Top
Dysmorphia II
Oil on canvas
32 x 20"
2013–2015

Bottom
Domes
Installation: Brass, Glass, Fabric
Variable dimensions
2016

Top-left
Dysmorphia III
Oil on canvas
32 x 20"
2013–2015

Below
Gingham Room II
Oil on cotton fabric
32 x 20"
2016

Left to right
Hermit I, Hermit II, Hermit III, Hermit IV
All oil on canvas
32 x 20"
2016
“Reality is frequently inaccurate.”
- Douglas Adams, The Restaurant at the End of the Universe

Stepping into the installation of The Metafold we follow Brendan Schick through a Baroque looking-glass into the shadowy tenebrism of dreams, an uncanny space where things can seem very real but look somehow just wrong enough to be unsettling. His still-life paintings of metaphorical objects hang in dramatic pools of light: a silver teapot pours drapery onto a tablecloth; an ornately framed mirror reflects a distorted gingham pattern; excrent fleshy blobs float over twisted sheets, inhabit clothing as if manifesting like spiritualist’s ectoplasm rolling outward like steam-clouds, and then hover in blackness. The exhibition also includes found objects that echo the still-life paintings, adding dimension and texture. Ornate, but empty frames hang in a brasssy cluster, and several black-lined shelves with glass bell-jars hold more emptiness. The folds of drapery, fractal-like ornamentation, reflections in reflections, black spaces, and discomfiting fleshy blobs are motifs rooted in nightmare-like trance states Schick experienced in childhood. In his “fever-induced Lilliputian hallucinations” the room would seem to expand cavernously and his body to shrink, or change shape, stretching grotesquely. Researching his symptoms as an adult, Schick found that he had experienced a condition known as Alice-in-Wonderland Syndrome, a neurological malfunction in cognitive processing similar to sleep paralysis. 1

First described in western medicine by Dr. John Todd in 1955, symptoms are caused by unusual activity in the parietal lobe which parses our senses of time, body posture and position, and manifest as hallucinations in which the body feels distorted, excessively tiny or strangely huge. Walls change shape, stretching grotesquely. Researching his symptoms as an adult, Schick found that he had experienced a condition known as Alice-in-Wonderland Syndrome, a neurological malfunction in cognitive processing similar to sleep paralysis. 1

His final steps, building frames and combining the paintings into a theatrically lit installation, creates an immersive space. Visually informed as much by historical painters such as Caravaggio or Henry Fuseli as by contemporary film-makers David Lynch and Peter Greenaway, The Metafold installation engages us with Schick’s questions on the nature of consciousness and reality on visceral and intellectual levels.

The title of the Dysmorphia series refers to deformity and in a clinical sense, the perception that one’s body is not right, out of control. Looking at the twisted sheets and fleshy blobs we can feel the sweaty terror of such nightmares. In the Hermit paintings, a blue sweatshirt stands in for the self and is also occupied by a cloud-like blob self. The hooded garment carries a further meaning: in Tarot the Hermit card symbolizes introspection, seeking enlightenment. Nobel winner and neurobiologist Eric R. Kandel writes that as science searches to understand the processes of the mind, art provides “insight into the more fleeting, experiential qualities of the mind….Both perspectives are necessary if we are to fully grasp the nature of the mind.” 2 The Gingham Room paintings were partially inspired by a dream, Schick explains, “of a room without doors or windows”. Looking into the paintings, we feel as Schick does, the red and white pattern is overwhelming. Our eyes escape into the reflections, freeing our minds to ponder the physics of bending light, multiple universes, time loops. Single, crucial moments that stretch out over a lifetime. When Alice asked the White Rabbit: “How long is forever?” He replied, “Sometimes, just one second.” 4

The very personal nature of individual experience is such that we may not realize that ours is not the commonly shared method of processing reality, or conversely, that we are not alone in our experiences. Schick’s work engages with the loss of control over body, senses of self and time, situations that we each will come to face. Science can help us understand the mechanisms of the mind and body, but we also feel imaginary life powerfully. Art can help us share the qualia of existence, discuss the otherwise ineffable, and inspire us to reach beyond our own experiences.

Margaret Bessai

Uncited quotes are from unpublished interviews with Brendan Schick, graciously granted to the author in February and March 2016.

1. During normal REM sleep, the body is “switched off” preventing sleepwalking. If the conscious mind wakes before the body can move, it triggers physical panic. Sam Kean: The Tale of the Dukeing Neurosurgeons. Little, Brown and Company (2014) pp. 7-11


4. Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, first published in 1865 by mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll)