

Desiring Drapery

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Cloth, textures and folds have fascinated me for as long as I can remember. After a few detours, I began to understand that drapery was the central force to my practice and research. Despite it often being thought of as *passé*, I obsessed about how to depict light on folds through paint. I have spent the last 20 years working with this wonderful subject. Here's where I am.

The term 'drape' describes the condition of the physical state of a fabric or cloth, whether that be hanging, suspended, veiling or resting. Joan Copjec in *The Sartorial Superego* 1989, states that 'drapery is defined as what it does'¹, meaning that its form is characterised by its very nature. This condition is made possible through the intervention of someone or something – a body or physical structure or element. Anne Hollander calls this interference the 'basic accountability in the cloth'² and because of the associations and implications of these interventions, the drape functions in the material world; therefore, it is always responding to it. These fabrics and folds are not just forms, but they are forms that are the result of something real. This accountability is of significant importance when representing fabric in two-dimensional artworks: what the fabric is covering, how it is suspended, and where lies the spine of the fold. Basically, what caused the fold, determines what gives the drape form. A structure is covered and yet the fabric traces the outline of its form; consequently, signifying the dualities of concealed object versus revealed object, and concomitantly, real object versus painted representation. At this moment, the matter is concealed whilst revealing its body and shape.³

To further explore these ideas around form, I can introduce Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault (1872 – 1934) the psychologist who specialised in treating women who fetishised silk. Through his research, he developed three orders of elements for the structure of drapery. These crucial investigations or strategies for the artist help to visually articulate the construction and purpose of the drape. De Clérambault's 'three orders of elements' are:

'1) The principal point of support (e.g. the head, neck, shoulders, etc.); 2) The movement of the cloth from this point; 3) The zones of the body covered and the various means of fastening, twisting and folding the cloth'⁴.

These three orders are valuable considerations in painting processes and for setting up compositions. Key to representing fabric's form is understanding the principal point of support; this is the point where the drape hangs from, how the fabric is affected by gravity and how the anatomy of the cloth behaves. Realising how and why folds are created makes for a practicable and structured representation. As previously stated, there is always a rationale for the drape; it is subject to what it comes in contact with, as well as the weight, texture and density of the falling fabric. The weight of the fabric, the gravity pulling it downwards, points of strain and twisting, invoke drapery. Each fold has a spine, the hinge in the fabric where the adjoining wings of the material succumb to gravitational pressure. The

¹ Copjec, Joan, "The Sartorial Superego" *October*, vol.50, The MIT Press, 1989, (57- 95), p69

² Hollander, Anne, *Fabric of Vision: Dress and Drapery in Painting*. London: Bloomsbury, 2002, p14

³ Other examples of reveal include a peeling back of the drape to expose what is underneath or the possibility of sheer fabrics that allow a viewer to see through to the object, or, when it is a curtain it embodies an anticipated spectacle and invitation to look behind the cloth.

⁴ Copjec, p69.

weave, the warp and weft, further format the fabric's creases. Understanding these physical attributes and their constraints mean that form can be interpreted and illustrated.

In Mick O Dea's tablecloth paintings, the fabric is depicted as resting or veiling a tabletop. Within these works, there is a certain stillness as the drape awaits the potential breeze to agitate its folds. Waiting. It is no longer simply a cloth; it is the principal protagonist. This application is contrary to one of the primary uses of drapery in figurative painting – the background. In this instance, it is neither subject nor object, yet paradoxically, both at the same time. The fabric exists in the in-between space; in-between awareness, invisible and present.

Moreover, drapery is as much about the subject matter depicted, as to what is not shown, but that is implied, hidden and concealed. It goes beyond the physical. Within its folds, it can expose relationships, tensions, spaces and forms. Not only is the rationale for the drape in its physicality, embedded within it are signs of artifice and deception. To uncover and disclose these conceptual ideas you need to delve further into the folds.

This investigation leads to finding the existence and purpose of fabric in art, which has an arresting and compelling history. Two essential references for understanding this discourse are De Clérambault and Loïe Fuller (1862-1928). De Clérambault's principal research focus was in perceiving the language and gesture of cloth, scrutinising the subject of drapery for what it was and what social implications it created. He used his findings for developing the teaching of the subject at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris. However, he had a commonly perceived image that he had a perversion with drapery⁵, which led to the termination of his teaching. Crucially, Copjec sets about reframing this interpretation of him and his obsession with fabric⁶. She points out that De Clérambault's interest is, in fact, with the physical structure of drapery as an artefact and an 'idiosyncratic passion for cloth'⁷. Alternatively, Loïe Fuller, a dancer whose innovative performance of the *Serpentine Dance*⁸ 1890 captured dynamism and an uncanniness in her handling of the swathes of fabric. This piece is still profoundly relevant today, due to her application of coloured light, mirrors and fabric to fill the space. Her performance goes beyond the discipline of dance and into an expanded field. Fuller's dramatic and theatrical use of fabric created and enhanced space and movement.

However, probably the most significant adjustment in drapery's history was the pathologising of decoration and ornament in art that began with Modernism and notions of reduction. Occurring at a similar time as De Clérambault and Fuller, Adolf Loos published *Ornament and Crime* in 1908, where he championed the removal of superfluous decoration and ornament in art and architecture. By the 1960s and the development of new movements in painting and sculpture, reductionist ideas were further amplified through discussions from critics such as Clement Greenberg (1960), Donald Judd (1965) and Michael Fried (1967).

