

# Reveal/Conceal

[*Reveal/Conceal* Eric Cameron and Christopher Gardiner. Moose Jaw Museum and Art Gallery, SK, April 14-June 4, 2011; Swift Current Art Gallery, SK, Oct. 5-Nov. 19, 2011.]

## SELF, CONTAINED

Eric Cameron and Chris Gardiner create seemingly spare formal objects, hand-made monochromes—self-contained, silent, beautiful and strange. But beneath their cool minimalist shells lie warmer layers of experience, ritual, repression, and desire. Like visitors in a museum, these calm figures roil with deep feeling beneath deliberate wrappings.

Eric Cameron's Thick Paintings consist of thousands of slender layers of alternating white and gray gesso brushed over everyday articles—a book, beer bottle, lettuce, chestnut, egg, chair, rose, telephone book, and so on. The strata are so dense that they obliterate the original items and morph them into non-objective sculptures. Chris Gardiner builds anxiety containers. He collects possessions whose donors feel they are burdened by negative affect. The toxic materials are bundled into cloth bags by the blindfolded artist who then sews up the sacks and inters them in a handmade wooden box. The boxes are then bound in fabric and sealed by thousands of stitches and strokes of paint.

In both cases, personal articles are buried by accretions of paint, labour and time. The resulting new things are compelling but ontologically suspect. They have an indefinite presence, uncertain being. They are both mere real things and works of art, neither quite paintings nor sculptures. And the extraordinary amount of care invested in them, along with the promise of hidden personal content, lends them a quality of being that beyond mere matter.

The anxiety containers and Thick Paintings perversely conceal rather than reveal their subjects, creating a mystery which, because unsolvable, leads viewers to reflect more on the kernels than the husks. The still-life subjects of Cameron's twenty-seven initial Thick Paintings (begun in 1979) are domestic articles ready-to-hand and chosen almost randomly. The painting process however entails decades of ritual: "an average of about three hours of work per day, weekdays and weekends, rain or shine, day in, day out, month after month, to keep me within sight of that ten thousand half-coat-per-year total."<sup>i</sup> Apart from being mundane traces of the artist's life, these mummified possessions are incidental. Cameron's real subject is his ceremony of concealment. The secreted things are less essential than is the act of having, keeping and embroidering a secret. In this work, being is process rather than essence.

Gardiner's project is a little different. While he, too, performs a disciplined ritual over many years, the possessions he entombs in his personal anxiety containers are significant to him. Though shrouded, the care he takes in the veiling is a clue that what lies beneath his golden caresses is meaningful to him. When he embalms the belongings of others (for example for a cancer survivor), Gardiner blinds himself so as not to betray his client's secrets. He neutralizes his notice so as not to contaminate these effects with his affect. This is an act of compassion and

duty, a sacred service. The process is the content. The purpose is to reify emotions, to give form to feeling. He legitimates emotions by sharing the fact of their existence but not the specificity of their content. The subject is acknowledged to be carrying an emotional burden but his or her privacy is protected. Gardiner's goal is not to hide the bodies, however. Anxiety containers are like cremation urns which give the absent an uncanny new presence.

These related practices are emblematic of an introverted desire to have presence but to remain illegible; to give hints, but not confirmation; to be socially engaged but retain a reserve, a separate space for contemplation free from surveillance. The essential meaning of this work is not a property of the things alone but experienced in their re-making. Both practices consist of having space and time apart from others, an empty margin within which one is one's self. In this room of one's own the artist is free to do things that symbolically satisfy their in-most needs and meanings. While introspective, this work is not always solipsistic or narcissistic. Uppermost in the desire of the mature adept is that the work be of service—emotionally or intellectually, if not always practically—to those beyond the studio. It resembles alchemy.

This essay takes Eric Cameron seriously when he professes that his individual works should be “understood and experienced as an object of feeling.”<sup>iii</sup> At first, this seems an odd claim. We are familiar with art—such as Van Gogh's—that more easily expresses and evokes feelings. Drained of the usual signifiers and stimulators of emotion, particularly representation and colour, Cameron's Thick Paintings are coy, subtle and cloaked in a protective layer of conceptual cleverness. The species of feeling they suggest are of a considered rather than ebullient sort; more Apollonian than Dionysian—and “English,” Cameron is sure to add—more articulate repressions than wanton abandon. They are a slow burn.

Emotions overwhelm us; we are their subject not their author. Feeling, however, is a mode of consciousness that contemplates sensations. It is a means of evaluating stimuli including emotions (feelings). If objects of emotion express specific momentary sensations and attitudes (usually toward something or someone), an “object of feeling” has the character of searching discernment. It embodies a self-conscious record of time and introspective action rather than expresses a brief moment (of sensation). An object of feeling is reflective rather than reactive. An object of feeling is a metaphor of the feeling subject, the considering and considerate consciousness. It is also a substitute, a doppelganger produced by the artist as an object of contemplation, an externalization (objectification) of a slice of the self phenomenon.

On the other hand, Cameron really does regard his Thick Paintings as “objects of feeling” in the sense of literally containing affect. He sees them as “the concentration of lived experience” and believes that his “unconscious feelings” are “imprinted” in them.<sup>iii</sup> We all know what that feels like. When doing a “mindless repetitive” activity—driving, a daily walk, gardening—our thoughts wander and sometimes become associated with things around us. Certain objects become associated with the inner dialogues, mental images and feelings we had while being with them. A scent reminds me not only of a specific person who wore it but also how I feel about her. Returning to the garden in the spring, even three decades later, fragments of those old impressions recur unbidden as if recorded in the plants, stones and trees themselves. The layers of the Thick Paintings, like pages in a book, are similarly inscribed—for the author. But it is a

volume with only one possible reader. The rest of us can only project meaning into the matter; making these sculptures strangers whom we speculate about but cannot fully know.

This is true when we are in a logical mode. In an affective and metaphoric mode—as when we are in the garden or on that walk—however, we are in an empathetic relationship with the world, our minds, the artwork and its maker. In such a time-space our reading-into feels like a reading-of. The hard-headed will balk at this abandonment of reason, but their frustration comes from being literal when they should be literary. We do this sort of thing all the time—when we read or watch fiction, when we imagine things that are not real. We are momentarily captured by an illusion, are moved by it and learn from the experience as if it were real.

