

## A requiem for handwriting

**Author:**

Kaplan-Freiman, Cyndi

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College of Fine Arts  
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Master of Fine Arts Thesis

February 2011

# A Requiem for Handwriting

Cyndi Freiman (9702045)



A research thesis submitted to the College of Fine Arts,  
University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine  
Arts



## **CERTIFICATE**

I certify that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. I also certify that, to the best of my knowledge, any assistance and help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Cyndi Freiman  
February 2011

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## ABSTRACT

My research is focused on the dying practice of handwriting, examining its origin and development, both historically and cross-culturally, and how it has changed over time in both form and function. As handwriting is replaced by digital media, handwritten letters, diaries and manuscripts are disappearing as a means of communication, and with it, a significant means of connecting to our humanity.

My studio practice, including painting, printmaking, mixed media and installation, is located at the intersection between writing and painting, between word and image, between letter and space. Alphabetic symbols become visual images as letters, finding their expression in a mediated art form. I use my artwork to draw attention to the aesthetic qualities of handwriting by revealing the essential shapes, forms and marks inherent in different scripts.

Through my research I explore this transformation of handwriting from its function as written communication into visual imagery and its emergence as an aesthetic in contemporary art. I establish connections between calligraphy and modern abstraction, exploring the materials, methods and process, ritualistic and performative, inherent in both forms of expression. I locate my practice in the framework of conceptual artists who transform text into visual imagery as a means of creative expression.

My artwork is an invitation to look at the unique and hand-crafted quality of handwriting in contrast to the homogenised quality of digital text. The locus of my interrogation is my personal diaries and handwritten correspondence from my mother and friends as well as acquired manuscripts and found objects. I use script, not only for its linguistic function, but for the calligraphic and gestural qualities embodied in its production.

### **Keywords:**

Abstraction

Alphabet

Calligraphy

Handwriting

Script

Text

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## Preface

My thesis consists of an exhibition and a written exegesis; both are the result of studio investigation and academic research, an ongoing dialogue between the practical and written processes. In the studio I used collage, painting and printmaking to explore my motifs, and in my writing I was inspired by the practices of other artists working with language and text, as well as art theorists. My interrogation resulted in a rich journey into the origins of writing and an opportunity to observe the transformation of different forms of scripts, both historical and cross-cultural.

For many years writing played a vital role in my creative life and then painting became my dominant form of self-expression. In this thesis I have combined both practices, and this synthesis of words and images has created a powerful bond. I concur with Iggulden who noted, *"For years I kept separate the act of painting and the act of writing, regarding them as crucial yet different components to my art practice. However a strong desire to bring these two languages together persisted"* (Iggulden, 2002, p.101).

In producing my body of work for exhibition, I moved back and forth from theory to practice; my academic research informed and directed my studio work. At other times my intuitive creative work led the investigation in unexpected directions. This combined approach provided me with a sense of momentum and energy. My printmaking and collages gave me an ongoing source of inspiration and subject matter for my paintings.

My painting experience was both a struggle and a challenge. There were times when I confronted the limits of my knowledge of the craft. I pushed through these limitations and discovered new dimensions. I enjoyed the process of push and pull, at each stage taking on elements which worked and letting go of others.

I endeavoured to paint with the same meditative, intuitive spirit that was used in the production of calligraphic writing in various cultures. My approach to my work is a combination of analytical and intuitive. Although I plan my composition and process, I am open to incorporating intuitive elements as I engage with the materiality of the medium, a method which invites unexpected outcomes.

My goal on this creative journey is to go beyond the limits of my existing skills and discover new ways of expressing my subject matter. It is essential that I seek the unknown, tread the unfamiliar and be continually surprised.

Some of the most special moments in my work happened when chance, a serendipitous incident or surprise element came into play. Like a baby taking its first breath, these moments are miraculous events. This creative excitement propelled me forward. As Picasso once said, *"It is your work in life that is the ultimate seduction"* (Chandler, 1984, p.3).

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

### *Thesis overview, aim and scope*

The focus of my research is an investigation into the dying practice of handwriting in our society, and with this intent I explore the origin and development of handwriting, both historically and cross-culturally. I follow the decline and neglect of the value of handwriting and examine the consequences of digital media such as email, text and Twitter on the quality and aesthetics of interpersonal communication.

My purpose is to raise the consciousness of this potential loss and to protect and treasure this practice that has been part of our past. I invite readers to engage with handwriting and become aware of this unique process, which has nurtured our civilization for centuries, as with its demise, an exceptional mode of self-expression will disappear.

Writing may become extinct in a digital era where people of all ages openly confess to their rapidly deteriorating handwriting, as the keyboard replaces our need to write. Increasingly schoolchildren do their assignments on computer and struggle to write by hand, typically having had little practice. Many of us may only use a pen for the occasional signature or greeting card, and are aware that our writing skills are disappearing through lack of use. Through my artwork I intend to champion the survival of the art of handwriting by foregrounding its aesthetic aspects.

I research the historical and cultural origins of handwriting in order to uncover the rich and varied trajectory of the handwritten word, from the walls of caves to contemporary texts. I follow the development of writing, starting out as a mystical, magical, shaman-like practice, used initially for religious or spiritual purposes, through to its use in narratives, trading, accounting, legal and other practical matters.

Initially writing was a privilege confined to a select few: dedicated scribes, priests and scholars, who were in control of the writing process. The invention of the alphabet as a symbolic code enabled writing to be practised by a greater number of people and as a consequence, letters were gradually simplified to allow for greater accessibility.

On analysing the shift of letter formations from the time of the Carolingian Empire (800-888AD) to the ubiquitous Coca Cola sign in the 20th century, one can see the gradual transformation of letter forms from elaborate to less complex forms that most people had the capacity to master. However, it was only in the 19th and 20th centuries that universal education became the common expectation across most cultures and the ability to read and write was extended to the masses.

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Concurrently certain cultures embraced calligraphy, a form of writing that embodied an aesthetic quality that was as important as its linguistic content. This dimension was found in Chinese, Japanese and Islamic calligraphy as well as in illuminated medieval manuscripts. I show how these calligraphic practices were placed in the hands of elite craftsmen who devoted their lives to the perfection of these scripts, mastering the beauty of each letter.

My research seeks to construct connections between calligraphy and modern abstraction where artists use calligraphic gestures to express their individuality. The context and mediums are different; however, I assert that the gestures, mark-making and aesthetic intentions are similar. My primary objective is to engage with different forms of handwriting and calligraphy and transform them into visual imagery through mediated art forms.

In my artworks I investigate not only my own handwriting but also different forms of the written language, in both cultural and historical contexts. I explore various manifestations of the alphabet and examine how this code of letters opened a myriad of possibilities as a vehicle for narrative, ideas and communication.

I focus my research on other artists whose artwork incorporates letters, words and text. In this exploration I selected artists whose work resonated with my own practice and exploration. I was attracted to some for their use of materials and process, like Cy Twombly, Imants Tillers, Brice Marden, Robert Ryman, Mel Bochner and others whose theoretical ideas inspired me, for example, Joanna Drucker and Annette Igulden. I have established my own unique position with regard to this conceptual practice.

Through my studio experience I became conscious of my own creative process, especially the ritualistic and performative aspect of art-making. As a consequence of working simultaneously with different media, painting, printmaking, collage and installation, as well as alternating theoretical research and studio practice, I developed a methodology that gave a dynamic impetus to my work. I will outline these practices in detail.

The installation dimension of my exhibition emerged as a result of my working with the material that constituted my lived life. I used the installation as a means of foregrounding these materials, all evidence of the value of handwriting in my life experience. In this area I was inspired by both Simryn Gill (born Singapore, 1959) and Christian Boltanski (born Paris, 1944) whose work has a strong archival impulse as well as a profound memorial element.

For centuries, most historical evidence consisted of handwritten letters, journals and documents. For example, the voyages of the world's great explorers, and diaries of eminent scientists, religious and secular leaders, were recorded in handwritten diaries. How will we access or retrieve material in the future? What are the implications of the disruption of handwriting?

## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING

The impact of new technology on writing may only be felt in hindsight. As elements of our culture disappear, we gradually become aware of their loss. Now that we are a decade into the 21st century, we can begin to see the impact of digital media. We may mourn the loss of our ability to write with the same meditative quality and considered reflection that we did before we were seduced by the speed of digital media.

The transient nature of modern technology is creating a culture that is ephemeral. Archivists are saying that more information has been lost in the last 10 years than in the preceding 150 years. It is very easy to press the “delete” button. Although, the majority of artists still keep handwritten journals with sketches, notes and ideas, in most other fields, material is now digital in nature.

Margaret Hedstrom, Professor in the School of Information at the University of Michigan and a specialist in digital preservation, discusses the fragility of digital materials, observing that they are vulnerable to deterioration and catastrophic loss (Hedstrom, 1997, p.1). She maintains that much needs to be done to preserve cultural, intellectual and scholarly resources, both materials in traditional format such as letters, journals and documents that require environmental controls to survive, and digital material.

The technology necessary to ensure that the storage, stability and accessibility of digital material is in a continuous state of development. At the same time, many cultural artefacts and historical documents may be at risk of disappearing if they are left behind in non-digital form. As most museum archives become digital domains and computers become the main tool for sourcing information, we need to become conscious of the gaps that may be left in our body of knowledge (Hafner, 2007).

The ability to represent language graphically stands as one of humanity's greatest intellectual and cultural achievements. Until recently this skill depended on the ability of an individual to master the art of handwriting. With technology we may not need this skill, yet the consequences of the loss of the ability to write by hand are not yet evident.

Ideograms, hieroglyphics and alphabets have survived many centuries, but have evolved in form and expression. Language and consequently writing is a constantly changing phenomenon, revealing differences in expression, mark-making and meaning. The expressive qualities of handwriting, the dance of the hand, include the irregular, inventive, quirky and idiosyncratic marks of the individual writer. Each culture, tribe and group of people has modified, adapted and transformed aspects of how it uses the written word to communicate, record and express its experience. I am hoping that my artworks will draw attention to the beauty invested in handwriting, to the unique expressive quality inherent in the handmade script and that they will encourage people to continue to write with a pen despite the temptation to use only digital forms of communication.

## Chapter 2. Handwriting: Connecting hand and heart

### *2.1 The art of handwriting*

"The pen is the tongue of the mind." Don Quixote (v. 16)

There is a connection between heart and hand that occurs when we write, rendering handwriting as a means of connecting to our humanity and signifying our individuality. It is this sensual and emotive component that positions handwriting as art and is the reason for my lament at its loss of value in the private domain in our contemporary society.

What are the peculiar qualities of putting pen to paper rather than fingers to keyboard? Handwriting is a tactile process; it involves the physical act of making marks with a pen or pencil on paper and in so doing imprinting our stamp of uniqueness. In *Reborn*, extracts from the diaries of Susan Sontag, she writes, "Still this childish fascination with my handwriting... To think that I always have this sensuous potentiality glowing within my fingers" (Sontag, 2009, p.52).

Umberto Eco writes on the lost art of handwriting:

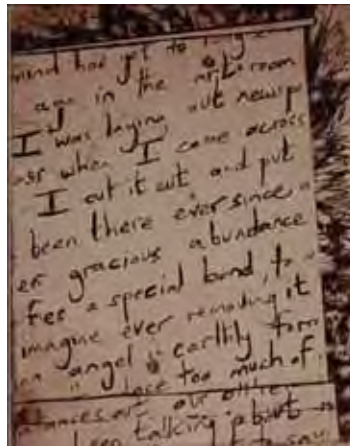
"My generation was schooled in good handwriting and we spent the first months of elementary school learning to make the strokes of the letters. The exercise was later held to be obtuse and repressive but it taught us to keep our wrists steady as we used our pens to form letters rounded and plump on one side and finely drawn on the other. The crisis began with the advent of the ballpoint pen; people no longer felt much interest in writing well, since handwriting when produced with a ballpoint no longer had soul, style or personality" (Eco, 2009, p.1).

Handwriting has underpinned every aspect of my life since I was first taught in kindergarten to shape letters on the lined pages of my exercise books. I am one of the generations that first learned to write with a dip pen and ink, then progressed to a fountain pen in high school and by the time I reached university, we used the functional Parker ballpoint. I now use gel pens for their smooth connection with the surface of the paper and the solid black trace, which is easy to read.

My writing is neither graceful nor elegant, with rounded irregular shapes and strokes that terminate prematurely in the quest of speed, revealing my impatient nature. I squash too many letters into each line and the letters slope backwards rather than forwards due to my being left-handed. However, I have developed affection for the familiar script that manifests in many aspects of my lived life.

## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING

Handwriting is a significant human behaviour as it leaves a recorded trace, a physical record revealing minute and intimate reflections of the inner self. It is possible to study the psychological nature of a person through analysis of their handwriting, whether it is a scribbled grocery list, some directions or calculations. The image below is a fragment of a birthday card written by a close friend who died tragically in 2007. The presence of the writer lives on in the handwriting.



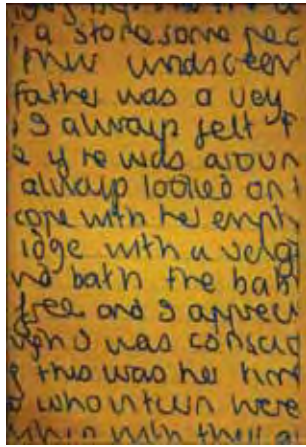
**Figure 2.1 Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Birthday card written by Amanda, 2002*, intaglio etching, 20cm x 15cm**

As a former student of psychology I am drawn to the study of personality through the analysis of handwriting, or *graphology* as it is known. I am intrigued by the revelation of a person's individuality as manifested in their handwriting. Alas, the anonymity of digital text will soon end this revealing dimension of written communication. A few years ago I had my handwriting analysed and the result was an astonishingly accurate view of my personality and behaviour, here is what the graphologist said,

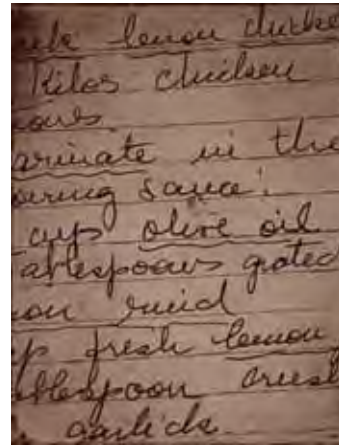
You have successfully blended an unusual mix of rich and sometimes opposing characteristics in your personality. Your artist's soul responds intensely to rich colour and texture while your intellect seems to hold sway. Your achievements are greatly increased by your single mindedness and ability to clearly identify with essentials and dedicate yourself to them while ignoring peripheral issues. Enthusiastic, energetic and lively, you can be competitive and enterprising. Speedy and impatient, you dislike delay and want to progress. Time wasters frustrate you; you have a strong literary bent. Although you do not wear your heart on your sleeve you have a great deal of compassion.

(Hera Sandison, 1997 p.4)

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Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *My handwriting*,  
intaglio etching, 20cm x 15cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *My mother's handwriting*, intaglio etching, 20cm x 15cm

**Figure 2.2 My handwriting compared with my mother's script**

Once handwriting has formed, the basic features remain unchanged, revealing an intrinsic character or basic personality structure. Even if someone is forced to use the non-dominant hand, eventually the writing will reflect the same style as before. Handwriting is the language of the subconscious, and by identifying features such as spacing, pressure, the speed, slope of the stroke, size and the shape of the letters, you can gain information about the character of the writer.

It is in the individual strokes of the pen that our individuality is revealed and it is this unique experience that I highlight in my studio exploration, in paint, ink, and in the installation of letters and postcards.



**Figure 2.3 Cyndi writing in her journal at her desk. Still images from the video**

## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING

"Handwriting is an imprint of self on the page." Professor Rosemary Sassoon, author of *Handwriting: The way to teach it*.

I have handwritten ten manuscripts, later published as books, and was accustomed to the flow of thoughts that comes with the physicality of handwriting. I was reluctant to give up the practice, even if only for the first draft of each book, as it took me years before I could to type as fluently as I could write. Eventually I made the transition, but I still often jot down my original thoughts and ideas in longhand before working at the computer.

Roland Barthes, French writer and theorist, construes "writing is a complex from of consciousness, a way of being both passive and active, social and asocial, present and absent in one's own life. Writing begins at the point where speech is impossible" (Barthes, 1975, p. xvii).

Recounting his own handwriting learning process, author, Robert Klose commented:

Writing by hand is a slow process; the slower the better, actually. The physical act of slipping lines of wet ink onto paper is an almost organic connection between the writer and the word. And when one takes the time to emphasize shape, size, and proportion, one is lingering with those words, giving them time to percolate in the mind and settle in for the long haul. Using a computer gets the job done, but it is nothing like a meditative act (Klose, 2002).

