Chapter 6
The Flesh Painting of Victoria Reynolds
Seeing God in the Flesh

Victoria Reynolds (1962) is an American painter whose work interrogates the rich symbolism of flesh. She frames her paintings of raw flesh rendered in very precise detail in ornamental rococo style frames, which she usually over-paints. Her works have a strong, almost visceral presence and many of them resonate with religious themes. The most evident reference is the Christian idea of the incarnation, the sacred and sacrificial meaning of flesh. She is an artist working with what Eleanor Heartney calls incarnational imagination, and arguably her works shares similar interests with that of Andres Serrano or Joel-Peter Witkin.¹

For the Carnal in Dante’s Hell, 1999, is a painting of a slice of raw meat rendered very realistically and framed in an ornate rococo style frame (Fig. 65). The lush frame in different hues of red and white corresponds closely to the surface of the painting making the framed image difficult to recognise. The painted surface resembles a cloudy sky, a stormy sea, or a complex pattern on fabric stretched inside the frame. The rectangular frame is oval on the inner edge where it meets the painted surface. The white floral motifs on the frame stand in contrast to the darker background colour of the frame and correspond visually to the round shapes of the whitish fat on the painted surface. The image is strikingly dynamic with its diagonal structure and the cloud-like structures of the meat’s fat. The painting was shown in the context of the exhibition 100 Artists See God, 2004, curated by Meg Cranston and John Baldessari.²

It was included in the group Artists see God in the Flesh, which was introduced with a short text on the issue of the body in different religious traditions.

The elaborate use of visual and textual frames that present the painting by Reynolds have an opposite effect to the usual role of the frame to establish the identity of

1 “…despite the wide variance in their attitudes toward Catholicism, all of these artists have acknowledged its considerable influence over their artistic imaginations. Significantly, the form that influence takes is remarkably consistent. Whether or not they use overtly Christian symbolism, they all create work, which focuses in some way on the physical body, its fluids, its processes and sexual behaviors. And when they run into political trouble, it is almost invariably because the work expresses a carnal vision that is deemed offensive to the American majority….The preoccupation with flesh and sex in the work of artists who were raised as Catholics reflects an essential aspect of that religion’s world view…” Eleanor Heartney, Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004), p. 6. 2 100 Artists See God, exhibition catalogue, John Baldessari, and Meg Cranston, (New York: Independent Curators International, 2004). The exhibition is discussed in Chapter One.
Fig. 65 Victoria Reynolds, *For the Carnal in Dante's Hell*, 1999
the object. In this sense *For the Carnal* poses questions concerning the issues of truth and point of view. The first sentence that introduces the painting by Reynolds is the title of the subcategory in the exhibition – “Artists See God in the Flesh.” The second is the text written by Cranston and Baldessari:

> Although a few religious traditions view the body as indivisible from spirit, most of the prominent ones diminish the importance of the mortal body in relation to an immortal, metaphysical soul. The soul is considered essential, the body merely physical. The idea that the body is worthless extends to a general suspicion of the material world, which is seen as inferior to the abstract realm of God. Islam, Judaism and Christianity all acknowledge the threat of the visible world. One reason they legislate against idols is the fear that the representation might get confused with what it represents: the creation might be confused with the Creator. These theological notions have had a profound influence on artmaking. Artists have struggled with the idea their works are mere physical things. It is felt that art must be imbued with something extra – the flesh is not enough.3

The key words in this fragment “God” and “flesh” point to the idea of the incarnation, and introduce the opposition between body and soul, the suspicion of the material world, the fear of representation and, finally, the way art positions itself with regard to these theological ideas. A key theme in the text is the tension between the intangible, irrepresentable divine and the body as something merely physical, material. This immaterial divine is seen as an indeterminate “extra” that the artwork will never achieve. Cranston and Baldessari refer to the fear of idolatry with a phrase by Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), who warns against the danger of “transferral to the creature of the honour of the creator.”4. The text points to the iconoclastic motive par excellence – the fear that images are false and impure.5 This logic of the pure, of a world purified of all mediations, is as well the logic of the “mono-“ and implies the affirmation of God’s invis-