Cameron's Thick Paintings and Gardiner's anxiety containers ask us to understand them with both senses of the word 'feeling': the detached evaluative assessment of an emotional circumstance as well as an object that holds the emotions being considered. Both practices are exercises of incredible will power, control and commitment, but at their heart is fissionable material they seek to contain, transform and harness. To appreciate, even use the work best, the viewer oscillates between reading for fact and reading as fiction. These works are autobiography, detective procedural, philosophy, speculative literature and myth all at once. And it is our magical thinking that completes them, makes the stones sing.

"Art School (1991-1994)," Gardiner's first group of anxiety containers, is an object of feeling that holds rather than overtly expresses emotional content. It consists of five shelves of bundles. The collection is cool and mysterious, vulnerable yet impassively present. Unlike most of his sculptures, Gardiner lists what lies beneath: 36 paintings, more than 200 drawings, his notebooks and 23 other objects produced during his first three years of art school. He associates these artefacts with failure and shuts them up in a form "disguised [ ] well enough as an art object."<sup>iv</sup> He wants us to imagine the frustration he felt as an art student with "artist's block."<sup>v</sup> The arrangement is designed to elicit empathy not evaluation. Gardiner does not want us to examine his portfolio to see if his projects are as bad as he thinks. He is not looking for critique. He has had enough of that. He has made a self-evaluation and found his work wanting. His judgement is absolute and does not permit a second opinion, a reversal or placation. We can only imagine the contents of his bound volumes, and this action places us in an empathetic relation, rather than a critical position. We are asked to feel the anxiety and then marvel at the author's creative solution.

Gardiner does not uncloset his specific shame. He gestures toward the hidden chambers and whispers its general contents. Redemption is a narrative that requires a simple story: embarrassment as a place from which one emerges triumphant. Too much detail can unbalance the story and hinder progress. The shame is bearable and can now be told because it is counterbalanced by the success of the fresh gesture, the better story. Gardiner seals the evidence, in part, because he does not want his judgement challenged or reversed—he needs to have an unmitigated failure in order to succeed. The new work, "Art School (1991-1994)," subsumes, includes and exceeds the old. It is a meta-discursive solution to the problem of traditional mastery. It is an end-run around art protocol but a complete fulfillment of its goal. Like all art students, Gardiner becomes an artist only when he abandons his exercises, abjures instruction, rejects imitation and makes an original gesture. This singular effort to contain anxiety was his

first work of art; the shocking impact of which he has been unpacking and repacking for the last seventeen years in a marvellous effort to understand and deepen that material insight.

Gardiner's containers house abjection. They are filled with emotionally heavy objects that are no longer felt to properly belong to the body of the subject, or in his or her home. Only by objectifying these rejected subjective experiences and isolating them can a (re)new(ed) self emerge. However, the dark matter is deemed too vital to be completely expelled. Cocooned, it becomes a source of potential energy and further transformation when its general form—rather than particular content—is contemplated.

The Thick Paintings are the record of an inquiry. Materially, they show/they are the surprising material results of the repetition of seemingly banal gestures: What happens if you do this, or that? They are interesting because no one has carried out quite this sort of experiment before. It is both a fact and important to Cameron that the objects are unique: "structures and forms that are still without precise parallels in any other works of art or any other kinds of object that have ever existed."<sup>vi</sup> An effect, and in some ways an intention, of both Cameron and Gardiner's work is that the singularity of these objects makes them unavailable to critique. They are so unique and the result of such complex subjective research that rendering judgment is pointless. It takes so much effort to understand the mechanics and meanings of these peculiar things that the potential critic becomes part of the process as soon as they engage it. The intense viewer becomes the work's subject and is unable to gain critical distance. We become subjects of feeling.

## **PRETERITION and SUSPENSE**

Eric Cameron's Thick Paintings arose as an uncalculated response to a personally significant event. In 1976 he began teaching at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design where he lived "a bachelor existence"<sup>vii</sup> in Halifax while his wife and family waited in England to see if the job would take. When it was determined that all would emigrate, he saw that his "way of life for the last three years was coming to an end"<sup>viii</sup> and reacted by going round his "apartment looking for things on which to apply gesso."<sup>ix</sup> For Cameron, making precedes thinking: "It is important to me to insist that the art always came first; my attempts to unravel its implications later. That is for me the guarantee of their authenticity."<sup>x</sup> He selected items with little thought, "hoping some unconscious significance would later become apparent."<sup>xi</sup> The concealing was more significant than the concealed. As a class, the objects "were tokens of a life that was about to change beyond recognition."<sup>xii</sup> His action "might be construed ambivalently as preserving as well as burying ...the visual evidence of my former life was obliterated, though the titles of the pieces (which were usually just the name of the objects at the core) provided verbal reminders of what was buried and denied."<sup>xiii</sup> What was being buried and denied?

Preterition is a "rhetorical figure by which summary mention is made of a thing, in professing to omit it." (O.E.D.).<sup>xiv</sup> It is a verbal slight in which something is offered the thinnest of signification in order that its elimination leaves only the barest evidence. It can also be a "passing by or over," an action that calls attention to a summoned but unnamed entity by rejecting it. (For example: 'Do not mention him.') Because the operation incompletely calls a

repressed thing into being, it creates mystery: “What is ‘the love that dare not speak its name’?” Whether the generation of this aura is intentional, a tease, depends on the situation. Though he writes the following to Pamela King—an artist in whose work he saw a mirror image of his own processes—this sentence offers insight into his own practice: “In admitting to ‘secrets’, you create an aura of external content and you are aware that in drawing a veil over the details you may be enhancing the sense of potential interest to the viewer as well as avoiding personal embarrassment.”<sup>xv</sup> Is he referencing King or her paintings?

According to Cameron’s formula, having a secret creates (external) content different from the secret’s (inner) content. The external ‘content’ is in fact a decoy that protects the embarrassing source. In the Thick Paintings, as the token of the inner content is veiled by layers of paint, the initial form is abstracted. It becomes something else, another thing; a distant and intriguing relation. The core content may be ordinary, human nature, but when wrapped in shame, elaborated by confusion and swathed in disgust the ridiculously trivial transforms into a bloated distortion, a Gordian complex, but also something unique and potentially attractive because of its strangeness. It is an elaboration that entices. Maybe someone can be persuaded to—at least imaginatively—untangle knot, or slice to the core, or be seduced into satisfying the desire that nestles in the secret.

“Whenever I have been able to think dispassionately about the intimate behaviours that fulfil desire, they have seemed to me so ridiculously trivial that I have had to wonder how any compassionate human being could ever refuse the pleadings of another.” Cameron.<sup>xvi</sup>

The danger in this strategy, sadly, is that in time the pearl becomes both too tough to infiltrate and too valuable to ruin. The content—the irritating desire that initiated the Baroque response—might, after all, really be too trivial to attract interest (other than dutiful compassion or paid attention). The fetish becomes more engaging than the primal drive.

Perhaps this is the point. Maybe satisfaction was never the goal. Gratification is the cessation of irritation—‘a little death’. Perhaps perpetual suspense, deferment and an extended life (even if it is the imagined life unlived!) is the purpose of these obdurate objects.

Each of Cameron’s suspenseful paintings is “to be continued.” Similarly, few of Gardiner’s works cease being worked. In “Framing the In-Complete Statement,” which derives from his 1998 MFA thesis, Gardiner cites Adorno, “Even in the most sublimated works of art there is hidden ‘it should be otherwise;’” and Barthes, “There is no obligation to end a sentence, it is infinitely catalyzable, one can always add a little something more to it;” and Flaubert, “We must work on finishing the sentence, but then again it is never finished.”<sup>xvii</sup> Released by these authors from the obligation to terminate—but nevertheless coaxed to press on(!)—the artist vitalizes his sculptures by granting them duration and mutability. They become forms of life dependant on him for their continued being, growth and meaning.

“Housings—Regrets at Various Stages in Four Untitled but Distinct Parts” (2007-2011) might be exemplary of this urge to irresolute resolution. “Might be” because while the artist claims they are “unique in that they are finally finished,”<sup>xviii</sup> I have over the years watched this and other ‘completed’ works get yet another dressing of fabric or coat of paint due to a pressing

psychological need.<sup>xix</sup> “Housings” is a village of large, simplified scale replicas of homes Gardiner lived in since birth. Each contains ‘anxiety objects’ relating to his father. The most recent home covering is suit material of the sort Gardiner senior wore. If you run your hand along its surface, you can feel (and could perhaps read) Braille worked into the roofs. The soft exteriors give way to firm interiors, and beneath many layers of previous finishes that make this shell are the vast unknown cavities that house domestic tensions.

My Dad was/is a Jeckle and Hyde personality.....He got up each morning, dutifully, shaved and put on his uniform. He went to work and was a very together person for strangers. He came home and took off the suit and with that all the stuff he repressed all day came out of the suit. I recall the suit being a transformative item which took my father to another place of his psyche. I have always meant to use the fabric of a suit for this reason as it always symbolized this unique transformation from dark to light to dark.<sup>xx</sup>

“Gardiner men may appear immaculate on the outside but on the inside, they are a bloody mess.” The artist’s mother, Marilyn Gardiner (1994).<sup>xxi</sup>

Gardiner comprehends this work as “a symbolic space to frame this dynamic effort of going deep into my understanding of my relationship with my father.”<sup>xxii</sup> The work gives shape to the complex early relationships that form us; one’s we never cease contemplating and gaining insight from as we age into our parent’s various positions. Because it is an endless project, perhaps its artistic articulation need never conclude as well.

What artists do when they ‘research’ is different from the academic use of that term. If artistic ‘experiments’ follow scientific modelling or methodology, it is only in a playful way, and the results are not verifiable in a conventional sense. What does Gardiner mean by “dynamic effort”? What did he learn about his father and himself from this odd job—that he is doubling his father’s footsteps? If he discovered anything, how is it transmitted to us? Both artists deal with their anxieties through their own eccentric material processes until results satisfy—they—according to their own (and the object’s and the process’s) “inexorable, unthinking logic.”<sup>xxiii</sup> The only test is that the work and positive results *feel* right—or inevitable. This is not to be trivialized as it is the primary process for both men. It is an understanding that exceeds words: “It was because my Thick Paintings took me by surprise...that I found it necessary to explain, but explaining involved the use of words and using words allowed me to be caught in the trap of language. There are times when you just can’t win! I may be digging myself deeper as I write.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

The hope is that if the work is authentic it will be felt and read as such by the empathetic viewer whose own subjective mechanisms will respond in harmony with the artist’s: “I see my incessant work on my Thick Paintings as leading to a[n] intimate union with the stuff of matter that I hope may be shared vicariously by viewers in a gallery or museum.”<sup>xxv</sup> This might sound Romantic but it is what is achieved through music,<sup>xxvi</sup> dance and other abstract practices.

On the other hand, a felt response—in the sense earlier described of an empathetic yet evaluative response—made audible can positively supplement this exchange of silent knowing: “I am aware that the audience will complete the works eventually but having had so little said back to me

until now (your text, for example) I have had little reason to believe the works are complete.”<sup>xxvii</sup> For Gardiner, knowing that his efforts are wordlessly appreciated is wonderful, but a noisier reflection is better. Words are needed to complete his work. These sculptures, like the persons they embody, long to be recognized, understood and made social: brought into fuller being through discourse.

The works in this exhibition present firm and hardened faces to the world. They feel at once blank and yet radiate a sense of pent energy—not always positive. The keys to the chambers begin with empathy and contemplation, but also words. The rich writings of both artists get the dialogue going.

## **EROS and HUMILIATION**

“Several years ago, [a] woman critic told me I was continually applying coats of whitewash to truths about my life I was incapable of facing up to. I thought at the time it was one of her best critical insights, but it follows that if the purpose of burial is to conceal these things from myself, I might be the last person to be able to see what they are.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Cameron.

