

# Material Painlessness through Metamorphic Media

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for

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Figure 1: Prometheus, Bound and Eviscerated (top: unilluminated, bottom: illuminated). By the author.

Jackson Pollock's drip paintings evoke the body not only because they are direct traces of the bodily gestures that created them; their success as body-imagery is largely dependent on the similarities between paint and flesh. Oil paint is uniquely suited to suggesting body metaphors due to its palpability, its tendency to congeal and clump, its flesh-like translucence, and its malleability through stroking, layering, incising, and scraping. Pollock's paintings exploit these flesh-like qualities of paint better than any artist since Rembrandt. Giacometti's portraits are evocative due to similar reasons of materiality. He slices and cleaves his paint (but not the canvas), and the resultant folds and creases in that flesh-like material mirror the vulnerability of our own flesh<sup>1</sup>. Material similarity in abstracted works of art is an essential facilitator of second seeing.

I have produced a body of work which depicts the body in pain, but does so through materials and techniques that emphasize immaterial metamorphoses. Using these bodies of work as test cases, this essay proposes to discover what happens when an artwork represents a body in pain as its subject matter, but uses an ethereal and metamorphic medium to manifest that representation. It is my hope that this investigation will shed light the relative importance of material versus subject matter in evoking either somatic empathy or analytic seeing.

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<sup>1</sup> One point on which I disagree with the text is the suggestion that canvas and flesh are analogous. From the preface (p. xxxvi) you assert: "Like all oil painting, *Grayed Rainbow* takes place on a skin (the raw canvas is a skin, both in its thinness and its opacity)". I believe that, except in rare exceptions (usually where the artist has taken the unconventional step of piercing the canvas or of not stretching the canvas), the canvas actually rarely evokes flesh. First of all, the majority of oil paintings cover entirely the canvas beneath, preventing the viewer from making any inference as to its analogous quality. Secondly, the opacity of canvas actually works against any flesh analogy. Skin is translucent, and we subconsciously acknowledge this. Who hasn't seen the glowing outline of his own thumb held up against a sunny sky, or his veins through his own skin?