3 Ibid., p. 43. 4 “Properly speaking, ‘idol’ implies the representation of a false god whom one worships as only the true god should be worshiped. That is what the church fathers mean by it. For Gregory of Nazianzus, it is a ‘transferral to the creature of the honor of the creator.’ Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image. An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm.* Trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 66. 5 In his classification of the different types of image destroyers, Bruno Latour classifies religious iconoclasts in the following way: “Type A is thus the form of “classical” iconoclasm … Purification is their goal. The world for A people, would be a much better place, much cleaner, much more enlightened, if only one could get rid of all mediations and if one could jump directly into contact with the original, the ideas, the true God.” Bruno Latour, “Introduction” *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art,* Ed. by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 21.
bility. Yet, invisibility is paradoxically a visual category; it is the negation of the visible.⁶

Considered within the frames set by the key words “monotheism”, “idolatry”, and “iconoclasm”, the visuality of the painting by Reynolds stands in striking contrast with the deep-rooted suspicion towards images in the monotheist religions, as related to the fear “that representation might get confused with what it represents.”⁷ It takes as its subject matter the materiality of flesh. It is a boldly visual object and one of its central aspects is an effect of disorientation created by the realistic rendering of meat and its visual resemblance to the frame. In this sense, the painting addresses a key aspect of the desire to ban images, namely the fear of their power to disorient the gaze. Reynolds points to the ambiguous status of the flesh in the Christian tradition as something that is both a site of a sacred presence and a sexuality that has to be controlled. The text from Dante’s Divine Comedy: Inferno, Canto V, “Circle Two: The Carnal” with which the artist frames her piece introduces themes and concepts that foreground the sensuality of the flesh:

“I came to a place stripped bare of every light and roaring on the naked dark like seas wracked by a war of winds. Their hellish flight of storm and counterstorm through time foregone, sweeps the souls of the damned before its charge. Whirling and battering it drives them on, and when they pass the ruined gap of Hell through which we had come, their shrieks begin anew. There they blaspheme the power of God eternal. And this, I learned, was the never ending flight of those who sinned in the flesh, the carnal and the lusty who betrayed reason to their appetite.”⁸

The second text is written by the artist and juxtaposes two themes: that of Dante and Virgil who, upon entering the Second Circle of Hell, see the Carnal who had abandoned themselves to the storm of their passions, and the tradition of alluding to “the weak flesh”:

Upon entering the Second Circle of Hell, Dante and Virgil are greeted by the bestial Minos. (In Greek mythology, Minos’ wife Pasiphae, crawled into a wooden cow in order to mate with a bull. Her son was the Minotaur.) Since the Carnal have abandoned themselves to the storm of their passions, they will whirl forever in this black hellish tempest, denied the light of God and reason. They scream and moan eternally blaspheming God. In sixteenth-

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⁶ This impossibility of seeing is described in Exodus with terms that refer to visual experience: “And the people stood afar off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.” (Exodus 20: 21, emphasis mine). ⁷ John Baldessari, and Meg Cranston, 100 Artists See God, p. 43. ⁸ Quoted after Reynolds.
seventeenth-century painting, the body and sacrifice of Christ were often symbolised by meat. A slaughtered animal could represent the death of a Christian believer, and butchered meat also alluded to the “weak flesh.” “Behold, there be oxen for burnt sacrifice” (2 Samuel 24:22): animal sacrifice in the Old Testament looks toward Christ as the sacrifice perfected.9

Reynolds’ entire oeuvre situates itself in the context of the tradition of depicting flesh, which usually symbolises the sacrifice of Christ in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painting. Pieter Aertsen’s Meat Stall, 1551, and Rembrandt’s The Slaughtered Ox, 1655, depict in detail the bloody materiality of flesh and are two of the most well-known examples of this premise (Figs. 66 and 67). This theme has its continuation in twentieth-century art in the work of such painters as Chaim Soutine, who painted his version of a slaughtered ox after Rembrandt in 1925, and Francis Bacon who portrayed carcass-like figures in his Three Studies for a Crucifixion, 1962. Flesh and the living body were also central for the performances by the Viennese Actionists in the 1960s, Gina Pane in the 1970s, and Marina Abramovich in the 1970s and 1980s.