In her essays, *Figuring the Word* (1998), Johanna Drucker, artist, writer, critic and teacher examines how language is expressed in contemporary artistic practice. She starts by explaining the ambiguity of the word "writing"; that it is a noun and a verb, an act and a product, visual and verbal: "At its most fundamental [level], writing is inscription, a physical act, a trace of the hand and a mark on the paper" (Drucker, 1998, p. 3). She highlights the performative aspect of writing.

Both Drucker and I felt, from a young age, that an experience was only significant if it was transformed into writing, and so we both developed a strong need to record our lives. She experienced a fascination with the alphabet and great pleasure in mark-making. She discusses the relationship between lived experience and its representation in written forms of language. She experienced "a tension between the lived and the constructed world" (Drucker, 1998, p. 30).

Drucker explains that writing is a visual medium embodying shape, colour, size, design, style, history, culture, composition and the physical properties of its material means, in addition to its linguistic content (Drucker, 1998, p. 57).

She goes on to explain that all writing has the potential to be both a visual image and something to be read, it may be present as both an object and a sign, both an expression of the individual and a construct of society and its culture: "Marks strokes, signs, glyphs, letters or characters, writing's visual forms possess an irresolvable dual identity in their material existence as images and their function as elements of language" (Drucker, 1998, p. 57).

There is a tension between the gesture and the mark of the individual and the formal, stylised conventions of writing in each particular culture. Engagement with writing in artistic practice foregrounds the dialogue between the personal and the social, the somatic and symbolic, the conceptual and the material. Drucker sees all writing along a continuum from a gestural trace to a standard sign. In order for writing to function as a means of communication, only a limited amount of diversification is permitted. However, it is in this deviation that individuality is expressed.

"From a psychoanalytic perspective the function of writing is both to provide an image of the self and to position that self within language as the system of the symbolic order" (Drucker, 1998, p. 62). She explains that the bodily gestures of mark-making, for example, scribbles, personal writing and signs permit a subjective self-identity with the mark made.

The words used in different languages to describe the phenomenon of writing may shed light on the origins of the process. For example, the Greek word, *graphen* describes both writing and drawing, indicating there was less distinction between the two processes in their culture than in ours today. The English word, to *write* comes from the Old Saxon *writan*, to write or cut. The Old High German, *reizen* means to tear or draw. These terms describing handwriting are connected to the materials used in the process as well as the form of writing.

The history of handwriting is one of aesthetic evolution framed within the technical skills, materials and context of its cultural origins. The key purpose of writing is communication or recording of information, whereas calligraphy, from the Greek *kallos*, "beauty" and *graphe*, "writing" is primarily a form of visual art, although it may also have a linguistic function.

The essential difference between Eastern calligraphy and writing is that the essence of Eastern calligraphy lies not in what is written but how it is written. "Writing needs meaning whereas calligraphy expresses itself through forms and gestures" (Mediavilla, p. 17). This focus of calligraphy on aesthetic qualities – the lines, shapes and rhythms – creates close ties with abstract painting. Contemporary calligraphic practice is "the art of giving form to signs in an expressive, harmonious and skilful manner" (Mediavilla, 1996, p.18). As my work progressed, this idea became the core concept underpinning my alphabet series of paintings.

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### *2.2 The art of keeping a diary*

"My pen travels through the darkness like a firefly." Anais Nin, 1924  
(Nin, 1986, p. 27)

Anais Nin owes her reputation as a key figure in the feminism of the 1970s to her *Journals* spanning 1931-1974, a passionate, detailed and candid description of a woman's journey of self-discovery. In her *Journal of a Wife*, Nin alludes to the intimate and vital role that writing in her journal played in her life:

Oh, the joy of writing, a joy so intense, so pure, so all absorbing and free and so all encompassing, flooding the soul in mystical ecstasy, elevating and sanctifying, infusing beauty in the humblest of subjects and a purpose in the most wayward life (Nin, 1923, p. 8).

Jesting, I begged Hugo to break me of the vice of diary writing. He objected. It was a privilege to be endowed with the habit of writing. Besides he added it was exercise and preparatory practice (Nin, 1923, p. 7).

My journal lay near me, on the desk, and the sight of it set me wondering for I sometimes doubt that this can be considered a complete record of a life. Not because I have not written every day but because I have not written all day, every hour every moment. Only thus, could it be complete (Nin, 1923, p. 26).

Like Nin, I am a compulsive journal writer. From the age of 12, I kept a handwritten journal, recording my thoughts and feelings of both the significant and mundane aspects of my life. Through this daily ritual I connected with myself, explored experiences and found a way to interpret and make sense of my relationships. I rarely re-read this written material; it is the tangible process of writing that is important; less so, the content itself. It is the ritual and performance of the writing that I need, not the product of the experience.

The experience of writing is much more important than the need to share the material with anyone. I like to write when I am alone and need solitude, a meditative space and privacy for my process. The physical act of putting pen to paper is the most important aspect of the experience and I use handwriting to achieve mental clarity and get in touch with myself. I very rarely reread any of my journals. These elements are represented in my installation of the many copies of my journals.



Figure 2.4 Personal travel journal circa 1971 from my first trip to Europe

This experiential aspect of handwriting connects strongly to the ideas of the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose writing centred around the concept of *phenomenology*, experiences perceived directly by the senses. He asserted that knowledge of the world begins with the lived experience and he explored aspects of human consciousness as *embodied experience*. He insisted that our human identity is formed by our sensory experience of the material world through the physicality of our bodies (Emerling, 2006, p. 214). These ideas connect strongly with my own experience of the tangibility of handwriting.



Figure 2.5 Installation of desk and journals

## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING



**Figure 2.6 Some of Cyndi's personal journals 1965-2011**

At a recent exhibition at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York, "The Diary: Three Centuries of Private Lives", curated by Christine Nelson, "one is able to see how fervently the keepers of journals labour to shape accounts of themselves" (Rothstein, 2011). These diaries range from the chronicles of Napoleon's physician to those of Queen Victoria, including writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Charlotte Bronte.

For some of these diarists, the pages unpack personal revelations encoded in secret writing; others are carefully crafted stories destined to be revealed to the world. For all of them, their journals are living documents, records of their lives in the making, some written only for themselves, others for an audience.

Handwriting transcends the power of digital text to capture thoughts and feelings documented on life's journey. The stroke of the pen is able to record the emotions mediated through words in a personal writing style that exposes the individual character. I feel grateful that I have thousands of written words as a tangible memory of my past. It is in my written words that the substance of my emotional life is embedded and recorded. Without this rich evidence, I would be dependent on an unstable and fragile memory to recall the past.

As a writer, I am heavily dependent on my notebook for recording ideas, jotting down my dreams, my plans, as well as my shopping lists and daily errands. The immediacy, accessibility and simplicity of pen and paper are indispensable. For over 30 years I have used the same A4 notebook, obtainable only in South Africa. It is a habit from the times when I lived there. Writing in this familiar notebook adds a sense of continuity to my life. This book contains pages that are ruled to a perfect size that accommodates my larger than normal script.

One of the most famous diaries of the 20th century is the *Diary of Anne Frank*, written between 1942 and 1944, while the 13 year-old girl was living in hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam during the Second World war. Frank's account of living in hiding has provided one of the most vivid and moving legacies of the era, testifying to the power inherent in the personal handwritten account. See Figure 2.7.



Figure 2.7 Pages from Anne Frank's diary, 1942-1944

### 2.3 The lost letter

"The pen is mightier than the sword."

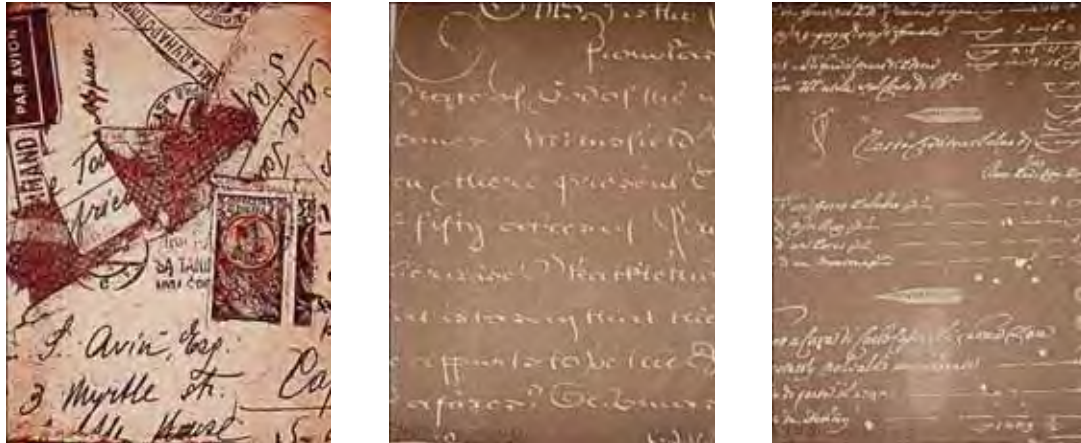
Edward Bulwer Lytton, 1839, *Richelieu, or the Conspiracy*.

For decades, I was an ardent letter writer; I wrote letters and postcards to family friends and pen pals, but now handwritten letters are a relic of the past. When one sees a handwritten letter it now takes on the quality of an artefact, an object of historical or museological interest.

Evidence of letters exists from the time of Ancient Egypt, Sumer and India as well as from the classical period of Greece, Rome and China. Historically letters were the only reliable form of communication between people until the development of the telegraph and later telex and facsimiles. These later technologies allowed the speed of communication to be drastically shortened. Today with the speed of the internet we are accustomed to instant digital communication.

Charles Bazerman, a scholar at the University of California who has contributed significantly to writing as a research field, states that letter writing is a direct and flexible medium of communication between two people. However, he asserts, "Today our daily activities are embedded in complex communication systems, spaces of social interaction far removed from the simple direct letter or face-to-face connection" (Bazerman, 2000, p.16).

## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING



**Figure 2.8 Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Lost letters*, intaglio etching, 20cm x 15cm**

We communicate differently when we email or send text messages, both of these methods being characterised by speed and informality. The meditative consideration, which accompanied a handwritten letter, is almost entirely absent. We may communicate more frequently and with more people; however, the depth and quality of our communication has changed and possibly diminished. In addition, few of us print or keep emails, so these digital messages are ephemeral, and any significant ideas or thoughts may be lost in cyberspace.

Just as there is a 'slow food' movement to counteract fast food and fast life, perhaps we should begin a slow writing movement, to regain the appreciation of writing letters as an important and meditative and historically significant activity, especially in literary studies.  
(Burns Florey, 2009, p.129).

In his classic essay, "The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility", Walter Benjamin discusses the concept of the authenticity of the original that cannot be reproduced by technological means. Although he was discussing *aura* in connection with an artwork, the concept may be extended to include original handwriting. The unique quality of a handwritten letter may be said to carry an *aura*, referring to its unique existence in time and space, the here and now of the original handmade mark and the tactility of the paper.

The French philosopher, Jacques Derrida discussed the concept of the unstable quality of writing as a trace:

For Derrida it is speech that is given the task of carrying the full presence, whereas writing is associated with distance, delay and ambiguity. By writing a letter to a friend, the writer is absent, yet the trace of his or her presence is conjured by the handwriting. There is a

play of presence and absence at the very origin of any system of meaning. (Emerling, 2005, p. 136)

I think back nostalgically to the seduction of a long, romantic love letter and the quality of emotion that was conveyed in the handwritten words. Nowadays, few of us write letters, even to those closest to us, as email and texting has replaced the practice of letter-writing. The aesthetic, tactile quality of letters composed into letter writing, is now an undervalued art form. The image in Figure 2.9 shows how the script on each envelope reveals the personality of each writer. Nowadays we may no longer recognise a friend's handwriting, as we hardly ever see their handwritten script.

During the first twenty years that I lived in Australia, I corresponded weekly with my mother, who still lives in South Africa. Luckily for me, she kept all these letters, hundreds of aerograms, and handed them back to me on my last visit. I spent hours on my long return flight reading them, amazed at how much I had shared with her.

Over the last decade our relationship has changed to telephone conversations that lack depth and intimacy compared to our written exchange. In the act of writing letters to each other we shared profound thoughts and feelings. If it was not for the letters, I would not have remembered the rich quality of our earlier connection. Although my communication with most friends and family has transformed from letters to emails, my mother does not have a computer so we depend on our weekly telephone calls.



**Figure 2.9 Letters from my friends during my early years in Australia**

The same can be said of my correspondence with friends dispersed in every corner of the globe. After completing university we all left South Africa looking for a safer place to create a new home. Some went to the USA; others to Canada and the UK, and a few of us came to Australia. From the early seventies to the

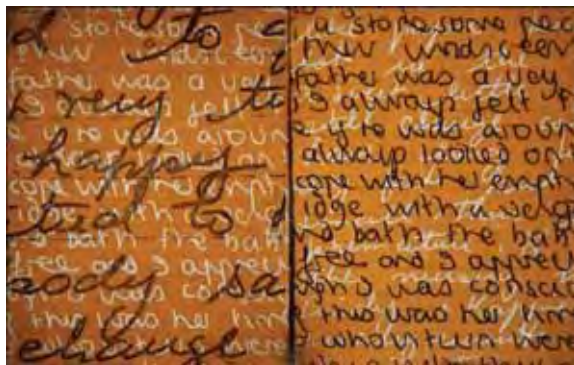
## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING

end of the 20th century we wrote long, detailed and emotionally charged letters to each other on a regular basis. Ten years later, with all the advantages of digital media at our fingertips, we write the occasional, hurried email. The end of letter writing has brought about profound changes in the way we communicate to each other.

In an article entitled “The handwritten letter, an art, all but lost, thrives in prison”, Jeremy Peters describes how one of the last places where handwritten correspondence is the primary form of communication is in prisons. Many prisons do not allow inmates access to computers, and most letters are censored by prison staff (Peters, 2011, p.1).

Over the past two years I have corresponded with a female prisoner who was given a five-year sentence for fraud. The experience of receiving her handwritten letters has been poignant and humbling, realising that her hopes, fears, needs and dreams are very similar to mine or yours.

In figure 2.10 you can see an etching where I have printed my mother's writing over my own; the differences in the expressive written forms emerge. My mother's writing slopes to the right, with generous loops, whereas my left-handed script has a backward slope with no loops and the words are crammed together as tightly as possible.



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Letter from my mother*, 1985, etching, 30cm x 20cm



Installation of aerograms I wrote to my mother

**Figure 2.10 Letters written from and to my mother**

## CYNDI FREIMAN



Figure 2.11 Letter written from my grandmother to my mother in 1951 and an aerogram written from me to my mother, 1987



Figure 2.12 Details of postcards from collection

## Chapter 3. Pivotal events in the history of handwriting

### *3.1 Significant events in the development of handwriting*

The history of writing is the history of our civilization. In tracing the trajectory of the origins of handwriting, the alphabet and writing materials, there are certain significant inventions that were turning points in the development of our media culture. The following ground-breaking discoveries radically changed the cultural evolution of our society.

This concept has been eloquently discussed by the revolutionary thinker and writer Marshall McLuhan, who depicted our cultural journey as being predicated on three key events: the phonetic alphabet, ushering in 1,500 years of manuscript culture; the printing press, bringing us 500 years of print dominance and the electronic and digital age, the era of cyberspace. McLuhan maintains that each transition in the mode of media has a profound effect on human sensibilities. (Stearn ed. McLuhan, p.165)

Despite the fact that there is evidence of human existence for over 100,000 years, it is only in the past 5,000 years that we have developed writing systems. Before that time we relied on the spoken word and an oral culture dominated. The first graphic signs go back 35,000 years when abstract geometric marks were cut into the walls of caves with bones and sharp stones. These manifestations emerged in various parts of the world at different times, revealing the deep-rooted human impulse to record, describe and draw images.

I will highlight some of these significant events and examine them in the light of my own research and *scripto-visual*, art practice, "the transition of words into images" (Iggulden, 2002, p. 98). I assert that, while writing came into being primarily as a means of communication, the aesthetic qualities of the letters, words and material methods of making text have always played an important role. The beauty of the visual marks, the placement in a grid, emphasising the formal qualities of the script and the shape of the letters are as vital as the content and meaning.

There are certain themes underpinning this grand narrative. Firstly many cultures attributed supernatural, mystical or magical qualities to the process of writing. They imbued the letters with mythical origins and those who executed the task of writing were regarded as a sacred, privileged class.

In his book, *The Art of Japanese Calligraphy* (2003), Louis Boudonnat describes how, "in the Sumerian myth, Enki the god of wisdom entrusts writing to the goddess Nisaba who watched over the reeds, from which the scribes cut their pens or writing tool" (Boudonnat, 2003, p. 8).

In contrast, in today's world writing is in the public domain, tainted by the profane and mundane musings of insignificant irrelevant Twitter and text-messaging. Compare this with the exquisite beauty of medieval calligraphy or Chinese script, where the production of each letter or character is considered an act of meditation and beauty.

