

MACQUARIE  
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# The Sense of Touch

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

11 February – 20 March 2009

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Effy Alexakis

Stephen Barrass, Linda Davy  
and Joel Davy

Meredith Brice

David Chapman  
and Adrian Palka

High Tea With Mrs Woo

Ron Mueck

Rosella Namok

Stefan Popescu

Amanda Robins

Gerd Schmid

Jan Shaw

**Curator**

Anne Cranny-Francis

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Cover image: Detail from Effy Alexakis, *Feel the Music series* (2009), photograph courtesy of the artist

## The Sense of Touch

Published by Macquarie University  
© Macquarie University, Sydney, 2009

ISBN 978-1-74138-316-4

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Monday–Friday 10am–5pm and selected weekends

Macquarie University Art Gallery and Anne Cranny-Francis (exhibition curator) would like to thank all the artists for their participation in and support of 'The Sense of Touch'. Thanks also to the Department of Media, Music and Cultural Studies for their financial support of the exhibition; to Fabian Astore of the Public Relations and Marketing Division at Macquarie University for producing still shots for the catalogue; to the National Gallery, London for their permission to show the *Ron Mueck* DVD; and to Hamish Francis-Martin and Connie Janiszewski for posing for the 'Feel the Music' photo series.

Anne Cranny-Francis would like to acknowledge especially the work of Macquarie University Art Gallery Senior Curator, Rhonda Davis and Curator, Kirri Hill for their invaluable assistance in putting the show together.

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Design: Paper Monkey  
Printing: Macquarie Lighthouse Press



# Re-reading the Touch myth

## The Midas Myth

One evening King Midas found an elderly man called Silenius, drunk and disoriented in his garden. Midas was concerned, so took him in and looked after him until he was able to go on his way. Silenius was both foster father and former teacher of the god, Dionysius. The god was very touched by Midas's generosity and offered him any gift he desired. Midas asked that anything he touched should turn to gold. Dionysius thought this was unwise and urged Midas to reconsider; however Midas persisted, so Dionysius granted his wish. Midas was delighted and immediately broke a branch from a tree to test his wish, watching as the wood and leaves turned to fine gold. But Midas's joy did not last long, because when he sat down to eat, the food in his mouth turned to gold and was inedible; the wine in his cup turned to gold as he tried to drink it. And when his daughter hugged him to comfort him, she too was transformed into gold.

Grieving for his child, starving and thirsty, Midas begged Dionysius to take back his 'gift'. Dionysius sent Midas to bathe in the river, Pactolus and the waters washed his powers away. Ever after that river was known for the gold deposits washed up by its waters.

## Re-reading the Touch myth

The Midas myth is conventionally read as a warning against greed. Midas's mistake is said to be his love of gold, or material wealth, which blinds him to the real treasures in his life — the embodied pleasures of food and drink and the love of others, such as his daughter. In this reading, the problem with Midas's wish is that he asked that everything he touched *should be turned to gold*. However, we can read the story differently; like Dionysius we can see the problem for Midas as being that *everything he touched* would turn to gold. The key notion embedded in the myth, that gives it its power, is that touch is pervasive. Midas could not confine his golden touch to some things only; *everything* he touched turned to gold. We cannot limit and control our touch by strength of will because we are always, already touching.

This myth can, therefore, be read as an explication of the nature of being and about the fundamental nature of embodiment; that we are embodied beings, physically impinging on, related to, connected into, the world, not disembodied will-driven minds. Our being-in-the-world is characterized by not our voluntary, will-driven acting on the world (as Midas assumed), but this connectedness — our constant (being in) touch (which Midas failed to recognize). We are, at all times, touching and being touched.

Even if we simply stand still, we touch the air around us, and are touched by it — and so perceive it as wet or dry, hot or cold. That bodily touch (or touching of our bodies) is the basis of our sense perceptions; it grounds the information we gather — perceptually and conceptually — about the world. Further it is an embodied deconstruction of the Cartesian dictum, 'I think, therefore I am', which is usually read as signifying the primacy of rationality and of mind (over body). If we understand embodiment (and not 'the mind') as the fundamental condition of being and of knowledge formation, then we must reverse the terms: I am embodied, therefore I think. And, if that embodiment is understood as connectedness that is experienced as touch, then we might reword this as: I am embodied, therefore I touch, therefore I think.

