian psychology, he claims that repetition (Freudian's term: *Wiederholen*) is very enigmatic:

⁵⁰ S. Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. By A. Richards & A. Dickson, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991, p.293.

⁵¹ J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 54.

⁵² H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 136.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵⁴ J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 54.

[*Wiederholen*] is very close, so the most prudent etymologists tell us, to the verb 'to haul' (*haler*) – hauling as on a towpath – very close to a hauling of the subject, who always drags his thing into a certain path that he cannot get out of.⁵⁵

Discussing Warhol's work, Foster further relates repetitions with the real. He claims that repetitions of Warhol's work are 'visual equivalents of our missed encounters with the real'.⁵⁶ His analysis is very much related to Lacan's claims that 'the screen' showing that the trauma is behind.⁵⁷ Painting his lover repetitively, Bacon's work implies something traumatic. Bacon revisits this subject matter many times. In *Triptych May-June 1973*, he portrays his lover, George Dyer, repeatedly in three panels. It seems he does not intend to show the subjectivity of Dyer, but he cancels out the storytelling elements and only repeatedly depicts a figure and the elements related to Dyer's death. I propose that the repetitive gesture is to approach the trauma and also reveals the artist's subjectivity. As a viewer, I am unable to figure out the narrative. The cancellation of the narrative is achieved by the use of triptych formation which directs my gaze from one panel to another; as such, I cannot make up a story on my own. The repetition distracts me from looking into the traumatic. Foster claims that repetition can 'integrate it [the traumatic] into a psychic economy'.⁵⁸ Berger points out how Bacon incorporates pain into his triptych. He argues that 'pain

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵⁶ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 134.

⁵⁷ J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p.55.

⁵⁸ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 131.

maybe the ideal to which Bacon's obsession aspires' although pain is not of the content.⁵⁹ He further argues that the real content lies elsewhere and the obsession is just to distract (the viewer). Obsession, here, I would suggest, is the revisiting of the trauma however it appears, whether in the form of an extra panel or a repeated representation of figures or objects. If we are to believe that the "real content" lies elsewhere, it explains why more panels could not help us understand what Bacon would like to say more easily.

The notion of trauma and how trauma is handled are different in Bacon and Dumas's works. In Bacon's work, it is more about 'the idea of a violent shock' and 'a wound'⁶⁰, whereas trauma in Dumas works is something that 'constitutes a more radical threat to the integrity of the subject'.⁶¹ In Dumas's work trauma is related to the gender and the racial identity of the artist. The split occurs especially in the signifiers Dumas incorporates. For example, the signifiers of 'black people', 'models', or the 'blindfolded' might be those which show the split in the artist's subjectivity. I would suggest that the repetitive representation of figures in Dumas's works is the way she responds to the traumatic. Warhol claims that 'when you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect'.⁶² I would suggest that, rather than revealing more, the split portrait actually reveals less by representing more. This repetition does not only serve as a tuché

⁵⁹ J. Berger, *About Looking*, p. 120.

⁶⁰ J. Laplanche & J. Pontalis, *The language of psycho-analysis*, 1st edn, London, The Hogarth Press Ltd, 1973, p. 466.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 469.

⁶² H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p. 134.

or punctum in the work, but also prevents me from going deeper into the incident. My claim is that Bacon's use of repetition reflects the artist's split and traumatic self. He is setting out a narrative reading but at the same time preventing viewers from reading the narrative. Vacillation reveals the traumatic side, and also can be regarded as a repulsion by the artist.

Chapter 3

Identification changed and aggressiveness revealed in split portraits --A comparison between single-panel portraits and split portraits

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Chapter 3

Identification changed and aggressiveness revealed in split portraits --A comparison between single-panel portraits and split portraits

In this chapter, I study if split portraits engage viewers differently in terms of identification compared with single panel portraits. To achieve this, I discuss two of my works as well as two works by Francis Bacon. In the first part, I discuss one of my split portrait works to see how split portraits change the identification in the looking, which in turn changes the way it engages viewers. In the second part, I discuss my split portrait and single panel work as well as one split portrait and one single panel work of Francis Bacon to see if split portraits reveal or conceal aggressiveness in the looking.

3.1 How do split portraits change the identification in the looking?

3.1.1 Discussion of my split portrait: *Good Wife* (2015) (plate 25)

Good Wife (2015) is a series of ten portraits, in which the subjects are painted without facial features but with their distinctive short hair painted. They are painted with black ink on paper and the reference of the paintings comes from



Pl. 25. Hoi Yee Chau, *Good Wife*, 2015
Ink on paper, installation view

housewives of different ages in Hong Kong. My project is very much related to identity, especially to the change of a female's identity in my hometown. I wonder how a young woman who is attractive and desired by men gradually loses her identity in families and is stereotyped in the society. In Hong Kong, housewives are stereotyped as fat, unattractive and uneducated by some people.¹ One of the stereotypes is the hairstyle, an association people make with housewives. I am also curious about why my mother, aunts and almost all of the women in the previous generations around me wear short hair. I regard it as an interesting topic for my painting, so I start to look into it.

As a first step towards finding out I take pictures of the women at the entrance of the wet market to see how many of them wear short hair. I also ask around to search for an answer. I am told that they have to wear short hair because they need to do a lot of housework. Therefore, their condition of living impacts their self-presentation and sense of self. In traditional Chinese culture, it is expected that wives stay at home, look after the children and take care of all the chores. It seems that the necessity for a woman to wear short hair has become a stereotype of a housewife for decades and even across different cultures. An example of this is a text which was circulated by fax in the 1970s. The 'guidelines' in the text consists