The dawn of the 21st century represents another major change in the area of communication as significant as the discovery of the Rosetta Stone or the invention of the Gutenberg press. The digital revolution, enabling instant communication and the capacity of each individual to reach a wide audience and access an enormous amount of information, represents an enormous shift of power from the elite to the masses. I trace this journey by depicting the various styles of writing in my artworks in order to represent the progression and changes that occurred within each era and culture.

Over the centuries many theorists have attempted to uncover the origin of the alphabet and the writing process. Theories are in a state of constant flux as new findings emerge as the result of advanced archaeological and linguistic techniques. The adaptability, versatility and endurance of the variety of visual forms invented to embody the various alphabets in disparate cultures are a remarkable phenomenon.

These ideas were substantiated for me by a recent exhibition at the Oriental Institute in Chicago, *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond*, where new perspectives on the invention of writing were presented. Current theory indicates that the written word originated in four independent locations: the Sumerian cuneiform, in what is now southern Iraq, between 3500 BC and 1800 BC; Egyptian hieroglyphics around 3200 BC in Egypt; Chinese script in China around 1200 BC; and the writing of the Mayan civilization in what is now Southern Mexico and Guatemala in the first millennium AD. I will highlight some of the key developments in the history of palaeography, the study of ancient writing, including the practice of deciphering, reading and dating historical manuscripts.

### ***3.2 The discovery of the Rosetta Stone***

One of the most significant events for our knowledge of the history of writing was the discovery of the *Rosetta Stone* by Pierre-Francois Bouchard in 1799 during Napoleon's Egyptian campaign. The Rosetta Stone was the key to the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Created in the 2nd century BC, this important artefact contains a decree passed by a council of priests affirming the royal cult of the 13-year old Ptolemy and establishing his legitimacy to rule.

Written three times, in Demotic, hieroglyphic and Greek texts, this translation enabled two brilliant scholars, the Frenchman Jean François Champollion and the English physicist Thomas Young, to decode and translate the ancient

## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING

language of hieroglyphics, which had been in use for over 3,500 years, from 3100 BC to the end of the fourth century AD.

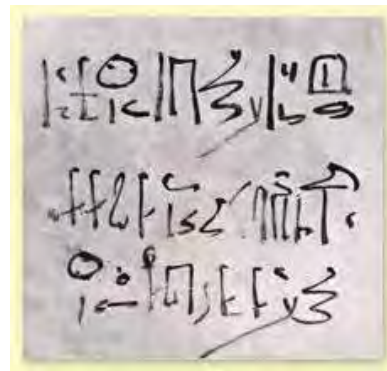


**Figure 3.1 Detail of the Rosetta Stone, 196 BC The British Museum, London**

Betro describes how the Egyptians developed hieroglyphics, a system of pictograms representing objects and ideas composed of over 700 signs drawn from both the physical world as well as phonetic sources. Throughout the long duration of its use, hieroglyphics retained their pictorial, ideographic quality. In the hieroglyphic system there is a close connection between writing and art, as text and image intermingle (Betro, 1999, p. 16).



Example of hieroglyphics (2500-1000 BC)



Example of Hieratic hieroglyphics (1500-800BC)

**Figure 3.2 Egyptian hieroglyphics**



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Ancient Hebrew and Arabic text*, intaglio etching, 30cm x 20cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Sanskrit*, intaglio etching, 20cmx15cm

**Figure 3.3 Samples of ancient Hebrew, Arabic and Sanskrit text**



**Figure 3.4 Example of a Sanskrit manuscript, 11th century, early Bhujimol script, Nepal, on palm-leaf**

In the etchings in Figure 3.3, on the left is a comparison between ancient Hebrew text and Arabic writing, both Semitic languages. The image on the right is an etching with an example of Sanskrit text, to compare and contrast the aesthetics of the three forms of writing. The image in Figure 3.4 is an example of Sanskrit on bark from the 11th century. Sanskrit, originating in India, is derived from the roots of Indo-Iranian languages. It has always been a sacred language used primarily for religious and ceremonial traditions.

### ***3.3 The invention of the alphabet: An alchemic code***

“The historiography of the alphabet is increasingly complex as archaeological and linguistic knowledge expands, this research will continue to be refined.” (Drucker, 1995, p. 48)

Another fundamental component in the history of the writing process was the emergence of the alphabet, a code representing the spoken language, making it visible in a graphic form with the use of abstract symbols. It was the invention of the alphabet that enabled us to communicate ideas, share knowledge, thoughts and feelings, transmit our stories and preserve our memories.

From the time I was introduced to the alphabet at the age of six, I was fascinated how learning this code of symbols opened up the world of reading, writing and self-expression. As my studio work progressed, I felt drawn to incorporate the alphabet in my paintings as a motif that reflected my connection to handwriting.

Joseph Lam, a researcher in the field of Semitic philology at the University of Chicago, in his essay “The invention and development of the alphabet” (2010), explains how the alphabet exerted the most lasting influence of all the writing systems and why it is still in use today. Its strengths are both its economy and functional advantage over *logographic* systems, in which a given symbol denotes a word or syllable. Alphabetic writing is characterised by the graphic representation of *phonemes*, the shortest unit of sound in a language.

An alphabet allows the more rapid spread of literacy and communication as it is easier to learn than a representational or ideographic system, which may contain thousands of characters. Codifying the alphabet enabled writing to move from the hands of the elite to the wider public.

McLuhan stated that the adoption of the phonetic alphabet, which demanded that the sounds of speech be made visible symbolically, was the moment when the eye replaced the ear as the central mode of perception (Stearn, 1968, p. 193). An alphabet serves dual functions: it records speech and it is a set of visual symbols and shapes. It is this visual aspect that is the primary interest of my research. Drucker has explained that besides its function in communication, “the alphabet may be interpreted as a symbolic code, in which the letters embody some fundamental cosmological or philosophical truth within their visual form” (Drucker, 1995, p. 14).

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a Swiss linguist, advocated the scientific study of language, in *The life of signs in society* (Emerling, 2005, p. 34), which he called *semiology*, a term derived from the Greek term, *semeion*. He advocated the study of the structure of language as a system of signification rather than the study of the history of language: “Every sign consists of a signifier and a signified” (Emerling, 2005, p. 34).

This approach focuses on the letters and what they mean in the context of each particular language. He referred to *langue* as the structured aspect of language and *parole* as the spoken word. For the purposes of my research it is the *langue* that is relevant, the linguistic sign, which takes on the qualities of an *acoustic image*.

In examining the different alphabets and how they changed from the Phoenician to the Roman alphabet there is a clear shift in the shape and form of the letters, moving from complex to a simpler representation of the shape.

Around 1700 BC the Phoenicians created what may have been the first alphabet, a system of 24 letters, one symbol attached to one consonantal sound, these symbols being clear and easily written letter forms (Jackson, 1981, p. 27). As a trading nation, located on the coast near Syria, the Phoenicians needed records of their business transactions, this becoming the impetus to find a practical way to record information.

The Phoenician alphabet underpins other writing systems such as Hebrew and Aramaic, and formed the basis of the Greek and later Roman script. The Phoenicians wrote from right to left, a practice retained by the Hebrew and Arabic languages, but the Greeks changed the direction of writing from left to right, a custom that is still in use today. Even in the reading of visual artworks, in the Western tradition we tend to look from left to right, mirroring the way we read text.



**Figure 3.5 Example of Phoenician writing approx.1050 BC**

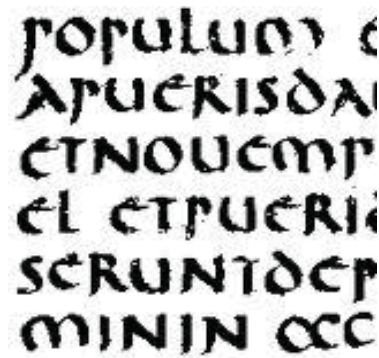
The Greeks developed their alphabet from the one used by the Phoenicians, a set of 24 letters that have been in use since the early 9th century BC and is still used today in modern Greek. Various adaptations had to be made to accommodate the Greek language; this included inventing new symbols for vowel sounds which were not used in earlier Semitic alphabets.

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The Roman or Latin script was derived from a branch of the Greek writing system known as the *Cumean* alphabet. A cursive Roman script, known as *minuscule*, was used in more informal situations such as letters and is the antecedent of the script used today in Western traditions. A more formal style of writing based on Roman capitals was used for inscriptions on monuments and state documents.



Example of the Greek alphabet 8th to 9th century BC.

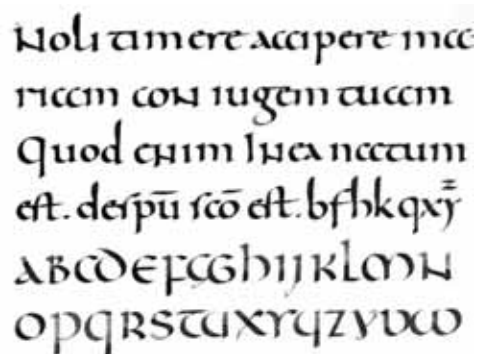


Example of the Roman alphabet 7th century BC.

**Figure 3.6 Greek and Roman alphabets**

The evolution of scripts from the 7th to the 20th centuries reveals a progression from complexity to simpler letter formation and this change corresponded to a greater number of people being able to read and write, so that writing shifted from the hands of a few to the public domain.

One of the most significant writing styles that evolved in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire was the *Carolingian Miniscule* developed by the Emperor, Charlemagne. He encouraged scribes and monks to develop a new style of handwriting, the *Carolingian miniscule* that was the first to slope gently, using lower case as well as capitals. It flowed more easily than earlier forms of writing and allowed for separation between words, something that Roman writing had not done.



**Figure 3.7 Carolingian handwriting 8th and 9th century AD.**

### 3.4 *The manuscript culture*

Medieval manuscripts refer to books created by hand in Europe between the 5th and 15th centuries. The very word “manuscript” references *manu* (a hand) and *scripto* (to write) in Latin. Until the invention of the printing press, for over 1,000 years manuscripts were written by hand; this medium encompassed the vast domain of scriptures, law, literature, history, philosophy and science from the classical to the Middle Ages (De Hamel, 1986, p. 9).

In illuminated manuscripts, text was supplemented by the addition of decoration, an example of *scripto-visual* text, in which text and visual image exist in the same visual space. Scholars today regard this period of illumination as a research field for painting and a laboratory for new inventions: “The new artistic idiom, that is the treatment of space, the rendering of mass, volume and movement was largely worked out in illuminators’ ateliers” (Voronova & Sterligov, 2006, p. 8).

Each region of Europe evolved its own style of manuscript that included features such as enlarged initials, floral motifs, patterned borders, marginalia and miniature illustrations with their own lettering forms. Although the term “illuminated” strictly refers to decoration that may include either gold or silver, many manuscripts do not contain metallic colours.

One of the key factors contributing to the legacy of illuminated manuscripts was their portability, and the fact that they circulated throughout Europe as highly valued and treasured possessions which were kept in families for generations.

The primary motive for creating these manuscripts was to promote the Christian religion; this missionary impetus gave rise to works such as the *Book of Kells*, (Trinity College, Dublin) created by Celtic monks in the 8th century, and the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, (British Library, London), dating back to the late 7th century.

Another motive for the production of manuscripts was imperial; works were commissioned by emperors and kings to enhance their wealth and prestige. In addition, the rise of universities and the need for manuscripts for educational purposes was a stimulus for the production of books.

The patronage of wealthy royal families like the Medicis, *Humanists* of Verona, Florence, Padua and Venice, who all commissioned and collected manuscripts, also led to an increase in the production of manuscripts and resulted in a flourishing trade, as well as leading to the greater refinement of skills in creating these works.

This increase in activity led to developments in the types of works produced. One innovation was a smaller book used for personal meditations at home rather than in the liturgy. An example is the *Book of Hours*, (France, 1410), created by the Limburg brothers under the patronage of the Duke of Berry.

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*Book of Kells*, 8th century, Trinity College  
Dublin



*Tres Riches Heures de Duc de Berry*, 1410,  
France

**Figure 3.8 Illuminated manuscripts**

I have used material from these manuscripts to create etchings that reflect the combination of text and image, the enlarged capitals and the decorative border motifs can be seen in the three images in Figure 3.9.



Cyndi Freiman, intaglio,  
20cm x 15cm



Cyndi Freiman, intaglio,  
20cm x 15cm



Cyndi Freiman, intaglio,  
20cm x 15cm

**Figure 3.9 Etchings, 2010, reflecting the combination of text and decoration in extracts from medieval manuscripts**

### ***3.5 The invention of the printing press***

The Gutenberg press, invented in 1439 by Johannes Gutenberg precipitated a revolution in the history of media. His epochal invention was a combination of the wooden printing press, a process for using movable type, and the use of oil-based ink.

Elizabeth Eisenstein, a historian specialising in the history of early printing, has drawn attention to the transition from the *manuscript culture* to the *printing culture* and its effect on cultural changes in Western civilization. In her seminal work, *The printing press as an agent for change*, (1979) she focuses on the dissemination, standardisation and preservation of material after the invention of the printing press. From this moment on, information could be circulated to a wide audience, and learning shifted from being the domain of a few scholars to being accessible to the broader population.

Marshall McLuhan maintains that the printing press brought about radical change by privileging the visual senses; likewise, the advent of the electronic and digital media are causing an implosion in our modes of sensory perception. We can see a similar impact on culture commencing with the advent of the internet in the late 20th century. ( Stearn, 1967, p. 41)

In *The Gutenberg galaxy: The making of typographic man*, (1962) McLuhan analyses the impact of the printing press on European culture and human consciousness. He believed that the invention of movable type was the decisive moment when change shifted from a culture in which all the senses were involved to a tyranny of the visual.

McLuhan coined the phrase “the medium is the message”, to refer to the symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. In McLuhan's terms, new technologies such as television, computers, telephones become a new environment and alter our sensory patterns:

McLuhan described human history as a succession of acts of technological extension of human capacity, each of which works a radical change on our environment and our ways of thinking and feeling and valuing. Typically it is only certain artists in any given era who have the resources and the temerity to live in immediate contact with the environment of their age, that is why they seem to be ahead of their time.....the new sensibility understands art as the extension of life, this being understood as the representation of new modes of vivacity (Sontag, 2009, p. 291).

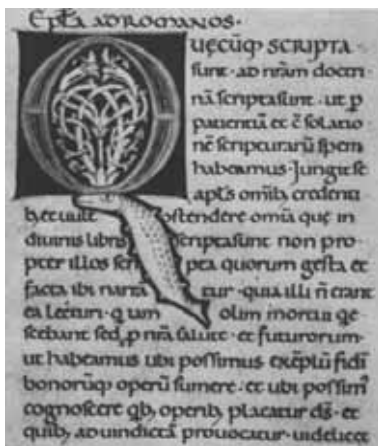
## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING



Figure 3.10 The Gutenberg Bible 1454

With the advent of the printing press, many scribes lost their work and became masters or teachers to the educated classes for whom an elegant hand became a mark of gentility or status. The inspiration for *Italic* script was an Italian printer named Aldus Manutius who introduced the style at the end of the 15th century. Italic was known for its clarity and readability. It was more pleasing to the eye than the earlier Gothic script, and the slant made it easier to write than other styles (Burns Florey, 2009, p. 39).

In my alphabet series of paintings I have adapted an Italic style of lettering, chosen for its humanist origin with its mark of individuality.



Example of 15th century Italic script



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *alphabet*, intaglio etching, 20cm x 150cm



Cyndi Freiman, *Alphabet painting III*, 2010, oil on canvas, 150cm x 100cm

**Figure 3.11 Details of Italic script in Alphabet painting**

### ***3.6 History of writing tools, surfaces and materials***

From the earliest existence of prehistoric man, there is evidence that marks were made on the walls of caves and, as a consequence, man searched continually for writing tools that would serve this purpose. Writing implements can be divided into two categories: those that scratch and those that stain. One method was incising, engraving or carving with sharp implements onto hard surfaces such as rock, stone, metal, wood, wax or clay tablets. Another method was using a reed pen, the *calamus* used on the bark of trees, papyrus, skins, vellum and parchment using dyes and inks.

The Sumerians incised on clay tablets using a wedge-shaped stylus, Egyptians used a reed pen and wrote on papyrus, in addition to incising on monuments with sharp tools. Ancient scribes used vellum, made from the hide of animals, on which to write their texts, sometimes reusing the same surface and writing other texts on top. They would erase what was originally written with an oatmeal mixture. This process of erasure is known as palimpsest. We often see traces of earlier writings that were written underneath the new texts, for example, Christian texts may be written over ancient pagan manuscripts.

Later parchment, made from calfskin, became the most common surface for writing, and this surface encouraged the Greeks to introduce other writing instruments, such as the split-reed pen.

## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Istanbul*, etching,  
20cm x 15cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Graffiti*, etching  
20cm x 15cm

**Figure 3.12 Etchings illustrating palimpsest**

In the two etchings above, I have incorporated the concept of palimpsest into the image by printing one image over the other and allowing some of the image beneath to be revealed. In *Graffiti*, I am looking at the revolutionary contemporary art practice of wall-painting that echoes the marks made on the walls of caves thousands of years ago. Each layer of *graffiti* is painted over the layer underneath, creating a sense of history and memory. In *Istanbul*, I have used one layer of Islamic calligraphy over another, reflecting an ancient surface.

In the late seventh or eighth century, quills became the most popular writing tool as they were versatile, flexible and easier to handle than a brush and, best of all, they were not expensive and were easy to acquire. The best were plucked from living geese, turkeys, ravens and other birds, prepared before use by hardening. The tip had to be formed with a pen knife. Although each quill only lasted a short time before being replaced, as a writing tool they endured for centuries.

The quill was gradually phased out when metal pens appeared. The first was patented in 1803. Initially they were very expensive, and were imported from England. The first successful fountain pen was developed in 1897, followed by many famous styles such as the *Schaeffer*, and the *Parker 51*, which was the most popular pen ever designed. In 1938, the Hungarian journalist, Laszlo Biro, invented the ballpoint pen, or *biro* as it became known. Initially leaky and smudgy, it met with considerable resistance in schools until manufacture improved and they became more affordable. Popularity increased and eventually they became ubiquitous. In the 21st century, technology has generated a much wider range of writing tools, including felt tip pens, markers and gel pens. There are a myriad of choices for anyone who chooses to write by hand, each pen providing subtle differences in the type of mark made.



The Quill Pen



Example of metal pen nibs



The Parker 51



Gel impact pen



Ballpoint pen

**Figure 3.13 Quill pen and modern writing tools**

## Chapter 4. Calligraphy and modern abstraction: Soul strokes

### *4.1 Contemporary calligraphy and its connections to abstraction*

"By freeing painting from traditional perspective and an imitation of reality, abstraction could flourish; by freeing calligraphy from delivering a message, the material physical line carried only aesthetic and expressive qualities" (Mediavilla, 1996, p. 293).

Abstraction has close links with Eastern calligraphy as an art form; both have form, rhythm and gesture at their core. In the 20th century both of these art forms have achieved a degree of autonomy; contemporary Eastern calligraphy has freed itself from the imperative to communicate or embody meaning, and exists primarily as an aesthetic entity. Likewise, abstract painting has liberated itself from the imperative to be representational. It no longer needs to reference the figurative external world.

Mediavilla describes features that lie at the heart of calligraphy, analysing the gestures, marks and materials that combine to make the forms. He highlights contrast, contour, direction, the texture of the surface, the tool or instrument used to make the mark, the colour of the ink and the forms that create the script.

For us to appreciate the beauty of calligraphy, we need to sensitise our eye to other expressive plastic elements of the art, including the size of letters, pressure, stroke, pace and the orientation of the line, the variation in the edges, the tone, the contrast between thick and thin, light and dark, heavy versus light and angular versus round (Mediavilla, 1996, p. 286).

I assert that abstraction has close ties with calligraphy: similarities in gesture, movement and its foregrounding of formal aesthetic qualities above the need for representation of the physical world or meaning of the letters or words in calligraphy.

In my work I have evolved a style located in abstraction, using the shape of the letters and their relationship to each other to create a visual image. I have moved away from any form of representation and used the variation in the edges, subtle shifts of colour and symbolism inherent in the shapes to create my compositions. I have allowed the layers of the *imprimatur* underneath to be revealed, by leaving irregular edges between the letters.



Figure 4.1 Cyndi Freiman, 2010, details of *Alphabet* painting

#### ***4.2 Chinese and Japanese calligraphy***

Chinese script consists of individual pictographic and ideographic characters, each corresponding to the meaning of one word, with no fixed relationship to the phonic aspects of the language. In order to become literate one is required to learn thousands of characters, in contrast to our Western phonetic alphabet consisting of only 26 letters. Over time many Chinese characters have become more abstract and less pictorial (Shen Fu, 1986, p. 11).

Chinese script is primarily produced with a brush that has the capacity and sensitivity to produce a diversity of forms: thick and thin strokes that respond to subtle manoeuvrings and the sensitivity of body movements. A Chinese brush is able to produce a much wider range of marks than any steel nib or goose quill:

"The brush is not a simple tool but a sophisticated instrument"

(Billeter, 1990, p. 56).

Although there are precise conventions for writing each character, the experienced calligrapher is able to introduce subtle variations that enhance the aesthetic quality of the work and yet adhere to the formal traditions of the practice (Billeter, 1990, p. 11). The skilled calligrapher will imbue these strokes with their own individual nuances, transforming the writing into an art form.

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Example of Japanese calligraphy 8th century



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Tokyo series*, intaglio and relief roll, 20cmx15cm

**Figure 4.2 Japanese calligraphy and etching based on Japanese characters**

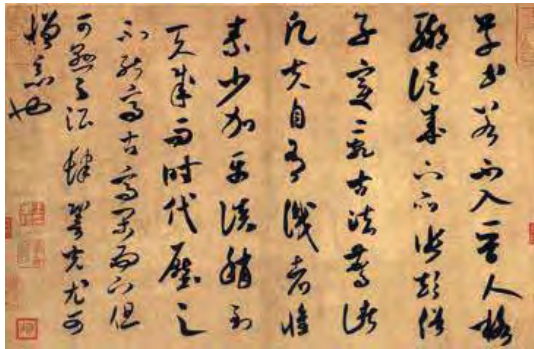
In the etching on the right in Figure 4.2 you can see the contrast of two kinds of Japanese calligraphy, one a more structured older version in black, the other a modern version that is more fluid and has letter forms that are less structured.

In order to achieve a sense of spontaneity, the calligrapher repeats the same gesture a thousand times, practising the subtle physical movement of the hand, the wrist and the arm, and the flow of energy from the body to the paper: "Calligraphy is a movement of the soul. Writing, the art of the brush, has become the painting of the heart" (Boudonnat, 2002, p. 47).

In the Japanese language there is a combination of phonetic and ideographic letters and as in Chinese calligraphy the brush is the key tool. Each character is situated within a uniform square, hence the connection to the grid. Children are taught writing skills in vertical, squared exercise books (Billeter, 1990, p. 27). Both Japanese and Chinese calligraphy are "written downwards in vertical lines arranged from right to left" (Nakata, 1973, p. 9).

The writing was either used in a scroll, a folding or sliding screen or a wall hanging. Japanese masters wrote on thin, almost transparent paper, layering one sheet on top of the other to strengthen, beautify and protect the writing. The mounting and presentation of the work was regarded as an art form in itself (Boudonnat, 2002, p. 50).

The etching in Figure 4.3 is a combination of an intaglio print over a raw sienna relief roll, imagery taken from an exhibition of Japanese calligraphy in Tokyo in 2008 (Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art, 11-17 January 2008, Dokuritsu Annual Sho Exhibition; see Appendix).



Example of Chinese Calligraphy, Song era



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Tokyo series*,  
intaglio and relief roll, 20cm x 15cm

**Figure 4.3 Chinese calligraphy and intaglio etching**

### ***4.3 Islamic calligraphy***

As no representations of humans or the deity are permitted in the Islamic religion, calligraphy acquired a special status as a form of artistic expression. It is a combination of text and art; every word has an aesthetic quality, so that the text becomes as much a visual image as it does a piece of writing.

The complex Islamic calligraphy is derived from a combination of Arabic, Persian and Turkish languages, comprising consonants written from right to left. The 28-letter alphabet came into use around the 8th century, primarily for transcribing the Koran, and a modified script was used for everyday writing.

An important feature of Islamic writing is the art of ornamentation, in which the letters are embellished and transformed. Graphic decoration is found in architecture, everyday objects and book illumination. Islamic calligraphy is not limited to the two-dimensional, but has the capacity to be used on surfaces ranging from parchment and paper to stone and metal. Many of the texts are written using a reed pen on delicate hand-dyed paper. Preparation of the surface is in itself an art form.

The dynamic interaction between the architecture and rhythm of the letters creates a plastic form that invites infinite visual possibilities: "The calligraphy of the Arabic language is constructed on a simple spatial principle: the Arabic alphabet is written in the interplay of a horizontal base line and the vertical lines of its consonants" (Khatiba, 1976, p. 60).

One of the classic motifs used on metal plaques is the Bismillah, a pious invocation that may be used in secular or religious contexts. The inscription signifies, "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful". An essential

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paradigm is the arabesque; the letter as image follows three rules of composition: phonetic, semantic and plastic. I have adapted this motif in my painting as a vehicle to highlight the twisting, braiding and fusing of the letters.



Bismillah, Islamic calligraphy



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Bismillah*, oil on canvas, 90cm x 70cm

**Figure 4.4 Bismillah motif and painting based on the motif**



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *calligraphic signature*, intaglio etching, 20cm x 15cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, A composition of six intaglio etchings, each 20cm x 15cm

**Figure 4.5 Intaglio etchings inspired by Islamic calligraphy**

#### ***4.4 Calligraphic styles: Transcending borders***

"Writing as a concentrated expression of culture played an important role in the development of different civilisations" (Anadol, 2010, p.7).

Examining a range of different cultural practices, I discovered that there are close connections between the various writing styles, although each calligraphic tradition has its own specific system of signs, symbols and forms (Mediavilla, 1996, p. 304).

At the exhibition, *Transcending borders with brush and pen*, at the Sakip Sabaci Museum, Istanbul, in June, 2010, the curator focused on a comparison of Islamic and Japanese calligraphy with medieval illuminated manuscripts. The works were presented separately, but in the juxtaposition of these three cultures, one is given the opportunity to compare and contrast the forms, the materials and the aesthetic qualities shared by all three kinds of writing.

This bringing together of different forms of writing reveals that the use of calligraphy as a means of artistic expression exists in many different historical and cultural constructs (Tanaka, 2010, p. 7). We observe that the necessity of writing for the purpose of recording and communicating information also resulted in a practice that reflected aesthetic qualities and provided for artistic expression.

In the hybrid artwork below, I have incorporated Japanese, medieval and Islamic script to create a composition that reflects the differences in the texture, shape and form of the script in each culture. My work reflects the hybrid nature of contemporary culture that includes and plural values and cultural influences.



**Figure 4.6 Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Hybrid*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 76cm x 51cm**

## Chapter 5. Text, letters and language in contemporary art

My research into other artists' work is characterised by three aspects. Firstly, I have elected to research artists who exhibit a strong presence of text in their work, using writing as visual imagery that is not necessarily content-driven, but that focuses on gesture and mark-making. Secondly, while their work may not have an overt religious or spiritual intent, many of the artists have a meditative or intuitive approach to their practice, engaging with their work in a way that absorbs and elevates them. Thirdly, I explored the materiality of the making of the works, a performative aspect that highlights the process rather than the product.

These qualities are evident in the work of Ian Fairweather. In his monograph on Fairweather, Bail described how Fairweather was obsessed by the act of painting: "He admitted a comparison with religion for him and the actual process of painting was more important than the finished work" (Bail, 2009, p. 157).

I identify with his practice of overlapping and interlacing calligraphic lines. For example, in a work such as *Monastery* (1960) or *Shalimar* (1961-2) the formation of various cells parallel to the plane, resembling a loose grid is deepened by overlapping lines (Bail, 2009, p. 174). His use of a limited, subdued palette of black white, grey and earth tones also resonates in my practice (Bail, 2009, p. 176).

The three major influences on Fairweather's work were Cubism, revealed in his linear approach with complex interlacing lines; Aboriginal art, reflected in his subdued earth palette, and Chinese calligraphy, seen in the gestural linear work that dominates his paintings. He lived in China for many years, studying the Chinese language with expert calligraphers who taught him how to create form and meaning with a brush and ink (Bail, 2009, p. 198).



Ian Fairweather, 1961, *Monastery*, synthetic polymer on board, 180cm x 144 cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Bismillah*, oil on canvas, 76cm x 51cm

**Figure 5.1 Calligraphic lines in Ian Fairweather's work and my own**

One of the exceptions to the use of text is the New Zealander, Colin McCahon who used handwritten language in his paintings so that the word became the image. In his works, one reads the text before one is aware of the formal aspects of the painting; the content being a vital aspect of his work. He developed a unique iconography of letters and symbols that enabled him to explore the spiritual realm and universal questions of faith and belief, by placing his words in deep pictorial space (Bloem, 2002, p. 18).

As he writes the script in his ordinary hand, without ornamentation or flourish, he reveals an honesty that does not hide behind style or formality. His writing is painterly characterised by varying size and density, some letters disappearing into the background, while others are underlined for emphasis. His sombre and limited palette echoes his ongoing engagement with a deep personal search for spiritual knowledge.

McCahon's work exhibits the influence of Chinese and Japanese scrolls where writing and painting are united as one process (Bloem, 2002, p. 41). His 1954-55 painting, *I and Thou*, was based on Martin Buber's concept of existentialist philosophy and he used highly constructed letters to reflect these ideas. He often varied the surface between matt and gloss to create texture and subtle differentiation, a technique, which I have incorporated into my painting.



Colin McCahon, 1959, *Will he save him*, enamel on hardboard, 122cm x 90cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Alphabet series*, oil on canvas, 150cm x 100cm

**Figure 5.2 Colin McMahon's work compared and contrasted with my work.**

In contrast to McCahon, whose letters are black, my letters are in white; his mood is sombre, while mine is light and playful. He uses words with intent to convey a message; I use letters for their shape, form and aesthetic quality.

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I am drawn to the work of Vivienne Koorland, a South African-born artist living in New York who uses writing as her subject matter. I relate not only to the process of her work but also to its historical origins, as Koorland and I share a cultural background, both coming from Cape Town, South Africa.

In her painting she painstakingly transcribes texts from her old school notebooks, imitating the repetitive strokes of a child practising the skills of writing. This work reflects the idea of a child learning handwriting to transcribe experience, cramming as many words as possible into one line: "Painting writing is at the heart of Koorland's practice. The words and letters are invariably taken from found sources, readymade sources, resonant with historical associations both formal and iconic" (Garb, 2007, p. 8).

Garb describes how Koorland evolves a series of layering actions: layers of canvas, layers of ground, layers of paint applied and removed, the *pentimento* of under-painting coming through the final work, which sits on the surface (Garb, 2007, p. 12). The many layers in her work take on the quality of an archived memory.

The same words and letters appear in different works, with varying degrees of legibility. Traces and echoes of previous marks disturb the visual surface. Koorland sometimes destroys paintings and later salvages and reworks them. She may stitch them together in a painstaking labour of transcription and transposition so that her work echoes the appearance of a ruined document: "The tactility of writing, its material form is felt on the painted surface; it leaves traces in words and things" (Kentridge, 2007, p. 26).

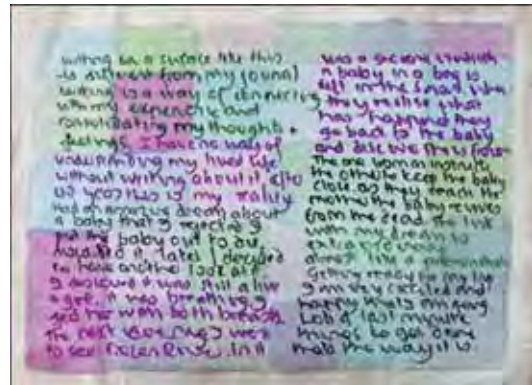
Koorland explained how she gave up figurative painting and instead used writing as her subject matter. She is taken by the idea of lists, fractured narratives and legibility versus illegibility. She also admits a fascination with artists like Eric Gill and Ben Shan, who created their own alphabets.

I relate to Koorland's use of handwriting extracted from her school exercise books and I examined her work in the light of my own. Figure 5.3 shows an extract from one of my journals, written in colour markers. In both Koorland's work and my own, the handwritten words in their original size are indexical images.

## CYNDI FREIMAN



Vivienne Koorland, 2005, *Dark Poem*,  
119.4cm x 109.2cm oil on stitched canvas



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Coloured Journal*,  
acrylic and markers, canvas, 30cm x 21cm

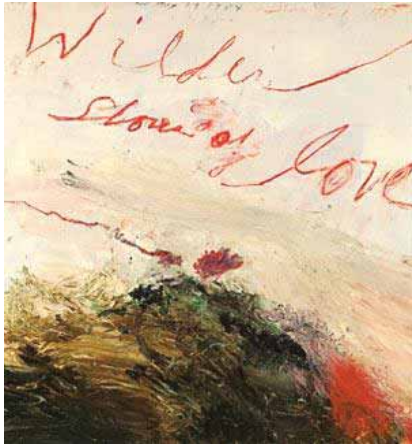
**Figure 5.3 A comparison of Vivienne Koorland's work and my own**

Another contemporary American painter who uses writing as the source of his imagery is Cy Twombly. He uses his own handwriting in his paintings, sometimes separated, other times in a cursive manner (Serota, 2008, p. 26). His irregular writing functions as a mode of drawing. Twombly writes as if he were seeking out the meaning of poetic words through the physical act of producing their graphic signs. He uses mixed media: acrylic, house paint, oils, pencil, oil stick and incised handwriting.

