

GLASS PAINTINGS



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In conversation with Harland Miller.

HM: There's a suggested narrative in these works, which is evident in much of your other work but much more so in these.

MH: With the Myra Hindley images and the Thatcher portrait from the 'White Riot' show, the story flows from an icon and the narrative woven from the objects used to construct the work. I suppose the glass supplies a similar digitising effect that takes place in the mosaics, but unlike working with symbols of, for example an island or a football or an official portrait, these paintings imply a continuation of activity off camera.

HM: Perhaps that's because when presented with a door or window, some device at any rate that can be opened but in these works will remain closed, we have an involuntary urge to know what's going on behind them. Put that way it seems to explain both the basis for and the enduring popularity of television soaps. I'm thinking of the traditional opening kind of credits that usually commence at a high angle over rather mundane roof tops before descending into predominantly working class streets, panning by doors and windows and offering glimpses of the ordinary lives going on behind them, perhaps

this is an appropriate place to start; would you say these paintings are rooted in your own childhood experience of growing up in Leeds?

MH: Yes and no, I do remember this kind of glass from my childhood, though we never had it in our house, but my awareness of it resurfaced while staying in a boarding house with my family in Broadstairs. My two nephews were peering through the glass into the living room, I think they were actually trying to see what was on the television but it was such an arresting image that I quickly took a photo.



"Exploding Lilly" from "Readers' Wives" series - 1996
Oil and acrylic on canvas - 244 cm x 244 cm - Collection of David Teiger

HM: So the rest of it is a construct; the female figure undressing -which seems to have almost transmogrified from the Reader's Wives series, that doesn't relate to a specific memory? Being transfixed by an accidental glimpse of something elicit - which at that age is probably more exciting for the knowledge you shouldn't be seeing it than any innate eroticism in the situation; Nabakov claimed that this kind of unwitting experience - if it chimed in with puberty, could shape your sexual propensities for life?

MH: Well I suppose he had a lot of back pedalling to do didn't he, and I can see where he is coming from but I incorporated these images into this work 'Peeping Toms' (2002) because - as you touched on, the glass struck me as being very particularly English and had an erotic element too that had to do with exposure and concealment that I was interested in when making the Readers' Wives series you just mentioned.

HM: And the wallpaper too, can I ask you about that - do you hate wallpaper or something, I mean, I don't know why, but the way its rendered, the worst examples of that period, you seem to have something against it as though you are exorcising some trauma which is bound up in it?

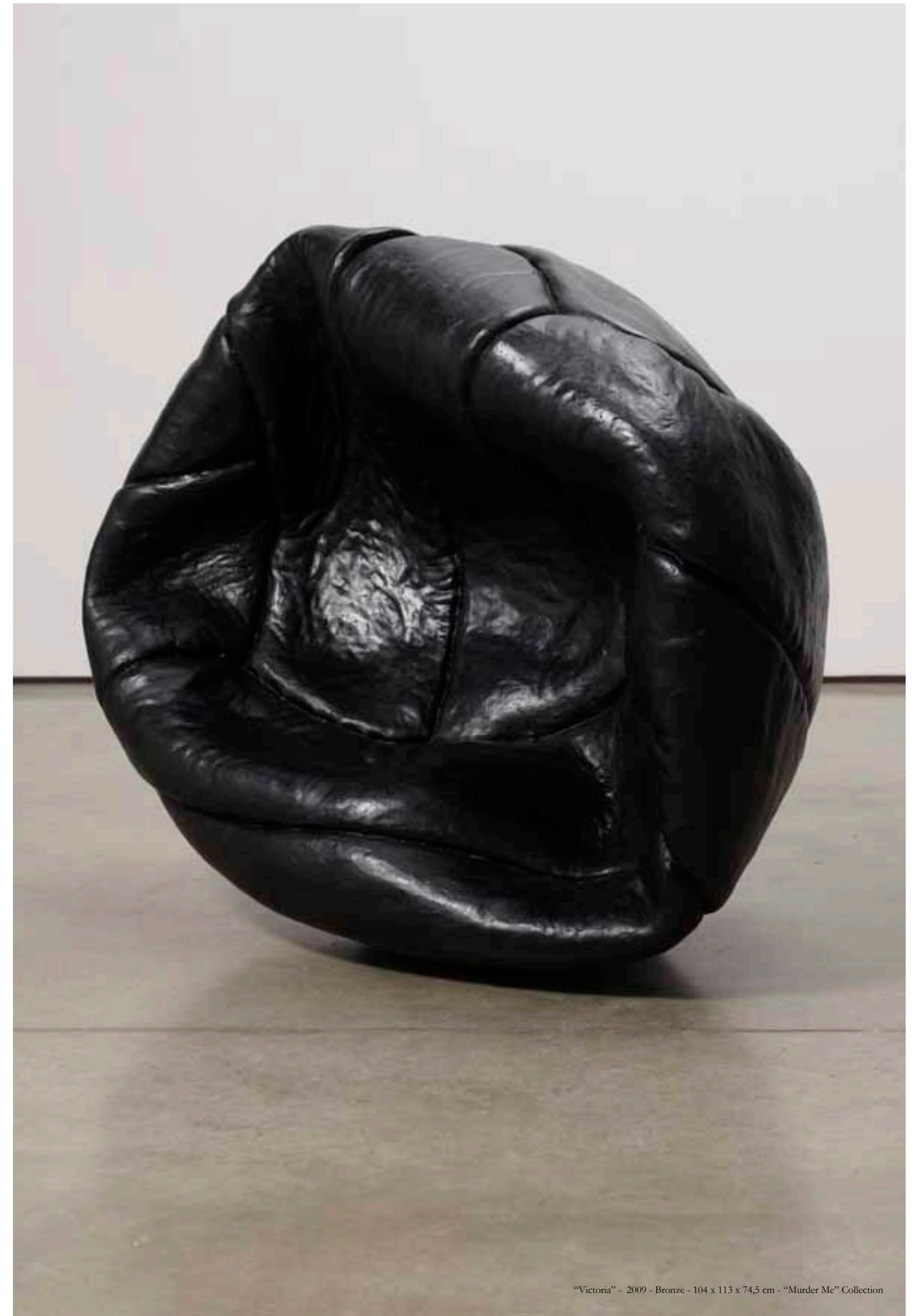
MH: [laughs] No, nothing so dramatic. I incorporated the wallpaper because in addition to the glass it grounded the paintings in the kind of working class environment you alluded to when we began talking.

