

UNDERSTANDING MATERIALITY AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE THROUGH CREATIVE ARTISTIC EXPLORATION

by

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Abstract: This paper is based on current research into the interpretation of archaeological artefacts and human experience of the past through art practice. It further develops the idea forwarded by some contemporary archaeologists that visual creative exploration can convey an understanding of these objects that reaches beyond their functionality and material existence.

Visual art communicates a type of knowledge that is not usually expressed in the intellectual, periodic structure of language and written text used in academia. It is a synthesis of individual perception, ideological background and physical manifestation of ideas. Building on the notions of material culture as a non-verbal mode of communication (Tilley, 1989) and the artefact as containing human experience (Shanks, 2005), I argue that visual artistic practice utilises the unpredictable nature of human agency to facilitate new interpretations and explanations.

Art practice as a creative process can help archaeologists to directly engage with material culture, expand their awareness of materials and explore new interpretive approaches.

Key words: Art practice; materiality; communication.

Resumo: Este artigo baseia-se em pesquisas que estão em curso no domínio da interpretação de artefactos arqueológicos e da experiência humana do passado através da prática artística. Procura desenvolver a ideia transmitida por alguns arqueólogos contemporâneos de que a exploração criativa visual pode permitir uma compreensão de tais objectos que vai muito para além da sua funcionalidade e existência material.

As artes visuais comunicam um tipo de conhecimento que não é habitualmente expresso na estrutura intelectual, organizada por fracções que se vão juntando umas às outras, da linguagem e da escrita usadas nos meios académicos. É uma síntese de percepção visual, “pano de fundo” ideológico, e manifestação física de ideias. Baseio-me em noções de cultura material como um modo de comunicação não verbal (Tilley, 1989) e do artefacto como um reflector da experiência humana (Shanks, 2005). Assim, proponho que a prática das artes visuais usa a natureza imprevisível da acção intencional humana no sentido de conseguir novas interpretações e explicações.

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A prática artística como processo criativo pode ajudar os arqueólogos a envolverem-se directamente na cultura material, a expandir a sua consciência dos materiais e a explorar novas abordagens interpretativas.

Palavras-chave: Prática artística; materialidade; comunicação.

Art Practice in Archaeological Research

Contemporary art practice has recently been drawn into the archaeological debate as a means of gaining further understanding of the past (Renfrew, 2003). Some of today's archaeologists are searching for new ways of interpreting evidence and expressing findings to include a description of human experience. (Shanks, 2005b; Tilley, 1989) The processes through which this additional understanding is achieved with the aid of art practice are, however, still unclear.

This paper will address the function art practice might assume in archaeology. Art making will be explained as a process, not necessarily confined by traditional media such as painting, or indeed representational imagery. Much of contemporary art practice in the past fifteen years has begun to critically evaluate the processes involved in art rather than concentrating on the finished work. This has led to the argument that art making should be defined as an enquiry similar to research in other disciplines, as research questions, collection of visual data and verification in a final synthesis are vital components of the process.

In this context I argue that art practice, not as a separate activity or field of research, but as a research medium bears potential for other disciplines such as archaeology in creating and communicating knowledge beyond the confines of verbal language.

At first glance, art practice exemplifies the difficulty in dealing with individual experience and motivation. It is not created as a result of external pressure – it does not directly produce food and rarely shelter. Its motivations are somewhat less tangible. In a functional sense, art could be said to develop and strengthen a sense of identity, social cohesion and visual traditions. In more recent times, artistic activity has been associated with self-expression, spontaneity and intuition.

The aim of the art practitioner is rarely of a utilitarian nature. Reconstructing the originally intended meaning or the initial motivation is therefore difficult. This has led to contemporary artists increasingly writing theoretical texts to explain and contextualise their work.

Whereas in visual art practice, written text serves to provide additional information only, archaeologists are bound to language as their primary mode of expression, with an interpretation of the past being brought into the present through the act of writing and its result – text.