This may once have been true, but as Cameron’s project swelled, so did his insight and craving to be publicly self-aware, to write. He has published numerous essays on his practice. Most strip the ‘bachelor’ bare, even. They reveal a man fascinated by the mechanisms of his own consciousness and frustrated by their biological container. Desire and dread are the twin mysteries of this particular (Duchampian) machine: “I saw my life and my art divided into periods of desire and periods of dread; dread occasioned as often by the folly to which desire has led me.”<sup>xxix</sup>

As he realized that his Thick Paintings were acts of repression enveloping feelings he could not (he figured) afford to have and desires he was too shy to satisfy<sup>xxx</sup>—Cameron changed his titling strategy. While the early works have matter-of-fact descriptions of the hidden thing (“Alarm Clock,” etc.), rather than titles that might elicit meaning, later works are more evocative. And what they evoke are people: “Alice’s Second Rose;” “Love Sonnets from Shakespeare—for Margaret;” “Exposed/Concealed: Laura Baird VII;” “Chloe’s Brown Sugar;” etc. Such naming allows feeling to seep out (or in), just a little. They change the public nature of these works from primarily being conceptual, or an extension of Greenbergian ‘truth to materials’, to leaky bodies that occasionally, physically split to reveal their contents—spill their guts.

There is a delightful tension in these works between the urge to show deep feeling (or its absence) openly and the anxiety of exhibition, misunderstanding and diffusion: “what is most clearly expressed in my Thick Paintings is the only half-conscious endeavour to avoid emotional exposure of myself.”<sup>xxxi</sup> The release of this tension (the return of the repressed) is figured by the lesions in the hoped-for perfect Platonic forms, the wounds in the striations of paint that try to hide the original entities, in the titles that hint at human contact, and especially in Cameron’s essays that cannot bear the cover-up and give it all away.

It is helpful to think of there being two Camerons: the textual, intellectual, Duchampian and the wordless beast in his shuttered basement performing “a strange ritual” while “half-naked in that fetal position.”<sup>xxxii</sup> The latter Cameron is like Pollock in his barn, being-nature. These two entities and their very different modes of expression (unconscious body and knowing text) are aspects of an ambi-valent whole: “I expressed the hope that my Thick Paintings would...come to epitomize a mode of being in the world.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> It takes the word to animate the golem.

The Thick Paintings obsessively shroud a token of a relationship in layer after layer of gesso, time and care. The effort may be an attempt to preserve a memory or keep a relationship through magical means. Then again, these memorials might be recitations of failure, desire unrequited, or worse still, unreported. For the deeply private or the romantically ambivalent, keepsakes have the advantage of appearing to the unknowing to be nothing at all, mere trivial things. But to the beholder who strokes into them remembrances and unrequited desire, it is a powerful fetish; proof of a rich interior life, evidence of vulnerability—best kept under wraps. Eventually, these concentrated investments develop an in-grown imaginative life beyond, even independent of their propelling circumstances. Like a love poem, the force of feeling remains in the over-primed memento (mori) long after its author and intended have breathed their last.

Gardiner explains that the goal of his project is “to devise a set of strategies designed to connote [an] inferred space of ‘nothing’ where I could suggest a potential for ‘everything’, ‘anything’, or plainly ‘something’ worthy of imagining...a supported interior void (or zone) of infinite implications, a defining space of quiet, of loud, of privacy, of mystery, of clean, of mess, of “Promise, Solace, and Menace.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Note that he is describing the space and ritual, not the objects. To the imaginative the real has only nominal meaning compared to the possible. It is in this contents of this imagining where Gardiner and Cameron part company. For Gardiner, the haunting presence in the “void” is a negative shape-shifter resident at the core of identity. For Cameron the no/thing is usually sexual; for Gardiner it is never so articulated. This is surprising. For most Westerners the preferred repression is sexual. It is what we like to imagine lurking in the empty volume behind the (ambi) valence.

HAMLET: Lady, shall I lie in your lap? [Lying down at Ophelia's feet]

OPHELIA: No, my lord.

HAMLET: I mean, my head upon your lap?

OPHELIA: Ay, my lord.

HAMLET: Do you think I meant country matters?

OPHELIA: I think nothing, my lord.

HAMLET: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

OPHELIA: What is, my lord?

HAMLET: Nothing.

(Hamlet. Act three, scene two.)

To some, including Cameron, his sculptures, indeed the very practice of shaping them, is erotic: “In the privacy of the studio there were occasions when some forms of some pieces would present themselves to me as women’s body parts with such an intensity that approached hallucination. It is perhaps understandable that such experiences should occur in the context of the obsessively repetitive activity of brushing out the gesso on piece after piece, over and over



again, hour after hour, till my involvement with the task reached the point of self-hypnosis.”<sup>xxxv</sup>  
You don’t need Freud to get the picture.

In a recent letter to a museum, Cameron describes “the Thick Paintings of the last thirty years had avoided colour almost completely.... their ice-cold eroticism relates itself more clearly to the years of my troubled libido.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> The trouble is spelled out variously. In discussing curator Diana Nemiroff’s titillating discovery in a poster featuring his work, Cameron explains: “She thought the kneeling figure could be that of a penitent. But if that implied the woman was exposing her upturned bottom to be smacked, rather than for sex, I knew that would accord with the repressed reality of my intimate needs all the more precisely.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> He clarifies:

my admitted proclivity for a form of sexual foreplay that could be construed as punishment in another context.... That sexual inclination is more embarrassing for its infantile triviality than for any suggestion of hurting (or being hurt) in earnest, though the anguish of the unfulfilled need can amount to an utterly crippling torment.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Another source of desire, dread and folly seems to have occurred in the mid-eighties when Cameron found a reflective muse in a young artist; a relationship he muffles clamorously in “An Open Letter to Pam King.”