Aertsen’s The Meat Stall, 1551, is one of the first paintings depicting the materiality of raw meat in panel painting considered as an “elite medium devoted primarily to the human figure.”10 It renders in detail butchered meat at a market stall. In the background of the vivid display of meat can be seen a miniature scene of the Flight into Egypt where “the largest person in view is smaller than a sausage.” Charlotte Houghton points out that art historians have granted to this painting canonical status as initiating several genres: market paintings, “inverted” morality pictures, and ultimately the entire field of modern still-life.11 While some authors have argued that the subject is secular, others have read it as a sacred, Eucharistic message. Some maintain that it conveys a moralising message and others insist that it is unabashedly festive. The Meat Stall juxtaposes various objects ironically, “deliberately to frustrate unitary reading.”12 Indeed, many interpretations of the painting treated its visual aspect as a “mere allegorical veneer.”13 In contrast, Houghton argues that it is important to consider the picture on a sensory level as well, and gives a vivid description of The Meat Stall, which emphasises the strong sensorial effects invoked by the painting:

What first arrests attention in Aertsen’s image is the meat. Great bloody hunks of it press outward from the picture plane, impinging on audience space with carcass parts and dripping viscera .... Just below, a freshly skinned ox head, looking chillingly alive, stares reproachfully at the viewer. ... Aertsen portrayed the properties of the animal flesh itself in exquisite

Fig. 66 Pieter Aertsen, *The Meat Stall*, 1551

Fig. 67 Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Slaughtered Ox*, 1655
sensory detail: the translucence of tripe extruding slime; the soft, bloody muscle of a severed joint; the silken shimmer of cooling, just congealing animal fat, contrasted with the chalkiness of rendered suet.  

*The Meat Stall* can be seen as the sixteenth-century counterpoint of *For the Carnal* to the extent that it frustrates unitary readings and produces powerful sensorial effects. The two paintings are related to religious meanings but in a way that cannot be read simply as religious allegory. The painstaking detail of depicting flesh in *The Meat Stall* offers a synaesthetic experience to the beholder, which is similar to that invoked by *For the Carnal*:

To keep one’s eyes on the picture is to feel one’s skin implicated in the process as well … These are sensations that are not normally aestheticized, or on which viewers would ordinarily linger. The longer one dwells on them, the more discomforts they evoke, moving beyond the physical to the psychological – from that *unblinking* oxen eye, which seems to accuse the viewer (me, you) of complicity in its dismemberment, into an anthropomorphic territory of disturbing identification.  

Reynolds herself notes that the paintings of meat provoke a mixed response. They are visually pleasurable but they also have a visceral impact and are repulsive. *For the Carnal* addresses the gaze of its beholder in a similar manner as *The Meat Stall*, with a similar effect of primary identification with the painted flesh. The painted surface of *For the Carnal* with its realistic detail then becomes a mirror of the beholder by showing what is underneath the skin, grounding the viewer into the “here and now” of the situation of viewing. According to Thierry de Duve mirrors are devices that facilitate the shifting between the first and the second person, the “I” and the “You.” They reflect the address of the beholder and give it back to her. *For the Carnal*, with its visceral address of the viewer, and the sensorial effects it produces, becomes a painting whose subject matter is “the presence of the beholder in front of it.”

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14 Ibid., p. 282. 15 Ibid., p. 282. 16 Victoria Reynolds, Artist Talk at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 17 March, 2009, http://hammer.ucla.edu/programs/detail/program_id/210 (accessed 29 June 2012). 17 “For a thing to be a work of art, it would have to escape from the third person and access the first. Hence the interest of approaching art via mirrors: they short-circuit the third person. We pay little attention to their thing-like existence because we don’t look at them, we look into them – as we might look into an Old Master painting to see the scene it represents. … In both cases, the surface is invisible, like a window behind which a duplicate of the world we live in unfolds before us.” Thierry de Duve, *Look! 100 Years of Contemporary Art*, Trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, (Brussels: Ludion, 2000) p. 120. 18 Ibid., p. 127.
This element of mirroring addresses the beholder on a bodily level, but it also endows the painting with an element of a *Vanitas* painting. The term *Vanitas* describes a type of seventeenth-century still-life painting and indicates the transient nature of human life. *Vanitas* images convey a moralising message that man should not be seduced by sensual experiences. They offer the possibility to enjoy or contemplate such beautiful objects as flowers, simultaneously emphasising the transient nature of earthly pleasures by skulls and bones. The objects usually depicted in *Vanitas* paintings are skulls and other human remains that symbolise mortality, a candle or a putto blowing bubbles that symbolise the shortness of life, they included such mundane objects as fruits, flowers and other objects from daily life. *Vanitas* images contain an inherent paradox; they fix in an image the life of the same object that they affirm as beautiful but transient, and portray the conflict between “world rejection” and “worldly ensnarement.”