Through the interpretive process, information gathered and recorded through all available senses is transformed into the conscious, periodic structures of verbal language. Through this process, a large quantity of information which does not fit into the constraints of verbal language, is lost to the receiver of the final product. Rather than examining visual representation and its value as communication, the following will concentrate on the differences in use of the visual image in art and archaeology. This will further illustrate the use of images as part of a creative process, not its final outcome.

Image and Experience

Due to the information gap between one individual's experience in a variety of sensory media, and their verbal description of it, images have been traditionally used both in art and archaeology to further illuminate their ideas.

It is therefore necessary to illustrate the differences in the use and function of images by artists and archaeologists. All too often, artistic techniques such as drawing are seen as the sum of creative activity. As explained above, attention to different modes of perception is the fundamental principle of art making, the image often being a record of the process of investigation rather than an end in itself.

In archaeological illustration, the artistic interpretive process can be undesirable and a hindrance to the accurate recording of finds, sites and structures. The archaeological drawing seeks to convey relevant information, editing any superfluous detail and providing a standard format for comparable visual data. Its main distinguishing characteristic is its selectivity. Although vital in archaeological practice, this kind of selective representation bears its own problems, which to date are very much under-theorised. Only with the advent of computer modelling has the question of appropriate representation been raised among illustrators.

The problem of interpretation and adherence to conventions both in research and illustration is exemplified in the Cambridge Manual in Archaeology on Archaeological Illustration. Psychologist and art writer Ernst Gombrich is paraphrased as defining the function of an illustration as being related to its purpose and its audience (Adkins, 1989). Furthermore, available technology is cited as a factor in determining the form of the illustration. The illustrators themselves do not have any interpretive freedom once these three factors are defined. Economy of transmitting information and the audience's level of understanding determine the type of drawing required.

In this instructional text the emphasis is on enabling the reader to produce a conventionally reasonable illustration themselves. However, "the illustrator must, of

course, know which details are important and should be included, and which can be omitted” (Adkins, 1989:7). The impact of this decision-making process, whether the decision is made by illustrators or archaeologists, on the perception of the artefact or site illustrated is not mentioned. It is accepted that an archaeological drawing will be an “interpretive diagram” (1989:7) and not an artistic image.

When compared to the rigorous accuracy of the archaeological illustration, the artistic image could be viewed as whimsical, purely intuitive or even as a romantic interpretation. Indeed, some histories of archaeological drawing include examples of romantic depiction – in the art historical sense - of artefacts within the landscape they were excavated from (Piggott, 1978:6). To the modern archaeologist, this mode of representation seems inaccurate and not relevant to scientific enquiry. The romantic paintings or drawings appear to signify a period in archaeology which was less familiar with scientific methods.

An example of romantic painting familiar to many archaeologists is John Constable’s 1836 watercolour of Stonehenge, which, without being referred to in the text, is used as a frontispiece in the Thames and Hudson publication of Piggott’s “Antiquity Depicted”.

It soon becomes clear that despite its depiction of an archaeological site, it is not an illustration. The preliminary sketches leading up to the final version give an insight into the artist’s intention. Having produced a number of oil studies of Salisbury cathedral, Constable visited Stonehenge, a local tourist attraction. The sketches he executed during his visit in 1920 could easily be mistaken for illustrations, as they seem to give an accurate representation of the monument in pencil. In fact, an initial roughly shaded compositional sketch was scaled up and slightly altered in the studio, not drawn from direct observation. The studio watercolour pursues a different aim again. Rather than investigating or recording the monument, the artist captures an atmosphere, the experience of visiting the site. The tempestuous skies so typical of the romantic period are Constable’s main concern – the monument forms part of the landscape and a setting for the lone figures within the composition. An inscription on the mount of the painting verbally captures the artist’s perception:

“The mysterious monument of Stonehenge, standing remote on a bare and boundless heath, as much unconnected with the events of past ages as it is with the uses of the present, carries you back beyond all historical records into the obscurity of a totally unknown period.” (in Upstone, 1991:95)

With archaeologists currently seeking an approach that encompasses the entirety of human experience in and of the past, an artistically constructed image of sites and artefacts, such as Constable’s watercolour, should not be seen as a “wrong” or obsolete way of representing the site. Its aim is not factuality or a claim to objectivity, but to record a subjective experience as part of the human condition.

A Hermeneutic Approach to Materiality

It has been suggested that artistic enquiry and the hermeneutic perspective are related in their attentiveness to context and differences in interpretive views, and perhaps more importantly, the role of the artist as an active participant in the interpretive process (Hannula, 2005). This connection between interpreter and interpretation is particularly visible in art practice, where researchers/artists physically create their own versions of reality through imagery or three-dimensional sculpture.

The development of artworks takes place through cycles of preparatory research of visuals and ideas, periods of incubation and realisation through a variety of media. Ideally, these are interspersed with periods of critical reflection and analysis, which evaluate the works on a background of historical relevance, motivation and critical context. In art, the suitability of the medium to the message is an added criterion, which in archaeology has not been sufficiently addressed.

In the following, a part of the process of exploration through visual means will be re-traced, from the artist's first encounter with an object to the creation of independent works of art. These works deal with the meaning of the object, its function and material nature.

The object of the visual investigation (Fig.1) could be described as a small, hollow, conical ceramic object, if one does not intend to assume anything about its function or meaning. It is also around 20 cms in height, pierced by a high density of holes and found in a variety of different shapes at European Bronze Age sites, from Biskupin, Poland, to Sussex, England.

Its function remains ambiguous. Often interpreted as a strainer of some sort, it has more recently been suggested that it could be a lamp cover, or a Bronze Age version of a Bunsen burner, used for soldering fine gold work (Wood, 2004)

From an artist's point of view, the uncertainty surrounding the artefact's function does not represent a problem to be eliminated. The conditions under which the artefact began its existence, how it was made, who made it, and who used it are not the artist's main concern.

The art practitioner will seek a personal meaning in the artefact, bringing it into the realm of his or her own experience and exploring it from an individual perspective. One of the aims of this process often is to communicate to the viewer a concern or content which utilizes the aesthetic and formal qualities of the artwork to convey an aspect of the personal experience of the artist. The creation of physical artefacts and images is the medium through which the artist conducts his or her research and records a creative process.

As a full philosophical, aesthetic and experimental exploration of the object would exceed the scope of this paper, the following will give a brief overview of

the perspectives applied to the artistic interpretation of the artefact. The use of specific visual media as analytical tools will be of particular interest, as the physical means of expression qualify the relationship between the art practitioner as researcher and the direct human experience of and with artefacts.

When considering creative exploration and the artistic image, it is helpful to keep in mind the difference in motivation between artist and archaeologist. While the archaeological experiment is valued for its scientific, reproducible outcomes, the artistic experiment seeks to find a multiplicity of original, new outcomes.

For example, Figure 1 shows a replica from memory of the sieve/strainer/bunsen burner object investigated by Jacqui Wood. Initially modelled in tempered ceramic, it underwent a transformation from “replica” to “sculpture” during an experimental Art and Archaeology symposium, organised by a group of Irish artists in 2004¹. The object was left in the workshop area with Bronze Age-style charcoal furnaces to be used as needed. In one instance it was used as a crucible lid preventing charcoal from falling into the molten bronze. Later on, participants placed it on the charcoal furnaces for entertainment and fireworks. Photography was used to capture the spectacular effects. (Fig. 2). The object undergoes a variety of transformations in the contexts of functionality, spontaneous individual response and aesthetic composition.