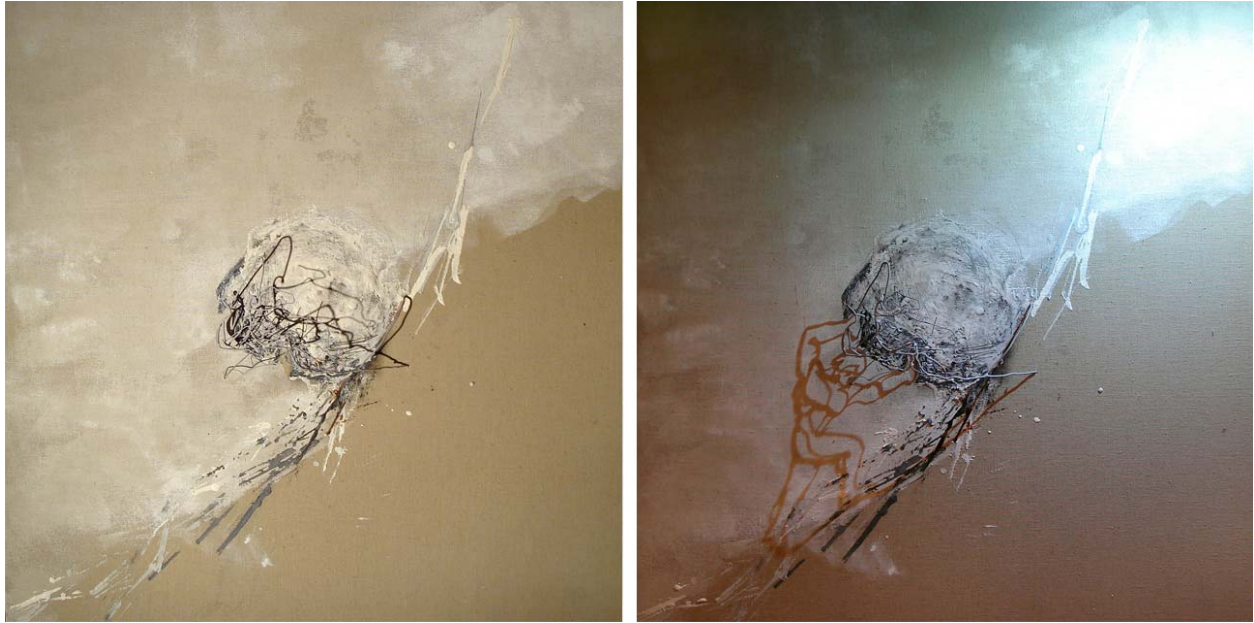


Figure 2: The Burden of Sisyphus (left: unilluminated. Right: illuminated). By the author

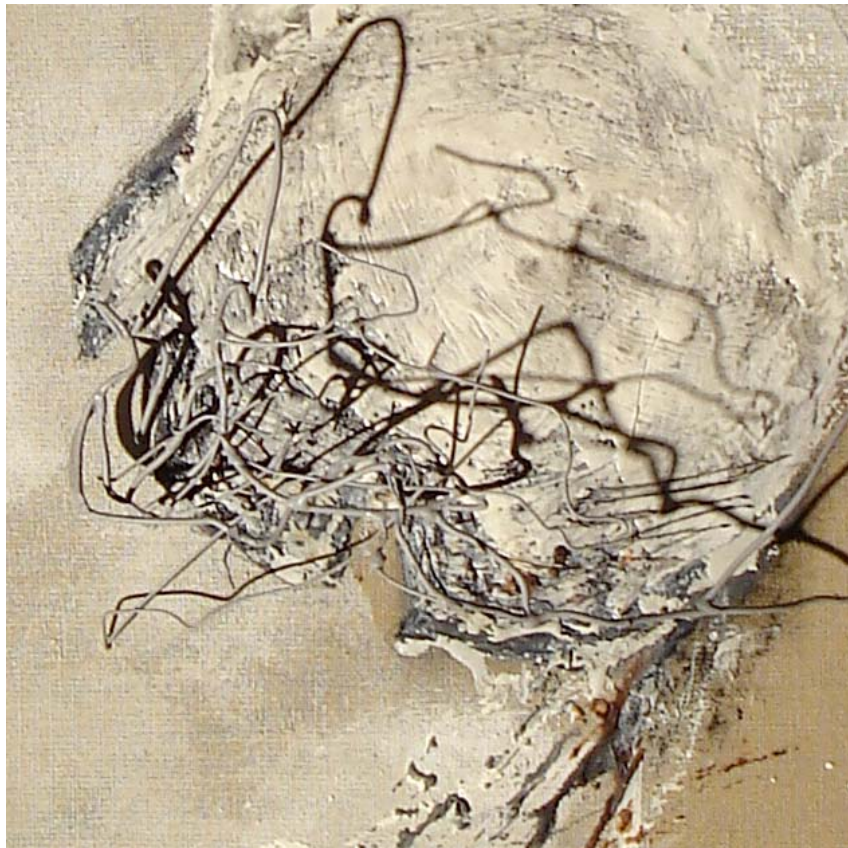


Figure 3: The Burden of Sisyphus (detail of wire protruding from picture surface)

*The Shadows of Burden* is a series of interactive mixed-media pieces on linen in which light and shadow are used as the drawing medium, and as a metaphor commenting on the subject matter they project.

Unattended, each piece consists of an encaustic painting on linen, with a tangled nest of bent wire and rod protruding from the surface of the piece. As the viewer approaches, a light mounted in the painting's frame fades on, and from that light source, the seemingly random arrangement of wires casts an intricate shadow. This shadow is a precise line drawing of a tragic Greek character at the moment of his corporal punishment.