HM: Though the glass is a greater - almost an ultimate signifier of this.

MH: Yes, it is like a lens that has swallowed the whole painting. Everything in the painting could be comprehended through the glass.

HM: Yes in particular the Reader's Wives figure who's been given the 'Glass' treatment for want of a better expression.

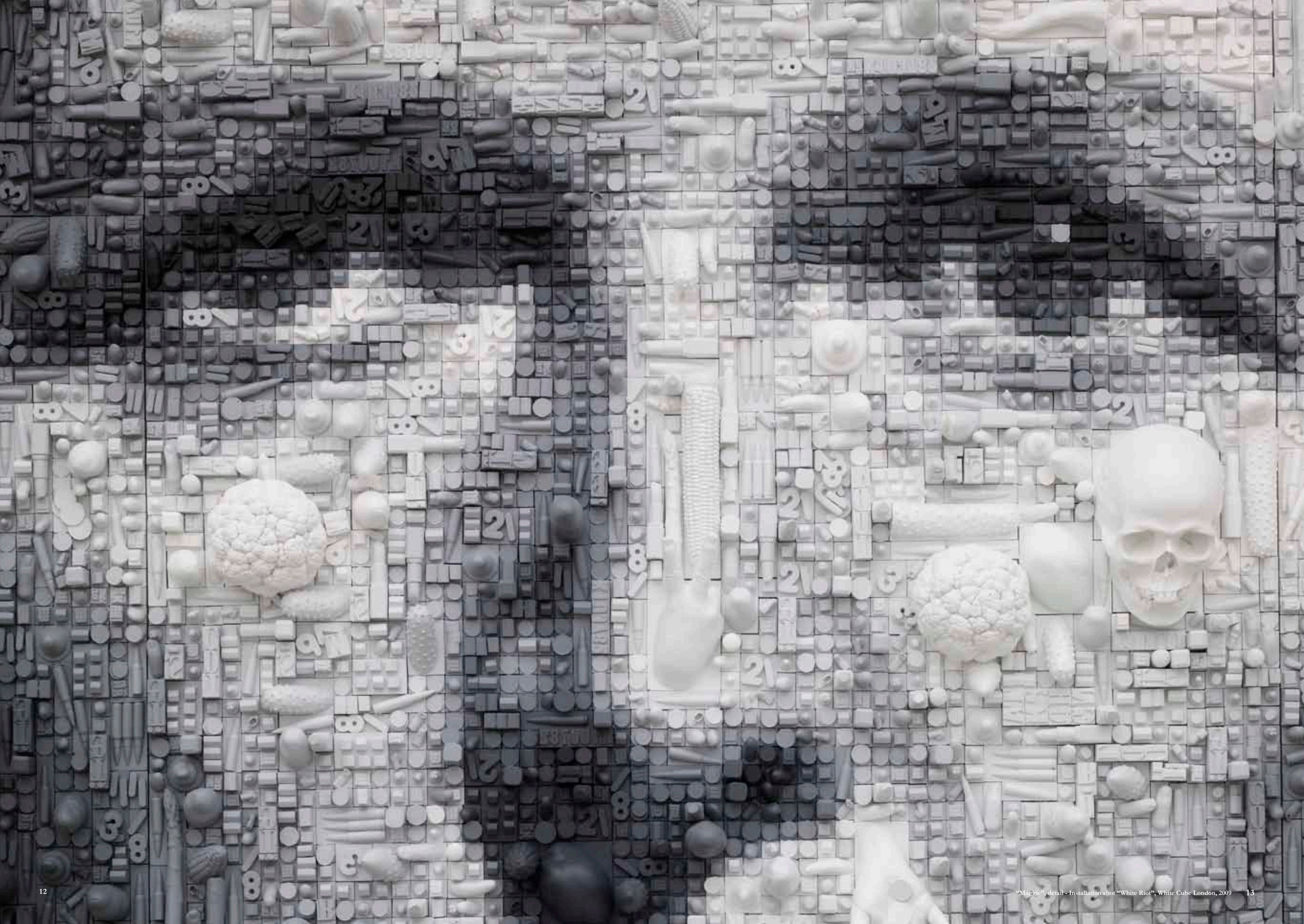
"Anne Summer's Party (Morning)" - 2001 - Oil and acrylic on canvas - 396 x 198 cm
Museum of Modern Art Denver, Colorado