In this example the boundaries between experiment and art performance, work and play are completely dissolved. Each activity, however, yielded some results: It was discovered that the object worked both as a lid for bronze crucibles as well as a device for channelling the heat from the furnace into a narrow flame, which could be accessed without the danger of burning one’s hands. A video animation was produced, which captured the object breathing fire as the bellows pumped air into the furnace. Photographic images recorded the intimate scale of an industrial activity, and of the powerful tools used. Functionality and human agency work as connected elements within a performance.

From an aesthetic perspective, its relation to the elemental forces of the furnace fire becomes relevant, as the process of shaping and firing is ingrained in its texture and surface. Vitrification and scorch marks are part of the sculpture, evoking the idea of “Truth to Material” so valued by the Modern sculptors.

During this experiment, the artefact has recurred as a motif in various forms. An aesthetic transformative exercise has yielded a number of sculptural pieces in ceramic, which release the artefact from the notion of functionality and view it from

¹ This group, Umha Aois (Irish for “Bronze Age”) was founded in 1995 and consists of artists, archaeologists and craftspeople. In their annual symposia, members experiment with Bronze Age casting technologies in a variety of contexts, such as art practice and experimental archaeology.

a Modernist artistic perspective as a collection of formal elements. The shape of the object has undergone a series of studies, which concentrate on the conical shape and the holes pierced through the surface as sculptural elements (Fig.3). By modifying the form and scale of the object to such extremes, the notion of functional use retreats into the background.

Similar to the replication of the artefact, a further suite of smaller pieces investigates the processes and substances which form the fabric of the object (Fig.4). Each tiny sculpture acts as a witness of its manufacture, bearing the traces of open firing in charcoal furnaces. A white glaze, applied as a “clean slate” records every stream of air, every temperature difference – the conditions surrounding it at the time of making.

The sculptures are displayed together with used clay crucibles, reddened from the oxidised bronze and vitrified from the heat of the furnace. Functional objects become sculptures through vicinity.

Transcending the aesthetics of the processes surrounding the artefact, and indeed the resulting sculptures, is the aim of a series of small paintings (Figs. 5, 6). The object is transformed again, this time not into a different shape, but a different dimension, from the spatial context of the casting site to the plane of the painting. These studies do not attempt to depict the object. The object becomes an agent within the pictorial space, creating a narrative by relating to the other shapes. Language and meaning are much more important in these works. Titles, composed from fragments of conversations which took place during the casting sessions, direct the viewer towards an intimate and personal interpretation. Researching archaeological processes and artistic expression are bound together by the image, with the titles specifically referring to the artists’ and researchers’ own personal experience of the activity.

Regarding the first series of explorations, the Modernist, aesthetic approach does not favour titles – designations such as “Composition”, “1953” or “untitled” are familiar to the museum-going spectator. In this case, “Five Pierced Forms” or “Group of 12” are more than adequate, as the spectator is capable of perceiving the same set of sensory data. The object remains the same.

When addressing the question of meaning, however, the image or sculpture becomes dependent on the title.

There appears to be a divide between the “processual” approach, which specifically utilises processes of manufacture or the qualities of the material, and the search for individual, personal significance, which uses language to connect image and meaning. This tension, which occurs in archaeological theory as well, may arise from the inability of linguistic structure to adequately communicate the sensual impressions through which an experience of materiality is constructed.

Objectivity and Creativity?

Until now art practitioners have been justifying their practice-based approach from a mainly philosophical basis, relating the artist's creative sensitivity to a phenomenological experience of reality.

Artist and educationalist Carolyn Bloomer has summarised what is known about the psychology of perception in "Principles of Visual Perception" (1990), a work aimed to promote an understanding of the specific sensitivity of visually trained artists.