I have to ask myself how the scenario would have been different if, in fact, we had been using our art as a pretext for communicating with each other as people—as man and woman—in an area that would otherwise have been taboo?..... I find the joy your letter continues to give me every time I read it suddenly undercut by a self-conscious awareness that I am Head of the Art Department and that, at the time you wrote, you were a graduate student in our MFA program.<sup>xxxix</sup>

There is an aching, (Henry) Jamesian slipperiness to this preteritive prose that encourages imaginative possibilities to wander tunefully without quite coming out to facing the music. The author plants seeds but wants the reader to tend the garden (and take responsibility for the weeds!). For all that, the desire is palpable, intractable and certainly embarrassing for all involved. “I will admit to you that my great anxiety, as I write this open letter, is that I might inadvertently have transgressed the domain of that aura in a way that might make publication problematic for you.”<sup>xl</sup> If he is that knowing, what compelling and potentially ruinous need drove him to nevertheless publish this?

Cameron’s texts are in the Rousseauian confessional tradition, and then some. His intellectual honesty (and sadomasochism?<sup>xli</sup>) compels him to share his insights, damn the price: “As an observer of the unfolding transformations of my work more completely informed than any gallery-goer could possibly be, I felt an obligation not only to follow the truth wherever it might lead, but also to make known what I (and others) had observed through verbal and visual commentary.”<sup>xlii</sup> While his paintings obfuscate, his essays excoriate. What he conceals in paint is revealed in prose. He is a split-self. The textual ‘Eric Cameron’ parses his deepest discoveries, desires and anxieties even if it may end in humiliation—well, especially if it might lead there.

The Thick Paintings are stand-ins for the artist's body. The layers are like skin, pale, smooth in some places, wrinkled and pimpled in others, bumps here, blemishes there. They are also intimate records of artist's gestures over nearly a lifetime. They have a 'life' in the sense that they mature as long as he applies the paint; which, he promises, is as long as he lives: "every brushstroke is referenced to the ultimate constraint on experience, the fact of my own mortality."<sup>xliv</sup> In a telling exhibition of the Thick Paintings, *Divine Comedy*, the bodies are laid out for inspection to the accompaniment of laughing women (but "only women who had been important to me in my art").<sup>xlv</sup> "I was fully aware that the laughter of women reverberating round the gallery as the doors opened could hardly fail to register as an ironic response to the male desire embodied in the work."<sup>xlv</sup>

The *Divine Comedy* is a strange scene re-enacting vulnerability, humiliation, even abjection—a man's body parts being laughed at by women. However, the scenario is also designed to display the artist's remedy. In his autobiography, *English Roots*, and other texts, Cameron recounts his physical anxieties and shortcomings. They are familiar—bright and sickly boy bullied, for starters—and constitute for him the essence of a type of Englishness. However, his solution is unique. "I started thinking about the inner object and how comforted it must be locked away inside the darkness, forever. And not only is the object hidden, but each preceding layer of paint is buried as well."<sup>xlvi</sup> Thick blank hide faces the ridicule and other daily humiliations born of physical existence while enwombed an essential aspect remains protected by layers of caul that in turn shield each other. He has it both ways.

Even the most sensitive aesthete could not deduce these scandals from mere paint. She or he would have to read all about it in Cameron's confessions. And who reads catalogue essays? Insiders, fellow artists and camp followers do; "compassionate human beings" who would understand, forgive and might even be induced to scratch an itch (though as I suggested earlier, perhaps having these needs as a proof of—a secret—life and being are more important than their extinction through satisfaction). Both Cameron and Gardiner present their hyperbolic anxieties and "trivial" needs (English understatement?!) signed sealed and delivered in texts and on pedestals and walls and wait for them to be opened. They are afforded the release of expression but the safety of a locked book.

"A Key to a Curator's Heart..." is a rare work for Gardiner in that its contents can be accessed, but only by key—one held by the artist and another, available on request, by the subject of the work. Inside, Gardiner tells me, are piles of letters and emails he wrote to a local curator but never sent. In the outer world, relations with this person were cordial if rare and glancing, but in his inner world, the more real realm, relations were passionate, inflamed. Responding to the curator's obliviousness as if it were a conscious assault, Gardiner, in his retained missives, "found [him]self knee deep in the politics of being seen or noticed and the paranoia [he] allowed to grow into an ugly, nearly uncontainable beast of anxiety."<sup>xlvii</sup> In his over-heated imagination, not being seen amounted to an act of being un-recognized; he felt neglected, ignored, for who knows what long list of legitimate and prejudicial reasons! He explains his method and the revelation they afforded: "I think now that all of my works are dangerous ... in that instead of revealing the frustrations and allowing for dialogue, I am prone to bury the frustrations and enter into a packed sphere of enduring the results of my approach. I know we all do it in one form or another but mine cuts directly on the jugular of such phenomenon."<sup>xlviii</sup>

Gardiner, too, longs for a “compassionate human being” who would not “refuse the [trivial] pleadings of another.” His appeal is to the “heart” rather than mind or erotic body. But not just any heart will do. His address is to a powerful local someone whose active notice would be socially meaningful. Reading back into Cameron’s earlier plea, then, it is clear that in his superficially different situation not just any compassionate person would give satisfaction: desire has its appropriate and inappropriate objects and relations. Gardiner’s insight is that in addition to his very human need for social signification, there is the complex of imaginings that precede social intercourse and that when they become inverted, hyper mono-logic, paranoid, and unchecked by discourse, they become their own monstrous entity completely separate from the assumed cite of co-generation (the curator, the desired lover). It is a product of the desirer, not the desired: “I create the anxiety I encase. I create the power struggle so I can dismantle it and rebuild it into something emotionally manageable.”<sup>xlix</sup>

General publication of his letters would be humiliating. So why share them with the curator? The sculpture is a dare. Gardiner offers the curator the power to humiliate as the price for recognition (and the price of power). While the full nature of his aborted dispatches is not revealed, we, too, are sucked into the power cycle. We get their gist and recognize the gambit—one that we all participate in to some degree. But here, as in other forms of fiction, the drama is exaggerated—potential, symbolic, rather than real. If the challenge were taken up (made real) it is likely that it would stay private, between men. Whatever the outcome, the artist gets what he wants: not to be the erased subject of the curator’s preterition; to signify in the art game.