In Reynolds’ painting the painted flesh is juxtaposed with the floral ornaments of the frame. It celebrates flesh as a beautiful object adorning it with the floral ornamentation of the frame, but it lacks the moralising message of a *Vanitas* painting. Instead of reminding its beholder of the inevitability of death through skulls and bones, it reminds her of the strange beauty of the flesh thus transferring the beauty of the inanimate objects in *Vanitas* painting to the painted flesh. This visual celebration is not present in *The Meat Stall* by Aertsen, where it is rendered realistically as butchered meat, nor in *Vanitas* paintings where the human remains are skulls and bones, which place the emphasis on remains of dead matter.

### Anachronic Elements

*For the Carnal* is a contemporary artwork that is aware of the past. The painting makes its critical point through performing an intervention in the history of depicting flesh by juxtaposing textual and visual elements belonging to different moments in time: the rococo frame, the flat picture plane characteristic of still-life but also of abstract painting, the realistic rendering of flesh. Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood suggest two models that explain anachronistic elements in Renaissance painting as “neither an aberration nor a mere rhetorical device”, but as “a structural condition of artifacts.” Within the first model, which they call performative, the visual artefact is

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bound to an author and beholders that agree to see the artefacts cited in the painting as traces of a historical moment. Within the second model anachronistic artefacts, mainly in painting but also in architecture, are seen as a substitution of older ones. The principle of substitution means that images were perceived as “tokens of types associated with mythical and dimly perceived origins” and one image or building was considered an effective substitution of a lost original. The visual similarity between the preceding and the later image situates the second as a substitution of the first, and thus implies that there is an original point or meaning that has to be rendered anew. The performative and the substitutive models can coexist in an artwork in a non-exclusionary manner transforming it into “an anatomical model, revealing the inner workings of picture making at this historical moment” thus allowing for a more complex understanding of the way images reiterate, or invent their origins.

For the Carnival becomes an open place where different past images are co-present. These elements are neither substitution through imitation of a lost origin, nor traces of a specific historical moment seen both by its author and its beholders. Reynolds does not borrow a visually similar motif as a substitution of an older one, but the presentational strategy associated with it, thus building a constellation of presentational strategies that bring to visibility the very infrastructure of representation. The painting is an image of a cut, slice of meat. It is precisely this cut that constitutes the visible surface, itself withdrawing from visibility. The cut functions as a quotation that makes the painting by Reynolds resonate with the work of an earlier abstract painter, Lucio Fontana, who transgressed the surface of the canvas by executing precise cuts in his Spatial Concept series (Fig. 68).

To cut, among other things, means to claim visually what was previously invisible, what is normally inaccessible to the gaze. In Fontana’s case these cuts foreground

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21 Ibid., p. 405. 22 “Carpaccio’s painting stages the statue’s substitution mode against a context of performativity, and in so doing diagrams a clash between two different versions of the time-artifact relation. From one point of view, the painted statue is the lost and absent original, the nonexistent original, that the modern Italian statue reinstatates. From another point of view, the statue is simply an anachronism, a citation of a modern work. The painting thus becomes something like an anatomical model, revealing the inner workings of picture making at this historical moment. The painting proposes as the resolution of the predicament a new, or at least newly institutionalized, function for pictures: the staging operation itself. Pictures like Carpaccio’s become places where competitive models of the historicity of form can be juxtaposed, places of impossibility, of critical reflection and nonresolution.” p. 407, (emphasis added).
Fig. 68 Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept. Expectations*, 1960
the surface of the canvas, which usually remains transparent. Fontana’s cuts seem to question that transparency, by emphasising its materiality. In addition, cuts have a function to show, to function visually, since they offer visual access to what was behind the canvas, something that remains not visible. Arguably the cuts in Fontana’s paintings function as devices that present the invisible as excess of representation. It is in that sense that For the Carnal resonates with Fontana’s Spatial Concept series. Both paintings embed cuts, in Fontana’s case a real cut, in Reynolds’ case showing the result of a cut – a slice of flesh, to perform an opening, to access the invisible. By employing a multiplicity of references, some of which are on the level of repetitions (like the frame), For the Carnal suspends the possibility of being placed univocally in the paradigm of any artistic movement or tradition. The excessive use of presentational devices results in showing the infrastructure of the very procedures of showing, those who make images what they are. 24