The trained artistic vision differs significantly from everyday perception. In order to navigate our environment and ordinary situations without having to constantly re-assess every detail, we rely heavily on the mechanism of recognition. In gestalt psychology, the recognition of the figure, as opposed to the "ground" or background noise, leads to an experience of closure, the satisfactory attribution of meaning to a stimulus, or "confirmation of a pre-existing idea". A typical operation is the recognition of patterns in random stimuli, for instance the seeing of objects in clouds. Mental operations may also compensate for missing information. This occurs constantly in visual perception, where the brain "fills in" for the eye – we do not consciously see the blind spot on our retina, for example. These mechanisms illustrate the tendency of the human mind to interpret a stimulus according to learnt mental models. This concept is more than familiar to researchers working in a postmodern context - "You see what you think you see". (Bloomer, 1990)

While helpful and necessary in negotiating everyday life, for scientists this process of perception is problematic. The habitual interpretation of stimuli presents the first hurdle to achieving objectivity defined as independence from the observer's own mindset. It is also a hindrance in conceiving new possible explanations of phenomena and relating information in new ways, in other words, creative thinking.

According to Bloomer, artists and scientists "display high tolerance of disorder" and the ability to "deal with unfamiliar, discomfiting, mind-boggling ideas". (Bloomer, 1990:16,17). This comment points us towards the contribution artists can make to other disciplines, especially in linking material objects and visual images to meaning and experience. A vital component of creative activity, performed by both artists and scientists, is the delay of closure, which is the recognition of familiar patterns or "figures". Postponing closure needs to be learnt, as it opposes the ordinary mode of perception. An exercise in open-mindedness, creative activity keeps the practitioner searching for meaning, thereby inducing attention to details normally overlooked, and presenting a greater variety of possible interpretations of the stimulus.

The attention to detail resulting from this greater awareness and the suspension of closure can extend to the artist's, or generally the creative person's own experience.

The main problem to be overcome, it seems, is the divide between the medium through which experience is generated and the medium through which it is communicated to others. When experiencing an environment or a situation, many different factors are having an effect on the individual – a variety of sensory impressions, location within the environment, own mental patterns and expectations and so forth. As no two individuals can ever assume the same position, and therefore never make the same experience, the attempt to understand individual experience, perception and agency in the past is often criticised as subjective and relativistic (Klejn, 2006).

The common idiom in academia is still the written language with its own definitions of meaning. Scientific models have established their own conventions and are laying claim to universal validity and objectivity.

However, in the empirical tradition associated with the sciences, John Locke recognised the insufficiency of language as a medium of communication. If used to convey simple ideas in philosophical or scientific discourse, the meaning of words needs to be defined by relating them directly to observable objects, not to other abstract ideas. This should facilitate the accurate transmission of knowledge from speaker to receiver (Locke in Harris and Taylor, 1997).

What is important here is the attempt to anchor language to the direct experience of objects. For artists, ideas and theoretical concepts are inextricably linked to the material object. Its interpretation has to consider all aspects – physical material, form and function. It also needs to postpone any conclusion about the motivation of the artefact's creator, allowing space for curiosity, intuition and creativity, vital characteristics of human beings.

In their practice, artists are then constantly negotiating the divide of material processes and objects and the immaterial world of ideas and meaning (Hodder, 2002).

The task of the artist may therefore be described as conducting visual experiments, which yield a large quantity of possible interpretations of a site or artefact, and to explore a wide variety of human concerns connected to the subject of investigation. As suggested by art educationalist Graeme Sullivan, art expands on the natural sciences, which assess the validity of their findings by probability, and the social sciences, whose standard is plausibility (2005). Art practice is successful and valid if it offers *possibilities* that force us to extend our frame of reference.

Considering the different media for artistic exploration, sculpture may be particularly suitable to scholars of material culture. Often on an intimate, personal scale, their texture and substance are tangible and therefore provide an array of sensual impressions, which are elemental to the construction of experience. These are as important to the interpretation of the object as visual stimuli and mental models. Not only does the practical artistic experiment produce a large variety of

new ideas, but the contact points between researcher and object are also physical. Especially in the case of sculpture, the physical attributes of a site or object are immediately transformed from the artists subjective experience into a physical reality, which can in turn be experienced by others.