Twombly has said that he is more interested in the surface than he is in his materials. His paintings reference a wall of graffiti, the surface becoming a palimpsest of layered marks. Pierre Restany, in his essay, "The revolution of the sign" (1961), described Twombly's work as moving between a graphic, pictorial style and ordinary handwriting without syntax or logic. (Serota, 2009, p.19). Dean states that Twombly's random marks come from "mindfulness rather than mindlessness and are not marks of an unconscious mind but of a knowing one" (Serota, 2009, p. 38).

In his essay, "Paintings or signs and marks", Walter Benjamin argues that there is a distinction between line and mark, drawing and painting: "Line is action become visible" (Benjamin, 1939. p. 104). These distinctions are difficult to maintain in relation to Twombly, in whose work the trace is the record of a gesture. According to Roland Barthes, one of the essential differences between writing and calligraphy is that writing needs meaning, whereas calligraphy expresses itself through forms and gestures. (Mediavilla, 1996, p.17)

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Cy Twombly, 1985, *Wilder Shores of Love*, oil, crayon and pencil on plywood, 140cmx120cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Signature*, oil on canvas 76cm x 51cm

**Figure 5.4 A comparison of Cy Twombly's work and my own**

In contemporary art, close connections have developed between calligraphy and abstract painting as evidenced in the work of Cy Twombly and other artists who use writing as visual imagery. Mediavilla, in his book, *From calligraphy to abstract art* (1996), explores the close links between these two forms of expression, abstraction and calligraphy. He draws our attention to the formal qualities of line, shape and texture.

In a 2009 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *Tangled Alphabets*, the work of Mira Schendel and Leon Ferrari is juxtaposed and compared. Both of these artists emerged in the 1960s, creating an oeuvre of conceptual works, fundamentally based on language. Their visual vocabulary included fragmented alphabets, isolated words and extracts of texts.

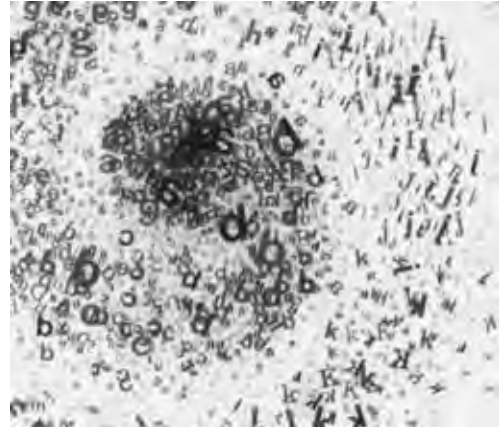
Perez-Oramas, author of the exhibition monograph, discusses how both of these artists utilised language for dual purposes: as a functional component of their art and as visual subject matter. He locates the work of these two artists in an era "when language was a paradigm for thought and for the world itself" (2009, p.14). "Texts are images and images are texts" (Perez-Oramas, 2009, p.16).

During this period in Western conceptual art, language played a major role in the visual arts. Perez-Oramas emphasises that both Ferrari and Schendel always made the word the essence of their work: the act of writing, of drawing letters, the muscular act of writing (2009, p.18) and the capacity of letters to function as visual imagery.

In their work, fragments of texts and unintelligible words form the basis of their oeuvre. In his work *Cuadro Escrito*, ("written pictures"), Ferrari works with writing that is "abstracted into calligraphy that is both illegible and indecipherable" (Perez-Oramas, 2009, p. 24).



Leon Ferrari, 1962, *Untitled*, ink on paper, 66cmx48cm



Mira Schendel, 1972, *Untitled*, transfer type on Japanese paper between transparent acrylic sheets, 95cmx95cm

**Figure 5.5 The use of text in the art of Leon Ferrari and Mira Schendel**

Annette Iggulden, an artist who uses text as imagery, compares her contemporary studio painting with the practice of the medieval nuns working on illuminated manuscripts. Iggulden changes words into images in a process that she describes as *scripto-visual* practice (Iggulden, 2002, p. 98). Her words, although illegible, evoke a visual language.

In her thesis, *Women's silence* (2002), Iggulden considers how silence in women's lives can be expressed through their work with words and images. She examines illuminated manuscripts, analysing how nuns may have copied texts following a prescribed code, yet found ways for self-expression using the visual language and inter-textual components of the page.

Iggulden made me aware of the complex skills required of medieval scribes, who wrote, drew and painted illuminated manuscripts. She noted that illuminated manuscripts were one of the earliest manifestations of words and images within the same visual field.

Another compelling concept which Iggulden raises in her thesis is the idea that human beings use writing *to perpetuate the myth of a living presence* (Iggulden, 2002, p. 101), that writing is an embodied form that has an element of immortality.

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In Iggulden's work, as in mine, the illegible text does not invite a linear reading by the viewer, but rather the words and letters are to be seen as an image. Iggulden says, "I investigate the acts of writing within the visual space of painting and of copying the words of others, changing the written texts into visual images and imaging the letters of the alphabet" (Iggulden, 2002, p. 13).

From the late sixties, feminist artists have used words in their artwork as a means to subvert the language of patriarchy. I do not take this approach in my work as my intent is different; I am focusing on the handmade mark, the shape and form of the letters and the process of writing rather than the content or message inherent in the words. Considering this paradigm, my work is closely aligned to that of Iggulden and Hanne Darboven, both of whom created their own illegible alphabet.

There are certain processes that Iggulden utilises in her scripto-visual practice which I use in mine as well; these are "changing texts into visual images, imaging the letters of the alphabet and copying the words of others, using writing as a form of drawing or imaging" (Iggulden, 2002, p. 99).

As with Iggulden, the handwritten word has always played a major role in my creative work, from the ritual of keeping a daily journal, to writing handwritten manuscripts. I use writing as a means of anchoring my thoughts and feelings. It was then a natural progression for me to incorporate the act of writing into my visual art practice and to close the gap between the creative processes of writing, painting and drawing. As Iggulden says:

The letters' illegibility allowed me to use the letters and words as visual imagery without being constrained by the sense or meaning of the words. So in this way I could see the writing as a visual image, a record of cultural and individual traces that embodied the voice of the scribe (Iggulden, 2002, p. 103).

Another area in which my journey follows that of Iggulden's is in the relationship of the theory to my studio practice. She says that her work is not theory-driven, although theoretical research plays a role in comprehending the issues that emerge through her art. She continues:

The idea is always secondary and often sacrificed to my intuitive response to working with the materials; the matter of painting itself. For as a painter, I respond to the materiality of paint and all that visual language provides as well as to the words that I write within its visual space (Iggulden, 2002, p. 100).

I am researching a visual language through which I can express my connection to the act of writing and the alphabet as a symbolic code, which is central to my work, and in so doing I will close the gap between my writing and my painting. Iggulden describes her process as follows:

When I draw, the line carries a gesture that embodies and activates the visual space. When my gesture is taken into the act of writing it crosses the boundary of visual language to share its space with a verbal code of language as word (Iggulden, 2002, p. 104).

In this context a dialogue is established between the visual and verbal images of words that share the same space. We are conditioned to search for meaning when we see words, however, viewing words as images only requires that we relinquish the need for linguistic comprehension:

When the written word co-inhabits the space of painting, it enters a dialogue with all the other visual components that share its space. This interaction with pictorial language affects both its image and its interpretation (Iggulden, 2002, p. 104).



Annette Iggulden, 2004, *She asked, she smiled*, acrylic and metallic inks on unstretched canvas, 46cm x 25cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, intaglio etching and metallic acrylic on Hahnemuhle, 20cm x 15cm

**Figure 5.6 Letters and words used as images in visual space**

Drucker discusses this in relation to the work of Pierre Alechinsky in *Exercise d'Ecriture* (1950), describing how writing in his work is a productive act rooted in automatic gesture (Drucker, 1998, p. 64). Although the marks or glyphs strongly resemble writing they are not legible words. Loops and strokes are gestural forms of self-expression, but they resist legibility, like an encoded, secretive language. The images are rhythmic gestures that resemble writing but do not conform to the shape of alphabetic letters.

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**Figure 5.7 Pierre Alechinsky, *Exercise d' Ecriture*, 1950, Destroyed, 1999, Artists Rights Society, NY**

The work of Imants Tillers includes aspects of appropriation and the same method of layering found in my own mixed media work. I attended a public discussion with Imants Tillers and Edmund Capon at his last exhibition at the Roslyn Oxley Gallery in Paddington on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2010.

At the lecture, Tillers explained:

My work is an evolution of process; each image has another life and each panel is in perpetual evolution. I use words as a visual component of the process. I am aware of the power that words may conjure up; in my work the word is the image. Although I am inspired by nature, there is a tension between the visual and the verbal, images and words.

I use canvas boards that have their origins in the amateur practice of art, simple techniques using a photocopier, handmade stencils and masking tape. The words are the first thing that I do, followed by lots of different layers of stencils and varying sizes of type and script. Chance and surprise elements play a strong role in my painting. My work is a continuous voyage of discovery

When asked by Capon whether he had the whole image in his mind from the beginning, Tillers replied,

I get an idea of the whole image and then break down the image into panels; however, each panel may have 20 different layers. I work with the panel flat on a desk, each panel one at a time. These works have a tonal cohesion. All my work is numbered and I am up to 88,000 panels. Storage is easy but installation is a nightmare!

Tillers continued:

I came to the work via the intellect not the visual. When appropriation and quotation first happened in the eighties it was regarded as outrageous and transgressive. I have over 3,000 A4 pages of text with thoughts, poems and ideas as a source of inspiration.

My approach to my work is more intuitive than that of Tillers. Although I begin my work with a structured grid, as can be seen in the collages below, I then experiment and play in an intuitive mode, in contrast to the cerebral process used by Tillers, where the end concept is planned and visualised from the outset.



Figure 5.8 Imants Tillers, 2005, *Nature Speaks* acrylic and gouache on 54 canvas boards, 229cm x 214cm



Imants Tillers, 2010, *Outback Q*, acrylic and gouache on canvas boards, 142.5 x 101cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Documenta*, mixed media, 16 canvas boards, 30cm x 21cm each

Figure 5.9 Appropriation of text in Tillers' work and my own work

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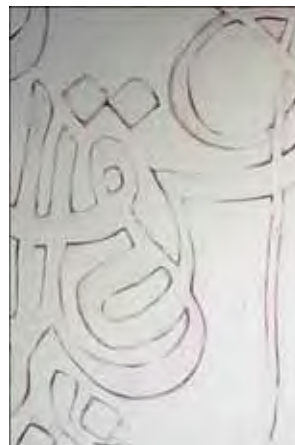
I investigated the physical aspects of the painting process in the works of Robert Ryman whose work involved interrogation of the various elements – such as canvas, paper, wood and metal; various consistencies of the medium – gloss or matte; manner of paint application; size of brushes; and all the practical considerations involved in the act of painting. Ryman experimented with a wide range of techniques, ranging from thick impasto to diaphanous glazes. As Sauer has noted in her 1999 essay:

Ryman's paintings are more defined by their materiality rather than their subject matter. Despite the absence of representational imagery, his work is absorbing and magnetic. He continually asks the question, "How are paintings made? What are they made of and how should they be installed?"

Ryman is not a theoretician; he is a practitioner of art who manipulated the material components of painting in every possible form. (Sauer, 1999, p. 4)



Robert Ryman, 1965, Untitled, oil on linen canvas, 28.3cm x 28.1cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *White on White*, oil on canvas, 76cm x 51cm

**Figure 5.10 Robert Ryman's work compared with my work.**

His process is transparent, revealing his methodology and his relentless exploration of the material problems that he defined for himself. From this perspective he is an ideal painter from whom to learn: "He makes visible the way he paints and what he paints with, rather than hiding behind illusion of the craft" (Sauer, 1999, p. 4). In my series, *White on white*, I have used white paint for the image as well as the background, inspired by Ryman's minimalist palette.

Contemporary American painter, Brice Marden reflects both a strong involvement with the materiality of painting as well as the influence of Asian calligraphy.

Marden's attraction to calligraphy was ignited by an exhibition entitled *Masters of Japanese calligraphy, 18-19th century*, which he saw in 1978. I saw a similar exhibition in 2008 at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, which drew me into the intriguing world of Japanese calligraphy. With no English explanation to accompany the exhibition, I was forced to examine the images until the differences in gesture, mark, form and shape revealed distinctions between the hundreds of works.

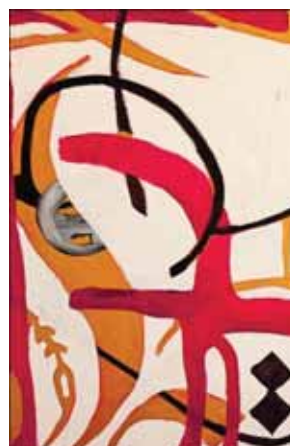
Marden is an artist who is continually pushing the boundaries of his craft and materials in order to transform his vision into an art form. "All of Marden's paintings and drawings come into being slowly and arduously. Paint is brushed on, scraped off, erased, corrected and painted again" (Richardson, 2006, p. 105). In his paintings *Suzhou* (1995-6) and *China Painting* (1995-6), oil on linen, he utilises a subdued, restricted palette and his calligraphic lines interlock, twist, and contort themselves.

This network of interconnecting lines is present in my own paintings and I am drawn both to Marden's self-imposed subdued palette of the early eighties as well as the weaving in and out to create a maze-like surface of painted lines. He describes his own studio process in an extremely articulate manner. He works through a series of issues: the handling of materials, the constant back and forth of examination, reflection and action, until a painting is resolved.

Marden's latest exhibition, *Letters*, was inspired by a trip to Taipei where he saw an example of 11th century Chinese calligraphy. Jeffrey Weiss, in his catalogue essay, notes the "complex play of colour and value in pictorial space, evasive dimensionality of the sinuous lines layered in the centre of the new works, thus establishing a dual figure-ground relationship in Marden's calligraphic drawings and paintings" (Weiss, p. 15, 2010). A similar relationship exists in my paintings of the *Hybrid* series, where I have used a complex overlapping and entwining of lines.



Brice Marden, 1996-6, *China Painting*, oil on canvas, 72cm x 71cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Hybrid series*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 76cm x 51cm

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Brice Marden, 2007, *Dark Letter*, kremer ink and white shellac on Lanaquerelle paper, 76cm x 57cm



Cyndi Freiman, *Hybrid series*, 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas, 76cm x 51cm

**Figure 5.11 Brice Marden's work compared with my own work**

Many 20th century conceptual artists, including Mondrian, Schwitters, Johns, and Scully, have used the grid as a compositional tool in their practice. The grid, as a structure, offers the contradictory qualities of being both restrictive and liberating at the same time. It is a formal structure that follows the surface of the canvas, like a mapping or a mesh, and provides the artist with a starting point, a ground zero.

Paradoxically, the grid holds the tension between repetition and originality. The moment an artist commits to the grid as an infrastructure, the work becomes repetitive, yet it provides the opportunity for unique discoveries and in that sense has a revelatory character. For these reasons I have used the grid as a device in many of my paintings. In addition, when text is added to a flat rectangle of clay, stone, wood or wax, the structure is reminiscent of the grid (Krauss 1987, p. 157).

Another conceptual artist whose work resonates with mine is Mel Bochner who was one of the first artists to introduce language into the visual field (Burton, ed. 2007 p.7). Coming out of the era of American Abstract Expressionism and the era of Pop Art, his work has followed a trajectory investigating language within the context of painting. His work explores a tension between the material and the conceptual, the background and the foreground, and the internal and the external. These tensions create a sense of dynamism, activating the surface of the paintings and creating a compelling perceptual ambiguity. These are qualities which I have attempted to incorporate into my work.

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Like Bochner, my work is located in a similar framework of conceptual art using language as visual imagery. His work, like mine, is grounded in the material use of paint foregrounding the texture of the surface rather than creating an illusion. I have also used a similar palette to Bochner, soft pastel shades, juxtaposing warm and cool colours. While he uses a contemporary sans-serif stencil for his letters, my alphabet, in contrast is derived from a 16th century Italic font.



Mel Bochner, 2004, 2010, *Aggravate*, monoprint with engraving and embossment on handmade twinrocker paper, 119cm x 86cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Alphabet*, oil on canvas, 76 x 51cm

**Figure 5.12 Mel Bochner's work compared with my own**

In a retrospective of Louis Maqhubela at the Iziko Museum of Art in Cape Town, I was inspired by his warm palette derived from his African roots and his bold brushstrokes reminiscent of Howard Hodgkin (born 1932, London). Maqhubela started his career in the early seventies as a township artist working in the stylised genre of many of the black Soweto artists.