¹ Since 1980s, the name 'Si-nai or C-lai' (Cantonese pronunciation) is used to describe a group of middle-aged housewives in media including popular TV programs, theatre, movies and magazines. Examples include *Fate of the Clairvoyant* (1994), *My Mother Is a Belly Dancer* (2006) and *My Life As a TV* (2008). In addition, the definition can also be found in the US website Urban Dictionary: Anonymous, 'C-lai', Urban Dictionary, [website], 03 Dec 2007, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/>, accessed 9 August 2018. Furthermore, literature which discusses the stereotype and the lives of this group of women includes: (1) A. H-N. Chan, 'Si-Nais Talking Dirty: Hong Kong Middle-Class Working Mothers on- and Offline', *Sexualities*, vol. 16/no. 1-2, (2013), pp. 61-77; (2) P.S-y. Ho, 'Desperate Housewives: The Case of Chinese Si-Nais in Hong Kong', *Affilia*, vol. 22, no. 3, Aug. 2007, pp. 255-270; (3) P.S-y. Ho, 'Eternal Mothers Or Flexible Housewives? Middle-Aged Chinese Married Women in Hong Kong', *Sex Roles*, vol. 57/no. 3, 2007, pp. 249-265.

of eighteen instructions for girls to serve their husbands in the future. Some of the guidelines attract my attention:

Listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first - remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours.

and

Don't ask him questions about his actions or question his judgment or integrity. Remember, he is the master of the house and as such will always exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to question him. A Good Wife always knows her place.²

In researching the context for the representation of the housewife I also find a book *The Good Wife's Guide (Le Ménagier de Paris): A Medieval Household Book* which illustrates the housewives in France during medieval times. The book is mostly concerned about how a wife oversees her soul, body, carries out duties towards her husband and looks after home and garden.³ I cannot conclude that those texts fully represent the real situation of the women at that time; however, these examples reflect to a certain degree the situation of women in the past and even now. Painting the Hong Kong housewives and naming my work "Good Wife" is inspired from the above literature and research.

² Anonymous, 'The Good Wife's Guide', *Sun Journal*, United States, 2008.

³ G L. Greco and C M. Rose, *The Good Wife's guide (Le Ménagier de Paris): A Medieval Household Book*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2009.

Regarding the physicality of the painting, the soft edges of the women's heads deliver a sense of blurriness and a dissolving effect. The direction of the ink of the hair dissolves not only away from but also towards the face; and the facial features are missing. The portraits show different distinctive short hairstyles of the Chinese wives, and the color of black ink genuinely represents the real color of the hair. The monochrome (black and white) implicitly reflects the diminishing presence of the portraits in the same way as people use a black and white photo to represent a deceased person. Black and white might also be related to dullness, lifelessness and insignificance. The gaps between panels are relatively minimal compared with the size of the paintings. Even though no facial features are present in the paintings, the contour of the faces still suggests that the figures are facing or looking away from the viewers.

In this work, something is not quite consistent between the title and the paintings. The title, *Good Wife*, reminds us of an image of completeness and wholeness and which can be an ideal image, in Lacanian sense, which can have been taken by a subject as 'self' since mirror image.⁴ A subject 'perceives the unity of this specific image from outside' as a way to attain the ideal unity.⁵ To put it directly, 'Good Wife' signifies an ideal female image which is unified and of wholeness. However, the paintings where the subjects' facial features are removed remind me of the nothingness and the fragmentation of the subjects. In this way, there is an inconsistency between the title and the images.

⁴ J. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, p. 166.

⁵ *ibid.*

I propose there are the two ways of identification. The first way of identification involves the looking from the perspective of a woman. The term 'Good Wife' in the title implies wholeness, a subject in a unique position and someone who knows their place; and invites viewers to identify with the 'ideal figure'.⁶ The name, Good Wife, also sutures⁷ an imaginary identity of a woman and a symbolic identity, which is the Ideal in Lacanian sense, of a perfect woman from the Other.⁸ The housewives are judged as 'good' in the title. As such, the suturing of social status 'wife' (ego ideal) and an image of wholeness, self-contained (ideal ego) is present in the title.⁹ In the Lacanian sense:

suture names the process by which the subject comes to find a place for itself in a signifying chain by inserting itself in what is perceived as a gap, a place-holder for it.¹⁰

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 268.

⁷ Suture is a term used by Lacanian Jacques-Alain Miller in his essay (J-A. Miller 'Dossier Suture: Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)', *Screen*, vol. 18/no. 4, (1977), pp. 24-34.). This concept was then used to analyse the relationship between the spectator and the camera/screen with regards to identification and narrative. (K. Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: a Lacanian Analysis of Race*, 1st edn, London, Routledge, 1993.). In addition, suture was also used to investigate the relationship between cinema and the 're-politicized critical appraisal of culture'. (F. Vighi, 'Lacan for Cinema Today: The Uncanny Pouvoir De La Vérité', *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society*, vol. 10/no. 3, (2005), pp. 232-251.)

⁸ D. Leader and J. Groves, *Introducing Lacan*, p. 44.

⁹ The concepts of ideal ego (written as 'i(a)' (D Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p.52) is different from ego-ideal (written as 'I(A)' (*ibid.*, p. 52). Darian Leader interprets Lacan's concept that ego-ideal is a symbolic introjection which provides the subject a place from which she is looked at. In other words, when one assumes an ideal image, ego ideal is the point where she thinks someone is watching her. (D. Leader and J. Groves, *Introducing Lacan*, p. 48.). Ideal-ego, Lacan claims, is the image the subject constitutes herself in her imaginary reality. (J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 144). It, Evan claims, is rooted in the mirror stage in which the specular image provides an illusion of unity and a promise of future coordination of the subject. (D Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p.52)

¹⁰ K. Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: a Lacanian analysis of race*, p. 105.

In other words, the title 'Good Wife' sutures the imaginary identity of a woman embedded in viewer's mind and the symbolic identity defined by the Other. As a woman and an artist, the title reflects the projection of my hope to search for a place to insert myself and establish my identity as a subject. It also incorporates the symbolic identity of woman in my mind. I argue that such a title reflects not only the artist's search of an identity, but also her invitation to viewers to project their imaginary and symbolic identity of woman to the work. However, the paintings show a different subjectivity which is fragmentary and subsequently break the sutured identity, Good Wife.