"Victoria" - 2009 - Bronze - 104 x 113 x 74,5 cm - "Murder Me" Collection



Installation shot "White Riot", White Cube London, 2009





Installation shot "White Riot", White Cube London, 2009





MH: Those Reader's Wives paintings basically morphed into the 'Glass' paintings and with quite a few interesting parallels too.

HM: Yes there's an obvious parallel here between the white wood work of the doors that contain and naturally frame the imagery in a domestic way, and the white borders around the traditional Polaroid picture that did exactly the same thing, and which were so distinctive in signifying erotic content that almost any Polaroid of anything seemed to have that faint charge of something voyeuristic, at least they did to me. Still do, would I be right in assuming that these polaroids were the references for the Readers' Wives series culled from pornographic magazines of the 1970's.

MH: Yes they were.

HM: I always liked them for their lack of design because they seemed to be taken with hardly any thought to composition, it's just all about capturing the eroticism of this transformative moment, when, true to the concept, someone's wife, girlfriend, becomes for a second, an Olympia figure, but around them you still have these arbitrary elements like the wall paper and table lamps, gas fires, but all these disparate elements were formalised by the frame, the same principal is at work in the door pictures right?

MH: Yes exactly, they work like that precisely, but also, those pre digital Polaroids were very much like objects in their own right which similarly made the

painting into an object or a sculpture which is very important for me.

HM: In the Reader's Wives series the areas of white seem to match what the black line is doing in terms of formalising the work?

MH: Yeah they provide this area of aesthetic containment and formal juxtaposition for what the painting is doing. They provide a jumping off point too, for the eye, you know, into the thrashing mass of the 'porn' paintings and the shivery little packets of paint in the 'Glass' paintings. I'm interested - in fact I'd say getting increasingly fixated on how a work is framed, how the edge of the work meets the real world - it's important for contextualisation and it really amplifies the energy in the surface.

HM: The energy is really important right because the subject is kind of indistinct at first but through all the turbulence - the line - when you decipher it, is very cool, and that cool detachment and the very expressionistic violence are two sensations which seem to constantly resonate in a way that remains with you long after viewing the work and there's an echo of this in the 'Glass' pictures too - 'the shivery little packets of paint' you referred too, though the subject matter is more evolved, that is to say the dramatisation of the subject through the glass is more conceivable, more palpable, visceral even, there's more potential to beguile let's say... with all that kind of stage how do you begin, how do you decide what you are going to paint?

MH: Well as we said the first one was of a woman getting undressed and this was the kind of link between the two series, a natural progression of the dramatic persona and it's interesting you said 'Stage' just then, because one thing I quickly realised is in order to show more I was in fact going to have to stage or exaggerate with a theatrical licence the whole glass thing.

HM: How so - why?

MH: This glass is never really used to fill a whole external door to a toilet or a bathroom. it's usually used to give a bit of privacy through obfuscation in the lower rooms and you might get a smaller piece in an outside window to let light in. I've completely overstated its use because of the connection people make in their minds with it and nudity

"West Midlands; We Aim To Please" from the "Readers' Wives" series - 1993
Oil and acrylic on canvas - 244 cm x 244 cm



HM: Yes it's like the scale which is slightly larger than life size I think?

MH: Yeah - either larger or smaller, as a rule.

HM: But these are all larger?

MH: Yeah

HM: And that seems to imply something.

MH: It does? I mean yes it does but... what do you mean?

HM: Well I think it's one of the things that makes the work powerful - by playing with scale - in this instance making it bigger, but subliminally so, so that people don't really notice.

"Dudley. Like what you see then call me" from the "Readers' Wives" series - 1996
Oil and acrylic on canvas - 244 cm x 244 cm



"The Lord High Admiral" - 2008
Bronze - 280 x 120 x 136 cm
"Burger Collection", Hong Kong



By doing this I think your actually making a comment on the subject - elevating its importance which is what people do.

