

How do objects express concepts about the human condition? Looking at the work of Susie MacMurray.

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Abstract. How do objects express concepts about the human condition? Looking at the work of Susie MacMurray.

My dissertation is an exploration and analysis of selected artworks by the contemporary Fine Artist and Sculptor Susie MacMurray. The artworks considered are sculptures made between 2002 and 2011 and are all constructed using familiar, everyday materials such as wine glasses, dressmaker's pins and household gloves. All the artworks use objects to address the timeless issue of what it is like to be human but the materials are used in a thoroughly contemporary way.

I have chosen to explore her practice because I want to understand how objects can represent the reality of human experience. What do objects say about us? How can artists use ordinary objects to express our feelings, fear, hopes and desires? How can an artist such as Susie MacMurray combine elements of found objects in such a way as they convey aspects of the human condition? By using reference to theories about language, art and objects, I will argue that in the way she arranges and composes objects and materials, MacMurray is able to express ideas, which engage and fascinate us.

In my introduction I will outline my line of enquiry into this dissertation. In the first chapter I will introduce MacMurray and explain my research methodology. Then go on to briefly outline my understanding of the concept the 'human condition' and explore some definitions and linguistic references relating to the word 'object.' In chapters two and three I will relate my research to the artist's practice and use it to analyse a selection of artworks. Finally, my conclusion will determine the success of MacMurray's practices to express concepts about our existence by using objects as metonyms for the human condition.

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Introduction

The idea for this dissertation started by collecting visual research for my studio practice on the subject of clothing. Looking through the plethora of printed material on newsagent's shelves, in hairdressers and dentist waiting rooms I became fascinated by the way the fashion industry and the media seduce us into a hyperreal world and pressurizes us in to continually transforming our bodies. By looking at fashion imagery and clothing as visual resource and contemporary Fine Art practices as contextual research my perception of the concept of the body changed. Artworks by Joseph Beuys, Louise Bourgeois, Christian Boltanski and Susie MacMurray have made me aware that every day familiar objects, not just clothing can speak of the body. Felt, meat bones, piles of discarded clothes and steel pins all have a language that can be used to communicate powerful concepts about our lives, experiences and emotions.

For example, Joseph Beuys's 'Felt Suit,' is a sculpture made out of grey felt. He considered grey felt to be 'one of the most basic fabrics, as a protective and magical material, offering both physical and spiritual comfort.' This statement is based on a story he told about being shot down in World War II whilst flying over the Crimea. He was reportedly discovered, badly injured by a tribe of Tartars, who saved his life by wrapping him in a cocoon of fat and felt. Felt, he explained represented: 'not even physical warmth... a completely different kind of warmth, namely spiritual or evolutionary warmth or the beginning of an evolution'. (Collins, 2008: p300) (www.tate.org.uk) (Fig 1)

Louise Bourgeois' 'Pink Days and Blue Days' consists of a selection of her own clothes hung on large meat bones. She said 'you can retell your life and remember your life by the shape, weight, colour and smell of those clothes in

your closet. They are like the weather, the ocean – changing all the time.’
(Coxon, 2010: p73) (Fig 2)

Christian Boltanski created ‘No Mans Land’, an interactive installation in the Park Avenue Armory, New York. He used 30 tons of discarded clothing, a sixty-foot crane and the sound of human heartbeats to explore the concept of ‘individuality, anonymity, life and death’. (Fig 3)

‘Clothes retain a trace of life, even when the person who wore them no longer exists. Clothes as a second skin of the human being becomes a ‘metonymic emblem of an absent presence.’ (Moure, G. 1996, Christian Boltanski, Advent and Other Times, Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafia) (www.armoryonpark.org)

MacMurrays garment sculptures: Gladrags, Icon, A Mixture of Frailties and Widow (Fig 4,5,6,7) appear to be about clothing and the body but are far more complex. For example, ‘Widow,’ looks like a ball gown with its full circular train and is displayed on a black dressmakers dummy. Made from black leather it is pierced with 43kilos of two inch steel pins. If someone close to you has died, the steel pins are a powerful personification of the physical and emotional pain caused by bereavement.

All these artists have used a wide range of objects to represent aspects of the human experience and it is this intriguing concept that I wish to discuss through the work of Susie MacMurray. Why and how does MacMurray use objects in her artwork to express concepts concerning the human condition? What do objects say about us? How can artists use ordinary objects to express our feelings, fear, hopes and desires? How can an artist such as Susie MacMurray combine elements of found objects in such a way as they convey aspects of the human condition?

By using reference to theories about language, art and objects, I will argue that in the way she arranges and composes objects and materials, MacMurray is able to express ideas, which engage and fascinate us.

In the first chapter I will introduce MacMurray and explain my research methodology. Then go on to briefly outline my understanding of the concept the 'human condition' and explore some definitions and linguistic references relating to the word 'object.' In chapters two and three I will relate my research to the artist's practice and use it to analyse a selection of artworks. Finally, my conclusion will determine the success of MacMurray's practices to express concepts about our existence by using objects as metonyms (that is an object which is used as a part of something which represents the whole) for the human condition.

Chapter 1

Susie MacMurray

Born in 1959, MacMurray's first profession was as classical musician with the Halle and Gulbenkian Orchestras. By 2001, she had retrained as an artist, graduating with a BA in sculpture and an MA in fine arts from Manchester Metropolitan University. Her work encompasses site-specific installations, sculptures and drawings; she is an active member of the studio group Suite, has an international exhibition profile and her work is in private and public collections in Europe, USA, Asia and Australia.

(www.collections.madmuseum.org. www.suite-studiogroup.co.uk)

Research methodology

I have seen MacMurray's work in three exhibitions. My first encounter was in 2010 at Pallant House, Chichester where I saw 'Gladrags,' (Fig 4) a garment sculpture made from 10,000 fuschia pink party balloons and a framed section of 'Shell.' The original installation was a wall covering of 20,000 mussel shells filled with red velvet. (Figs 8)

In December 2010, I saw 'Widow,' a black leather dress pierced with 43kilos of steel pins on show at the exhibition, Aware: Art Fashion Identity at the Royal Academy of Arts. (Fig 7)

Finally on 2nd December 2011, I visited Agnews Gallery in London, one of the world's leading international art galleries to view 'Eyes of the Skin,' MacMurray's first London solo show. On display was 'a Mixture of Frailties' a gown made from 1400 household gloves and seventeen more artworks all

made using a diverse range of materials such as wax, cling film, fish hooks, feathers, dairy hose and wine glasses. (Fig 6)

I was privileged to meet MacMurray that day, talk briefly to her about her work and watch her being interviewed alongside Gina Agnew, (an associate Director of Agnews and seventh generation member of the family) by the Emmy award winning New York documentary filmmaker, Susan Steinberg for a series she is in the process of making for Sky Art called 'Portrait of the artist as a woman'.