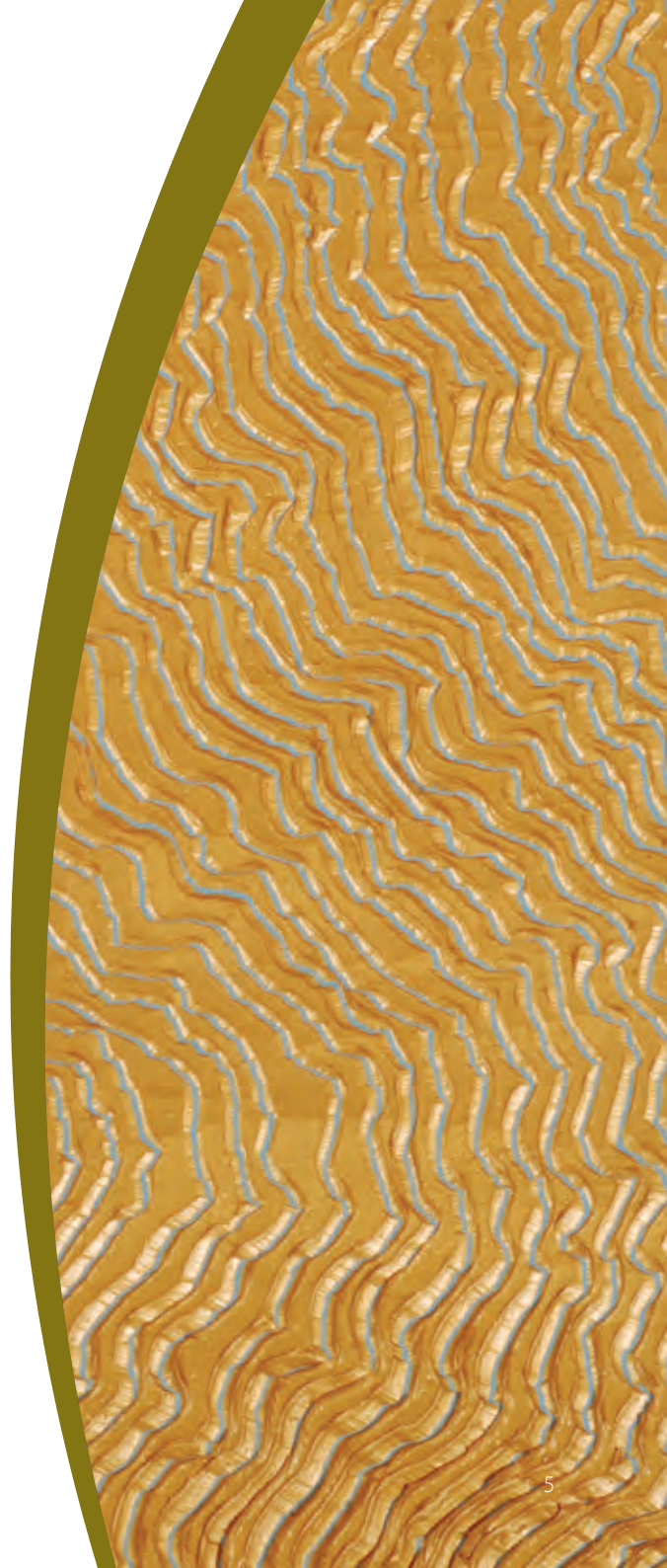
This formulation works against not only the hierarchization of mind and body (where 'mind' is ranked higher and 'body' lower in the hierarchy), but also their separation. In other words, it rejects the idea common to western philosophy and religion that the mind is a rational machine trapped in a decaying, physical body. Instead, it argues, along with Bruno Latour (2003), that the mind is a brain, a fully organic component of the embodied subject — the sensing, feeling, thinking body that is our being. We think as and what we think because we are embodied as we are, and touch the world, and are touched by it, as we do.

It isn't surprising that Midas was granted the gift of touch by Dionysius who, as the god of wine. As the god of celebration Dionysius knows that being is about more than the ability to think. Rather, it is a fully embodied, fully connected being-in-the-world — as the consumption, and over-consumption, of wine makes clear. The Dionysian consumption of wine is about good time in company, about celebration and being with others — the connectedness of being. About being in touch with others. So re-thinking the Midas story leads us to an understanding of how touch is critical to an understanding of embodied human subjectivity.