On moving to London, however, in 1977 and studying at the Slade School of Art, he was exposed to Modernist European artists such as Klee and Miro, and his work changed dramatically into a form of abstract expressionism. His works of modern abstraction are characterised by their subtle palette, vibrant brushstrokes and layering in order to engage the viewer. I have incorporated these colours into my work *Alphabet V*, 2011. See Figure 5.13.

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Figure 5.13 Louis Maqhuebela, 1992, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 172cm x 102cm  
Details from painting to show colour, brushstrokes and layering



Figure 5.14 Cyndi Freiman, 2011, *Alphabet V*, 150cm x 100cm oil on canvas

## Chapter 6. The history and practice of artists' books

"Books are created for a one-on-one interaction and are by their very nature a zone of privacy, intimate encounters and an art form in their own right." (Drucker, 1994, p. xviii)

I have embraced the concept of the artist's book in my practice as I have a deep affinity with the book form and my lifetime relationship with books has shaped the course of my life. Books have always been my passion and an integral part of my everyday existence. Besides collecting, reading, sharing, studying and researching books, I have also written and published ten books, the first of which, *There is a lipstick in my briefcase* (1989), was a bestseller.

The book has always been valued as a precious object, worthy of collecting, and representing wealth, intellectual and social status, a unique human artefact, something that is a small world unto itself. For all these reasons I found myself drawn to utilising the book form as a satisfying synthesis between the elements of printmaking, using letters and texts for their aesthetic qualities rather than their content.

The book format offers infinite possibilities that challenge the creative impulses of the artist. Artists may explore the format: the binding, the pagination, the shape, the cover, the openings, the construction and the material choices. They may exploit the design elements and incorporate sculptural or painterly elements. They may draw inspiration from the book's size, use of language, typography, and graphic elements.

Drucker, in her ground-breaking *The century of artists' books* (1994), provides an overview of the concept of the artist's book in every avant-garde art movement of the 20th century. She explains how an artist's book may succeed on the strength of its formal qualities or on the compelling nature of the content. However, the best are those which integrate production and content so dynamically that the distinction is seamless (Drucker, 1994, p. 359). It has been said that the best artists' books are those which interrogate the production and content.

The 21st century has offered us a diverse range of mediums and variety of new techniques to use in the creation of artists' books, ranging from drawing, printmaking, photography, photocopying and collage, as well as using found materials. The artist's book has evolved in terms of its content, materials, and the way in which it integrates technological media, and in its conceptual elements.

As Drucker noted, artists' books are portable and easily storable. Their form is infinitely adaptable: some books are made for reading, others for looking at and still others for touching; some are made to serve all three purposes.

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A further attraction to this format has its origin in how we experience a book as opposed to the conventional work of art. Most of us read alone in a space of solitude or quiet. However, we see art in a public or commercial gallery; this space creates distance and formality. The book form offers an intimacy between the artist and the viewer as well as a vehicle for deeper communication.

Artists' books have the capacity to be expanded into multiples through the realm of mechanical reproduction. It is a versatile format with limitless potential. However, it is only in the past decade that its inexhaustible possibilities have been realised and it has come into its own as a quintessential art form.

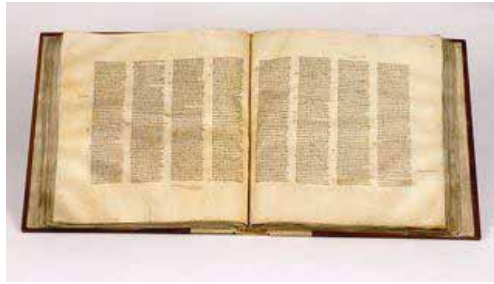
The earliest book forms may have had their embryo in the scroll, known as the *Torah*, used by the early Hebrews for their biblical texts. However, there were limitations to the use of the scroll: access to the material was difficult, as was opening and closing the scroll, so the parchment could be easily damaged. The Chinese and the Japanese also used the scroll format as a vehicle to contain their early writings.



**Figure 6.1 The Torah, scroll of the Hebrew Bible**

Drucker explains, "A book is a highly complex organization of material and conceptual elements. Although books may take a variety of other forms, the most common is the codex, a conventional structure, in which pages are fixed in a rigid sequence by being bound or clasped at one side" (Drucker, 1994, p. 121). [NB editing within quote]

The codex book form, made originally from parchment and later from paper, has survived as the most dominant book structure, as it is efficient, practical, adaptable and functional. Made of folded pages gathered and sewn together, the earliest complete Greek book, which survives is the *Codex Sinaiticus*, a 4th century Christian Bible (Jackson 1981, p. 45). The history of the artist's book goes back many centuries, one of the most significant examples being the illuminated medieval manuscripts, which flourished from the 7th to the 16th centuries in different European locations.



**Figure 6.2 Example of codex book**

In the 20th century the artist's book emerged as an art form in its own right – not books about art, but art that uses the book as a medium of expression. Matisse was one of the artists who pioneered this form, using his method of cut-outs to develop his images.



**Figure 6.3 Matisse, *Jazz*, 1947, handmade book using cut-outs**

The books that I have created use the traditional codex form with a sewn binding and a soft leather cover. The pages are made of double-sided bleed-print etchings printed on *Hahnemuhle* paper, a tactile surface which gives the book an object-like quality well as making it a simulacrum of an old book.

To create the images I used the photocopier to manipulate the text size and layered one or more images over each other to create composite images. I used a combination of raw sepia and raw sienna to evoke a sense of history and antiquity in my etchings. The Japanese calligraphy is printed in red and gold, evoking the cultural practice of that tradition.

The relation of images to each other creates connections so that each viewer may experience the book differently depending on the association evoked by the images. Viewing an artist's book is a process of intimate discovery. The book is directed by sequential images; however they are purely visual, and have no accompanying text. As the subject matter is handwriting, I invite the viewer to engage with the visual imagery of different forms of handwriting.

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I have also created books using the prints in a concertina format. These are double-sided images in panels of five that are folded and retain a sculptural three-dimensional quality when viewed.



Figure 6.4 Cyndi Freiman, 2009, handmade books, etchings on Hahnemuhle



Figure 6.5 Cyndi Freiman, 2010, concertina style book, etchings on Hahnemuhle, 75cm x 20cm



Figure 6.6 Cyndi Freiman, 2010, installation of concertina books, etchings on Hahnemuhle, each one 75cm x 20cm,

## Chapter 7. Studio investigation and practice

### *7.1 The creative process*

My artwork is divided into four areas of investigation: collage, printmaking (primarily etching), painting and installation. My collage panels were the starting point for my research, allowing me to experiment with my subject matter. I began with inspiration drawn from my own life experience and then included material drawn from other sources in different eras and cultures.

In my studio practice I continually search for methods, images and techniques that will transport me into a zone where I can work in an intuitive rather than analytical mode. Like Iggulden, I look for the "uninterrupted momentum of body movement, rhythmic flow of line, less conscious control of the words and evolving overall image, allowing for an intuitive response and slippage of thought, feeling and action" (Iggulden, 2002 p. 110).

Using laser photocopies, an overhead projector and a combination of acrylic and oil paints, I explored the shapes inherent in different forms of handwriting. I also created hybrid images, combining letters from different cultures and historical eras. There was a crossover effect as each medium informed and stimulated ideas for the other.

### *7.2 Collage and mixed media*

Collage was the ideal entry point for my work as it gave me the opportunity to play with the material elements and arrive at unexpected outcomes. I established a unique process that utilised a combination of acrylic paint, heat press and collage to build images on canvas, which were then mounted on marine-ply board. Echoing the process used by Imants Tillers, who worked with the same size panels, I developed a series of images to be exhibited as one composite work. ( see Figure 5.9)

I cut canvas into A4 rectangles (30cm x 21cm), primed them with gesso, drew a 5cm x 5cm grid and painted each square with watered down acrylics using a limited palette. The grid provided a classic structure, underpinning many writing systems in both the west and the east. I then photocopied extracts from my journals, manuscripts and letters, enlarging and printing them onto the canvas using heat press. I mounted the canvas onto three-ply marine board cut to A4 size, trimming the edges of the canvas flush with the board. I then photocopied text onto laser transparencies and collaged them onto the canvas using acrylic matt medium. This technique enabled me to establish a series of layers alluding to the concept of palimpsest, a process whereby writing was erased and the surface reused by superimposing another text, often revealing elements of the earlier writing. This can be seen in the two panels in Figure 7.1.

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Figure 7.1 Cyndi Freiman, 2009, two panels from *Documenta*, mixed media collage, 30cm x 21cm

### 7.3 Painting

I established a process of working in a series of four canvases at a time in the same size and format. This practice enabled me to work on each canvas for a few hours and then move onto the next, taking each one a little further without overworking the painting. Each series explores a similar motif, the repetition giving a sense of continuity and connection to the works. Using the overhead projector as a tool, I projected text onto the canvas and painted the shapes in acrylic and then repeated the motif on the other canvases, varying the size and focus.

Occasionally I struggled with my painting, coming up against the limits of my craft. However, there were other times when the painting generated a momentum of its own and this enabled me to work in an intuitive mode. I searched for ways to engage with the work without self-consciousness or being analytical. My challenge was to create a sense of depth and space using abstract elements.

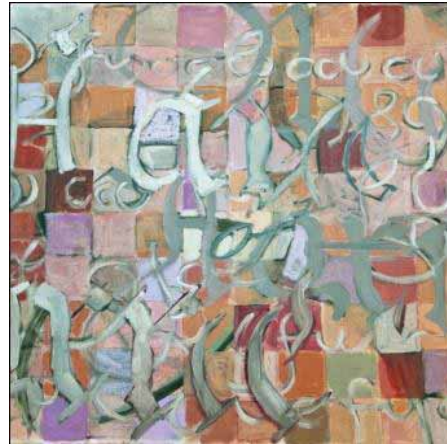
As I was doing simultaneous theoretical research, I was able to learn from artists like Ryman and Marden, techniques which I could use in my work, for example, using large brushes and palette knives to apply paint, and experimenting with white impasto on an *imprimatur*. The continual interplay of reading, researching and painting has added a depth of knowledge to my practice.

In my initial series in 2009, I painted ten canvases 60cm x 60cm, using a similar method, first constructing a 6cm x 6cm grid, then painting the squares in a wash of limited colour acrylic paint. As with my collage panels, this ritual established both a rhythm to my work and a structure to hold the script that was superimposed. Then, using the overhead projector, I traced script over the top of the grid, repeating the process with text of contrasting sizes, working with oil over the acrylic underpainting. In the examples in Figure 7.2 you can still see elements of the grid as well as the interplay between the layers of text.

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Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Writing*, oil on canvas, 60cm x 60cm,



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Document*, oil on canvas, 60cm x 60cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Tokyo 1*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60cm x 60cm



Cyndi Freiman, 2009, *Tokyo 11*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60cm x 60cm

**Figure 7.2 Developing my methods of representing text: four samples**

### *Bismillah Series*

The *bismillah* series of paintings depicts the motif of an enclosed form, incorporating Islamic script relating to the meaning, “in the presence of God”. This quote is used on gateways, portals and entrances to houses and buildings. It is a form of welcome in the Islamic culture.

I was deeply attracted to this motif, in terms of both its meaning and its aesthetics, as a handmade inscription of Islamic script reflecting a swirling, intertwined and spiral formation. I initially made an etching of this image and was then inspired to use it as a theme in my painting. I like the enclosed form as it allowed for a figure-ground composition in contrast to the colour-field quality of my earlier works.

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Initially painted on a canvas, 102cm x 76cm, projecting the image onto the canvas with an overhead projector. The next interpretation of the same motif was fragmented into four canvases, each one 76cm x 51cm vertical, with each quadrant containing a section of the motif. There was a disjunction in the fit of each quadrant to the other, emphasising the fragmentation of the image. By breaking up the image I was able to achieve a greater degree of abstraction and focus on the negative spaces, once again echoing the concept of loss.

The background was painted in impasto, white oil paint using a large palette knife. Next, I applied white paint in the negative spaces of the image, concentrating on the irregular shapes created by the curves of the motif. Later I painted the positive elements of the bismillah using raw sienna, transparent yellow oxide and white. When this layer was dry, I used a transparent glaze with raw sienna, burnt sienna and classic archival medium over the white background to activate the surface by creating further contrast.

I completed a second set of four paintings in the same size, 76cm x 51cm, using the same motif but enlarging the image and distorting the fragments even further. With this series I painted a Payne's grey *imprimatur* and painted the white on top. The dark *imprimatur* resulted in changing the quality of the white surface, by adding another layer of history to the work and allowing some of the dark *imprimatur* to be revealed. This method proved to be significant in my later works.

Through the process of developing these paintings I learnt much about the material aspects of painting: painting in layers, starting with an acrylic *imprimatur* and then building texture with oils, allowing elements of earlier layers to create a sense of history. With each successive image of the same motif, I was able to apply techniques acquired from one to the next in the series, taking each one further.

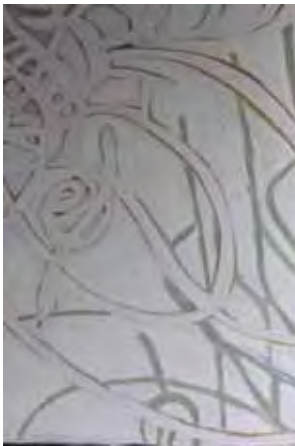


Figure 7.3 Cyndi Freiman, *Bismillah*, 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas, 76cm x 51cm

*Islamic calligraphy series*

In this series of four oil paintings I have used the same calligraphic motif, a fragment of an elaborate signature of an Ottoman Sultan, *Tugra*, photocopied onto a laser transparency and projected onto the canvas. I did two sets of four images; each of the eight works is 76cm x 51cm painted with acrylic underpainting, as referenced by the images in Figure 7.4.

The minimal palette and the absence of colour highlight the concept of loss, death and disappearance, echoing the demise of handwriting. Influenced by the materiality of Ryman, I have applied thick, white impasto with a palette knife, leaving only the edges of the imprimatur to reveal a sense of form and shape. The ghostlike imprint emphasises the idea of loss and death – white being a symbolic reference to death in many cultures.



*Sultan's Signature*, 2010, oil on canvas,  
76cm x 51cm



*Ghostwriting*, 2010, oil on canvas,  
76cm x 51cm

**Figure 7.4 Cyndi Freiman, Islamic calligraphy series**

*The hybrid calligraphy series*

This series was inspired by an exhibition in Istanbul at the Sakip Sabanci Muzesi in June 2010, called *Transcending borders*, where Islamic, medieval and Japanese calligraphy were compared and contrasted. In these paintings I combine and overlap fragments of three letters drawn from the three cultures, using the colour contrast of red, black and gold to highlight the differences in shape, form, mark and texture.

The distinctions between the various forms of calligraphies are manifested in the forms and shapes of the letters as well as through the tools with which they are created. The Islamic calligraphy was created with a reed pen; the medieval manuscript with a feather quill and the Japanese script with a brush, thereby creating different qualities of marks and edges.

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These paintings are constructed as hybrid images. They contain a combination of elements from Japanese calligraphy (the red forms), illuminated medieval manuscripts (the gold lines) and Islamic calligraphy (the black strokes). My intention was to foreground the differences in the lines, shapes and textures of the letters, each made with different materials, with varying density and forms. In Figure 7.5 the overlapping and intertwining lines are reminiscent of the work of Marden, contrasting matt and gloss, acrylic and oil, thick and thin, smooth and rough texture.



Figure 7.5 Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Hybrid series*, oil and acrylic, 76cm x 51cm

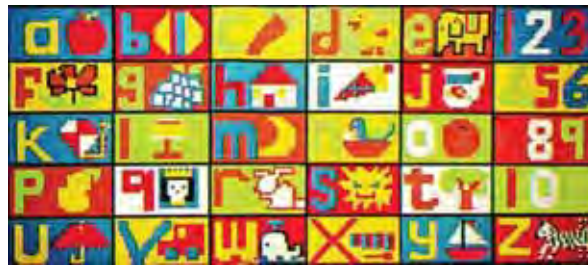


Figure 7.6 Cyndi Freiman, 2010, Installation of 24 paintings, oil and acrylic, 306cm x 304cm

Figure 7.6 shows the proposed installation of 24 rectangular paintings of 51cm x 76cm in a grid format, echoing the shape of an ancient writing tablet, the original surface for writing. The combination of the 24 images reflecting different forms of script highlights the similarities and differences. The technique of emphasising the negative spaces is present in all of them, alluding to what is not said – the nuances and complexity in the written word.

### *The Alphabet series*

The Alphabet series is based on an ornamental, *Italic* alphabet motif. The inspiration for the work was a memory of my first exposure to the alphabet in kindergarten and my enchantment with the letters and their shapes. I remember struggling to memorise the sequence of all the letters and their names. In order to learn this symbolic code, I translated the letters into a colourful grid with images to illustrate each letter. This vivid memory gives the work a playful, whimsical, quality, resulting in an image that has a sense of fun and lightness. I designed the alphabet below initially to teach my two year-old son the alphabet and later sold thousands as an educational kit to other mothers by mail order.