During the interview, Gina Agnew explained that Agnews had recently acquired this new purpose built street-level gallery in Mayfair and its primary focus would be modern and contemporary exhibitions.
(Appendix A) (www.artdaily.org)

Gina Agnew and Tom Lighton, (former managing director of Waddington Galleries and now Chief Executive of Agnews) researched MacMurray and on the basis of her website, visited her studio in Salford earlier in 2011 and secured the show. They were very excited to be showing MacMurray's work and on this final day of the show, could report that it had received positive press coverage, excellent sales figures and drawn the highest footfall since the gallery had opened in September 2010. It was a very educational experience to be there that day and I was made aware of the hard work, pressure and financial risk taken by the artist and gallery along with their relationship with the media. Plus I feel that I have had the opportunity to observe a pivotal point in an artist's career. (Appendix A)

Both in the gallery that day and through my research via her web site, interviews on You Tube, reviews and essays, Susie MacMurray comes across as an artist who is refreshingly down to earth and open about her practice, ideas and objectives. When asked by the social network site

Jotta.com what it was like to work for institutions like Agnews, MacMurray says -

Working with a commercial gallery is a new experience for me. What I am loving is the more personal nature of the relationship I am developing with Agnew's. The interaction I have with them is more like the way I work with people when doing a site-specific project. You get to know people better and there is much more collaboration as opposed to straightforward loaning and installing an existing piece of work. It's that part that I love, sharing together with likeminded people the ambitions, the risks and the excitement of trying to do something new. (www.jotta.com)

MacMurray said that she wanted to become an artist because 'she wanted to get her hands on stuff' and this tactile response to materials is at the heart of her work.

The artist writes in the catalogue: "My choice of materials is a search for ways to explore the contradictions and paradoxes of human existence. I am often attracted to "Stuff" that generates a measure of ambivalence. Memory/mortality, power/fragility, seduction/repulsion, terror/wonder - I am drawn to materials that help me make sense of these juxtapositions, and I see sites and cultural references as further materials that must be juggled and finely balanced until nothing superfluous remains'. (www.treehugger.com)

MacMurray is exploring the concept of binary opposition, a theory that has its origins in twentieth century structuralist theory. Swiss linguist and structuralist theoretician, Ferdinand de Saussure investigated how words came to have the meaning we associate with them. He considered that the meaning we ascribe to a word is 'culturally constructed rather than inherent within the word itself. It relies on its opposite to provide its core meaning, for example hero and coward, young and old, rich and poor. Structuralist theory proposes that the meaning of a word does not exist on its own; it is defined by what it is not.' The post structuralist philosopher, Jacques Derrida identified that one half of a binary pair is 'culturally marked as being more positive and the other as even negative.' He suggests that we judge the meaning of a word against its binary opposite to create a 'hierarchy of value'.

(www.englishbiz.co.uk/popups/opposition)

MacMurray explores the concept of binary opposition by selecting words concerned with the opposing themes of human experience and combines them with materials that generate extreme reactions. For example, the green turkey feathers in *After Flock* (Fig 9) can mean life, warmth and protection to one person and notions of death, smothering, fear to another.

Ambivalence and this sense of duality are also generated through the use of the multiple. For example, a steel pin is essentially a functional item but when thousands are painstakingly speared through soft, fleshy skin they evoke new meaning. (Fig 7) The familiar is transformed into the unfamiliar and an aesthetically beautiful, sensual gown tips from the seductive to repulsive, the wonderful to the terrifying and fragile to the powerful.

When Steinberg asked MacMurray if she had a 'female sensibility in her work, a 'sense of the domestic.' MacMurray replied, that as a woman that was her perspective but she did not intentionally 'gender' her work, she was interested in what it was like to be human, the human condition, the body and its frailties. (Appendix A)

The materials I use mostly have some kind of relationship with the body. Either they have come from it, like hair, leather or feathers for example, or they are something that has been used to touch/constrain/protect in some way, i.e. hooks, bandages, hairnets, clingfilm etc. The metaphors, semiotics and connotations attached to the object and materials I use are very important to me.
(www.jotta.com)

It is interesting that despite this emphasis on engaging with the human condition rather than the female, or feminine 'condition' much of her work does seem to be about the experience of being a woman. The semiotics (the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation in verbal and written language) of her choice of 'stuff' in her work has associations with the domestic and essentially feminised objects: rubber gloves, hairnets, net curtains, feathers, thread, velvet, and human hair. (Soriano, 2011).

For example traditionally, women wear dresses and sew and I see the garment sculpture, 'Widow' as a metaphor for death, the condition of human mortality and a direct representation of MacMurrays personal experience.

Human condition

The concept of the human condition is a massive philosophical subject. A dictionary entry states that it is concerned with the positive and negative aspects of existence as a human being especially, the inevitable events such as birth, childhood, adolescence, love, sex, reproduction, aging, and death.

The twentieth century existentialist psychotherapist Irvin D Yalom identifies, 'meaning, loneliness, freedom and mortality' as the four ultimate concerns of the human condition. My understanding is that we cannot make assumptions about humanity; one person's freedom is another's imprisonment, the human condition however, does describe what makes us irreducibly human, what we have in common and what makes human beings different and distinctive regardless of gender, creed, race or class. (www.dictionary.reference.com) (www.changingminds.org/explanations/needs/ultimate_concerns)

MacMurray explores the contradictions and paradoxes of meaning, loneliness, freedom and mortality by playing with the ambiguous nature of materials. For example, Feast 2011 is made from plastic wrap and cotton thread. (Fig 10) It is a narrative piece taken from a specific incident involving one of MacMurrays cling film sculptures and US customs in Los Angeles. The officials cut the original sculpture open because they thought it contained drugs. MacMurray uses Feast to reference the narcotic industries use of cling film to conceal and traffic drugs and the domestic of protecting food and keeping it fresh. The cling-film in this artwork harbors ominous undertones that speak of concealing/revealing, contamination/cleanliness,

suffocation/protection and ultimately a sense of mortality with human natures ability to nurture yet kill.

'An engagement with materials is central to MacMurray's practice. Her role is one of alchemist: combining material, form and context in deceptively simple ways to stimulate associations within the viewers' minds and to elicit nuanced meanings'. (www.suite-studiogroup.co.uk)

She is fascinated with 'these moments of change, of alchemy,' when the familiar becomes unfamiliar, when an object slips from being one thing into another or when a situation turns from positive to negative. (Soriano, 2011)

What is an object?

How can an object undergo 'moments of change, of alchemy,' be familiar yet unfamiliar or slip from one thing into another? Theories about language, definitions and etymology are a fascinating methodology to the understanding of meaning and I have explored some ideas relating to the word 'object'.

For example, Objecthood is the condition of being an object and is concerned with how objects relate to their 'properties' and their 'relation' to other objects. 'Hood' derives from a noun, which had the meaning of person, sex and state of condition. Therefore the properties of an apple on a tree are its shape, colour and size whilst its 'relations' are the apple tree and the other apples. Objecthood can be understood using the Substance or Bundle theory.

Substance (derived from the Greek *ousia*, which means being) theory posits that an object is physically separate from its properties, (its shape, colour and size). The Bundle theory (considered by the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume) on the other hand proposes that an object is no more than a bundle of all its properties.

In other words, Substance theory purports that an object consists of separate, individual components. The Bundle theory reasons that the senses do not separate the object from its component parts but considers it to be one entity. (www.plato.stanford.edu. www.csmt.uchicago.edu)

The concept of the whole consisting of parts is present in our verbal and written language. We use rhetorical tropes such as synecdoche and metonymy to convey abstract, subconscious ideas; otherwise we would interact in a literal and non-descriptive way.