What are the other dangers in this sort of play? Here is Cameron at his most eloquent, complex and depressed: “The opalescent chill and the ever thickening shell convey together an effect of emotional numbness, an absence of feeling which may yet be a more authentic expression of feeling than any of the particular emotional shocks that continue to blunt the capacity to feel that numbness itself.”<sup>l</sup> In this perplexing passage Cameron explains that the layers of paint signify emotional anaesthesia. A sentence before this renders even the core of these beings as “the frozen heart of my Thick Paintings.”<sup>li</sup> However, the end of his sentence suggests that this frigidity can be felt—which requires some thawed parts with vestigial feeling to sense the surrounding deadness—but these sections, too, he writes, are blunted by emotional shocks.

Most puzzling is his claim that “an absence of feeling [ ] may yet be a more authentic expression of feeling.” If this melancholic sentence is to make sense, we must differentiate between emotion and feeling. Emotions happen to us; feelings are means of evaluating affective signals. In other words, “an absence of feeling,” in the sense of *emotional* numbness, blunted affect, might be a sensitive person’s radical response to overwhelming emotions. The anaesthetization of emotional response leaves room for feeling—as a critical response. This idea is most elaborately performed, for example, by Henry James’s fictional bachelors of his Late Phase, and by the Master himself.<sup>lii</sup>

I am inclined to read this passage as central but also as over-wrought, poetic. The imagery is of ice, which can be melted. If he chose marble, it might be unsalvageable. The source of thawing warmth is human. We must differentiate between Cameron the compassionate and public man

from the beast in the basement and from the objects made there. Elsewhere he explains: “The thickening crust around the core of my Thick Paintings is the objectification of the shell of numbness I have tried to avoid building up around myself.”<sup>liii</sup> The Thick Paintings are concrete metaphors for how he feels in the basement, apart from people; not how he is (in every instance of his self). The golems he builds are the hard versions of what he might have become were he not to have this outlet. “It follows that the life I have lived in my art may, in some ways—as with Oscar Wilde’s portrait of Dorian Gray—have been more real than the life I have lived in the world.”<sup>liv</sup>

Interestingly, Gardiner employs similar metaphors. He explains that his process

is a closed system meant to arrest the content in a frozen bonfire. I looked closely at Eric’s work when I was a young man and saw just that, a frozen bonfire slowly becoming more frozen in a routine layering of ‘art itself’. Agnes Martin’s repeated fields of squares, lines and soft tones also accomplished something similar in that it cut to the chase, arresting the simplicity of making and the quiet beauty that occurs through such service to reconciliation of deeper purpose.... It is a conundrum because I want to have the conveyed bonfire but work to douse the flames. The trick will always be the middle ground where both states can exist simultaneously in a work.”<sup>lv</sup>

It is time to engage this “deeper purpose” and move beyond the erotic content of Cameron’s open secrets, which I think are screens concealing deeper and yet more obvious content. While the textual ‘Eric Cameron’ hints of amorous possibility, or at least romantic frustration, that might, could possibly, may have occupied margins of his life—what he actually does is visible and more interesting. The real embarrassing content is, like Poe’s “Purloined Letter,” inverted and in plain sight. Cameron is a formalist. The form *is* the content. The shameful secret is not primarily erotic, but the desire to be alone. The “former life....buried and denied” when the family returns, was not—as far as I know—one of lustful adventure but one with reduced “emotional shocks” and responsibility and a space for seemingly non-productive reflective action—a space to be self-ish.

## **ALCHEMY and MEMENTO MORI**

Cameron’s Thick Paintings appear postmodern.<sup>lvi</sup> The project features perpetual deferral (“to be continued”) arrested only when collected or with the ‘death of the author’. Hovering in the neither/nor space between painting and sculpture, still life and as the residue of performance, these mutable mutations seem the progeny of Duchamp’s ready-mades and Derridean philosophy. And yet Cameron insists that he has more in common with modernism and Jackson Pollock<sup>lvii</sup>, that his is an investigation into material, and that he is more formalist than conceptualist. His maxim, after Greenberg, is “to justify the inevitability of its particular forms.”<sup>lviii</sup>

By ‘forms’ he means some in-forming X factor found in working with material. While he respects the scientific method, Cameron intuits that there are truths embedded in nature—or better still, in our working with and contemplating the physical—that exceeds the truths

knowable by science. He wants to get to the reality behind our maps of the real and perceives of art as that means: “The idea of mystical communication with the stuff of matter beyond the surface of appearances seemed exciting intellectually and the idea of aesthetic reconciliation with that realm of the real beyond our construct of the real brought satisfaction at a more deeply human level.”<sup>lix</sup>

Though a professed materialist, his prose is shaded by Platonic Forms, metaphysical forces thought to in-form the physical. His guiding idea that forms have “inevitability” certainly sounds like metaphysics or at least of anthropomorphic projection. But my argument throughout is that art demands magical thinking, or as Cameron describes it, “material mysticism.”<sup>lx</sup> In material mysticism, “the ritual of working with the stuff of matter (paint/gesso) is seen as having as its object the quest for truth, though not through means of rational investigation.”<sup>lxi</sup> Jung calls this ‘extra-rational’ research “reason by other means,” and would not hesitate to name this work alchemical. The alchemists were not so fussy about divisions. They took what truths came to them, as material or metaphysical insight, as chemistry or psychology.

Cameron explains that his operations are not rational. The work begins with an intuition that what he is doing is worthwhile. This leap of faith includes the belief that the paint somehow records his experience. But he cannot account for how this could occur: “how feelings that may have been experienced or denied in life could be embodied in my art I again cannot begin to explain.” “I cannot pretend to understand the process by which their imprinting in my art takes place.”<sup>lxii</sup> That it does so he has no doubt—or proofs. This seemingly absurd claim is the expression of a desire—*The* desire buried beyond the erotic screen stories.