We naturally create or clothe by latching onto a snippet of something - people do it with gossip - or they see a figure lit up by a light going on in an upstairs window and the supposition begins - i think

it happens all the time unconsciously and these paintings are in this kind of area of abeyance to an outcome you know.

MH: Yeah actually I was - there was something you just said - I'm trying to remember; it reminded me of something Gombrich said in his History of art.

HM: Story of art

MH: Yeah. Sorry

HM: No I'm sorry, that was fucking pedantic go on please Gombrich?

MH: Well he actually uses this rolled glass as an analogy for grasping what's happening to the figure in modern art by way of an explanation to the so called 'Layman'. If I recall correctly he suggests that seeing an image in an straightforward representational painting is a bit like a pre-weaned child eating smoothly blended food. Perceiving the figure through the distortions of the obscuring glass asks the brain to put the gentle fragmentation back together.

This challenge he argues is like the infant starting to incorporate sort of 'crunchy' food into the diet. By 'crunchy' he's arguing that it's a more developed adult experience, the ability and challenge of absorbing more fragmented imagery is key to the more mature and challenging psychology of modern art... I think that's roughly what he said - I'm trying to remember something I read over thirty years ago.

HM: Yes, but I guess with you having three young uns that paragraph has resurfaced for you.

MH: [laughs] Maybe that's what triggered it yeah.

HM: But I totally see, the glass device obviously functions in your pictures along the lines Gombrich

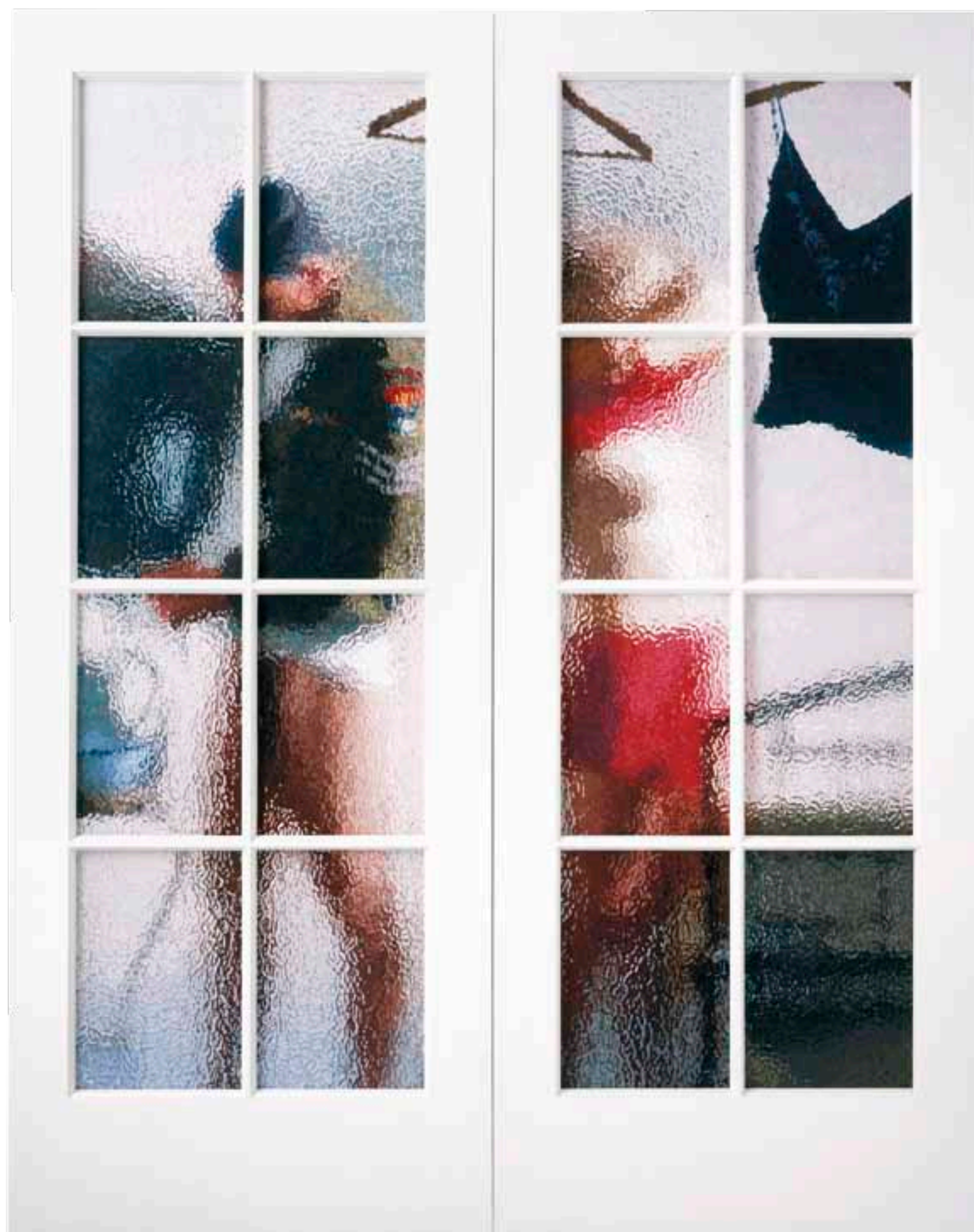
suggests with the brain having to er, fill in the gaps for want of a better phrase.