Synecdoche uses a part of something to denote the whole thing, for example 'I deal with the general public (customers) and the whole to denote a part: 'I was stopped by the law (police officer)'. It is a device that suggests that what is being offered is only a part of life and the reader must use their imaginations to fill in the gaps. In media terms (Fig 11), a Nissan Micra campaign targets women drivers. The advert crops to the anatomical part that signifies masculinity and linked with the text - 'The Micra. Ask before you borrow it' the reader is left to connect the parts of the action to make the whole scenario.

The formal frame of any visual image (painting, drawing, photograph, film or television frame) functions as a synecdoche in that it suggests that what is being offered is a 'slice-of-life', and that the world outside the frame is carrying on in the same manner as the world depicted within it. (Chandler, D. in www.aber.ac.uk/media)

Metonymy suggests something else with which it is associated, for example a sheriff's badge stands for law and order, a crown for the monarchy.

Advertisers use metonymy to depict products and activities to suggest consumerism and lifestyle choices. (Fig 12 and 13) In 'No Man's Land', Boltanski uses clothes and their association to the body as horrific metonymic emblems for the holocaust victims of war. (Fig 3)

A thesaurus dictionary defines an object as a 'tangible thing able to be seen, felt or perceived and as the root for objectifies, meaning actualize, materializes, to become real. This clarification is relevant when considering the relationship between the 'object' and art practices. The process of making real is where we begin to perceive 'moments of change and alchemy, where the familiar becomes unfamiliar and an object materializes from one thing into another.

A dictionary delineates 'object' in grammatical terms as a noun that receives or is affected by the action of a verb within a sentence.' For example 'The cat sat on the mat', 'cat' is the subject (the performer of the action), 'sat' is the verb or action and 'mat' is the object (what or whom the action of the verb is acting upon). The 'object' is always being acted upon by the verb.
(www.grammar.about.com. www.thesaurus.com)

To summarize, an object can be defined as consisting of separate, individual components or it is considered to be one entity. It can signify a part of its whole and suggest something to which it is associated. It is a tangible thing that is seen, felt or perceived. It is the root for the word 'objectifies,' to materialize, become real and the object is always being acted upon.

Chapter 2

By investigating the word 'object' I have suggested that figurative language is used to convey meaning and express abstract ideas about life and human experience. Terms and words are used to denote and suggest.

Using my research I will argue that MacMurrays practice mines this fertile landscape and creates a visual language that explores meaning through objects and materials.

First, each artwork is made up of separate, individual components that come together to form one entity. Each artwork is constructed using one clear visually dominating object. These objects are used in profusion, in an obsessive repetitive process to create a fresh object that expresses new ideas or makes existing implicit ideas explicit. For example, wine glasses transform into a mass of glass to imply fragility; a luxurious pelt of steel pins suggests terror.

Secondly, The objects within an artwork can signify a part of its whole and suggest something it is associated with. These materials are functional, essentially feminised, domestic objects and hold a common interest in things of the body. As MacMurray explores aspects of the body and the bodily, the carefully chosen materials suggest something to which they are associated. For example, a wine glass smeared with red lipstick is a synecdoche for a woman's mouth.

Thirdly, The outcomes are real, tangible objects and they harbor ambiguous undertones that we can see, feel and perceive. MacMurray objectifies, makes real the ambiguity of the human condition: meaning, loneliness, freedom and mortality.

Here Come the Girls

For example, dominating the front window space of the 'Eyes of the skin' exhibition is a huge chandelier of wine glasses called 'Here Come the Girls'. (Fig 14) This is an iteration of a piece commissioned by the Manchester Art Gallery in 2009 to celebrate Christmas and to link with their exhibition *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*. This exhibition was the first one in Europe to explore the role of women artists in the surrealist movement. MacMurray's piece references Meret Oppenheim's fur teacup, saucer and spoon, *Object /Le Déjeuner en Fourrure* (Breakfast in Fur) of which a photograph by Man Ray could be seen in the exhibition. (Figs 15 and 16) (www.manchestergalleries.org)

MacMurray's original wine glass sculpture (Fig 17) was made with 1100 wine glasses and hung high up in the atrium of the Manchester Art gallery. The one I saw at Agnews was about two metres long and close enough to touch. The wine glasses were all the same size, style and shape and hung upside down from their stems, crowded and clustered together, each glass affecting the angle of the next in a controlled downward tumble to the floor. The rims were lined with the traces of red lipstick yet the glasses were devoid of fingerprints and wine dregs. They sparkled in the spotlights.

When I asked MacMurray what this piece was about, she said that she had been watching the Boots advert on TV during the run up to Christmas with its theme tune 'Here come the Girls' covered by the Sugarbabes.

(www.adland.tv) The advert depicts predominantly, very happy young, attractive professional women having a celebratory meal. They burst in to the restaurant and sit around their dining table opening their presents. She said that the advert made her consider the power and the independence enjoyed by today's young western women and how they choose to exercise that empowerment.

'While thinking of 'strong women' femininity, power and Christmastime, I was reminded of the recent Boots TV commercials with crowds of women getting glammed up and marching out to celebrate to the Sugababes 'Here come the Girls.'

This unique artwork consisting of hundreds of lipstick smeared wine glasses references today's culture in many ways. The wine glass, like 'Object' by Oppenheim stands as a metaphor for the female body. However in the 21st century the red lipstick references sexual politics by signifying feminine power, choice and potential aggression. Even Boots the Chemist once launched its 17 cosmetic range for young women, as 'it's not makeup – it's ammunition'. (www.highbeam.com) MacMurray explains,

'The work offers a space for rumination on the evolution of feminism and perceptions of female power/empowerment in it's various guises – cultural/political/sexual. Also on the different ways women choose to exercise that empowerment (including binge drinking), the ambiguities it throws up, and psychological bargains we strike with ourselves.'
(www.susie-macmurray.co.uk)

The sheer quantity of glasses, and a seemingly fragile and precarious construction all contribute to a feeling of both wonder and impending disaster. Like the glasses, the women on mass are spectacular but are fragile. They are confident and assertive but are also struggling to overcome their loneliness and insecurity.

The objects within this piece are all the same; they are clearly visible and recognizable as wine glasses. They are used in multiples to create one artwork. They are functional, domestic vessels and because we drink out of them they are associated with our bodies. The finished artwork is a real, tangible entity yet it continually changes: when is a wine glass not a wine glass, at what point does it slip from one thing into another? The undertones allude to freedom/entrapment, independence/dependency, moderation /excess and ultimately to an awareness of ones own powers; your mortality may depend upon it.

A Mixture of Frailties

A sense of fragility is also referenced in the title of A Mixture of Frailties (Fig 6). Made from 1400 household gloves, calico and displayed on a tailor's dummy, the garment sculpture stands proud and regal in the middle of its full circular train. The shape of a woman is suggested by a nipped in high waistline and a neckline.