**Figure 7.7 Cyndi Freiman, 1977, *Alphabet tapestry*, yarn on canvas, 100cmx50cm**

I projected and enlarged the alphabet onto the canvas, starting with an acrylic underpainting followed by an impasto white oil paint background with the individual letters painted in a range of pastel colours. I followed my personal response to colour, the pastel shades inspired by my memories of learning the alphabet as a six year-old child. I selected colours based on an intuitive response to the shapes of letters and the spaces between them. As I continued to place one colour next to another, I became completely absorbed in the process of visual thinking, where rationality played no part in my choices. The paintings have a childlike naivety, a sense of playfulness and freshness, which comes from the direct application of colour.

The shape of the letters is rooted in an *Italic* font used in the 15th century, but the feel of the work is contemporary, with its connection to the colour-field abstraction of the fifties, pop art of the sixties and the conceptual work of current genres. I have given the text a tangible, tactile surface connecting the ideas of text and texture. The materials, the colours and my act of painting the letters of

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the alphabet have become an "embodied pictorial field" (Iggulden, 2002, p. 127). This juxtaposition of an *Italic* font and a contemporary painting style created a dynamic tension.

The first four paintings were 76cm x 51cm and I made six further paintings using this same motif in a larger format, 100cm x 150cm. By enlarging the format I was able to highlight the complexity of the various combinations of letters. This work is a breakthrough, combining a number of processes that I have been exploring. These include a consciousness of the edges, allowing some of the dark *imprimatur* to be revealed and creating a sense of layering. It also reflects my awareness of using complementary colours and utilising the negative spaces in such a way that the letters are abstracted. The inability to recognise the letters provides a sense of medieval mystery in contrast to the accessibility of the colour, with its fresh and childlike quality.

The spaces between the letters are as important as the letters themselves and the way they fit together creates new shapes that inform the composition. My visual imagery evolves from a manipulation of the order, position, size and colour of the alphabetic letters. The combinations of subtle shades of colour, changing the order of the letters and playing with the positive and negative shapes offer an endless variety of permutations.

I am influenced by the materialism of Robert Ryman and the colour usage of Brice Marden and Mel Bochner. I have abstracted the alphabet and in some of the works such as *Alphabet II*, reversed the positive and negative shapes. The repetition of the letters of the alphabet using this script in different sequences has provided me with a material ritual to perform and transform the writing into visual imagery. Although the composition is highly structured the brush marks are loose and gestural creating a tension between structure and process.

As part of the process of working with the letters, I had a set of these Italic letters laser-cut in acrylic so that I could experiment with repeating letters, changing the position and even creating words which are embedded in the painting. I have shown the stages of the painting by being transparent with the process, as can be seen in the images in Figure 7.8.

The colours in *Alphabet V* were inspired by the palette of Louis Maquebela's work *Untitled* (2006) in which he uses the earthy tones of Africa, the country of my origin – dusty pinks, golden oranges, pale yellows and the turquoise of the African sky. In contrast, the colours in *Alphabet VI* are a homage to the frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel in Venice. The italic script used in my painting is derived from the same era as these images so it seemed fitting to borrow the palette used by Masaccio – warm pinks, pale greens and ochres, typical of the Renaissance era.

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*Alphabet II*, 2010, 150cm x 100cm



*Alphabet I*, 2010, 150cm x 100cm



*Alphabet, III* 2010, 76cm x 51cm



*Alphabet II* 2010, detail



*Alphabet III*, 2010, detail



*Alphabet I*, oil on canvas, detail



*Alphabet III*, 2010, 150cm x 100cm



*Alphabet IV*, 2010, 150cm x 100cm



*Alphabet*, detail of III

## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING



*Alphabet VI*, 2011, acrylic and oil on canvas, detail, 150cm x 100cm

**Figure 7.8 Cyndi Freiman, 2010, details from the *Alphabet series*, oil on canvas**

### ***7.4 Printmaking***

The etching process was an ideal medium to historicise the trajectory of handwriting in its various cross-cultural manifestations. My material was a combination of original sources from my personal letters, journals and manuscripts; photocopies of master calligraphers and found material.

Covering Islamic, Asian and medieval calligraphy as well as extracts from my own journals and letters, I developed 40 plates to illustrate the unique qualities inherent in different forms of handwriting. These visual images reflect the richness of handwriting as a means of communication and the variety of marks and shapes in each culture and individual scripts.

I utilised heat press to transfer the image onto the etching plate, a method that allowed me to retain the authenticity of the original image, as well as engage with the technique of printing dating back to the 15th century. I then etched these images onto the plates with acid and printed two or three plates on top of each other, alternating between opaque and transparent inks – intaglio and relief roll methods of etching. I used predominantly raw sepia and raw sienna to simulate the ink colour of old documents and ancient manuscripts. For some images I did an aquatint to enhance the density of the tone.

By keeping the etching plates the same size, 20cm x 15cm, I was able to create a sense of history by printing one plate over the other, layering different images, ink colours and forms of text. I inked a number of plates at once and then put them through the press more than once, the second time being the ghost print, often more subtle than the original. The ghost print is used as an under layer for the next print. I chose to make all the images bleed prints, which have an object-like quality.



Etchings, 2009, 20cm x 15cm,



Etchings, 2009, 20cm x 15cm,

**Figure 7.9 Cyndi Freiman, 2009, etchings**

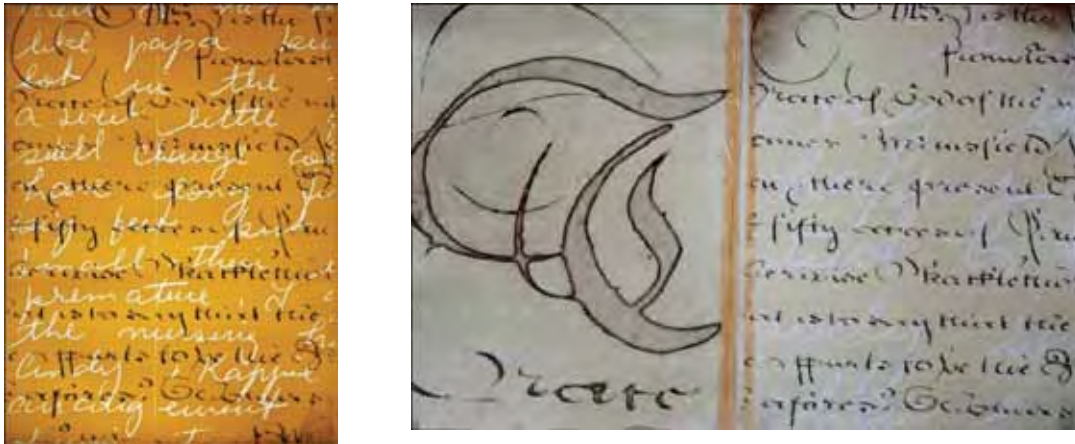
The more I become involved with the printmaking process, the more connected I felt to the practice and discovered it to be the perfect vehicle of expression to develop my ideas. With over 40 plates the limitless combinations of prints were compelling and I experimented extensively with colour, opacity, printing techniques and the layering of different images, one over the other.

As I worked, I discovered that the process took me to a place of complete absorption. The sheer physicality of the process, the wiping of the plates and working the press over and over, created energy and a state in which I could lose myself. The fascination lies in the unpredictability – the unexpected chance happenings of the etching process, as well as the endless possibilities of combining different plates and printing techniques. The process is like a dance, a whirling dervish dance, generating creativity and energy, releasing the intuitive creative process from the unconscious.

The next step was to assemble the prints into various installations. This includes hand-sewn and concertina books, and handmade boxes made of board covered with book binding fabric to store my printed images and memory boxes.

I created four hand-sewn books from etchings 30cm x 20cm, printed on both sides of Hahnemuhle paper. In the first book I used mainly images with historical writing taken from illuminated manuscripts, original documents from the 18th and 19th centuries and images of ancient Hebrew and Arabic texts. In the second book I used material from my own personal archive of correspondence and extracts from my journals. The third book contains images of Islamic calligraphy, the *Bismillah* motif, a stamp series, and images of graffiti. Together these books encompass a cross-section of cultures and different eras.

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**Figure 7.10 Cyndi Freiman, etchings, 2009, raw sepia intaglio over raw sienna relief roll on Hahnemuhle, 20cm x 15cm**

Once I had printed the etchings, I stitched the pages together and glued the spine. I then made a leather wrap-around cover. This process inspired me to look at the concept of artists' books and how they are perceived as a work of art. The book format is an ideal mode of utilising the etchings as it influences the way in which we view the images. We are familiar with the shape and form of the book and it gives us a different way to view art. In contrast to putting the artwork in a frame and hanging it on a wall, the book form invites an intimate engagement with the viewer.

On reading Johanna Drucker's work, *A century of artists' books* (1994), I was inspired to explore some different concepts of the book form, and consequently I made a series of concertina or accordion-shaped books. I printed five images horizontally on both sides of the paper, which was then folded to form a book. I made eight different books by theming my 40 plates into groups of five. These comprise personal examples of handwriting, 18th and 19th century manuscripts, stamps and envelopes, illuminated manuscripts, Hebrew and Islamic scripts, Japanese calligraphy and graffiti.

The arrangement of the concertina books in an installation reflects a historical and cross-cultural collection of writing and calligraphy. The concertina book format gives a sculptural three-dimensional quality to the etchings that reflects a bygone era. This configuration highlights the essential qualities of a range of scripts, creating awareness of the lines, shapes and forms. These can be seen in figure 7.10.

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I experimented with installations of prints to create three-dimensional memory boxes. Although these structures are fragile and ephemeral, they transform the two-dimensional print into sculptural forms. I have also overlaid handmade letters painted with acrylic over etchings, exploring the difference between the etched mark and the handmade gesture. The successful images are those in which the layers interconnect.



Figure 7.11 Cyndi Freiman, concertina book, double-sided bleed-print etchings



Figure 7.12 Cyndi Freiman, 2010, *Memory boxes*, intaglio prints

### 7.5 Installations

My installations are developed using collections of personal materials, including postcards, journals and diaries, notebooks and letters, and a writing desk, which I have used for over 50 years. These evocative personal artefacts constitute evidence of the written history of my life. My intention is to construct a theatrical centrepiece on a plinth using my antique desk and an altar-like installation of the letters and postcards, a memorial reflecting the loss of writing.

My plan is to assemble fragments of memories, echoing the idea of artist as ethnologist as illustrated by Christian Boltanski's work (1997, p. 19). A slice of life

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is removed from the original context and reconstituted in a gallery context. The transformation and dramatisation of mundane material into an installation may evoke associations and memories in the viewer, "a palimpsest of metonymic objects" (Bishop, 2007, p. 41).

Boltanski's installations are characterised by their theatrical qualities. His use of light to create drama, multiples and repetition gives his work an aura of magic, a totemic quality that invokes memories and emotions. His work has the power to touch us. "Boltanski interrogates the ritual basis of artistic activity" (Semin, 1997, p. 49). His repetitive images may be seen to have connections to Andy Warhol and his pop art multiples in the sixties, although the context and intention could not be further apart.



Figure 7.13 Boltanski, *Monument*, 1986, 133 colour photographs, metal frames, light bulbs, wire, 190cm x 330cm

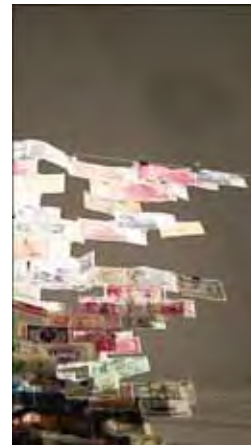


Figure 7.14 Boltanski installation (location unknown)

In my proposed installation I intend to use the aerograms that I wrote to my mother from 1983 to about 2000 and suspend them from a transverse wire so that they hang vertically across the gallery. This mode of installation reflects the influence of Boltanski, who used a grid of multiple images in his work. The original artefacts are imbued with an aura of authenticity, so the work becomes totemic and magical in its ability to conjure up associations for the viewer.

The two images in Figure 7.15 are an installation composed of banknotes from different currencies glued together, a model for how I intend to exhibit my aerogram letters – suspended in the middle of the gallery and attached to wire with black paper clips. I am attracted to this mode of installation, a cloud-like, floating image that reflects the fragility of aerograms, now an almost extinct form of communication.

I will arrange them so that they reflect different stages of my emotional life, with the letters containing the most intimate personal aspects set as high as possible from the viewer, so that my privacy is respected. The light and fragile quality of the aerograms is contrasted with the weight of the words written on them; they are heavy with the burden of emotional content.



**Figure 7.15 Joel Andrianonearisoa, 2010, *Tres Cher*, collage installation, Iziko, South African Museum**

Another of my installations is composed of an altar-like collection of family postcards that I collected from 1960 to 1980. It seeks to evoke the sense of a past era, the familiarity of a custom no longer practised in our contemporary life.

Simryn Gill is another artist who uses text and archival memory in her work, an outcome of her lived life. This aspect of her work aligns closely with my own practice where the source of my inspiration is a direct outcome of my day-to-day life and the various collections of found material that cross my path.

Christov-Bakargiev observes:

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Gill's works are often constructed in the form of collections or archives that arise from personal encounters. Speaking from a specific time and place, using tools and materials close at hand (Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, 2009).

Her ongoing engagement with the world is imbued with an archival impulse incorporating both found and lived materials. She refers to her process as "intuitive collecting, sorting and processing" (Christov-Bakargiev, 2009), which values the aspect of the accidental. These are qualities that relate strongly to my existential way of making and thinking about art. I collect books, journals, letters, cards, wrapping paper, found objects, receipts and tickets. My impulse is to make art that is a direct outcome of a personal engagement with the lived world.



Simryn Gill, 1999, *Untitled*



Simryn Gill, 1999, *Pearls*

### Figure 7.16 Simryn Gill works

The work of Simryn Gill considers questions of place and history, and how they might intersect with personal and collective experience. Using objects, language and photographs, her work conveys a deep interest in material culture, and the ways that meaning can transform and translate in different contexts. Through the reinterpretation or alteration of existing objects, the photographing of specific locations, and the forming of collections, Gill contemplates how ideas and meanings are communicated between people, objects and sites (Dr Marcus Bunyan, 2010).

My installations of desk, journals and letters reflect the ideas of George Perec who in his work, *W*, describes his intimate work space using the familiar objects in his environment, each functioning as an archaeology of registers triggering an emotional response. These domestically scaled settings provide a context, combination of objects, materials familiar and repetitious that creates a poetic surreal tableau (Perec, 1975, p. 24).

The video component of the installation shows a close-up of my hand writing in my journal. This incorporates the performative and ritualistic aspects of handwriting, emphasising its existential and phenomenological qualities. As the

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pen glides across the surface of the page, the letters emerge under the moving pen, unfolding shapes and forms of letters that embody the essence of self and the unconscious. It is this familiar practice, this meditative, soulful act that connects heart to hand. In the second part of the video, the process is reversed and the writing is erased reflecting the dying practice of handwriting.



My antique writing desk  
1959-2010



Installation of aerogram  
letters



Aerogram letter to my  
mother

**Figure 7.17 My writing space and detail of aerogram letters**



Detail, Postcards, 1962-1981



Altar-like Installation of Postcards,  
2010

**Figure 7.18 Postcard installation**

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

"And others simply lament the loss of handwritten communication for its sheer beauty, individualism and intimacy" (Pressler, 2006, p. 1).

Through exposure to my artwork, I invite viewers to engage with handwriting and become aware of the sensual, tactile, expressive and lyrical qualities that it embodies in its various manifestations, and at the same time elicit a sense of meaning that traverses different cultures and times. As the phenomenon of handwriting could disappear, and with it a treasured part of our culture, I hope to draw attention to both its value and aesthetic attributes.

Handwriting as a means of interpersonal communication appears to be facing extinction; however, it has re-emerged as an aesthetic in the form of conceptual art, calligraphy and contemporary design which references a sense of the past. My focus is the investigation of this connection between art and handwriting and how writing is transformed into visual imagery.

In the process of researching the origin of the alphabet, calligraphy and the manuscript culture, I connected with the aesthetic and formal qualities of each script. I interpreted the material through a variety of techniques that I developed, enabling me to find a unique form of visual expression. My intention is that my work will evoke both an affective as well as aesthetic response in the viewer.

My studio work has given me the opportunity to connect with handwriting using a range of media, each one exposing different facets of the texts. I explore scripts, focusing on the variation in the shapes of the letters, the direction of the strokes, the formal attributes, as well as examining individual writing styles. By using a combination of different media, collage, painting, printmaking and installation, I transformed various manifestations of handwriting into mediated art forms.

In my paintings I explored the alphabet, the relationship of the letters to each other and the spaces between the letters. I became involved in the materiality of the oil paint, highlighting the texture of the text influenced by conceptual artists such as Marden, Ryman and Bochner. The choice of script, an Italic font from the Renaissance era, emphasises the humanistic and individual quality of the letters. I seek to capture the essence of the letters, by transforming them into *scripto-visual* images, emphasising the unique qualities of each letter, its construction, shape and plasticity, embodied in the materialism of the paint.