(Cranny-Francis, 2008c)

**Image on right:**

Detail from Gerd Schmid,  
*Air, Light, Water series* (2008)



# Touch technologies

The sense of touch has come to new prominence recently with the development of a range of touch-based technologies. So what is touch? How does it contribute to our lives? How does it shape the people we are? Perhaps it's no coincidence that at the same time these new technologies are being developed, anthropologists, historians, cultural theorists, artists and philosophers are exploring the power and significance of the sense of touch. The senses — or our understanding and use of the senses — changes over time, as it does from one society to another. We may all have basically the same set of physical attributes, but we understand and deploy them differently, according to the time and place we live, which means we have wholly different experiences of the world, from one time to another, from one society to another.

So, for example, the status of touch within Western society has changed since the scientific revolution and the development of scientific instruments. As historian Lissa Roberts (2005) noted, doctors once relied on the senses of touch, smell and even taste in order to make diagnoses and touch played a major part in the care relationship between doctor/healer and patient. Then Western science developed an extensive range of scientific instruments for collecting, measuring and analyzing — and more recently, for visualizing — the human body. Direct touch became subservient to the impersonal touch of instrument and machine. The result was a kind of estrangement between doctor and patient, with both becoming subject to the apparently greater accuracy of the instrument.

# Reconnecting

At the beginning of the 21st century we are experiencing the reintegration of body and mind in a range of social and cultural institutions, practices and products. A range of healthcare modalities that focus on the senses and on the reintegration of mind and body (e.g. homeopathy, acupuncture, reflexology, iridology, reiki) have challenged the dominance of mainstream Western medicine — and conventionally trained Western health professionals have moved away from the focus on disease to 'holistic' treatment of the sick.

This reintegration of mind and body works directly against many deeply acculturated attitudes to the senses, particularly to the sense of touch, which is surrounded culturally by many taboos and rituals — from who you can and cannot touch to the finest gradations of the kinds of touch that are permissible. Recent government regulations that have made it illegal for teachers to touch students, even when they are young children needing physical comfort, demonstrate how deeply fearful we are as a society about the sense of touch. And perhaps we are frightened not only of what touch can do, but also by how much of what we are and what we know is created by this most basic and pervasive sense.



# The Exhibition

This exhibition explores the significance of touch and embodiment in the work of artists from a range of disciplines and modalities, including painting, sculpture, design, film and sound.



**High Tea With Mrs Woo**  
***Hidden (2007)***  
*photograph courtesy of the artists*

The three sisters, Rowena, Juliana and Angela Foong who are *High Tea With Mrs Woo* describe their interest in exploring the relationship between clothing and technology: "It would seem that wearable technology would merely be a modification of clothing in terms of fabrication and construction, but we must ask the purpose of such a modification? Is it just another form of cultural expression in this new technological era? Or perhaps it may be considered as a shift towards a new purpose for clothing as a second skin, a means to document, analyse, understand and modify the relationship between our bodies and the environment in which we live." (2008)

**Stephen Barrass, Linda Davy and Joel Davy**  
***Fauxy the Fake Fur With Feelings* (2008/2009)**  
*photograph courtesy of the artists*

Stephen Barras, Lindy Davy and Joel Davy take another approach to wearable technology with *Fauxy the Fake Fur With Feelings*. If you walk towards or near *Fauxy*, you will activate the movement sensors and *Fauxy's* feather collar will respond to your presence. Barrass writes about their research with *Fauxy*, including its nerve extension buttons on the wearer: "Do the nerve extensions provide an altered sense of perception? How does it effect the wearer's behaviour?... Is there an augmented or heightened perceptual awareness when wearing the coat? Can you learn to understand patterns of activity in the surroundings from these perceptions." (2008)







**Stills from *Ron Mueck* (2008)**  
*courtesy of the National Gallery, London*

Sculptor, Ron Mueck's work is represented in the exhibition through the DVD showing on the LCD screen in the gallery. Art critic Susanna Greeves described touch as "the sense which Mueck's rendering of warm, heavy, flesh or fine, downy hair most arouses" (Greeves, 2003: 30) — because viewers want to ensure that his hyperreal but *non-lifesize* figures are not somehow alive. In negotiating the contradiction between appearance and scale the viewer confronts the relationship between perception and knowledge, to challenge assumptions about the relationship between what we feel and what we know — and most importantly to explore how what we think we know is determined by the ways in which we experience (bodily) the world around us, other people, and ourselves.