'Frailty', the condition of being weak, easily destroyed and delicately fragile belies the powerful stature of this imposing sculpture. On first encounter, it is an absolute delight. It is creamy white, frilly and fun, a fountain of froth. The front and back silhouette is symmetrical and just the tip of the dressmakers dummy peeps through the top to indicate the neck. You immediately feel that you could be window-shopping and are lured to view the gown.

The yellow household gloves are turned inside out to expose their vulnerable, pale and downy interior giving the feeling of flayed skin. Only the finger section of the gloves is visible, the gloves are layered so the same amount of finger is exposed and each finger droops in the same way. The shadows made by the fingers are the same and they spring out to the same distance. The volume is smooth, balanced and equal all round. I noticed that the fingers that lay directly on the floor were a little greyer than the others. You are immersed in the making and craftsmanship of a monumental gown made from humble washing up gloves.

When Steinberg asked MacMurray what this piece was about, MacMurray said that everyone calls it a wedding dress but she had never referred to it as that. She had been initially thinking about the bound feet of Chinese girls, their subjugation to a torturous custom in the belief that it would make them attractive to a future husband. That beauty has a horrible, negative side. She referred to the circular train as an entrapment; rendering the wearer

incapacitated and isolated, only to be admired from afar and she associated latex with drowning and claustrophobia. (Appendix A)

I think the beauty of this piece hides a sinister warning about the domestic reality of the marital exchange. Being a couple and having a family maybe what most women hope for but domesticity can become a barrier between women and the outside world if they are stuck in the house on a treadmill of meals and childcare. Fourteen hundred gloves at a pair a week, denotes three years of housework, a powerful reference to feminine experience and a cautionary note to be wary of what you enter in to.

MacMurray uses the clearly recognizable, domestic and functional object: the household glove in its multiple, to create the whole: the wedding dress. The complete artwork is associated with the body because the washing up glove is being used as the metonymic emblem for skin and the outcome is human sized. MacMurray changes meaning and creates nuances to transform a garment sculpture into a wedding gown and then, into a highly charged symbol of essentially feminine domestic drudgery.

A Mixture of Frailties explores the contradictions and paradoxes within meaning, loneliness and freedom so the viewer can see, feel and perceive notions of idealism/realism, inclusion/isolation, and freedom/enslavement.

Chapter 3

Widow

'Widow' (Fig 7) is MacMurrays fourth garment sculpture and I saw it at the 'Aware Art Fashion Identity' exhibition at The Royal Academy of Arts in London, 2010. This exhibition focussed on contemporary fashion designers and artists who use fashion as a means to explore identity. MacMurrays exhibit, 'Widow' is an autobiographical work made in 2009, three years after her husband suddenly died. Both the date and the title of this piece have immediate poignancy because they reference the recent death of a man, the changes in a woman's social status and the irrevocable end to a union and a lifestyle.

'Widow' is a stunning silver and black ball gown of monumental proportions, displayed on a dark headless, armless mannequin and positioned in an isolated position in the middle of the exhibition space. At first sight this exquisite piece shines and sparkles like luxurious fur or thick, expensive tinsel and the impulse to stroke it is irresistible. However a closer inspection reveals a more sinister macabre aspect, attraction is replaced with physical repulsion even shock because of the objects used within its construction.

This artwork is made using one hundred thousand silver two-inch steel pins individually pierced through black nappa leather. The weight of the pins control the fall of the gown, gravity controls the angle of the pins and they point downwards and through the full circular train.

In the BBC programme about the exhibition on Woman's Hour presented by Jane Garvey, MacMurray explained that she was suddenly widowed at forty-seven and that this piece was about the complexities and mixture of things

that you experience when you are put in this position. She worked through her feelings about widow hood in this piece. She was shocked to find herself widowed and had not even considered the term before.

The leather is human flesh and this pelt of pins has to be handled very carefully and only stroked in one direction. If you rub her up the wrong way you will hurt yourself. MacMurray explained in the interview that this a powerful metaphor for the way people respond to you when they discover you are a widow. She uses the pins to imply excruciating pain, a sense of impalement and to be both protection and a deterrent from a predatory world. She made this piece as a dress because she wanted to make it as easy as possible for the viewers to imagine themselves in that position and for they're to be very little between them, the work, the emotion and the idea.

(www.bbc.co.uk/programmes)

One hundred thousand exquisite yet lethal components make up this one glamorous yet terrifying piece. Every individual object exudes a sinister beauty and collectively they become a powerful icon of female strength and survival. The steel pin connotes physical pain caused by psychological trauma. The black nappa leather denotes human flesh. They are both used to suggest an association with the human body and experience. 'Widow' makes real the trauma of widowhood and forces the viewer to confront their mortality.

Maiden

Possibly the most fragile yet malevolent artwork in the Eyes of the Skin exhibition is Maiden (Fig 18). Almost invisible on the wall, Maiden is a line of twenty-two bronzed finished, eagle claw treble fishhooks threaded onto human hair. The minute holes in the mount are equidistant, every hair that loops through the eye of a hook is the same length; colour and density and

each fishhook is suspended in space at exactly the same angle. At first glance, this artwork appears very delicate and the materials are difficult to define. It is smaller than the rest of the exhibition pieces and tricks the viewer into getting too close.

The title is equally deceiving. Maiden means the state of being a 'virgin, unmarried and sexually inexperienced which in its primary sense signifies new, fresh or first, but it carries connotations of death. The maiden was a guillotine invented by the Scots in the 16th century and used as a method of execution for over a hundred years. (www.nms.ac.uk)

When Steinberg asked MacMurray to discuss this piece, her answer was short and succinct; Maiden is about 'women getting their hooks into you'.

(Appendix A) In the artist's catalogue, Soriano states,

Maiden, with delicate yet malevolent fishhooks threaded onto human hair, considers the essence of being female. Whilst once again the objects are aesthetically seductive, it is only on closer consideration that their violent nature becomes apparent. In simple terms MacMurray is exploring the notion of 'being a catch' of women 'getting their hooks into you. (Soriano, 2011)

This piece is exploring what its like to experience the predatory nature of women from a female perspective and may be referencing an experience in the artists life. The undisguised raw, cruelty of the barbed fishhooks combined with the intimacy of human hair seems to imply a personal conflict and trauma. MacMurray plays with the idea of being hunted and captured, evoking powerful feelings of pain and fear. She uses the fishhooks to convey the idea of being lured, caught and reeled in. The hair is a potent reference to black magic and the traditionally feminised art of witchcraft.

The idea of the 'maiden' is suggested by the powerful sexual symbolism of hair and together with the fishhooks, alludes to the body and the delicate flesh in the mouth and throat. This physically emotive piece is a metaphor for

hegemony; the undertones allude to entrapment and freedom, the pursuer, the prey and ultimately death and life. However, there is an added twist in the twenty-two fishhooks, catch-22 is a dilemma from which there is no escape.

Conclusion

The idea for this dissertation evolved from my enquiry into the subject of fashion and clothing as a legitimate visual resource for my own creative practice and research into artists who explore the qualities and human, bodily association of clothing in theirs. By broadening this to an interest in 'objects' and focussing on selected artworks by MacMurray I have set out an investigation into how objects can be used as metonyms to express concepts about the human condition.