The suture and the urge for identifying an image might reflect the lack in the subjectivity of women. Woman, in Lacanian sense, is 'other'¹¹. Woman's position is 'either automatically defined by the man she adopts as partner or is defined only with great difficulty'.¹² Lacan considers 'phallic' as the master signifier in regards to sexual difference which is 'a product of the symbolic order of the society concerned'¹³ whereas women are not signified.¹⁴ It is traumatic for a girl to take in the society's sexual rules which have been situated in the symbolic order and subsequently entered into her psyche.¹⁵ As such, the title suturing the symbolic and the imaginary identity invites a viewer to identify with in the first place. However, when the viewer goes back to the paintings, the faceless portraits can

¹¹ J. Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, trans. J. Rose, 1st edn., New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1985

¹² B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 116.

¹³ M. Bendle, 'Jouissance – 'right off the scale': Lacan, Sexual Difference and the Phallic Order', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, Vol. 47, no. 1, 2006, p. 80.

¹⁴ B. Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 116.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

nowhere be figures of 'wholeness' or 'unified'; instead, the portraits expresses weak, disappearing, and empty subjectivity. It seems everyone can be projected into the void of the face. The space which should contain the facial features is a void space in which the ink wash implies that the facial features were there before but then were absorbed into the void. Furthermore, the contours and the whole face are of an unstable condition which seems to disappear at some point. The suturing appears, in language, when 'wife' meets the (imaginary) 'female figure'. However, the images stop the viewer from identifying the subjects of 'Good Wife' suggested by the title. The paintings do not present us how an ideal subject looks like as the title promised. There is not only one portrait, but ten -- therefore, when one fails to see that ideal figure, she might look at the other one and so on. However, there is not a single panel showing a complete figure. The enigmatic circular images trap the viewer.

The suture happens and fails in the looking in this work. It happens when the title arouses the imago in the viewer's mind when she projects the symbolic identity of herself. But then the suture fails when the viewer's gaze moves to the paintings and finds that the promise of the ideal woman images is not present. She can only see her fragmentary self to be reflected by the paintings which are very much like mirrors. The suture of identity is in the title, but the paintings push her away. There are useful texts that explore cinema and regimes of looking, such as Siegel and McGehee's discussion on suture and films. There is a long history of Lacanian thinking in cinema which is useful for my analysis of the portraits here. The discussion is also a backdrop to my claims regarding what happens in the viewing of the split portrait painting. For example, Siegel and

McGehee discuss how the suture of identity works in the looking in the cinema. They argue that suture happens in the aspect of spectatorial and diegetical. One's identity can be sutured symbolically by identification, but the process of suturing is unravelled in the film they mention.¹⁶ Likewise, the paintings unravel the sutured identity of 'Good Wife' used in the title.

Indeed, we can gain more insight from the discrepancy between the title and the work by referring to Lacan's discourse on the formation of ego. The subject 'primordially identifies with the visual gestalt of his [her] own body' which is 'an ideal unity, a salutary imago' as her own motor functioning was lacking at that stage of life.¹⁷ As in the title, the language captivates the subjects to identify with, it represents the wholeness of the subjects and reminds us of the imagos in our mind.¹⁸ How one is attracted by the language promised in the title fulfills Lacan's claims that 'a subject is pulled towards a totalizing (re-)union by which he or she hopes to stop up the hole in the real via the path of identifying with ideal figures and traits found in the other'.¹⁹ However, when one moves her gaze to the paintings, the images present her fragmented figures contrary to the title promised. The repetitive representation of a faceless portrait seems to drag her from the 'imaginary' to the 'real'.²⁰

To conclude the first identification, the title 'Good Wife' implies the ideal figures and the faceless faces represent the fragmented being; I would propose that the

¹⁶ K. Seshadri-Crooks, "Desiring Whiteness, p. 106.

¹⁷ J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p.113.

¹⁸ D. Evans, *An introductory Dictionary*, p. 83.

¹⁹ E. Ragland, 'An Overview of the Real, with examples from Seminar', p. 193.

²⁰ J. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955. (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan; Book 2)*, p. 152.

happening and the failure of suture make the identification different from single portraits.

Regarding the second way of the looking and identification with the image, 'Good' in the title is a judgmental word which is a compliment given by 'the Other'. In the title, the word 'Wife' also implies the object of compliment while the subject, the husband, gives compliment. Indeed, such language is alongside images of the fragmentary which symbolize a sense of Otherness. Laura Mulvey claims:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.²¹

I argue that men do not identify with the image in the way a woman does. To a male viewer, 'a Good Wife' is not an ideal figure for him to identify with as his sense of self is tied to his sense of masculinity. In contrast, the female signifies the lack in Lacanian sense.²² Mulvey argues that 'the meaning of woman is sexual difference' and the male counters the threat in castration anxiety in two possible ways, which are either demystifying woman's mystery or turning her into a fetish which becomes reassuring instead of dangerous.²³ The pleasure of looking at artwork is similar to looking at contemporary mainstream films in which the

²¹ L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, p. 7.

²² *ibid.*, p.6.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 14.

language of the dominant patriarchal order is incorporated with the erotic, as such the alienated subject is able to be satisfied through its formal beauty and its play on his own formative obsessions.²⁴

Mulvey also refers the possible pleasure of looking to Freud's ideas such as 'taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze'²⁵, and claims that looking becomes fixated into a perversion and that sexual satisfaction comes from an objectified other.²⁶ Although Mulvey's discussion focuses on how cinema works, it also provides insight into film-like multiple panel portraits. What makes her analysis relevant in the thesis is that she admits that the cinema reaches forwards and backwards as the central panel of a triptych does; and the filmmaker is inspired by the stilled images.²⁷ It indeed gives us a new perspective to view a split portrait instead of treating it as a still painting (or image). Besides, she distinguishes the difference between the male and female in the looking of split portraits. Mulvey further relates looking to the fragmented body. She argues how looking can be 'loss of ego' and 'reinforcing the ego' at the same time and the eroticism is delivered through the fragmented body:

The cinema has structures of fascinations strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego. The sense of forgetting the world as the ego has subsequently come to

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.8.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.9.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 22.

perceive it (I forgot who I am and where I was) is nostalgically reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition.²⁸

[...] conventional close-ups of legs or a face integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space[...].²⁹

If there is a difference in the looking between males and females, we shall look at how a male may look at this split portrait. It is obvious that when we are talking about identification, males would not necessarily identify with an ideal female figure. Therefore, to males 'Good Wife' is not an imaginary identity when they read the title. But will the title register in them as 'an otherness' in their mind when they read it? Or will it arouse what they desire? Or males identify with the authority figure who complements the 'wife'?