The physical and operational relationships between the light, wire, and shadow also serve as a metaphor for the fatalism of the doomed characters' plight. *The Burden of Sisyphus*, for instance, presents to the viewer a centered, roughly round form, with the abstract arrangement of wires vaguely resembling the form of a boulder hanging in space. As the light breaks through the wire, creating the image of Sisyphus struggling up the mountain, a hierarchy of causality is established: the rock is not the burden or tragic instrument of Sisyphus; rather, the hero is merely the artifice of the boulder. His body is an immaterial projection of the source of pain (the rock), which is represented quite tangibly as extruding off the picture plane.

Another piece from the series, *Prometheus, Bound and Eviscerated*, initially presents itself to the viewer as another tangled mess of wires encircled by birds rendered in a pulpy encaustic. As in the other pieces, when the viewer approaches to observe closer, his presence is detected by a sensor in the linen picture surface and the strategically-placed light turns on, revealing the titular character in writhing agony and re-contextualizing those wires as viscera spilling through the cut flesh of the linen.

These pieces create a paradox on the axis of pain and metamorphosis, simultaneously presenting pain through visual subject matter, and metamorphosis through its medium.

- THE BODY WITHOUT FLESH -

Keeping with the general tradition of depicting mythical figures and allegories, pain is conveyed through the characters' taut and twisting gestures. This is largely out of necessity, as the limitations of drawing with extruded shadow lines make it difficult to represent fine details, or to illusionistically represent the quality of flesh. Sisyphus pushes the boulder with his legs in line to the upward slope of the hill while twisting at the waistline to show his torso in a full frontal view. Prometheus, bound to the stone, resists violently with his right arm, the while his left arm remains restrained behind his body, producing the suggestion of a spinning corkscrew motion. In both, the body is depicted as under duress—that is to say, deformed, or evocative of pain.<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on contrapposto and de-emphasis on representing the texture of skin parallels Renaissance-era work, to which the same qualities are attributed in chapters 1 and 2 of the text.<sup>3</sup>

And so according to the traditions of subject matter and contrapposto, it would be simple to conclude that these are images of pain. The question now becomes: is the possibility of inducing somatic reflex, or empathy, precluded by the immateriality of the shadow they are drawn in?<sup>4</sup> Unlike viscous oil paint, shadow has no flesh-like qualities. Can pain exist in a thing which is not material? If not, then the hierarchy of material over subject matter in evoking viewer response is established.

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<sup>2</sup> p. 70: "As opposed to dancing or balancing, twisting is futile and even unpleasant, and it expresses a body badly reconciled with itself."

<sup>3</sup> P. 45: "... Michelangelo, whose surfaces deny the palpable texture of skin or the difference between skin and viscera ..."

<sup>4</sup> Assuming these images are actually, you know, good in the least. One of my greatest insecurities in producing this essay on my own work is that any unexplained reaction to the pieces could be simply explained by saying, "well, it doesn't achieve the expected result because it's just not done properly." The viewer's response to all the artworks used as examples in the text hinges first and foremost, I believe, on their competent execution. The debate on the executive success of my pieces is probably best left outside the pages of an essay written by myself, but if you wanted to rebut that, in fact, the images lack empathetic value due to their shoddiness, I'd accept your opinion but politely request this course credit regardless.

- METAMORPHOSIS MADE EASY -

If these are images of bodies that do not elicit pain, then the central axiom of the text suggests that they ought to instead represent a metamorphic distortion. This is undoubtedly true of the artwork when the viewer removes himself from the subject matter and looks at the technical execution of the piece; after all, there is a literal transformation at work, of the wire sculpture from three-dimensional mess into two-dimensional image. That transformation, and the metaphor therein, is one of the central themes of the series. However, these pieces manipulate the process of analytic seeing by making the viewer's body an essential part of that metamorphosis, potentially pulling the experience of the piece back into the realm of pain.