Creative exploration through art practice therefore offers both new ways of perceiving and interpreting material culture and an opportunity to directly experience a medium of communication, which is non-verbal and non-linear.

CONCLUSION

In a creative interpretive process, the delay of closure prevents the premature attribution of function or meaning to objects and sites, leaving a space for alternative explanations. Creative art practice also encompasses more than just cognitive, social and rational levels of human motivation. It acknowledges the more obscure, individual reasons for action which do not leave physical traces in the archaeological record, such as intuitive and emotional motivations. It is based on the full spectrum of human experience and does not exclusively deal with one particular medium.

If art practice is to be used as a means to bridge the current divide in archaeology between material culture and human experience, a direct engagement with the materiality of objects, environments and substances is necessary. Sensual impressions need to be evoked in the artist or archaeologist to make direct personal experience possible. Contemporary art practice cannot provide a universal explanation for human agency and individual experience. Neither can creative or artistic engagement with material objects and environments reconstruct a past experience. But it can expand a researcher's frame of reference to include the possibility of experiences that differ significantly from his or her own.

Present means of communication within the academy, however, do not favour direct experience. Written text and diagrams as the only accepted media corroborate the dichotomy between materiality and abstract idea. Where expression through language is reliant on previously defined ideas which are linked to the experience of objects, visual expression may, through its existence within a material present provoke direct experiences itself. The question must be asked if academics have equipped themselves with the appropriate tools to overcome the divide between materiality and experience.

Until recently, archaeologists have been investigating contemporary art as separate from archaeology. This has led to an implicit view that archaeologists can gain some insight into their own discipline from studying the artworks themselves.

I argue that current art practice functions as a thinking tool, which deals with

non-verbal expression and draws on the artist's own material and ideological experience. It is therefore not sufficient for archaeologists to analyse contemporary art in the same manner as the archaeological record or material culture in general. In order to fully benefit from the creative process, archaeologists may need to participate in it.

The creative process may be used as a means of postponing closure, thereby preventing premature conclusions, while at the same time deepening the archaeologist's awareness of materials. Creative exploration can then serve as a preparatory stage to a research process, a physical brainstorming session as it were, preparing researchers for the unexpected and furthering their understanding of the objects, sites and materials they are interpreting.

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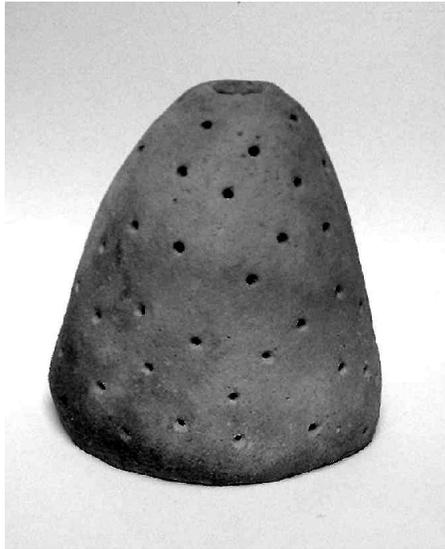