Let me try to stand in the position of a notional male viewer. In this work, to make females as reassuring, male viewers might identify with the one who addresses the subjects in the painting as otherness and whose position is an authority to judge the wives as 'good' or 'bad'. This identification with the big Other³⁰, in Lacanian sense is to counter the threat of 'the other sex'.³¹ The desire of an imaginary female subject might also lead to aggressivity³² emerged in the

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁰ J. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955. (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan; Book 2)*, pp. 235-247.

³¹ D. Evans, *An introductory Dictionary*, p. 133

³² I will explain the term 'aggressivity' in section 3.2

identification. The first female figure, 'the mother', who appears in a male's life is an imaginary figure in Lacanian sense, also signifies the first lack of the child, which is the absence of the mother (or the breast). The identification further leads the child into the narcissistic-aggressive relationship with the imaginary father.³³ The title might signify the imaginary mother the male viewer once connected with and imply the hidden imaginary father. Furthermore, the women without facial features might signify the inaccessible figures whom the male viewer has been forced to give up. As such, it represents the lack and trauma. The repetitive representation of the lack further reinforces his traumatic experience and the aggressive competition with the imaginary father.

I am proposing that a male subject looks at the 'otherness' in the work, objectifies the 'otherness', and then finds pleasure in the looking at the paintings. In other words, male viewers are lured by the suggestive title to identify with a hidden subject. On the one hand, the multiple panel of fragmentary females subjects fulfills their pleasurable looking. In conclusion, the title arouses the male viewer's desire, lack and his aggressive relationship with his imaginary father.

³³ F. Sheikh, 'Subjectivity, desire and theory: Reading Lacan', *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 4(1), vol. 4/ no. 1, 2017, p. 3.

3.2 Do split portraits reveal or conceal aggressivity, trauma, and fragmentation?

In this section, I will continue to discuss *Good Wife* (2015) and bring in two other works, one single panel work and one split portrait work as a way to see how aggressiveness is revealed in split portraits.

Aggressiveness or aggressivity, in Lacanian sense³⁴, is related to the formation of one's subjectivity, so it is relevant to my discussion on what split portraits speak about today. The discussion on aggressiveness also extends the discussion on subjectivity in chapter two of this thesis. Moreover, aggressiveness is an important emergent aspect of my own art practice. I would therefore like to explore here what is at stake for me. Lacan admits that the death instinct is at the heart of the notion of aggressiveness³⁵ as Sigmund Freud claims.³⁶ To Freud,

³⁴ Regarding analytic experience, Lacan claims that the analyst can measure the aggressiveness in the behaviors of the analysand such as demanding tones, hesitations, inflections, slips of the tongue, and calculated absences etc. He also relates it to the subject formation. When the subject identifies with the specular image, he experiences aggressive tension in the mirror stage. In particular, the wholes of the image seem to threaten the body with disintegration and fragmentation. (J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p. 102-115) Lacan claims that aggressivity refers not only to violent acts but other phenomena also. (D. Evans, *An introductory Dictionary*, p.6)

³⁵ J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p. 82.

³⁶ Freud discusses aggression (or aggressiveness) differently in different stages. In the beginning, Freud regards aggressiveness as important in psycho-analytic treatment: he sees that it is crucial to make the arousal of motives including hostile motives during treatment conscious for the purpose of analysis. In his writing, he also connects the Oedipus complex to loving and hostile wishes. In addition, although he declines to conjecture on a specific instinct for the aggressive tendencies or behavior, in the first instinct theory, he explains the expressed aggressive behavior or feelings, sadism or hate in terms of the life instincts and death instincts. In the final instinct theory, aggressiveness is regarded as more important. Freud claims the 'aggressive instinct' is a part of death instinct and is expressed outwards or inwards by the muscular apparatus, leading to sadism or masochism in the service of the sexual function. For the subjectivity, Freud regards self-aggression as the essence of all aggressiveness in a way to expand the traditionally-defined aggression (where it is about the relation to other by the means of aggressiveness). (J. Laplanche & J. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, pp. 17-21.)

violence is a manifestation of the death drive, he explains violence in the example of sadism-masochism, in which 'sadism consists in their exercise of violence or power upon some other person as object' whereas masochism is 'this [that] object is given up and replaced by the subject's self'³⁷. However, Lacan sees aggressiveness 'in the dual relation between the ego and its counterpart'³⁸ and it is a fundamental relation which underlies not only violent acts but also many other phenomena also.³⁹ Specifically, Lacan concerns the aggressivity in the mirror stage:

In the mirror stage, the infant sees its reflection in the mirror as a wholeness, in contrast with the incoordination in the real body: this contrast is experienced as an aggressive tension between the specular image and the real body, since the wholeness of the image seems to threaten the body with disintegration and fragmentation.⁴⁰

³⁷ S. Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, p. 124.

³⁸ D. Evans, *An introductory Dictionary*, p.9 .

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*



Pl 26. Hoi Yee Chau, *You See It Intimate, I See It Violent*, 2015
Oil on canvas



Pl 27. Hoi Yee Chau, *Study of Emmeline Pankhurst's arrest*, 2018
Ink on paper

3.2.1 Discussion on my single-panel work, *You See It Intimate, I See It Violent*. (2015) (plate 26) and split portrait *Good Wife* (2015) and *Study of Emmeline Pankhurst's arrest* (2018) (plate 27)

By reading the Lacanian discourse on aggressiveness, we might have an explanation on how one perceives the aggressiveness or is stirred by the aggressiveness emerged from the discrepancy between the title and the work of *Good Wife* (2015). An 'ideal-I'⁴¹ or an 'objectified virtual image' with completeness and wholeness⁴² appears in the title which invites the viewer to identify with, and aggressiveness is unavoidable in identification. As Peggy Phelan argues, the relationship between self and other is unequal and 'alluring and violent because it touches the paradoxical nature of psychic desire'.⁴³ More specifically, the title reflects the desire of the viewer created by the imagos rooted in the subjects. To identify with the ideal female figure, one 'develops a hateful relation with the same image with which [she] he joyfully identifies. [She] He feels alienated by being and not being the image at the same time.'⁴⁴ The hope, Phelan argues, 'produces violence, aggressivity, dissent'.⁴⁵ Besides, the brokenness in the painting reminds her of her own fragmentation in her subjectivity. The wholeness and fragmented subjects are put side by side in this work. The images remind us of the traumatic experience in the mirror stage, where 'the troubling psychological tension that arises

⁴¹ J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p. 76.