The pieces address the relationship between image, art-object, and the viewer's body in unconventional ways. The transformative operation between the sculptural wire element and the stenographic image is entirely anamorphic, but unlike most works of anamorphic art, in which the viewer is offered the privileged viewpoint to decode the work, here the light source is given that station. If the viewer could place his eye in the exact location of the light, then the viewer could flatten the depth of field and see the true image. Instead, the space of anamorphic transformation exists between the light and the wire, and the viewer is on hand merely to see the projected result of that relationship.

Despite being excluded in the anamorphic process, the viewer's body is nonetheless still an important element in the piece. On the most basic level, this is a result of the proximity detector hidden in the artwork. Because the artwork is programmed to activate when the viewer crosses a certain

threshold, these artworks assert strict control over how the viewer perceives the work at different distances from the canvas.<sup>5</sup>

After activating the artwork by approaching, and then realizing the correlation between the wire and the image, viewers inevitably begin examining the wire in an attempt to find parts of the sculpture that correspond to the parts of the projected image. At this moment, the viewer has identified the bent wire as an extreme metrological system.<sup>6</sup>

Still, it remains possible that these wire sculptures may not invoke analytic seeing at all. Though these components are undoubtedly metrologic objects, there is no pressing need to decode them; the light serves as a sort of Rosetta Stone to the seemingly unintelligible wire, and the translation is projected right there on the linen. The text defines metamorphosis as a way of looking in which the mind performs the reconstruction of the piece. In these shadow drawings there is nothing in the image itself to decode—only to reverse engineer—since the work decodes itself. So does this move the artwork back into the realm of pain?

If so, then the move back to pain is abetted by the materiality of the wire, the most tangible aspect of the piece. It protrudes from the stretched linen, breaking the picture surface. It is bent in odd, but still body-relatable, angles. In the Prometheus piece, this wire is simultaneously a metrological map and a stand-in for the hero's spilling guts. In the Sisyphus piece, it stands in as the boulder pushed up the hill, and rightfully so: the wire is the only aspect of the artwork with real weight, in sharp contrast to

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<sup>5</sup> The importance of the distance relationship between the viewers' body and the work of art on display is an idea that is extremely important to me, and one that I have experimented with through a number of proximity-activated artworks. The preface of the textbook (p. xxxviii) offers a very useful schematic organizing the various positions, but unfortunately I could not find significant further exploration of this concept in the book's subsequent chapters.

<sup>6</sup> According to the definition on p. 293 of the text, I believe that once the nature of the illusion has been revealed, the wire can be seen as a physical manifestation of the "deformation grid" that operates in three dimensions.

the total weightlessness of the shadow through which the character himself is drawn. Judging by material similarity, this wire maze carries more body metaphors than any other aspect of the artwork.

Furthermore, any thorough analytic viewing of the piece will make the viewer complicit in the pain of the character depicted, a causality that ought to produce empathy. The light in each piece is activated by a viewer's proximity to the piece, so to inspect the piece closely in order to analyze the deformed wire is to create the image of the hero suffering. The longer the viewer remains in front of the piece to inspect it, and potentially analyze the mechanics of the wire/shadow transformation, the longer the viewer is responsible for sustaining the image of the character in pain. Analytic seeing produces pain in the depicted subject.

#### - POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS –

It is possible that, in flip-flopping between depictions of pain and metamorphosis through so many different facets, these works ultimately fail to achieve either. It's a conclusion which I am forced to consider all the more due to my belief that, as the artist of these pieces, I am uniquely ill-suited to declare what the common viewer's honest response to them would be. A more optimistic view (and the one which I will take) is that these are works of both pain *and* metamorphosis, with each trait brought forth from the image least likely to induce it. The twisting contrapposto figures, depictions of mythical cruelty that are well-known and often referenced, are in fact painless due to the insubstantiality of the shadow they are drawn in. And the complicated, mathematically manipulated wire, which would seem to lend itself to analytic seeing is, in fact, recontextualized by that massless shadow as the most visceral element of the artwork. With the aid of a number of unexpected techniques, these artworks remind us that the material media of artworks have the ability to turn an artwork's body metaphor or body empathy on its head: they are the true heart of the matter.