MH: Yeah the brain is having to cement the fragments of light back into make a coherent image, where the brain has to work the mind takes pleasure in lingering you know.

HM: Yes, sort of this way or that, according to your leanings, and I guess once there's something sexual in the mix, where there's an elicit glimpse which the mind then tries to see fully resolved you have a very compelling moment in painting don't you - but, you don't just stick with voyeurism and nudity do you, you have many other subjects; dressed characters - the soldier for instance, and ex characters even, as in the skulls, and then following on from those inanimate heads you have man made inanimate objects, toilet accoutrements etc.



"Study For Peeping Toms" - 2000
Oil and acrylic on canvas - 198 x 198 cm - Private collection



MH: Yes, what I like about this device and this body of work is that it allows me to concentrate on the abstract elements in the paint without disrupting the image in an expressionistic way.

This is a theme that you will find in most of my work whereby I will find an image I feel is important to work with, that I feel I can squeeze further meaning from by its treatment.

I don't want to subject the image to any expressionistic distortion, its power and its truth are unfortunately in its photographic representationalism.

In that respect I am trailing behind Warhol and Richter, which is rather miserable.

HM: [laughs] Sorry, I don't know why that should be funny, it's alarming really.

MH: Well yes it is, but with the glass pictures I'm really not reliant on found media images but can contrive some pretty theatrical scenes and in some cases recreate scenarios based on other painters work.

HM: Such as?

MH: The painting 'Two Figures' after Francis Bacon which is based on Bacons 1953 painting 'Two Figures'.

HM: Yes that's ' I didn't realise that was after Bacon, but I see it now and it's curious because I was saying how with these pictures there's a real and immediate connection with the figures because by recreating them yourself your sort of internalising them which

obviously makes it a very visceral experience and Bacon said something similar about how he wanted his images to assault the nerves directly, I think this picture does the same thing 'indirectly' but just as successfully, and which was the other one?

MH: Diptych after Edward Hopper's 'Excursions into Philosophy.'

HM: Why these?

MH: Well to go back to Voyeurism again, both these paintings have a very voyeuristic, intrusive element to their construction and are both sexual in very different ways.

Bacon uses his 'shuttering technique' of broken sweeping marks to fragment the scene, you therefore go further than the photographic source bacon was working with (Wrestlers) and supplant the idea of aggressive sexual congress.

In both cases the paintings were as much a 'homage' as much as they were suitably analogues and I had fun - an element I don't normally associate with my work setting them up.

HM: Can you say more about the 'staging' process?

MH: It's a guilty secret, well not really a secret but I feel really uncomfortable being a painter who hankers after being a film director. Further than that, I feel quite queasy making paintings so entwined in the photographic process.

HM: Isn't that a bit idealistic or perhaps unrealistic in a digital era?

MH: Not at all. I try to play it down in the company of other painters because the purist in me wants to create a narrative that comes from the imagination and through the materiality of the paint.

However, I will when pushed dust off my standard rebuff and stand side by side with Richter (which I don't want to be seen to be doing) in defending the primacy of the photograph in visual culture, with this...

Just suppose a projected image of Christ was preserved, something to do with the a pin hole camera effect in a curtained off room adjacent to where the last supper was taking place.

And suppose there was some photosensitive property at work in a recently whitewashed wall, and that a record of the last supper was preserved in this way, which is maybe not beyond the realms of possibility, which would you rather look at, this, or Leonardo's last supper?