Fig. 1 – Sieve/strainer/bunsen burner
ceramic, pit-fired. C. Hansen, 2004



Fig. 2 – Object on Furnace
Ceramic, charcoal, fire, air. C. Hansen, 2006

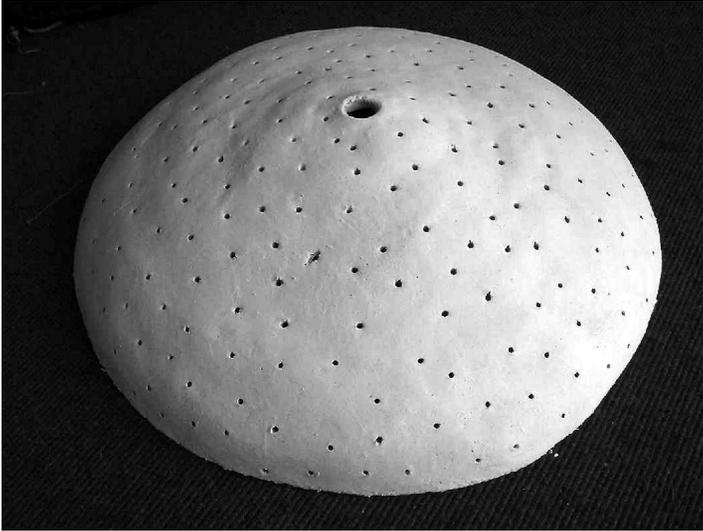


Fig. 3 – Formal Exercise. ceramic, water, tin glaze, unfired.
C. Hansen, 2005



Fig. 4 – Objects and Crucibles. ceramic, charcoal, air, fire, bronze,
tin glaze. C. Hansen, 2006

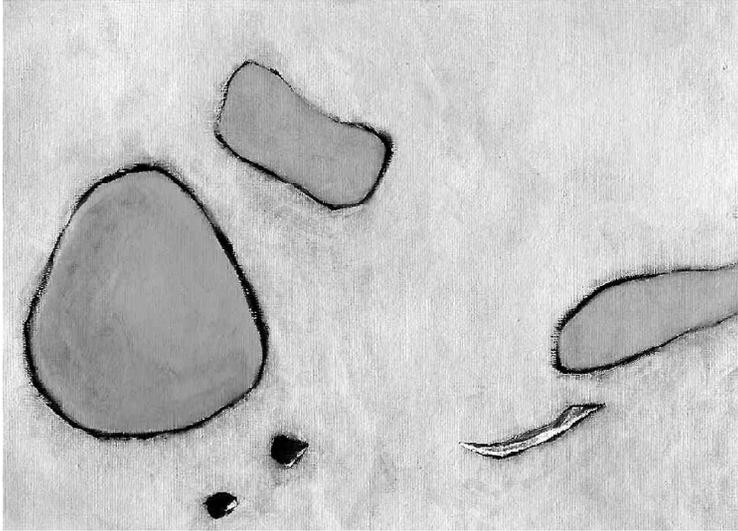


Fig. 5 – “It is too dry now to be pierced”
acrylic paint on textured paper. C. Hansen, 2006

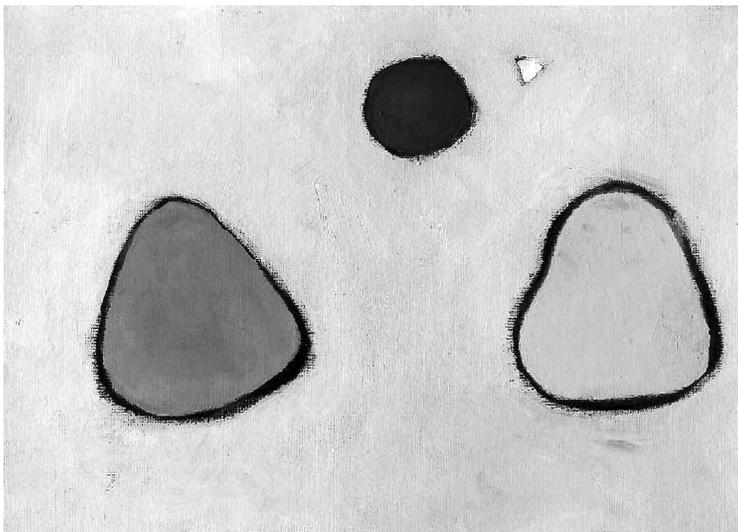


Fig. 6 – “Will you fire it before we eat?”
acrylic paint on textured paper. C. Hansen, 2006