⁴² R. Feldstein, 'The Phallic Gaze of Wonderland' in J. Lacan, *Reading Seminar XI*, ed. by R. Feldstein, B Fink & M Jaanus, Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 159.

⁴³ P. Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ F. Sheikh, 'Subjectivity, desire and theory: Reading Lacan', p. 2.

⁴⁵ P. Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 4.

when the intrinsic fragmentation of subjectivity destabilizes one's "illusion of autonomy".⁴⁶ Lacan claims that human baby finds the specular image 'an ideal unity, a salutary imago' and the imago of the human form 'crystallizes in the subject's inner conflictual tension, which leads to the awakening of his desire for the object of other's desire: here the primordial confluence precipitates into aggressive competition'.⁴⁷

As such, this experience can be extended to the looking in the adulthood. Bert Olivier argues 'that the process of identification with images continues beyond the 'mirror stage'[...] and adults, no less than children, are subjective to the desirability of images'.⁴⁸ Aggressivity emerges in the enigma of the identification, the symbolic and imaginary figure in the title, the brokenness and fragmentation of figures in the artwork and the imagos deeply embedded in the viewers' subjectivity.

Discussing my single panel work, especially from the creation process where I break down a video into shots as reference to making a single panel painting, it would be helpful to see how aggressiveness is revealed in split panel portraits. I created '*You see it intimate, I see it violent.*' (2015), a single-panel painting, oil on canvas. There are two figures who are brothers; one is holding the other in the painting. Both faces are blurred and painted with thick paint. The boundary of the area overlapped on their bodies is also unclear. The reference

⁴⁶ A. Stewart, 'Witnessing horror: Psychoanalysis and the abject stain of lynching photography', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, vol. 19, 2014, p. 424.

⁴⁷ J. Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p. 92.

⁴⁸ B. Olivier, "That Strange Thing Called 'Identifying'", p. 412.

of this painting is a Facebook's video clip posted on Facebook by my friend, who records an interaction between my friend's two children. In the video, the older brother is being helpful, carrying his little brother to walk for a short distance. My friend intends to show her friends the intimacy between his sons. I find that aggressiveness co-exists with intimacy in a number of shots from the video and hence use them as reference of my paintings. Thanks to technology, I can cancel the narrative elements in the clips by breaking down the video into still images (plate 28) and projects some of my thoughts and reflection on their interaction. The looking is changed by the digital effects as Mulvey points out:

Now, as the digital affects contemporary perception of the world, so it also affects popular experience of film and the mode of perception traditionally associated with it.⁴⁹



Pl 28. Hoi Yee Chau, multiple stills from the reference video of 'You See It Intimate, I See It Violent', 2014

⁴⁹ L. Mulvey, *Death 24 x a second*, 1st edn, London, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2015, p. 27.

The perceived intimacy in the clip is related to the technology instead of the real interaction between the two siblings. It might be worth looking at what happens when a linear narrative is broken down into fragments and finally turns into a single still image. Looking at what has been lost, distorted, added in the transformation might give insight into our looking. The clip is perceived as real, especially with the 'extra-diegetic'⁵⁰ element including their mother's description and her friends' comments. However, when the clip is broken down into still images using the digital technology, new meaning is found in the process of taking out images from a continuous movement of figures, and Mulvey argues that a disruption of linearity can be related to a certain kind of mental process such as dreams.⁵¹ The signified intimacy is largely lost when the clip is transformed to still images, and at the same time aggressiveness emerges. I argue that the perceived intimacy can be shared collectively because of the presence of others as well as the Other. Lacan argues that the Other shapes the subject's desires.⁵² He claims that 'the unconscious is the Other's discourse'⁵³, and Fink argues similarly that 'at times something extraneous and foreign speaks, as it were, through our mouths'.⁵⁴

As such, the video clip is presented upon the desire of others and the Other. Similarly, one's comment/reflection on the video is upon the Other. When the video is broken down into fragments, the perceived intimacy fades and the aggression between siblings emerges. I propose that the splitting contributes to

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵² J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p.689.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.219.

⁵⁴ *indesing B. Fink, The Lacanian Subject*, p. 4.

that effect. While this formation breaks down the wholeness, it then can break down the imaginary and symbolic and finally can lead the onlooker to come closer to the Lacanian real. Going back to the painting itself, the painting conceals the aggression between the subjects, but signifies something else. Without knowing the title, a woman comments that this painting depicts the intimacy of a mother and a child. Apparently, the figures once again signify the desire of the others and the Other:

There is a major difference between the painting, the video clip, and the screenshots. The screenshots show different moments of the interaction between two siblings. From the screenshots, I can see the passivity of the younger brother. It directs me to look at the aggression in the brotherhood and re-represent the entwinement of the intimacy and aggression in the process. However, in the painting, the little boy is looking at the viewers while the older boy is looking away. Both of their facial expressions are blurred and we cannot tell if they are happy or not. The facial features are covered by the brushstrokes and the paint. The ambiguity in the facial expression blocks the viewer's looking at the interaction between them. The multiple stills suggest movement and the figures seem to communicate with me or ask something of me. The little brother's gaze is towards me (the viewer), keeps me looking and jumping from one panel to another panel. The gaze arrests me in certain panels, which tells me that the subject is aware of being looked at while he is looking away on some other panels. Multiple stills give the feeling of endlessness and discomfort, implying that more is to say, and more is to come, all of which I cannot grasp.