Cameron says his work has seven stages. They are remarkably similar to alchemical stages.<sup>lxiii</sup> He takes a base mere thing (*nigredo*), projects possibilities and desires upon it, engages in a whitening process (*albedo*), the layers of gesso. The work is guided by a vision of a pure form, a large white sphere that he had in mind while working.<sup>lxiv</sup> Also in mind (or body) was a sense of great anticipation and the feeling that the project would yield “immanent potential for growth.” He explains that this work of “applying layer after layer of paint, is conducive to this state of disinterested concentration.”<sup>lxv</sup> This is similar to alchemical physical meditations. Gardiner method is an echo: “name the frustration, collect it, contain it, meditate on that containment over laboring its framework.”<sup>lxvi</sup>

Next is failure, then transformation. In the initial stages, Cameron anticipated that his coatings would eventually render his irregular objects into uniform spheres, detritus into giant pearls. This did not happen. The forms are pearl-like in the sense of those grotesque, misshapen oddities prized in the Baroque period,<sup>lxvii</sup> but Cameron also likens them to turds.<sup>lxviii</sup> The initial project is changed by the ‘work’. The project never ends but does yield, in the final stages, both psychological insight and the philosopher’s stone (the Thick Paintings themselves).

Chris Gardiner shares remarkable insight into his efforts in relation to Eric Cameron’s:

It may be too private a practice at this stage in that I may have not found an interstice yet where my private need for reconciliation of emotion fuses indifferently with its exterior body, enough so to allow for unfettered resonance beyond my own satisfaction. Eric's

work performs this perfectly in that one is left amazed by the outcome of such necessary labors as an actual external evolution is apparent. My alchemy is reverse of his in this regard. My laborious evolution grows inwards. Viewers will need far more time, or I need to find the right access point for them, in order to fully grasp the depth of the agenda.

I really do believe it is a form of alchemy alive in both practices but possibly it is the very fact that they transform in reverse of each other that makes them so similar. This paradox is necessary in alchemy, the union or marriage of opposites.<sup>lxi</sup>

These are long, long term, life-term projects. The younger man recognizes the skill, dedication and achievement in his elder's efforts. He also senses a complimentary difference but perhaps the projects are not so far apart, one is just further along. He hints of a possible way out of his inward spiral. Perhaps "the right access point for [viewers], in order to fully grasp the depth of the agenda," as with his mentor, is the publication of guides. Chris is a prolific and passionate writer. What little I have to say about his works derives from his emails to me. Perhaps creating a textual key will lead to the discourse and evolution he craves.

This introverted hero's journey begins with something less heroic than research, retreat: "Tension mounts at the dinner table over some domestic irritant. This has often been my cue to bury myself in my art, go down to my basement studio and add more half-coats until the tension eases, the irritant is forgotten, and my own nerves are steadied by the demands of a sufficiently exacting task that is yet comfortably within my capacity to "undertake" – the term with funerary echoes, seems to be doubly appropriate!"<sup>lxx</sup> The answer to the earlier question--"What is buried in the work?—is, 'the artist'. The work begins as an escape. It is therapeutic and dogged by guilt that can only be redeemed by having a noble mission or outcome.

Cameron recognizes the importance of compassion and basic humanity but is not keen on their being a required link between art and social justice<sup>lxxi</sup> or even sociality beyond the gallery encounter. This is the source of one of Gardiner's primary anxieties. 'How can artists be so selfish when there is so much pain and injustice in the world?' A partial remedy is his occasional making of anxiety containers for others. A therapeutic service he recently provided to Eric Cameron. "Eric's Anxiety" (2010) is probably the most finished work in that it doesn't contain my own anxieties. It may be one of the most perfect of my works for this reason in that I facilitated the opportunity to arrest, indifferently, an anxious item(s). This may be the solution I have been seeking all of this time. The performance of concealment that is not mine own."<sup>lxxii</sup> It is as if after many years of alchemical research he has finally come up with the elixir that would be a boon to those beyond himself. The test of value and maturity for Gardiner, it seems, is selfless duty. Before painting him a hero, though, Gardiner explains: "Then again what would I do with all the anxiety I come across and design for myself? I find I am wired far too Calvinistic to go entirely there. I need the penance, the enduring program, the rituals."<sup>lxxiii</sup>

Art is the exception to many conventional rules. Freud and Jung were bothered and envious of the injustice of it all. Artists are rewarded for doing the opposite of what normal people are supposed to do (Freud), and they could engage transformative symbols and themselves be unchanged (Jung). The material fact is that Eric's weird behaviour in the basement enabled a

career (art professor and administrator) that paid the bills that built the superstructure of normality that hovered over his head. “The reality of my life as an artist is a social reality, and social approval provides the source of such ability as I may have to satisfy biological need or keep at bay the threat of material disaster.”<sup>lxxiv</sup> This alone would justify the behaviour in some minds.

Visual art, particularly of the sort practiced by Cameron and Gardiner—featuring thousands of hours alone in a studio making things of value dubious to the average person—tends to attract introverted people. Eric and Chris make quintessential introverted art. Both practices have their own inner workings as their primary subjects. The discovery of work that allows you to be alone a good deal of time, to be your own boss, to follow your thoughts and feeling wherever they may go, to make the stuff you like and yet also feel that it is important and valuable to others, and to be rewarded by the outside world (in manageable doses) by cash and praise is the introvert’s grail—and these fellows found it.

I want to close my consideration of Eric Cameron’s Thick Paintings and Chris Gardiner’s anxiety containers by briefly considering them as a form of *memento mori* and embodied philosophy. The *memento mori* theme in northern European still life painting of the 17<sup>th</sup> century attempted to show through displays of time pieces, mirror, skulls and dying flowers, that all is vanity and will not last. It is better to contemplate the fate of your eternal soul than to enjoy temporary luxury. The irony is that these paintings preserved the flowers, mirrors, and beautiful people, and even their perceptions of the world, long after they had been themselves decayed.