My aims have been to understand how ordinary objects can represent the reality of human experience, what they say about us and how artists use them to express our feelings, fears, hopes and desires? In particular, how MacMurray combines elements of found objects in such a way as they convey aspects of our lives and express ideas that engage and fascinate us?

This topic has significance to us all, because through my research I have recognized that our lives are full of 'stuff' that have a particular appeal to us and we express ourselves through the way we use the things around us. We use a speech, language and objects to communicate visually in literal and abstract terms and we find meaning by having theories about language, art and objects.

I have looked at ideas concerning what makes us human, how figurative and visual language simultaneously interchanges and have used my findings to consider MacMurrays artwork. I propose that the theory of language is of fundamental importance to her practice. She uses objects as physical metonyms to represent and stand in for abstract ideas and the principle of binary opposition runs throughout her concepts, materials and words.

She sets out to prove that there are two sides to everything, a ying and yang, life and death, freedom and constraint, soft and hard and even if a dress is not a dress.

The degree of MacMurrays success at representing the human condition depends upon your own life experiences and physical reaction to her materials. My response to her work is emotive because I can identify with some of the aspects she explores like bereavement and loneliness. I am fascinated with the way she skilfully transforms objects into a physical embodiment of emotions and has forced me to confront difficult issues.

I consider that through her choice of objects MacMurray is successful at representing aspects of human experience and though she does not intentionally genderize, the artist is a woman and therefore brings the sensibility of a feminine perspective into her work. Her choice of objects is sensual, tactile and intimate to the body and in her hands become powerful metonyms for communicating ideas about what makes us irreducibly human, different and distinctive.

Illustrations



Fig 1, Beuys, J. (1970) Felt Suit in the Tate Collection, www.tate.org.co.uk
Felt. Dimension unconfirmed 1700 600 mm.



Fig 2, Bourgeois, L (1997) Pink Days and Blue days in LB Louise Bourgeois (2010) Tate Publishing.

Steel, fabric, bone, wood, glass, rubber, and mixed media.

297.2 × 221 × 221 cm overall.



Fig 3, Boltanski, C (2010) No Man's Land in magazine.saatchionline.com
Installation incorporating 30 tons of discarded clothing, a 60-foot crane and the sound of human heartbeats.



Fig 4, MacMurray, S. (2002) *Gladrags* in www.susie-macmurray.co.uk
10,000 fuschia pink balloons, rug underlay. Dimension variable.

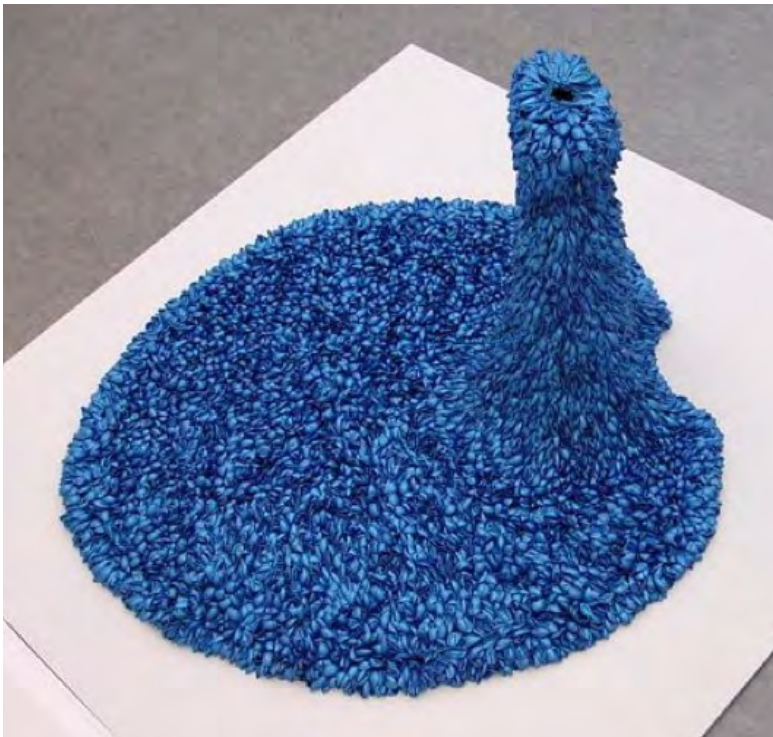


Fig 5, MacMurray, S. (2002) Icon in www.susie-macmurray.co.uk
15,000 metallic blue balloons, rug underlay. Dimension variable.



Fig 6, MacMurray, S. (2004) A Mixture of Frailties

in www.susie-macmurray.co.uk

1400 household gloves turned inside out, calico, tailors dummy.

Dimension variable.



Fig 7, MacMurray, S (2009) *Widow* in www.susie-macmurray.co.uk
Black nappa leather, 43 kg adamantite dressmakers pins, tailors dummy.
Dimension variable.



Fig 8, MacMurray, S (2006/7) Shell in www.susie-macmurray.co.uk
Mussel shells and red silk velvet. Dimension variable.



Fig 9, MacMurray, S. (2011) After Flock in www.susie-macmurray.co.uk
Dyed turkey feathers, convex polystyrene base. 90 x 90 x 15 cm.



Fig 10, MacMurray, S (2011) Feast in www.susie-macmurray.co.uk
Plastic food wrap, cotton thread, steel ring.
195 x 30cm diameter at widest point.



Fig 11, Nissan Micra magazine advert (1997)
 in Chandler, D, The Basics of Semiotics, Routledge (2002)

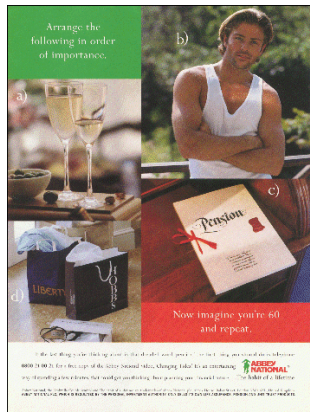


Fig 12, Abbey National advertising (1990s)
 in Chandler, D, The Basics of Semiotics, Routledge (2002)



Fig 13, Silk Cut cigarette magazine advert (1990s)
 in Chandler, D, The Basics of Semiotics, Routledge (2002)



Fig 14, MacMurray, S (2011) Here Come the Girls in www.agnewsgallery.com
Wine glasses, lipstick, wire. Dimension variable.



Fig 15, Oppenheim, M (1936) Object in www.moma.org/collection
Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon, cup 10.9 cm in diameter;
saucer 23.7 cm in diameter; spoon 20.2 cm long, overall height 7.3 cm.



Fig 16, Man Ray (1936) Petit déjeuner en fourrure (breakfast in fur)
in www.manray-photo.com/catalog/product



Fig 17, MacMurray, S (2011) Here Come the Girls
in www.manchestergalleries.org 1100 wine glasses, lipstick, wire.
Dimension variable.