My use of etching was in a sense paradoxical, mirroring as it does the early techniques of printing, which posed the first threat to the handwritten manuscript. I created over 40 plates using this process. This allowed me to explore the cultural and historical aspects of writing, as well as my own handwriting. By printing one image over the other, I created complex combinations of text,

revealing elements of the layer beneath, echoing the phenomenon of palimpsest. Collage enabled me to play with scale and in so doing I become aware of the formal qualities of each script, layering and juxtaposing different letters and extracts of texts so that their formal aspects were compared and contrasted.

The installation component utilised material from my life, adding a tangible, personal dimension to the exhibition. The letters, postcards, antique desk and video of my handwriting bring the experiential and phenomenological elements into the work. My process was inspired by Boltanski and Gill who both use these elements in their work.

Ironically, with all these media, I used aspects of technology: the photocopier, the heat press and the overhead projector, in order to translate, project and transpose the images of text onto the canvas or working surface. My methods have become inextricably linked with Walter Benjamin's concept of mechanical modes of reproduction. The methods of technical reproduction devalue the "here and now" of the artwork (Walter Benjamin, *Work of art in the age of reproducibility*, 1939, p. 254).

Another important dimension to my studio work is the ritualistic and performative aspects of the art-making process, an essential part of my method and practice manifest in all the media I employ. This involves a combination of my creative process, the total sense of involvement and the unconscious, instinctual flow of energy.

The combination of theoretical research and studio investigation proved to be a rich and fruitful journey; at times the practice would surge ahead and the writing would follow, at other times the discovery of artists' work and ideas would inform and direct my creative work.

In extending beyond the realm of the studio and relating my research to a wider context, the consequences of the loss of handwriting are being experienced in a number of areas, including museums, archives, education, communication and personal relationships.

Already the flow of handwriting material to our archives and museums is dwindling. The letters, journals and correspondence that used to inform our research for biography and history will no longer be available to archivists. We now regard a handwritten note or letter as an artefact, a rare object to be treasured and revered.

It is too early to ascertain the impact of the loss of handwriting. However, educators tell us that it will change our perceptions and mental functioning. Researchers in the field of child development state that writing is necessary for eye-hand coordination, fine motor skills and visual perception. They argue that it is important cognitively for children to develop proficient handwriting skills. Louise

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Spear-Swerling, a learning specialist who is committed to the instruction of handwriting says, "Writing focuses their attention" (Burns Florey, 2009, p. 155).

This is endorsed by Professor Steve Graham of Vanderbilt University, an expert in writing acquisition skills. He states that "the neurological process that directs thought through fingers into written symbols is a highly sophisticated one" (Pressler, 2006, p. 2). Several academic studies have found that good handwriting skills at a young age can help children express their thoughts better, a lifelong benefit:

When young children learn handwriting at the same time as they are learning to express their thoughts on paper, the two kinds of writing – one a mechanical skill and one a creative intellectual process – become naturally and inextricably connected in the child's mind (Burns Florey, 2009, p. 155).

In our digital world where we are texting, Tweeting and emailing, the perceived value of writing is no longer obvious and the case for retaining the practice of writing needs to be made. The dual skills of handwriting and typing are both ways of communicating and recording our ideas. Educationally both methods have value, so we need to develop our abilities in both areas.

Are there any computer-free zones left? Are we aware that electricity is needed for using computers and these resources may not be available to everyone in the world? As time goes by, our dwindling natural resources may force us to depend less on computers, rather than more (Burns Florey, 2009, p. 185).

We are entering a new era. Before we discard the pen, the beauty, the rich and varied quality of writing, all its aesthetic attributes, should be assessed and valued. The ephemeral dimension of the cyber world, where little is retained for any length of time, must be judged alongside the more durable aspects of handwriting. Letters, diaries and written accounts of the past have formed the bedrock of historical research.

Each new invention, by extending one of the human sense organs, upsets a previously achieved sense of balance. Until this century these were closed systems. Now our technological revolution has constituted a single field of experience, with a global impact. "Print detribalised humanity; the new media retribalises humanity, but on a global scale" (Culkin, 1968, p. 60). As McLuhan has stated:

We have been through enough revolutions to know that every medium of communication is a unique art form, which gives salience to one set of human possibilities at the expense of another set. Each medium of expression profoundly modifies human sensibility in mainly

unconscious and predictable ways. Each mode of expression has advantages and unimagined consequences" (McLuhan, 1967, p. 149).

One of the consequences of the computer revolution is the resurrection of handwritten fonts as an aesthetic choice in digital communication. The rise in popularity of typefaces that resemble, imitate or simulate handwriting is indirectly keeping alive scripts from bygone eras. As we write less and less, we fill the void with digital scripts that remind us of the personal, the intimate and the more human aspects of interpersonal connection in contrast to the globalised, homogenised fonts used in texts, tweets and emails.

So... is handwriting important? Should we save the humble pen and paper when laptops and mobiles are functional, ubiquitous and unstoppable? Should children continue to be taught to write with a pen and paper? (Burns-Florey, 2009, p. 179). Will the loss of handwriting change the way we think and impact our memory and imagination? Will it change the way we feel and what we say to one another?

My *raison d'être* for exploring the disappearance of handwriting is to raise awareness of its potential loss and encourage people to treasure and protect this precious aspect of our culture, which has sustained our civilization for centuries. I argue that the skill of handwriting has the capacity to increase our level of consciousness, enhance our creativity and deepen our relationships. We should not abandon the pen just yet!

Through my studio research I have embarked on a journey to celebrate and honour the art and craft of handwriting, both historically and cross-culturally. I foregrounded the unique and expressive qualities of writing by hand through a combination of collage, painting, etching and installation, techniques that reveal different aspects of handwritten scripts. The aesthetics of these works may provoke, stimulate and evoke others to preserve, nurture and treasure the essential qualities of the handwritten script and protect this valuable practice from possible extinction.

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CYNDI FREIMAN

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12:28pm

<http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/the-demise-of-handwriting-25/12/2010>  
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<http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/resources/ENS-Boltanski> 28/12/2010  
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7:53pm

<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,78880800.html> 25/12/2010 12:43pm

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[http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/article\\_index/r/the...](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/article_index/r/the...) 29/11/2010  
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11:49am

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3:38pm

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## A REQUIEM FOR HANDWRITING

review: *Simryn Gill: Gathering* at Heide Museum of Modern Art , Melbourne, art blart.

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### *Websites for images*

<http://www.mccahon.co.nz/cm000664> 21/01/2011 12:21pm

[http://archive.com/archive/T/twombly/twombly\\_wilder.jpg.html](http://archive.com/archive/T/twombly/twombly_wilder.jpg.html) 21/01/2011 11:30am

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[http://www.matthewmarks.com/exhbitions/2010-10-29\\_brice-mard...](http://www.matthewmarks.com/exhbitions/2010-10-29_brice-mard...) 21/01/2011 11.34am

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## Appendix 1

### *Catalogue of works*

#### *Collage*

##### **Personal journals**

This series of six works 30cm x 42cm was created using old journals, letters and artefacts from my first overseas trip in 1971, my early diaries and correspondence with my mother.

##### **Tokyo series**

The Tokyo series of 10 works (21cm x 29cm) were drawn from an exhibition of Japanese calligraphy from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo in 2008.

##### **Illuminated manuscript series**

This series of 12 panels (21cm x 29cm) were made using images drawn from the *Book of Kells*, the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the *Choir Book Miniatures* from the Sienna Cathedral. I used a combination of different manuscripts, some from 15th century Italian illuminators and others from the Irish and French miniatures.

##### **Documenta series**

I extended this process to a series of 24 works, (29cm x 21cm) using text photocopied from original 18th and 19th century documents. The script on these documents was enlarged so that the juxtaposition between the sizes of the text created contrast and tensions.

#### *Painting*

##### **Handwriting series 1-10, 60cm x 60cm**

These works all began with a grid structure contained projections of writing onto the grid.

##### **The Grid installation 1-32, 51cm x 76cm**

Bismillah series 8 works

Ghost series 4 works

Calligraphy signature 4 works

Hybrid series 8 works

Stamp series 4 works

Alphabet series 4 works

##### **Alphabet series 1-6, 100cm x 150cm**

This series was based on an Italic alphabet dating back to the 16th century.

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### *Printmaking*

#### **Plates 1-3 Personal handwriting**

This material was taken from my own journals and letters from my mother. These bleed prints were printed either on single sheets 15cm x 20cm or double sheets 30cm x 20cm. One plate was printed over the other to juxtapose size and style of lettering.

#### **Plates 4-6 Antique documents**

This material was taken from original antique documents from the 18th and 19th centuries. Letters were enlarged and others overlapped to create the plates. I also collaged elements together to make a satisfying composition.

#### **Plates 7-10 Japanese calligraphy**

This material was derived from photographs taken at an exhibition of calligraphy at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, in January, 2008. I photocopied and enlarged images as well as collaging elements together to create each plate. I used intaglio over relief roll, this time using a red roll and a metallic gold intaglio over the top. This series were also printed on a longitudinal format 15cm x 60cm to resemble a Japanese scroll.

#### **Plates 11-12 Hebrew and Arabic text**

These texts were taken from an extract of Hebrew script from the *Dead Sea Scrolls* found on a greeting card. The Arabic script was taken from some wrapping paper. These two plates reflect the ancient biblical languages from the Middle East, one modern and one ancient. I used raw sepia and raw sienna to create the effect of antiquity.

#### **Plates 13-15 Illuminated manuscripts**

These plates reflect material photocopied from *The Choir Book Miniatures, 15th century* from the Siena Cathedral. I assembled a collage using the photocopier to enlarge different sections and I used collage to create a composition with a decorative, floral border that was typical of the manuscripts of this era. I have used gold ink to reference the illumination.

#### **Plate 16 Bismillah**

The motif of a bismillah often appears on gates to gardens or portals, carrying a message in Islamic script, "walk or be with the spirit of God", so it is a form of welcome or a blessing. It is often constructed out of wrought iron and uses traditional spiral pattern formations.

#### **Plate 17 Amanda's birthday card**

This image contains an extract from a card given to me by my friend Amanda on the occasion of my 50th birthday. It is particularly significant as she died 6 months short of her own 50th birthday on 11 October, 2007.

**Plate 18**

This 15th century Italian Renaissance script was derived from a piece of wrapping paper. It reflects numbers and calculations with an image of a nib-pen repeated on the document.

**Plates 19-20**

These two plates depict a fragment of Sanskrit, one in the positive and one in the negative. They were developed from a piece of scrap wrapping paper found in someone's recycling bin on a morning walk.

**Plates 21-23**

Three plates made from images of antique stamps that appeared in a medical journal, reflecting famous scientists and professionals. I photocopied the images, enlarging and collaging them into various compositions.

**Plate 24**

This plate reflects a handwritten musical score, another form of handwriting, which is still used; it is an important signifier of the hand and the hand-made.

**Plate 25**

An enlarged letter from an 18th century manuscript, Suffolk Hall.

**Plate 26**

This image is derived from a fragment of an illuminated manuscript.

**Plate 27**

This image is derived from a fragment of a Sultan's signature taken from *The splendour of Islamic calligraphy*.

**Plate 28-30**

These images were composed from photographs of graffiti from the streets of Tokyo, Florence and Tel Aviv. The last image was heat-pressed onto a plate that had already been used, but discarded. In this process elements of the earlier image were revealed in the etching, creating a sense of history and complexity, giving the image a palimpsest quality.

**Plates 31-32**

Images taken from an 18th century deed of sale located in England; enlarged, and collaged using photocopies of the original material.

**Plate 33-34**

These envelopes were found in an antique shop in Jaffa in May 2010. The letters were dated 1933 from Warsaw, Poland, addressed to someone in the Gardens, Cape Town, written in Yiddish on thin transparent numbered notepaper.

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### **Plates 35-36**

These images were taken from photographs of book stacks, taken in a market in the village of Ortakoy, on the banks of the Bosphorus in Istanbul in June, 2010.

### **Plate 37**

A poem written to me by my daughter in 1983 when she was seven years old.

### **Plate 38**

Japanese calligraphy, an image formed by photocopying and enlarging a section of a photograph taken at an exhibition of calligraphy in Tokyo in January 2008.

### **Plate 39**

An ornamental alphabet reflecting an Italic script from Lombardy region in Italy.

### **Plate 40**

An Islamic ornamental motif.

### **Plate 41**

Cecilia's Lemon chicken recipe (my mother).

### **Plate 42**

Catherine's chocolate cake recipe.

### **Plate 43**

Arabic text.

### **Plate 44**

My father, Isaac's handwriting taken from the last letter he wrote to his grandchildren in 1985, shortly before his death.

### **Plate 45**

An extract from one of Elaine's letters dated 1973, written on her first trip to the Amazon as a journalist, aged 20 at the time.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Disclaimer**

Every effort has been made to translate, honour and appreciate the cultural sensitivity of the various examples of writing used in my work.

## Appendix 2

### *Workshops and conferences*

- *Art and Society Conference*, 28-31 July 2009, Venice, Italy
- *Contained Memory*, 8-11 December 2010, Wellington, New Zealand
- *International Symposium of Female Calligraphers*, 5 June 2010, Istanbul
- *Transcending Borders*, 15 April to 27 June 2010, Sakip Sabanci Museum, Istanbul
- *Urdu Calligraphy*, 22 June, 2009 Cross Art Projects, Potts Point, Sydney
- *Dokuritsu Annual Sho Exhibition*, Jan 11-17, 2008, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum

#### *Art and Society Conference*, 28-31 July 2009, Venice, Italy

I was invited to present a paper on “The death of handwriting” at the Art and Society Conference held in conjunction with the Venice Biennale. This was a multidisciplinary conference held at the Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti, of the Istituto Veneto di Scienza, in Venice. The conference addressed a range of critically important issues concerning arts and society, and included contributors in all areas of the arts: curators, writers, researchers, and curatorial and educational scholars.

*Contained Memory Conference*, 9-11 December 2010, Wellington, New Zealand, held at the Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa in partnership with Massey University and Syracuse University.

This conference explored ways that we shape our memories and ways that our memories shape us. This covered both public and personal memory, a multidisciplinary opportunity for academics to talk across boundaries and address how our memories define who we are and what we become. Public remembrance is a powerful aspect of our cultural identity and active engagement into this issue attracts discussion from faculties of art and design, philosophy, political science and religion.

#### *International Symposium of Female Calligraphers*, 5 June 2010, Istanbul

On 5 June, 2010 I attended the *International Symposium of Female Calligraphers* in Istanbul. I saw the exhibition of master works by leading international female calligraphers from various countries, including Iran, Iraq, Spain, Syria, United Kingdom, Turkey and United Arab Emirates. This gave me an opportunity to see

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how calligraphy has evolved into an independent art form with practitioners finding a wide range of individual expression within the guidelines of the conventions.

*Transcending Borders with brush and pen*, 15 April to 27 June, 2010, Sakip Sabanci Museum, Istanbul

“This exhibition was an opportunity to celebrate writing as one of mankind's most important discoveries as well as a confirmation of the common features of aesthetic discernment of many cultures.” Ertugrul Gunay, Minister of Culture and Tourism, Turkey

Selected works from Eastern and Western calligraphy, medieval illuminated manuscripts, and Japanese and Ottoman calligraphy were exhibited side by side, revealing similarities and differences in their execution and their aesthetic qualities. The exhibition shows how humanity developed art out of the universal necessity of writing, each culture evolving a unique mode of expression.

*Urdu Calligraphy*, Cross Art Projects, 26 June 2010, Potts Point, Sydney

In order to better understand the process and techniques involved in Islamic calligraphy I enrolled in a one-day workshop to learn the basics of *Urdu Calligraphy* with Naeem Rana on Saturday, 26 June, 2010, held at Cross Art Projects in Potts Point. Naeem Rana's family has practised the art of *Urdu Calligraphy* for seven generations, specialising in a regional style known as *Lahori Khat* and he trained from the age of twelve with his father and grandfather before attending the National College of Arts in Lahore.

After an introduction to the materials used in the process, we were given a demonstration and told to practise the first three letters, *alif*, *bay*, and *jeem* following a worksheet. The reed-pen is called a *Qalam*, and the inkpot is known as a *Dawaat*. I soon discovered that learning this style of calligraphy takes time, focus and complete concentration on the task to control the reed pen and duplicate the Urdu letters. After three hours I had only mastered one letter! Having attended this workshop in *Urdu* calligraphy I can appreciate the practice and skill needed to create these elegant scripts.

*Dokuritsu Annual Sho Exhibition*, 11-17 January 2008, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, Tokyo

The Dokuritsu Shojindan Foundation, a non-profit organisation with about 3,000 members showing their work annually, each show consisting of the most esteemed contemporary Japanese calligraphy artists.