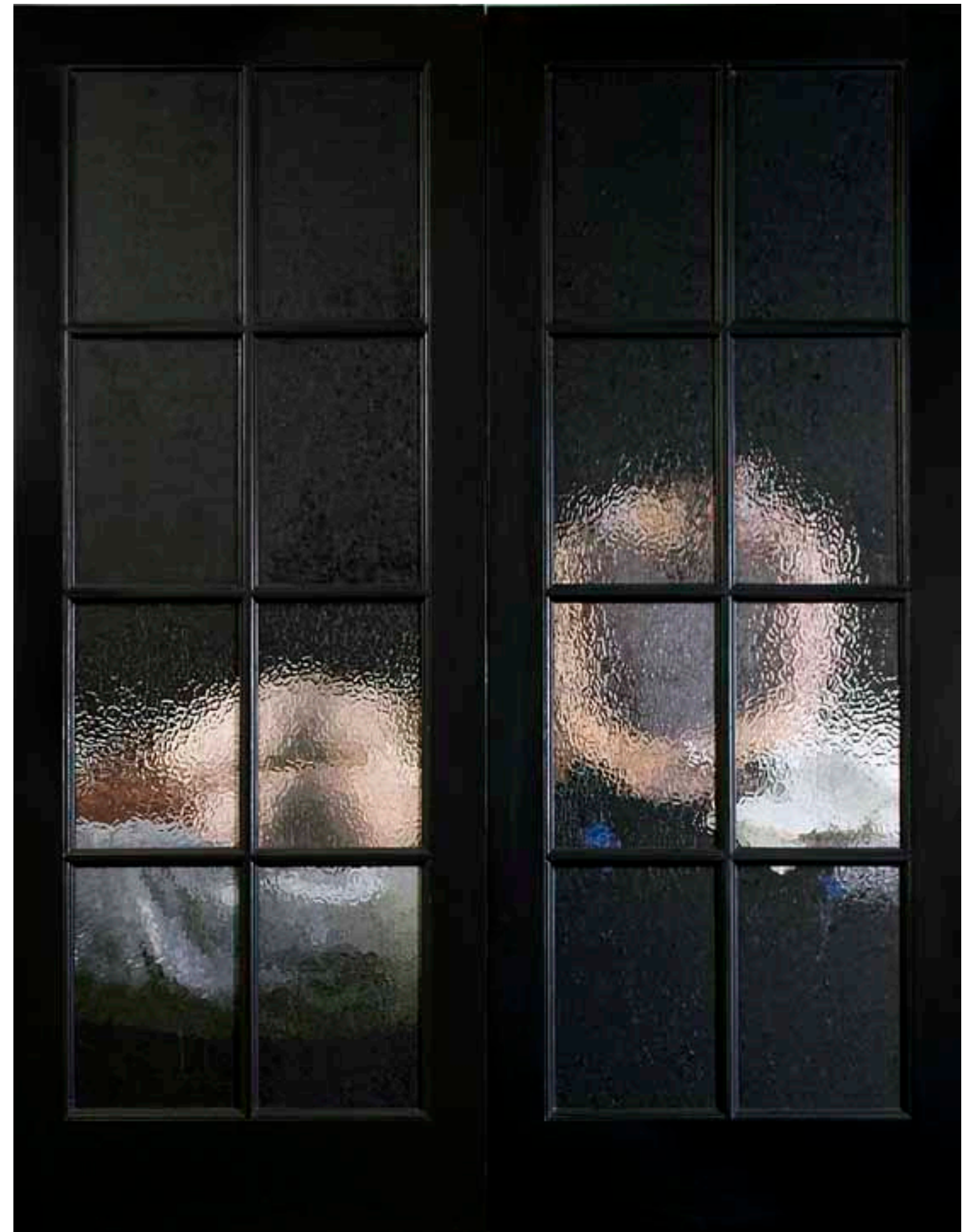
Sorry, Leonardo but no contest! Not for me anyway.

Photography still comes closest to the kind of truth I'm interested in despite all the deconstructive post structuralist stuff I guzzled in the 80's. The princely authority of the photo is still so strong for me.

HM: Ok, you've made a rigorous defence of the use of the photo but 'staging it'?



Edward Hopper
"Excursion Into Philosophy"
1959
Oil on canvas
76,2 x 101,6 cm





MH: Yeah! Sorry, I digressed. When I went to Angels and Burmans which supplies the costumes for the film industry, to select some outfits to dress my models in, an unspeakable excitement possessed me. It made me want to use all these amazing period costumes, I felt very comfortable in the role of director of my paintings as much as being the artist or the painter. This then opened a new dimension to the work in terms of the performance. In order to counteract the dryness in transcribing a photograph into paint, a lot of the creative process, for want of a better word, took place in the endless staging, lighting and photography behind the glass.

HM: And the models, your kids seem to appear a lot.

MH: The figures in these paintings are all friends and family. I have rarely spent a consistent stretch of time making these works - unlike other series that have a clear start and a natural end point they have continued over the years and not often been shown publicly. In that respect they have become quite intimate for me, and also come to represent a bit of autobiography too, my eldest son for instance, Harvey, appears in them when he was only three years old and now again as a teenager.

HM: And again as a young man.

MH: [laughs] I don't know about that.

HM: Notionally?