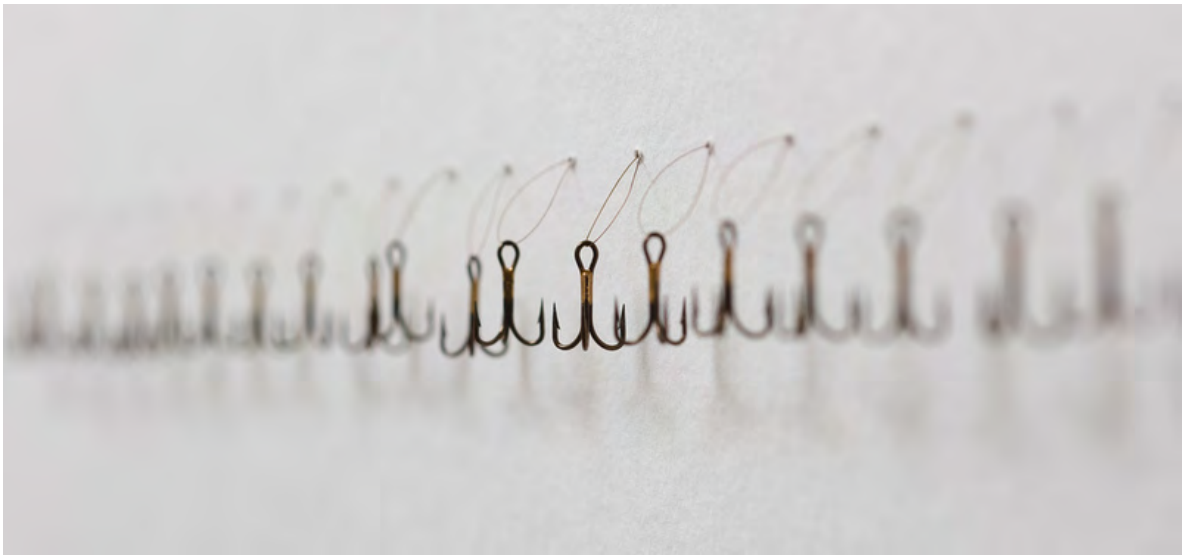
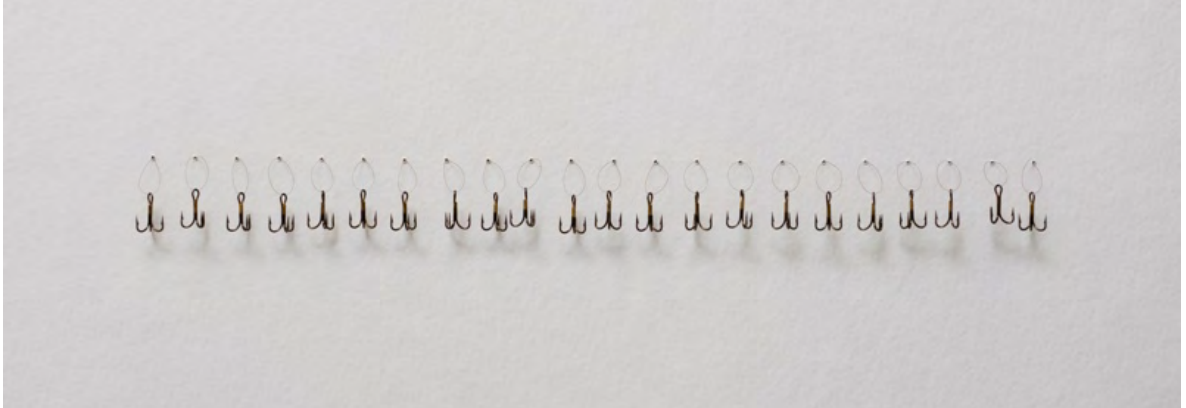


Fig 18, MacMurray, S (2011) Maiden in www.susie-macmurray.co.uk

Human hair, fishhooks. 23 x 53cm.

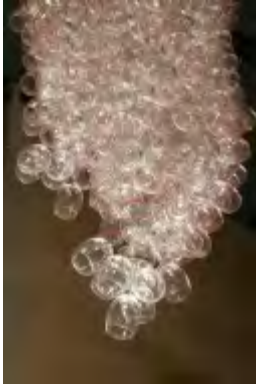
Appendix A

Exhibition notes for my visit to MacMurrays first solo show called 'Eyes of the skin' at Agnews Gallery, London. 9 Nov – 2 Dec 2011.

I have just been unbelievably lucky to see not only MacMurrays show called Eyes of the Skin at Agnews but to meet her and watch her being interviewed with Gina Agnew (Agnews – modern, British contemporary) by Susan Steinberg for Sky Art for a film about women artists. The working title is 'women in art'

I walked in to the Gallery and was talking to the gallery assistant about MacMurrays work. I was aware of a woman walking up to us and the gallery assistant said 'why don't you talk to the artists her self'. She was really friendly, down to earth. Wearing jeans, t-shirt. MacMurray came up because she heard us talking about her work.

We talked about Here Come the Girls. About the power women have and how they choose to use that power. They have the independence. How women choose to use that independence. (BG: alcohol abuse has risen in women. So her work is about the 2 sides of a story, a situation. Good and bad. The positive and the negative)



Left: Here Come the Girls (2011) Wine glasses, lipstick, wire.

Dimensions variable.

Right: A Mixture of Frailties (2004) Household gloves, calico, tailor's dummy.

Dimensions variable

(BG - this hangs from the ceiling to the floor. A cascade of wine glasses. All the same glasses. All the same lipstick applied by MacMurray and her assistant. Glasses glisten in the spotlights. MacMurray lets the materials do their job. They bend, droop and hang.

I drew and commented on the work in my sketchbook and was then allowed to watch the interview that took place around the 'glove dress' called A Mixture of Frailties. An interview for Sky Art by Susan Steinberg.

Gina Agnew explained how she met MacMurray. Agnews had moved into a new modern space in 2010 Albemarle Street so that they could exhibit more contemporary artwork. Gina Agnew said that her colleague, Tom Leighton had told her about MacMurray's work. GA looked at the website, saying what a clear, fantastic site it was and liked the work she saw. She thought that MacMurray's work would do well in Agnew's new site.

She contacted her and went up to Salford, Manchester to meet her in her studio. I think this must have been early this year because it seems that all this work was made over the summer of 2011.

Agnew said that you have to see MacMurrays work to really appreciate the size and materials used and the impact. MacMurray exhibits at Manchester Art Gallery. But up till now not represented by a London gallery. This was a whole new thing for her. She has been working as an artist for 10 years and had not considered the commercial world.

MacMurray was asked of the significance of this show. She said that she wants to make work, to see if things do what they say they will do. I think she might also mean to see what the materials develop into.



Stratum 2011. Islington Mill, attic space. 80 kg feather down.

A site-specific installation celebrating 10 years of Islington Mill, Salford. MacMurray is known for her site-specific installations. This exhibition is sculpture that does not have to consider the site. She has lost herself in the work all summer for Agnews. This exhibition, cling film; wax etc is all new for this exhibition.

MacMurray asked about the strengths and weaknesses of Manchester versus London. She answered that Manchester is a supportive, helpful and friendly environment for artists. But curators, galleries, and journalists from London miss you out. They do not seem to want to go up north. London scene is full.

Agnew and MacMurray discussed ideas together for the show. Agnew said that they would never tell the artist what to do. They trust the artist. Agnew was asked how she knew MacMurray would do all this work for the show. Agnew replied that she just knew she would.