Modernism's focus centred on surface and materials rather than the image. Greenberg, in *Modernist Painting* 1960, argued that the essential element of modernist painting was its flatness. It is an object and should be read as such⁹. These arguments would prompt you to believe that the erasing of a subject such as drapery is fundamental in the move to be contemporary. However, contrary to these assertions, drapery's salient achievement is that it is a persistent, but often overlooked, source of creative and social importance. It is more than a depiction of folds on a surface; it is a social and cultural signifier in western visual language

⁵ Doy, Gen, *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture* 2002.

⁶ Copjec, p57 – p95.

⁷ Copjec, p60

⁸ The context of this work was the time of Art Nouveau in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century, when nature and ideas of femininity significantly influenced art. The Lumiere Brothers recorded the *Serpentine Dance* in 1896.

⁹ Greenberg, Clement, 'Modernist Painting.' 1960, In: *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 4, *Modernism with Vengeance 1957-1969*, edited by John O'Brian. London: University of Chicago Press, 1995. p87

that has a lengthy and captivating presence within painting and sculpture. This tenaciousness is due to an ability to straddle both ideas of reduction and figuration. In its simplest form as a fabric, it can be used as both the surface and material of a painting, where, for instance, fabric screens like a tapestry or curtain on the gallery's walls. When employed figuratively, drapery references its long history. Referring back to ancient Greek marble statues and through each successive era and movement in art history. Each one has its interpretation of how light falls on a piece of fabric, how it caresses a body and, crucially, what its socio-political meaning can be. With all of these strands and influences working concurrently over the last 100 years, or more, the subject of drapery in western art was re-imagined, re-formed and re-articulated.

What's more, if you look closely at traditions of fabric and textiles, it exemplifies crafts and labour that are associated with women. Fabric carries its history in the bleached threads and imprints of the hands that made it. Common themes, such as, the relationship of the body to cloth, are embedded with notions of the feminine, eroticism and commodification. These ideas are often incorporated into social rituals; from desiring luxury items through commodification and the cultural value of textiles to the touch and sight of cloth as an interface between the concealment and revelation of the body. However, the female use of fabric is more than merely an eroticised process of concealing and revealing for the male gaze. There is a different set of perspectives – this time based on women's specificities, experiences and positions, rather than those of men. This portrayal allows for sensual enjoyment and discussions around materiality and the female. These narratives are realised in the work of Amanda Coogan, whereby through material compositions, conditions and performances her work articulates the abject peripheries of drapery and the body. It challenges prescribed ideas around relationships between subject/object and body/materiality.

In addition, when physically interacting with the real fabric, the relationship of an object to a body can create an opening for fetishisation. Depending on your understanding of fetish and desire, the object, in this case, fabric, can be either a substitution for a lack (Freud)¹⁰ or it can be seen as positive and productive, an affirmative positive force (Deleuze)¹¹. My issue with the first interpretation is that the primary context of fetish comes from the domain of masculine sexuality; it insinuates that its predominant understanding is that women are the passive objects of men's fetishisation. Elizabeth Grosz discussed this rejection of the patriarchal definition in *Volatile Bodies* 1994:

'Instead of aligning desire with fantasy and opposing it to the real, instead of seeing it as a yearning desire is an actualisation, a series of practices, bringing things together or separating them, making machines, making reality. Desire does not take for itself a particular object whose attainment it requires; rather, it aims at nothing above its own proliferation or self-expansion¹².

One appeal of fetish is that it has a nuanced play within and against existing structures and narratives of power, namely the structure within a capitalistic, patriarchal society. These ideas of play, fantasy, dualities of power or hierarchy, become prevalent while thinking of consumption and seduction of the object. It is important to note that the fetishist needs the real object and not a substitute or representation to achieve satisfaction. Even though an artist might paint realistically and do an authentic representation of the fabric, the process removes the viewer a step from the object of desire. It could be argued that as many painters work from photographs, this method removes the viewer and the artist a step further again. Therefore, painting becomes a barrier between the viewer and the object of desire.

¹⁰ Freud, Sigmund, 'Fetishism.' *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, edited by Angela Richards, 345 – 358. London: Penguin Books. 1977.

¹¹ Deleuze, Giles, *Anti-Oedipus*, translated by Hurley, R., Seem, M., and Lane, H. R., New York: Viking, 1977; reprint University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

¹² Grosz, Elizabeth, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1994, p165

You see, the real drape has different objectives to that of one of painting. It creates aspects as spatial forms and physically manifests space, whether blocking off, covering up or for comfort. A natural reaction is to question the space beyond the drape, what is behind it, and the theatricality that's embedded within it. These installed swathes of fabric and curtains generate an anticipated spectacle. Each separate space, in turn, circumscribes and produces behavioural patterns and codes. The associations of social encounter, experience, revelation, voyeurism, sensuality, dressing up and ritual are still present. However, when we are confronted by a real drape, it becomes a portal that relates to the architectural and movement; there is something beyond it, something hidden, something waiting to be disclosed. It replaces the simulated reality with a new and actual reality.

Between authenticity and artifice, interior and exterior, fiction and reality, drapery creates narratives that straddle notions of both figuration and reduction. Within these discussions, I have embedded my painting practice, which has spanned from still-life to spatial installations. Through understanding and acknowledging some of the tropes of structure and physicality, it enabled my practice to expand beyond traditions and historical interpretations to progress into a metaphysical sphere that explores both artifice and desire. As in my practice and the wider contemporary arts, where artists question modes of art making, materials, meanings and strategies, the subject of drapery persists. It is an element in fine art practice loaded with history and socio-political meaning, affirming drapery, conceptually and physically, as necessary.