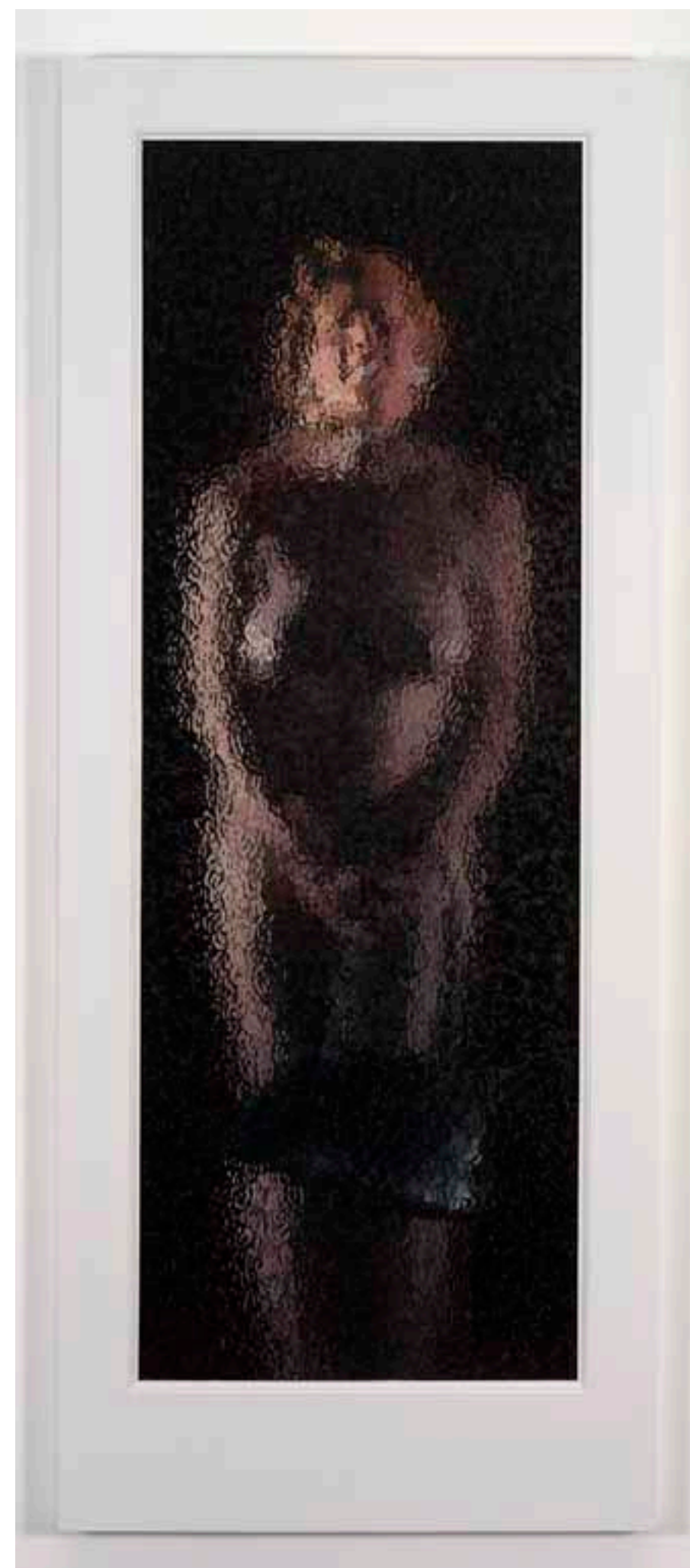
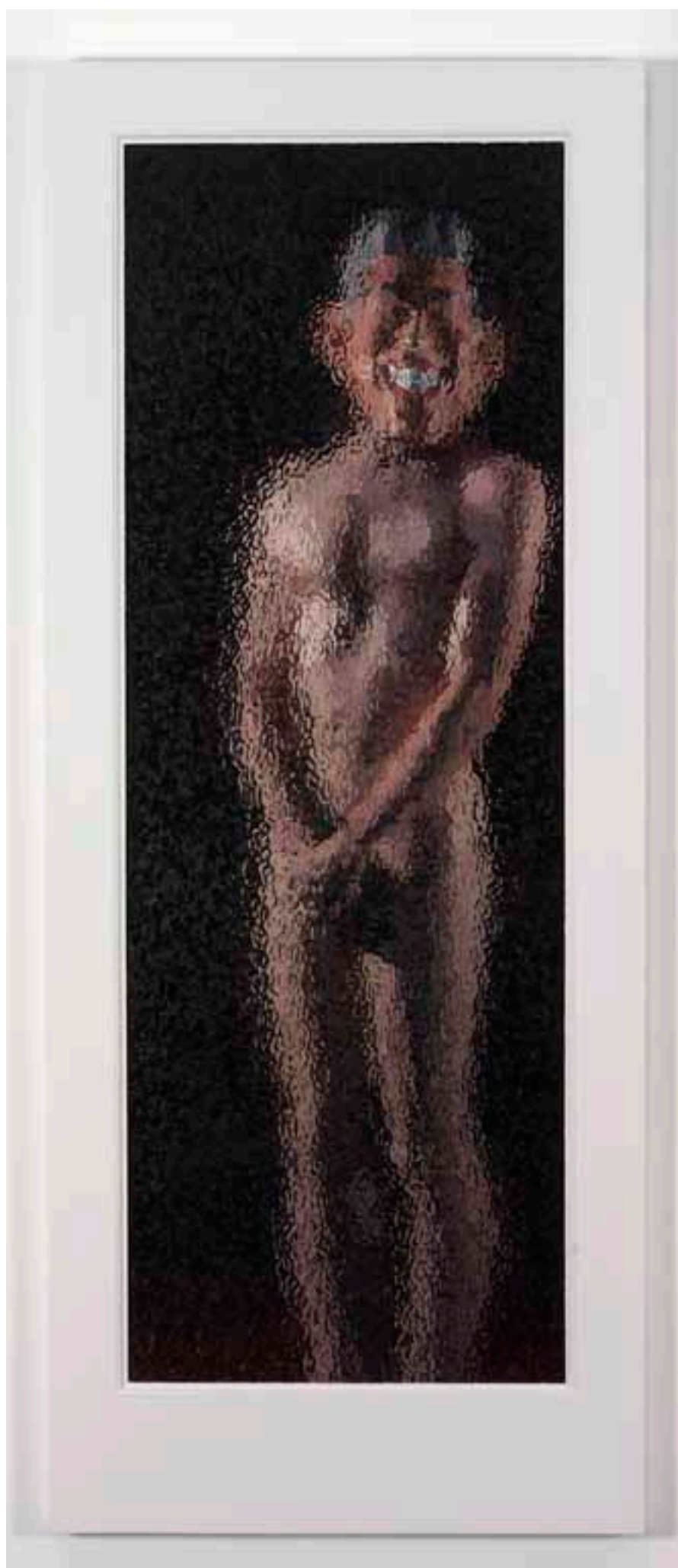
MH: Notionally maybe.