**Still from Stefan Popescu (dir.)**

***Repressions (2005)***

*courtesy of the artist*

Film-maker Stefan Popescu deploys touch as a director, scratching the film stock and burning it, using light exposures to create unusual optical effects that appeal directly, viscerally to viewers. His aim is to challenge viewers to explore how our bodily engagement creates the meaning of the film, as well as how the engagement with film touches us physically, emotionally and intellectually.



**Gerd Schmid**

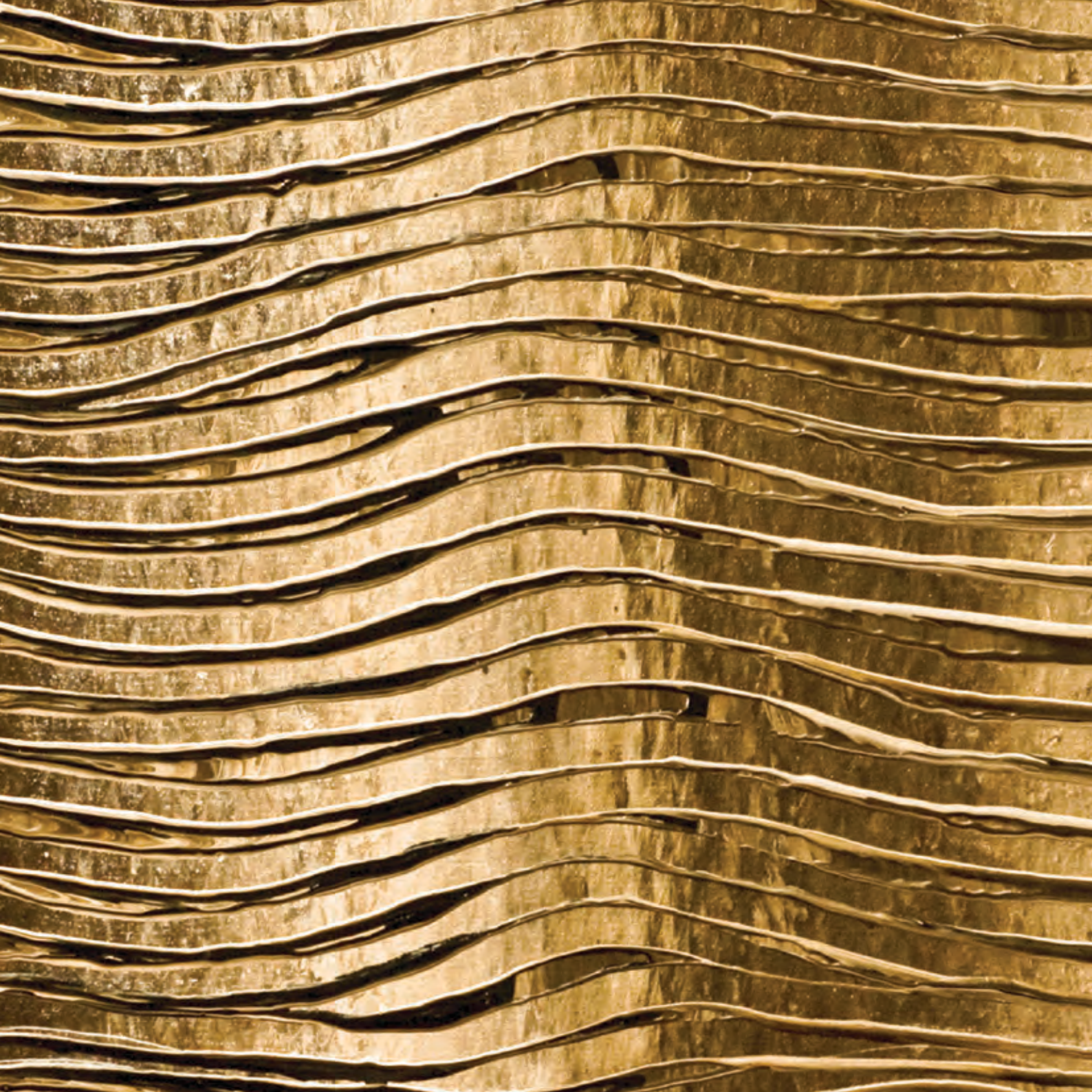
***Air, Light, Water series (2008)***

*photography Effy Alexakis PHOTOWRITE*

As with Popescu's film, Gerd Schmid's own touch is obvious to viewers of his paintings, particularly in the way his brushstrokes score the surface and in their palpable materiality — the way the paint is piled onto the canvas. His paintings and sculptures deploy our tactile sense of proprioception, or positioning in space: how we establish our physical relationship with the people and objects around us. We viscerally feel our way around these works in a way that mimics (and deconstructs) the way in which we bodily negotiate our place in the world.







**Rosella Namok**

**Detail from *Old Girls they talk in the sand... yarn for country... family law* (2005) courtesy of the artist**  
*photography by Effy Alexakis PHOTOWRITE*