“The separation proposed by Martin Heidegger between everyday inauthentic experience and that specifically human experience that can encompass the possibility of its own extinction in death is a notion that holds certain temptations for me.”<sup>lxxv</sup> In the introverted imagination, the space of the studio is the site of authentic being-in-the-world because it is uncompromised by other selves and their perceptions: “It follows that the life I have in my art may, in some ways...have been more real than the life I have lived in the world.”<sup>lxxvi</sup>

The Thick Paintings are Heideggerian *memento mori* in so much as they are singular and literally defined by their being-toward death. They will only finish when Cameron does. His end is theirs; their after-life is his. And Cameron has special plans for that material after-life. Not only are the arrested objects already in prominent collections (a hilarious play on Duchamp’s joke on museums as mausoleums) but he has a last will. If he does not go suddenly, “my intention is to bring all the Thick Paintings to the all-white state immediately and cease further work on them. In the meantime, every brushstroke is referenced to the ultimate constraint on experience, the fact of my own mortality.”<sup>lxxvii</sup> “For the materialist, there is no possibility of redemption in the old religious sense, but the kind of meditative engagement with matter I have entered into in panting my Thick Paintings may lead to reconciliation with the finite materiality of life and the unavoidable finality of death.”<sup>lxxviii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Cameron, Eric. “Oedipus and Sol LeWitt.” *Divine Comedy*. Exhibition catalogue. National Gallery of Canada: Ottawa, Canada. 1990. 15.

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- ii Cameron, Eric. "*Sapere Aude.*" *Desire and Dread*. Exhibition catalogue. Muttart Public Art Gallery: Calgary, AB. 1998. 35.
- iii Cameron, Eric. "*Sapere Aude.*" 35.
- iv Undated email from Chris Gardiner.
- v Email from the artist, May 23, 2011.
- vi Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 21.
- vii Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 122.
- viii Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 123.
- ix Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 123.
- x Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." *Desire and Dread*. Exhibition catalogue. Muttart Public Art Gallery: Calgary, AB. 1998. 18
- xi Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 123.
- xii Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 123.
- xiii Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. The University of Lethbridge Art Gallery: Lethbridge, AB. 2001. 123.
- xiv I am indebted to Eric Savoy for introducing me to this delicious word.
- xv Cameron, Eric. *An Open Letter to Pamela King*. Et in Arcadia Id, catalogue essay. Calgary, AB. 1993. 34.
- xvi Cameron, Eric. "*Sapere Aude.*" 36.
- xvii Complete citations are not recorded in Gardiner's unpublished essay, "Framing the In-Complete Statement."
- xviii Email from the artist, Feb. 14, 2011.
- xix In fact, during the installation, dissatisfied with the formal arrangement on the plinth, Gardiner added a fifth element at the last minute to make in balance.
- xx Email from the artist, Feb. 14, 2011.
- xxi Gardiner, Chris. "Framing the In-Complete Statement." 1998.
- xxii Email from the artist, Feb. 14, 2011.
- xxiii Cameron, Eric. "*Sapere Aude.*" 33.
- xxiv Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 18.
- xxv Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 27.
- xxvi Cameron, Eric. *Divine Comedy*. 26.
- xxvii Email from the artist, May 23, 2011.
- xxviii Cameron, Eric. "*Sapere Aude.*" *Desire and Dread*. Exhibition catalogue. Muttart Public Art Gallery: Calgary, AB. 1998. 35.
- xxix Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." *Desire and Dread*. Exhibition catalogue. Muttart Public Art Gallery: Calgary, AB. 1998. 20.
- xxx "My work on the Thick Paintings is repressive." Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. The University of Lethbridge Art Gallery: Lethbridge, AB. 2001. 122.
- xxxi Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 122.
- xxxii Cameron, Eric. "Squareness." 25.
- xxxiii Cameron, Eric. "Oedipus and Sol LeWitt." 24.
- xxxiv From an undated email correspondence.
- xxxv Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. The University of Lethbridge Art Gallery: Lethbridge, AB. 2001. 122.
- xxxvi Unpublished and undated letter from Eric Cameron.
- xxxvii Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 24.
- xxxviii Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 25.
- xxxix Cameron, Eric. *An Open Letter to Pamela King*. Et in Arcadia Id, catalogue essay. Calgary, AB. 1993. 45.
- xl Cameron, Eric. *An Open Letter to Pamela King*. Et in Arcadia Id, catalogue essay. Calgary, AB. 1993. 34.
- xli Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 24.
- lii Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 122.
- liiii Cameron, Eric. "Oedipus and Sol LeWitt." 24.
- xliv Cameron, Eric. "*Sapere Aude.*" 36.
- xlv Cameron, Eric. "*Sapere Aude.*" 34.
- xlvi Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 35.
- xlvii Email from the artist, May 23, 2011.
- xlviii Email from the artist, May 23, 2011.
- xlx Email from the artist, May 23, 2011.
- <sup>1</sup> Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 123.



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- li Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 123.
- lii Garneau, David. The Hermeneutics of Introversion: Henry James's Bachelor' Suspense." MA thesis. University of Calgary. 1993.
- liii Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 125.
- liv Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 125.
- lv Email from the artist, May 23, 2011.
- lvi Dawn, Leslie. "Pleasures of Paradox—Works of Eric Cameron."
- lvii Cameron, Eric. "Squareness." Catalogue essay. Southern Alberta Art Gallery: Lethbridge, AB. 1993. 1989. 3.
- lviii Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 21.
- lix Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 121.
- lx Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." *Desire and Dread*. Exhibition catalogue. Muttart Public Art Gallery: Calgary, AB. 1998. 27.
- lxi Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 27.
- lxii Cameron, Eric. "*Sapere Aude*." 35.
- lxiii Cameron, Eric. "*Sapere Aude*." 32-5.
- lxiv Cameron, Eric. "*Sapere Aude*." 33.
- lxv Cameron, Eric. "Oedipus and Sol LeWitt." 25.
- lxvi Email from the artist, May 23, 2011.
- lxvii Dawn, Leslie. "Pleasures of Paradox—Works of Eric Cameron." *Desire and Dread*. Exhibition catalogue. Muttart Public Art Gallery: Calgary, AB. 1998. 3.
- lxviii Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 21.
- lix Email from the artist, May 25, 2011.
- lxx Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 124-5.
- lxxi Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 25.
- lxxii Email from the artist, May 23, 2011.
- lxxiii Email from the artist, May 23, 2011.
- lxxiv Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 158.
- lxxv Cameron, Eric. "Oedipus and Sol LeWitt." 24.
- lxxvi Cameron, Eric. *English Roots*. 125.
- lxxvii Cameron, Eric. "Oedipus and Sol LeWitt." 24.
- lxxviii Cameron, Eric. "Why I Was So Pleased...." 24