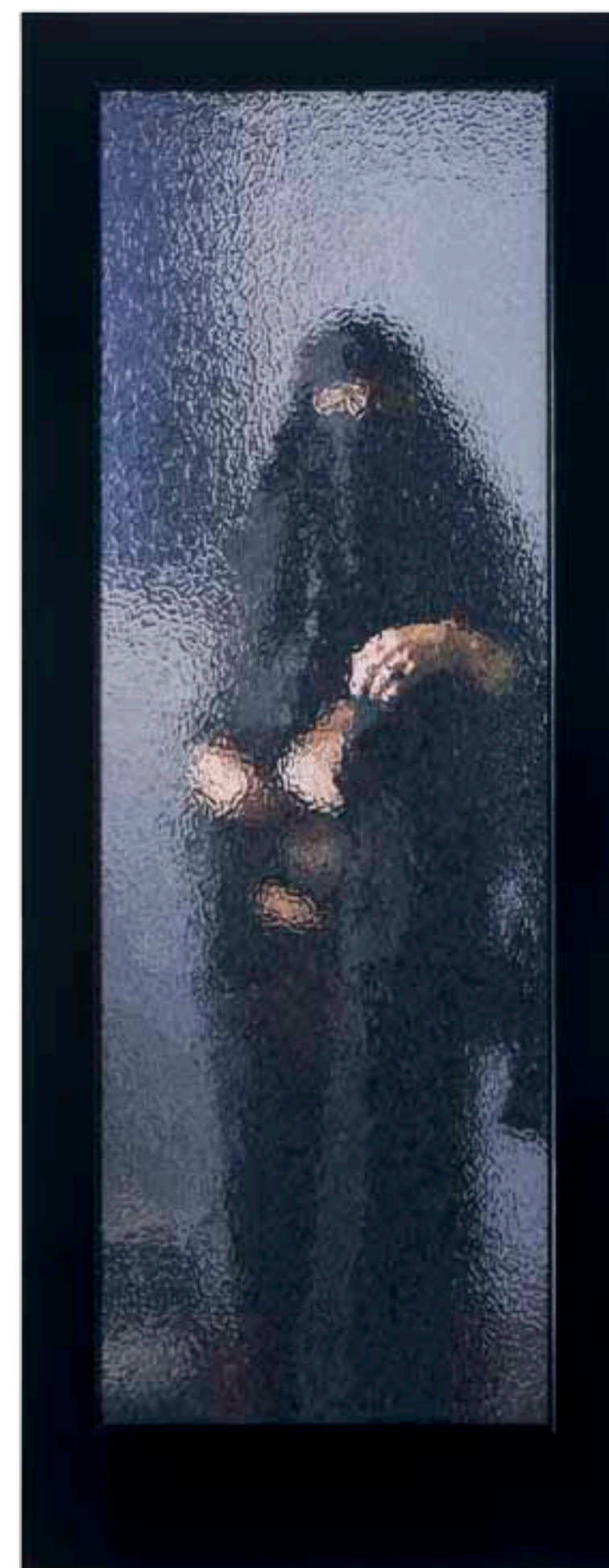
HM: I love these pictures and I'd like to think of them as being ongoing; the door is after all such a recurring image in Films - your self-professed medium of choice, but it also figures in Plays Books, Cartoons, Aphorisms, and Songs - especially Songs, where its either opening or closing to dramatise a beginning or an end, particularly endings where it's always a bit heavy with symbolism, so I like the idea that in your canon of work it would remain open.

MH: Ajar. [laughs]



Francis Bacon - "Two Figures" - 1953 - Oil on canvas - 152,5 x 116,5 cm
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