The painting style of Australian indigenous artist, Rosella Namok is often similarly tactile as she communicates to viewers the visceral experience of being in the country and in community:

*"My work is modern but sometimes I paint about traditional Aboriginal culture and stories in my own style. I paint about country and people around me ... about traditional culture... about things that happen ... things we do ... the weather ... our isolated Community. My recent paintings have been about how people live in our community and about country." (2003)*



**Amanda Robins**  
***Harris Tweed (Open Coat III) (2004)***  
*photograph courtesy of the artist*

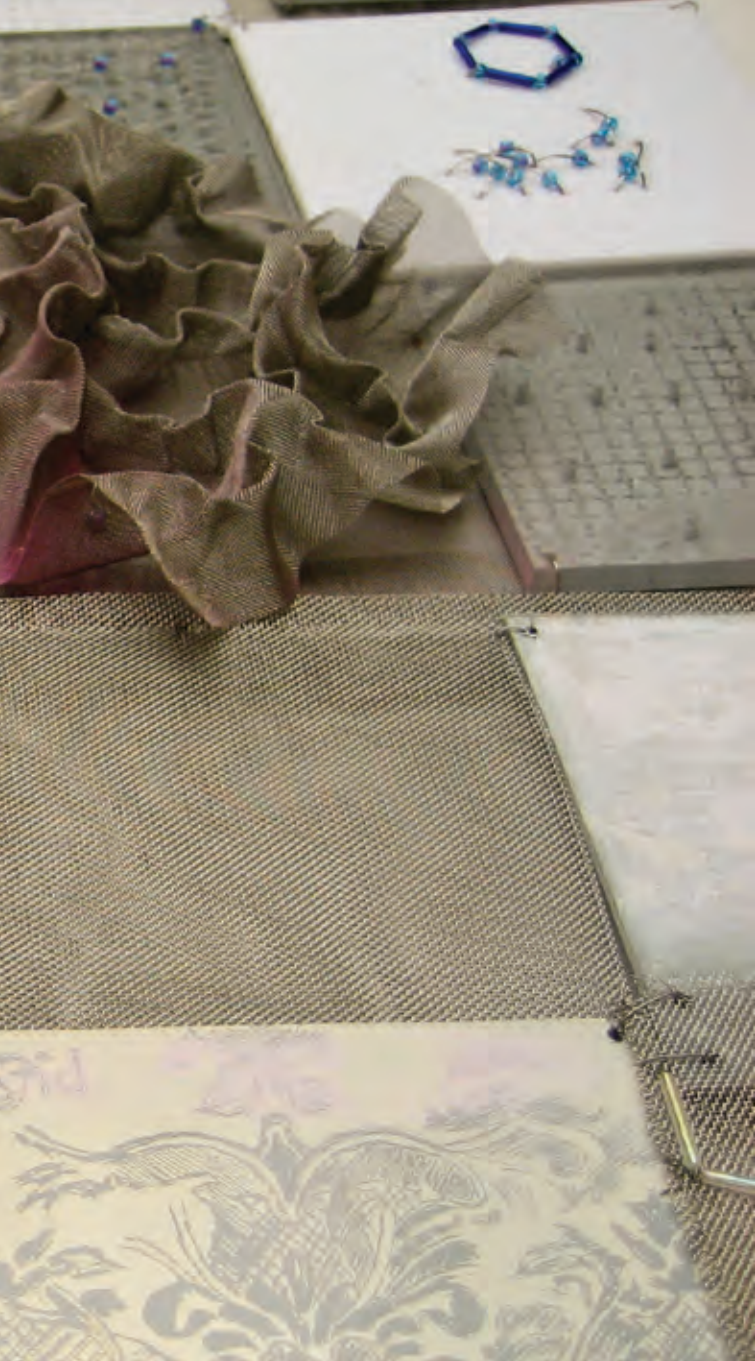
Amanda Robins' sensual paintings take us right into the throbbing heart and heat of the body, through metaphors of clothing and silky skin: "The garment is a surrogate body, equivalent perhaps to the complexity of my own body... In my open coat paintings, the whole garment becomes the world; it brings the world into it, the intensity of this incorporation is expressed through the layers, colors and marks." (Robins quoted in Beilharz & Vander Moere, 2008). We experience and know the world as we do because of our embodied engagement with the world: the fabric that is our interface with the world is also the world we experience.