MacMurray said at this point she is trained in Sculpture. Art Education:
2000-2001: MA Fine Art. Manchester Metropolitan University.
1997-2000: BA Sculpture. Manchester Metropolitan University.
1996-1997: Foundation in Art and Design. Manchester College of Arts & Technology.

In the room with the dress in it, Susan Steinberg commented on the difference between the dress and the art on the walls. Very modern sculpture versus modernist oil paintings in gold frames. Agnew compared MacMurray as the Sickert of today. That Sickert was the MacMurray of his time. Agnews sell very modernist artworks as well. They wanted to get into the contemporary market. The original gallery had red walls. Not conducive to contemporary artwork like MacMurrays. Agnews is seven generations old. Gina Agnew is an English graduate. On the Agnews web site she is modern, British contemporary.

Agnew and MacMurray discussed A Mixture of Frailties. MacMurray said that it was made out of 1400 yellow household gloves, turned inside out to expose a the soft and downy inner surface, like flayed skin. She says every one calls it a wedding dress, maybe because it's white. But she has never called it that. MacMurray referred to the circular nature of the train. You can only stand in it. You cannot move. Therefore you can only be admired from afar and you are trapped.

She said it is about the power and the bargaining within our selves. Giving up your independence. Gaining but losing. MacMurray said she was thinking

about the bound feet of Chinese girls. Families binding their feet to make them more attractive to husbands. (BG – beauty has a bad side)

The dress is the question. Steinberg thought it was amusing that you cannot wear it and it's made from gloves. MacMurray referred to the smell of latex, drowning and claustrophobic. Beautiful and horrible at the same time. It's confusing because of what it's made of. MacMurray was asked about transporting it. She said you take it off the dummy and roll it up and put it in a crate. The challenge was setting it up and getting the gloves to go in the right direction and spreading it out. (BG – all the gloves are the same. Attached in the same way. Hang the same length and droop the same. Same shadows. The edge of the train was dirty. Nice link with the fact that they are household gloves. They look nice in the spotlight)

Agnew said the exhibition has been well-received, good press. Highest footfall since they opened. A lot of sales and positive response. Agnew said, she loves MacMurray's work; everyone in the gallery loves it. Another year or so before another show.

Steinberg asked MacMurray if there was a female sensibility in her work. Women's work, the domestic. MacMurray said it's about being human, the human body, human frailty. (BG – MacMurray lets the materials do their job. They bend, droop, hang etc. The body works with gravity in the same way. Her visual research is hard ware shops and the materials themselves. Why is she so interested in the body? – a postmodern investigation in to the body. The insides of people. That may be a more female thing to want to do. But I do not think she particularly sees her work as female. It is to do with the body. She said that she is a woman so that's the way she sees it.

Its not about the female body it's the body. We all have hopes and fears. MacMurray said that it's coming from her. So the female aspect is irrelevant.



Maiden. 2011 Human hair, fishhooks on paper 23 x 53cm

(BG – A sense of voodoo. Maiden 1 and 2 were sold to women. Attachment was sold to men)

Steinberg said she went to Frieze this year and could not tell if male or female artists had done the artwork. Agnew said she believed that there were still fewer female artists exhibiting yet the art schools are full of women. Steinberg thought that the MOMA in New York was re-hanging to address the male and female issue. Steinberg is filming for SKY Art and the working title is Women in art. This maybe why she asked these female/male questions.



*Anima. Air compressor hose, wax, and steel bracket. 57cm x 27cm x 30cm.
Wax pieces 2011*

*Animus. Air compressor hose, wax, and steel bracket. 75cm x 27cm x 28cm.
Wax pieces 2011*

Steinberg asked MacMurray about Anima. MacMurray said it was the last piece she made for the show. It is a pair with Animus. (Research Jung)
Same materials as other sculpture in the show, wax and hose. She was playing and it came out without really examining what, why, how.

Anima and Animus are made from dairy hose and creamy white wax.

Anima consists of around 20 hoses varying from 1 to 2 feet in length and the wax looks like a huge ear bud on the end. Animus is the same but there are maybe 7 hoses and they are from 2 to 3.5 feet long. They hang down and are weightier.

She felt that Anima and Animus were related. She referred to the alchemy process. They came from somewhere inside me. MacMurray explained that Anima is the Jungian idea of the femininity in the male and Animus is the Jungian idea of masculinity in the female. SM referred to the BODILY and wall drawings. (BG – The male and female inside you. She named them after she had made them. Wax pods on the end of dairy hose. Hose used to carry body fluids. The pods are about the size of a fist. Soft but hard. The light makes them shine. The dairy hose are different lengths and the pods are the same size)



After Flock. 2011 Dyed turkey feathers, convex polystyrene base 90 x 90 x 15cm

Turkey feathers. Taken from Stratum I think. This is round dome of green and black feathers. There appears to be a dent, hole in the middle. You want to push your finger in it. MacMurray mentioned Venice Show.



Left: Venice lagoon series.

Right: Oracle 2008. Rubber dairy hose, dimensions variable

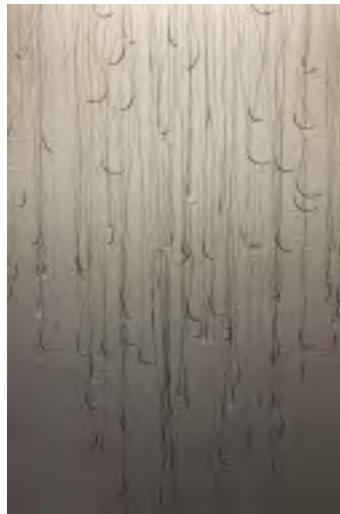
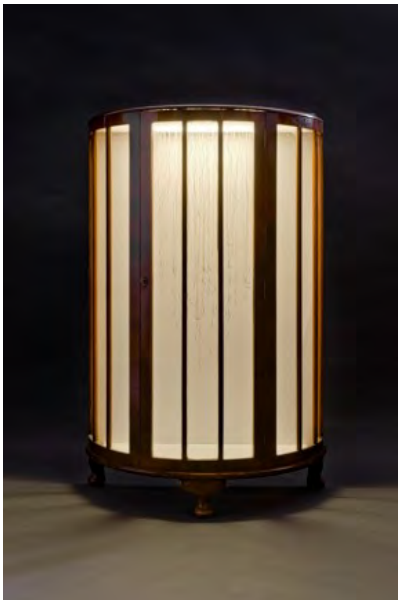
Oracle - the materials make the sculpture. They hang with their own weight. Tall. Like a crucifix. You have to look up at it. The hoses just grow out of the wall. No frame. It also looks like a person in a garment. This is the rubber hose piece that was about 7 foot tall and hung from the wall like a crucifix. I think there were 3 of them, See the flyer for the show. Bodily again. Wall drawing?

MacMurray was asked about the ideas behind her work. She referred to everyday materials. Matters that relate to the body, of the body, E.g. feathers, leather all used on the body, to wrap it up, keep it warm and constrain it. Feather Attic piece - STRATUM.