In addition, the blurriness and the indecisive brushstrokes at the boundary of their bodies represent the interaction between the bodies. The aggression in the work is conveyed by the interaction between the two figures, if only we could identify them as brothers and have experience of aggression with those around us. The violence comes from social relations as Lacan claims. Lacan relates the aggressiveness between children, not only to their experiencing own bodies, but also very much to social relativity. In his text, Lacan claims that 'the aggressiveness that is manifested in the retaliations of slaps and blows cannot be regarded solely as a playful manifestation of the exercise of strength and their employment in getting to know the body'.⁵⁵ It must be understood within a broader realm of coordination: one that will subordinate the functions of tonic postures and vegetative tension to a social relativity. The aggression in this work is something that I can handle. It gives me the sense that nothing more is coming, unless this painting reminds me of my own experience. I wonder why the aggression I identify in the reference photos cannot be delivered in the painting.

It seems that when the brothers' interaction is presented on a single panel, the perception of aggression depends on the viewers' reaction and thinking. The viewer takes the dominant role. One can view the two as having an intimate interaction, or one can view it as two creepy figures staring at each other. It is more open for people to project their feelings onto. In short, from the process, I break down a video into multiple stills and then make one painting out of it, I realise that aggressiveness reveals more in screenshots compared with

⁵⁵ J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p.91.

single-panel portraits. In single-panel portraits, aggressiveness is concealed instead.

In my split portrait work *Study of Emmeline Pankhurst's arrest* (2018), the creation process also involves an indecisiveness between creating split portraits and single panel portrait and the presence of aggressiveness in the image. The reference photo I come across captures Emmeline Pankhurst, 'the most prominent campaigner for women's right to vote'⁵⁶, being arrested at Buckingham Palace. From the reference photo, I can feel the aggression asserted on a vulnerable woman. A group of three males are arresting Pankhurst; one of them is restraining Pankhurst's movement by forcing her feet off ground. Her eyes are closed in the photo which attracts my attention. The gazes of the three gentlemen are all different; their gazes give me the unsettling feelings. The gentleman on the far left is staring at the back of Pankhurst and seems to be happy that the gentleman holding Pankhurst is doing his job. It makes me feel that the restraint on Pankhurst is even tighter. The gentleman on the left is staring at Pankhurst with his mouth half opened and it seems he is about to instruct her verbally. The photo is a still one, but the dynamic is present in it. It is not because the people in the photo are walking or moving, but because there is violence, and another force is there to counter that violence, as well as yet more force suggested to secure the violence.

⁵⁶ P. Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, 1st edn., Abingdon, Taylor and Francis, 2002, p. i.

The closed eyes are mystery and attract my attention. The closed eyes seem to prevent me from looking or telling me more about the incident, but then engage me more. As an artist, I understand an image by painting, so I use it as a reference photo. I paint Pankhurst only but not other people from the photo. I want to understand the pain, the feelings and the unknown in Pankhurst. I use painting as a way to identify with Pankhurst. I create one painting followed by another one. I end up making a split portrait of Pankhurst.

When I look back at my painting process, my repetition is contradictory, and it seems that two minds are working in both the creation and exhibition processes. In one way, I would like to understand the pain and get closer to the pain, so I paint Pankhurst. But the pain and the aggression are so intense that I could not represent it properly. Instead, I paint another one after finishing the first one. I propose that the activity of painting is similar to the 'alternating game, fort-da' which symbolizes repetition, and by which a child deals with the trauma created by the separation from her mother.⁵⁷ Regarding aggressiveness, the violence represented in the photo is not intense if I view it at a distance. However, through identification, the violence becomes intense and it leads to the repetition in my creation process.

⁵⁷ J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 62-63.



Pl 29. Francis Bacon, *Painting*, 1946
Oil and pastel on linen

3.2.2 Discussion on Bacon's single panel portrait, *Painting* (1946)

(plate 29)

Bacon's *Painting* (1946) contains violent elements such as the flesh, the blood and the language (title). I am asking if the aggression is from those elements. John

Russell describes Bacon's painting:

Bacon began by painting what he thought would be a chimpanzee in long grass, went on to try his hand at a bird of prey landing in a field, and almost involuntarily ended up with a monumental painting – one of the few in which he came near to realizing his full intentions – in which three of his preoccupations are mysteriously conjugated: war, meat and the dictator.⁵⁸

The violent elements are present in the painting and are related to Bacon's times as well as to his views on the important events in his era. *Painting* (1946) was finished after the World War II. The pink coloration is believed to be inspired by the great mosaic hall that Speer designed for Hitler's Chancellery building. The position of the figure and the animal is inspired by a photo in which Hitler was standing in front of the heraldic Nazi eagle.⁵⁹ Martin Hammer describes this work:

Bacon's picture seems, then, to encapsulate an entire historical narrative of power corrupted, of the barbaric savagery that had always lurked beneath the Fascist propaganda façade, and had resulted in mass torture and slaughter on a scale that was perhaps difficult even for him to grasp.⁶⁰

This work is believed to have captured the 'overwhelming sensations and memories'.⁶¹ But does the aggression deliver to me visually? The aggression

⁵⁸ F. Bacon & J. Russell, *Francis Bacon*, 3rd edn, London, Thames and Hudson, 1993, p. 24.

⁵⁹ F. Bacon & M. Hammer, *Francis Bacon*, 1st edn, London, Phaidon Press Limited, 2013, p. 52.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*

is a representational one, referred to something outside the painting. At first, this painting gives me some haunting feelings, especially the big man without eyes. I feel that I am stared at by him when I look at the painting. Then I try to connect the elements in the painting to justify the violence; and by doing that, I can stay away from the scary feelings which the painting tries to deliver by the use of 'a mystery of sorts' in this painting.⁶² However, the violence can be understood from a third-person view and analysed in a rational and comfortable way. To engage with how viewers identify, Krips interprets Lacan's idea of the Other:

But why does the Other exist? Why do subjects identify with it? Lacan makes the key hypothesis that the subject constructs the point of view of the Other as a place where it can project its unconscious point of view, expressed through unconsciously driven symptoms, parapraxes, slips, and the like. This hypothesis explains the inscrutability of the Other's point of view, as well as, of course, the subject's identification with the Other. To put it bluntly: because it corresponds to the subject's Ucs [unconsciousness], the subject finds the Other inscrutable, but also identifies with it.⁶³

As such, I do not identify at all with 'the Other' in this painting I cannot say that there is no aggression or violence in this painting. But I argue that the way aggression operates is not the same it does as in the split portraits. The single panel's aggression is a representational one while the multiplication in the split panel enacts the operations of the mirror stage and so brings us closer to the

⁶² H. Krips, 'Politics of the picture', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, Vol. 18, no. 1, 2013, p. 19.