## Love Poem

You are the only one  
I cannot touch.  
Your arms around me,  
Coat unbuttoned,  
You pull me close.  
I feel the warmth,  
Your body on mine,  
Coat wrapped around us both,  
My love.

You pull open your skin,  
Your heart pulsing.  
You pull me in-  
to your body.  
I feel you, warm, wet,  
I sink into you,  
Skin wraps around us both.  
Me, next to your heart,  
My love.





**Meredith Brice**

**Detail from *Smart Fabric Samplers: Embedded* (2008)**  
*photograph courtesy of the artist*


Meredith Brice's work also makes a direct sensuous appeal to the viewer in work that demonstrates her interest in both ecological sustainability and new technologies. The magic of Brice's own work is her manipulation of texture, a kind of visual(ized) tactility — leading the viewer to explore the construction of the work and so to experience the transformation of old materials into new works, and the potential of new materials and of re-workings of old materials to create new experiences that redefine the nature of everyday life.





**Jan Shaw**  
***Whisper Again (1983)***  
***photography Effy Alexakis PHOTOWRITE***

Sculptor, Jan Shaw challenges the extent to which human touch is created by the physical world in which we live: "When I carve I attempt to capture an emotion, but with no preconceived ideas. I work into the block and when 'something' takes over I find my direction. I am led by the stone itself."



*Hearing and touch meet where the lower frequencies of available sound pass over to tactile vibrations (at about 20 herz). Hearing is a way of touching at a distance...*

(Schafer, 1994: 11)



Creator, **Bob Rutman** playing steel cello  
in Kassel, Germany (2005)

*Photography by David Chapman*

The DVD produced by David Chapman and Adrian Palka, *Steel Cello and Bow Chime: a performance history* (2005) tells the story of expressionist artist, Bob Rutman's sound sculptures which combine the tactile properties of sculpture, deriving from their occupation of space and stimulation of proprioceptive responses in viewers, with the tactile properties of sound, which includes its physical touching of the listener through the vibration of air molecules. As Chapman notes, however, these sculptures are also *playable*, are touched by performers, so that the sound they make is the medium of an assemblage that includes performers, instruments and listeners. In this way the instruments demonstrate and deconstruct how sound touches us — physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually — in the process of making meaning.



**Effy Alexakis**  
***Feel the Music series (2009)***  
*photograph courtesy of the artist*

The *Feel the Music* photograph series by photographer, Effy Alexakis continues the exploration of sound and touch through images of the performer's 'touch'. Concert pianist, Simon Tedeschi noted that 'touch' is a tactile metaphor referring to the contour of pressure and release that characterizes the way a pianist touches the keys. But he also insisted that the materiality of music is evident in the actual physical touch of the pianist: the performer's 'touch' is her or his embodiment of music. And he underscored this with the striking image of the performer playing on a practice piano, the keys of which are stained with blood. This, he insisted, is what constitutes music, not the disembodied and decontextualized sound recorded on a CD.

# Touch

Touch is more than a simple physical action; it is about connection in all senses — a medium of individual, cultural and social exchange and transformation. It is this complex understanding of touch that can inform the ways in which new touch technologies enter our lives, the meanings we make of them, and the people they make of us. As musician, David Moss writes:

## Touch

This is the central concept-image-action for sensual exchange!