Attachment. Wax, fish hooks. Wax pieces 2011. (BG - Bought by men)

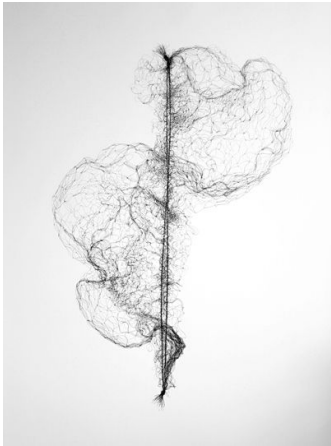
Fish hooks – feels the pain of it. How the fish might feel. She has a physical response to the materials.



Cabinet of Curiosity 2008. Glass fronted display cabinet, light box & ophthalmic sutures used in eye surgery.

Spooky, sinister. They suspend from the ceiling of the cabinet.
Different lengths of sutures. The cabinet is quite small. Like an old fashioned cabinet for displaying ornaments. I think there is a light in it. Sutures used in eye surgery.

Bandage/gauze all constrain the body. MacMurray does not feel her work targets the female body. It is all work that is of the body.



Left: Stretched Hairnet no 1 2011. Pen on paper. 152cm x 121cm.

Right: Gauze Bandage no 6 2011. Pen on paper. 152cm x 121cm.

No buying pattern yet.



Here Come the Girls Hundreds of wine glasses and lipstick hanging upside down from the ceiling by wires. Commissioned for the Manchester Art Gallery. Angels and Anarchy exhibition

MacMurray explains

From - <http://www.manchestergalleries.org/whats-on/here-come-the-girls/>

'While thinking of 'strong women' femininity, power and Christmastime, I couldn't help but remember the Boots TV commercials with crowds of women getting glammed up with make-up and marching out to celebrate to the catchy tune 'Here come the Girls', by the Sugarbabes. I hope visitors will

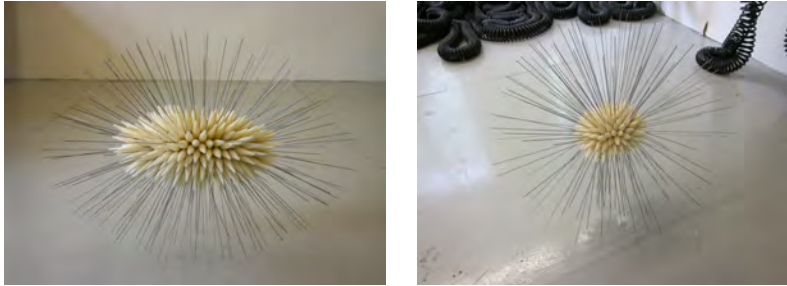
find the work beautiful and celebratory - it is made for a space where people gather to celebrate art, to hold events, during which glasses are raised and toasts are made. It is also intended to encourage thought on how female power/empowerment is now perceived, its various guises – cultural/political/sexual, as well as the ways women choose to exercise it, the ambiguities it throws up and the psychological bargains we strike with ourselves.

Atrium at Manchester Art Gallery. MacMurray referred to the Angels and Anarchy exhibition. www.manchestergalleries.org/angelsofanarchy/explore MacMurray referred to Oppenheim's Furry teacup. Was watching the Boots advert about girls going out at Christmas therefore you must buy the Boots presents. It is also about excess. Women have all this power but what do they do with it. How far do you go? How do women use the power they have achieved? Made with her lipstick and that of her assistant. It is hung like saddlebags. 6 wine glasses on each side. They are hung on varying lengths of wire. They come apart in sets of 12 and crate up.



*Feast 2011 (large version). Plastic food wrap, cotton thread, steel ring.
195cm h x 35cm diameter at widest point. Clingfilm protects meat – women's spa treatments.*

Feast came originally from story telling. A gallery I think in Los Angeles sent 300 artists a birdhouse each. They were told to do what ever they wanted to them and send them back. MacMurray wrapped her birdhouse in cling film. It was 40 cm sphere I think with a hole in it. Customs in LA were convinced it was full of illicit substances. Even though they x rayed it, they still slit it open. The gallery were horrified, MacMurray thought it was amusing.



Left: Swarm wax, steel pins. Wax pieces 2011. (BG - Bought by a man)

Right: Nest. Wax, steel pins. Wax pieces 2011.

Nest was not in the show but I have put it here because it relates to Swarm. Made from wax and long 'lay pins' Sculptural for a wall piece. Wanted to make a discreet object. The long pins are used in knitting. Playing with materials again. The wax is protective body. (Wax looks like saturated fat. The weight of it bends the pins that supports it)

Steinberg asked MacMurray what her art school influences were.

Answer – Arte Provera, Louise Bourgeois, Ann Hamilton, Rebecca Horn, Cornelia Parker. Sensibility about the touch of the body. Steinberg said the rest of the interview would be in MacMurrays studio in Salford.

Gina Agnew asked about who bought what. i.e. male, female.

Anima bought by a man. Hair net drawings – no pattern as yet.

Maiden 1 and 2 bought by women. Attachment bought by a man.

Swarm bought by a man.

Appendix B

This chart analyses artworks against my research criteria.

Synecdoche: a part of something that is used to denote the whole thing.

Metonymy: a word used to suggest something to which it is associated.

Human condition: meaning, loneliness, freedom and mortality.

Artwork	Object	Metonymy	Ying - Positive	Yang - Negative	Human Condition
Widow	Steel pins Dress	Pain, nerves Skin/Woman	the wearer Worn by women	the viewer	Mortality Freedom
A Mixture of Frailties	Rubber gloves	Skin Women Servitude	Part of a group Looking after a family	Servitude Drudgery	Freedom
Here Comes the Girls	Wine glasses Lipstick	Alcohol Skin/woman	Celebration independence	Binge drinking dependence	Freedom Loneliness Mortality
Oracle	Dairy hose cows	Arteries, veins Bodily fluids female	Being alive Breathing	Fragility of the material	Mortality
Attachment	Fish hooks Wax	Mouth, throat Fat	Hooks protect the host object	Caught, reeled in. Hooks act as an aggressive layer	Freedom
Gladrags	Balloons	Skin, mouth	Celebration fun	False. Balloons go brittle with time	Mortality
Shell	Mussell shells	female genitalia			Mortality
Drawings Stretched hairnet	Hairnet	The head, mind Thoughts	Delicacy of the mind	dementia	Mortality
Stratum Flock	Feathers	Skin Loft space = memories	Comfort, warmth protection Delicacy, fragility	Suffocation Smothering easily lost	Mortality
Feast	Cling film		Protection	Concealment	Mortality

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2. December 2010. 'Aware Art Fashion Identity' exhibition. The Royal Academy of Arts, London.
3. December 2011. 'The Eyes of the Skin' exhibition' at Agnew's Gallery, 35 Albemarle Street, London W1S 4JD 09. I met the artist, Susie MacMurray at Agnews Gallery and watched her being interviewed by the documentary filmmaker Susan Steinberg for a Sky ART film. I took notes throughout the interview. See appendix A.

Secondary research

Essays

Published essays on www.susie-macmurray.co.uk

The Eyes of the Skin by Kathleen Soriano [read essay](#)

Promenade by Frances Guy [read essay](#)

Sound Relics by Annabel Lucas [read essay](#)

Network by Dr Catherine Harper [read essay](#)

Shell by Dr Catherine Harper [read essay](#)

Echo by Caroline Worthington [read essay](#)

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Feb 2)

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