⁶³ *ibid.*

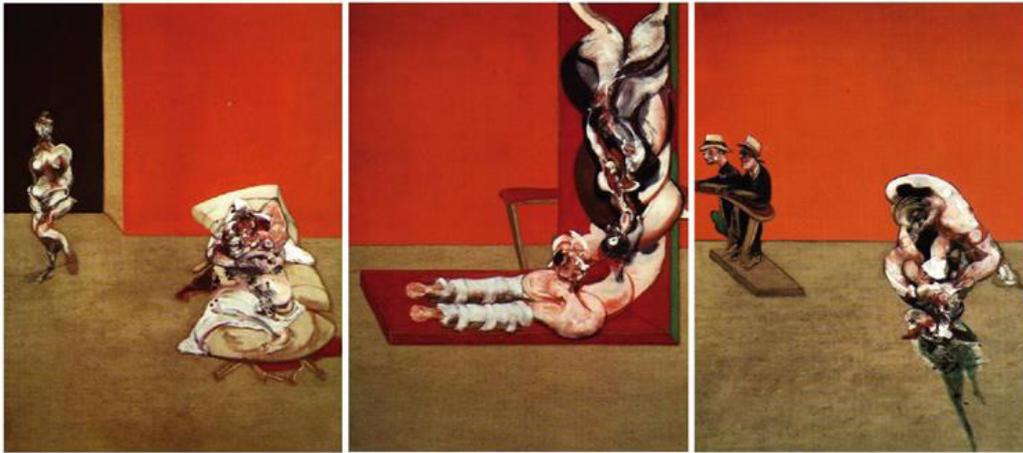
Lacan's real: it works on the level of unconscious which has more power. The aggressive elements in the work disguise something haunting and veil the scariest thing which could shake us up. Instead, what makes a work aggressive is the split (or multiplication). Olivier explains well why multiplication brings effects in the looking:

['Identical twins'] seems to be ontologically 'wrong', inconceivable, or even 'evil' for two or more things, each uniquely valuable (especially 'in the eyes of God'), to bear the 'same' image or appearance.

This may also explain the satirical or critical weight of artworks that employ multiple images -- either explicitly juxtaposed, or implicitly -- with suggestions of endless, alienating multiplication and standardization.⁶⁴

Looking at the multiple panel work of Bacon might give me some hints about what multiplication is doing.

⁶⁴ B. Olivier, "That Strange Thing Called 'Identifying'", p. 408.



Pl 30. Francis Bacon, *Crucifixion*, 1965
oil on canvas

3.2.3 Discussion on Bacon's split portrait, *Crucifixion* (1965) (plate 30)

The work *Crucifixion* (1965) contains elements similar to *Painting* (1946) such as figures, meat, and blood. When asked if he would like to create tragic art, Bacon denies it.⁶⁵ Although he denies it, the paintings clearly suggest some sort of tragedy. On the left panel, someone is lying on something like a bed and being looked at by a woman on his left. The figure in the bed is fragmented and deformed while something like ashes or blood are coming from his body. His face can hardly be identified and looks like a skull. It is suggestive of violent acts which have happened or are happening to his body. On the central panel, there is much flesh, with a body opened and something coming out of it. It seems that it is partly hanging against the wall and partly leaning on the floor. There is a head, which looks like human's with its eyes closed. Its hands look human. But the whole body is like a pig hanging at the butcher's. On the right panel, a man seems to struggle to stand. His face is away from me, his body is twisted and with a Nazi swastika

⁶⁵ D. Sylvester and F. Bacon, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 43.

armband.⁶⁶ Blood seems coming out from his lower part of the body and a green shadow is under his body as well. On the far left, very similar to the position of the lady on the left panel, two men are standing with their hands on a stool table. They do not look at the bleeding man and their presence looks unrelated to the bleeding man. The Nazi armband in the right panel and the title 'Crucifixion' might make people think about the murders that happened in London in the last days of Nazidom at that time.⁶⁷ When Bacon talked about the subject matter, he said 'It[crucifixion]'s a magnificent armature on which you can hang all types of feeling and sensation' and that he was unable to 'have found another subject so far that has been as helpful for covering certain areas of human feeling and behavior'.⁶⁸ In the triptych, the traditional narrative of crucifixion is expected to be expressed in sequence across three panels. I expect some sort of a narrative although Bacon always aims to cut the narrative out by the use of triptych formation.⁶⁹ This crucifixion is different: no piece of meat or a creature/figure with hands tied is hung in the central panel, the figures are alive but injured on the other two panels. Almost all elements of crucifixion are present, but the figure whom the title is referred to is missing. In other words, the promised narrative is lacking in the work.

My looking is dragged from one panel to another, enhancing the mystery. The blood and all the other violent elements give more impact because my gaze keeps returning to the panels. As I suggest earlier, the representation of the blood

⁶⁶ F. Bacon & M. Hammer, *Francis Bacon*, p. 67.

⁶⁷ F. Bacon & J. Russell, *Francis Bacon*, pp. 61-62.