Someone creates something: touches pen to paper, brush to canvas, hand to violin, fingers to ivory keys, palm skin to drum skin, feet to floor. *Touch* is the moment of contact, the memory of contact, the wish for contact, and contact to memory and desire (past/future). *Touch* is transference. Why do you want to own a Monet or a Warhol? Because we want to physically share the same space with an artist, dancer, actor, musician whom we love. We want to breathe their molecules.

*Touch* is the release valve, the go-button, the point-of-no-return, the crossroads, the balancing point, the motor that activates all other qualities. *Touch* is the pathway tracer, the joiner of similars and the revealer of (and reveler in) differences. (2001)

**Acknowledgment:** The research on which this exhibition was based was part of a Discovery Project funded by the Australian Research Council ([www.arc.gov.au](http://www.arc.gov.au)).



**Australian Government**  
**Australian Research Council**

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# List of works

Effy Alexakis

**Feel the Music series**

2009

Photograph

18.5 x 27.5 cm; 28 x 18 cm

Collection of the artist

Stephen Barrass, Linda Davy and Joel Davy

**Fauxy the Fake Fur with Feelings**

2008/2009

Faux fur, feathers, wool, electronic sensor circuitry, electric motors.

70 cm high X 50 cm wide X 30 cm depth

Collection of the artists

Meredith Brice

**Molecular I Wild Silk Refugia**

2007

Glass beads, monofilament

35 x 35 cm

Collection of the artist

Meredith Brice

**Molecular II Bloom**

2007

Glass beads, monofilament

35 x 35 cm

Collection of the artist

Meredith Brice

**Nano Damask**

2005

Oil on canvas, paper

100 x 100 cm

Collection of the artist

Meredith Brice

**Smart Fabric Samplers: Embedded #1, #2, #3, #4**

2008

Recycled materials — plastics, stainless steel, aluminium, meshes, glass beads, wire, oil paint

27 x 27 cm

Collection of the artist

David Chapman and Adrian Palka

**Steel Cello/Bow Chime: a performance history**

2004

DVD

Courtesy of the artists

High Tea With Mrs Woo

**Hidden**

2007

Cotton, silk, polyester, conductive thread and nylon ripstop, nichrome, copper, PVC, hook-up wire, NI-MH rechargeable batteries

Courtesy of the artists

Ron Mueck

**Ron Mueck**

2008

DVD

Courtesy of The National Gallery, London

Rosella Namok

**Old Girls they talk in the sand... yarn for country... family law**

2005

Acrylic on canvas

180 x 45 cm each (5 panels)

Macquarie University Collection

Stefan Popescu

**Repressions: Screenworks 2000–2004**

2004

DVD

Courtesy of the artist

Amanda Robins

**Harris Tweed (Open Coat III) (2004)**

2004

Oil on linen

183 x 122.4 cm

Collection of the artist

Amanda Robins

**Hypochondria Series Painting 1**

2005

Oil on linen

83.5 x 45.5 cm

Collection of the artist

Amanda Robins

**Hypochondria Series Painting 2**

2005

Oil on linen

83.5 x 45.5 cm

Collection of the artist

Amanda Robins

**Hypochondria Series Painting 3**

2005

Oil on linen

83.5 x 45.5 cm

Collection of the artist

Amanda Robins

**Hypochondria Series Painting 4**

2005

Oil on linen

83.5 x 45.5 cm

Collection of the artist

Amanda Robins

**Hypochondria Series Painting 6**

2005

Oil on linen

83.5 x 45.5 cm

Collection of the artist

Amanda Robins

**Hypochondria Series Painting 7**

2005

Oil on linen

83.5 x 45.5 cm

Collection of the artist

Amanda Robins

**Lovelocked (Open Coat IV)**

2005

Oil on Linen

183 x 122.4 cm

Collection of the artist

Gerd Schmid

**Air, Light, Water series**

2008

Oil and mixed media on canvas

152.3 x 101.5 cm

Collection of the artist

Gerd Schmid

**Air, Light, Water series**

2008

Oil and mixed media on canvas

91.5 x 152.8 cm

Collection of the artist

Gerd Schmid

**Air, Light, Water series**

2008

Oil and mixed media on canvas

91.5 x 152.8 cm

Collection of the artist

Jan Shaw

**Whisper Again**

1983

Gosford Sandstone

69 x 27 x 16 cm

Macquarie University Collection



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