⁶⁸ D. Sylvester and F. Bacon, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 44.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 23.

and the violent elements in the painting is not where aggressiveness emerges. I would say that the multiplication of the figure created in the three panels makes aggressiveness emerge because it is there that the operation of infant trauma is re-enacted. It reminds the subject of the split self in which the split comes along with aggressivity, as discussed before. But how about if two multiplied figures appeared on a single-panel work? I would say it could give me haunting feelings, but it does not operate in the same way as multi-panel works do. The split does not allow a figure to be duplicated in another space; its hermetic nature of composition would also keep me moving across the panel without being able to leave it. I can indulge in looking at triptychs more than at single panel paintings. I wonder if the pleasure of looking is from scopophilia, which Freud relates to organ pleasure⁷⁰ as Mulvey claims:

an illusion of looking in on a private world... [and] satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking in which the wish to look and curiosity intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body and relationship between the human form and its surroundings in the world.⁷¹

When the triptych lures me to look at it with its promise of fascination, it then throws at me the fragmentation of figures and the reminders of my split self. However, I cannot stop looking. Or I am trying to deal with the trauma in the

⁷⁰ S. Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. By A. Richards & A. Dickson, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991, pp. 122-125.

⁷¹ L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 9.

multiplication. In this work, the figures seem indifferent to each other. In general, in Bacon's works, usually only one fragmented figure is presented in one panel, except in some painting like this one where a fragmented figure is entwined with another fragmented one. The fragmented figures are gazed at by other figures in the painting. Owing to the other figures' indifference, the narrative cannot be established, and the pain and horror remains unexplained. As such, the mystery prompts me to move to another panel to sort the narrative. In this work, the fragmented figure stands alone in front of gazes. In the left panel, the figure which looks at the fragmented figure invites me to identify with it and leads me to join her to look at the fragmented figure. The aggressivity seems to come from the gaze where the self-contained, whole figures look at the fragmented one. Lacan claims that we are looked at and the gaze circumscribes us. He claims that 'I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.'⁷² In addition, Krips, with reference to Lacan's discourse, points out that a painting is very much related to a social bond which is formed by a dual identification:

First, people identify with a common ego-ideal, an "objective," and thus authoritative, point of view from which they perceive but also evaluate themselves[...]. Second, people identify with each other in virtue of sharing this common ego-ideal.⁷³

⁷² J. Lacan and A. Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 72.

⁷³ H. Krips, 'Politics of the picture', p. 18.

He also argues that the painting whose point of view is identified by all the members 'must successfully interpellate the audience by offering them a point of view that they find authoritative'.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 19.

Conclusion of the thesis

In this thesis, I have demonstrated the contemporary relevance of split portraiture by discussing the specificity of this particular art practice, the modern and contemporary subjectivity revealed in split portraits, and the change in identification and the aggressiveness perceived in split portraits. To answer my research question, I have extensively discussed the split portraits and single-panel artworks of Marlene Dumas, Francis Bacon, and Ed Atkins as well as my own works such as *Good Wife* (2015), *You See It Intimate, I See It Violent.* (2014) and *Study of Emmeline Pankhurst* (2018) in the light of Lacanian discourses.

Regarding the specificity of split portraits, I have demonstrated that the discontinuity (split), the multiplication of figures and other elements, the narration as well as the repetition in the expression and techniques in the creation process are present in split portraits. They all show the contemporary relevance of split portraits.

I have argued that certain elements such as vacillation, emptiness, the split, and the traumatic are present in contemporary subjectivity. The repetition in split portraits is used by the artist to deal with these elements in their subjectivity, but it also reveals them. In the prevalent formation -- single panel or the traditional triptych formation -- where the work presents the wholeness and singularity, it does not tell us those elements of the contemporary subject as such.

In addition, I have argued that identification changes in split portraits and an important element in my practice -- aggressiveness -- is perceived and manifested differently in the viewing of split portraits compared with that of single panel portraits. In particular, the suture of the symbolic and imaginary identity is broken down and the fragmentary invites viewers to identify with the figure. In addition, since split portraits are being extensively explored by a certain number of artists in their practice, I argue that contemporary subjects tend to get closer to the real rather than identifying with the ideal images only, reflecting the contemporary relevance of split portraits. I also claim that the aggressiveness I find in the split portraits resembles the formation of subjectivity which goes to the core of why split portraiture is so powerful and important for today. The perceived aggressiveness in the looking is very closely related to the experience of aggressiveness during the identification in the mirror stage.¹

This thesis has four contributions. First, this thesis addresses the specificity of the split portrait which has been extensively discussed in the literature. Secondly, this thesis is among the first to enrich the understanding of split portraiture related to art practice in the light of Lacanian discourse. Thirdly, it reveals the contemporary subjectivity through the discussion of the emergence of split portraiture.

Finally, by using the new term 'split portraiture', I discover a new way to rethink portraiture and re-read the works of Marlene Dumas and Francis Bacon.

¹ J. Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 92.

This research starts from the premise that I find more and more artists who create their artworks with more than one panel. As I am among one of them, I am motivated to research this new kind of artwork. I also want to reflect on why I am particularly drawn to this type of image making and what is at stake in this form. After putting substantial effort in finding an answer to my research question, I understand more from a Lacanian perspective about my practice and other artists whose works employ 'repetition'. My major discovery is that an artist's subjectivity poses a major influence on the repetition appeared in the creation process and the works. The repetition comes from her unconsciousness and the presence of an 'other'. Indeed, an artwork can record the elements of an era; as such, an emergence of a new kind of artwork can reveal the significance of that era. I cannot prove that the elements in the artists' subjectivity only exist in this era, but through the case studies, I show that those contemporary elements can be revealed and approached by the multiple panel formation which I name 'split portrait' and categorize as a particular kind of artwork.

Before carrying out this project, I regarded repetition as a contemporary technique in the creation process or in displaying works. After approaching the works of various artists in the light of psychoanalytical discourse, I realise that the repetition means something of the modern and contemporary subject; and more importantly, it has paradoxical functions which veil as well as reveal the artist's subjectivity at the same time. In other words, it is originally a mechanism for the artist to veil the fragmented self, but is also a punctum or tuché for the viewer to get closer to the artist's subjectivity. As for my practice, before this

project, how I arranged the panels and how many panels I used had always been one of my concerns. I now tend to focus less on my repetition in the creation, as I do not use this formation as a tool to create my work. Instead, I let the repetition happen naturally in the process. I realise that it is directed in the process from my unconsciousness and I very much believe that it should not be planned.

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