**Illusionism. Mirror.**

Reynolds’ way of working with the infrastructure of representation – the use of frames and their integration in the space of the painted image and illusionism – poses questions related to pictorial artifice and illusion. Furthermore, the very choice of her subject – raw flesh, which usually evokes a visceral response – indicates her interest in the way paintings address their viewers. The rococo style frame simultaneously focuses and disorients the gaze because of its visual similarity to the painted surface. By employing a variety of devices of address, Reynolds destabilises the very procedure of re-presentation.

The very definition of visual representation implies resemblance. As Louis Marin formulates:

To ‘represent’ signifies first of all to substitute something present for something absent ... This type of substitution is, as we know, governed by a mimetic economy: it is authorised by a postulated similarity between the present thing and the absent thing. 25

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23 Fontana used the title Concetto spaziale (spatial concept) for almost all of his later paintings, created after 1949. These can be divided into broad categories: the Buochi (holes), beginning in 1949, and the Taghi (slashes), which he instituted in the mid-1950s. In both types of painting Fontana transgressed the surface of the canvas, either by making holes in it or by slashing it with sharp linear cuts. 24 Didi-Huberman discusses the operation of cutting as related to the concept of the detail in “The Detail and the Pan,” In: Confronting Images p. 230.
Representational images show their referents in their absence. The object is something external, situated outside the image. In the painting by Reynolds, the reciprocal imitation of the painted surface and its frame invite the beholder to perceive them as extensions of each other – the painted flesh becomes part of the frame and the other way around. This destabilises the identity of the represented object, thus making the painted surface appear as an abstract image or pattern.

Still, *For the Carnal* is a photo-realistically painted slice of meat. Marin argues that illusionism, as an excess of mimesis, exposes the procedures that make an image a truthful representation. In his book *To Destroy Painting* he suggests that Caravaggio’s work embodies a paradox that is at the very heart of mimetic representation. That paradox consists of “copying the truth of what appears in so slavish a manner that the pictural representation becomes a mere effect. That its truth is an effect of painting and not its origin.”26 Because of that excess of imitation, Caravaggio’s paintings cannot be a representation of the object appearing before one’s eyes; instead, they become a presentation of the object’s double or simulacrum. In that way, Marin argues, they expose the infrastructure of representation, which in the case of illusionist painting, reveals and cancels it own law and “becomes a simulacrum and thus ceases to be a re-presentation.”27

*For the Carnal* re-works elements from *Vanitas* and illusionist still-life painting by means of both repeating and reversing some of their aspects. Reynolds employs hyperrealism as a pictorial strategy that gives exhaustive access to reality in a similar fashion as the illusionist still-life as being deceptive, of distorting the truth of its object. The similarity between the painted surface and the frame destabilises the representational relationship between the image and its object or referent. This adds up to the operation of mimesis within the image – the frame imitates the central image and the other way around. The painted surface imitates its frame and questions the procedures of presentation by leaving the gaze in a brief moment of confusion concerning the identity of the painted object. This similarity makes the realistic representation of flesh look unreal; it “severs” the link to the referent. Instead of presenting or establishing the identity of the space of representation, the frame interferes with it.

The painted surface of *For the Carnal* has a near photographic quality; it represents meat in very precise detail, which amounts to mimetic transparency; it makes the material medium invisible and focuses the attention on the depicted object.28 Flesh as it is depicted becomes not a representation, but a presentation of its double,

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to use Marin’s term. According to Roland Barthes a photograph is never distinguished from its referent and therefore has something tautological about it: “a photograph is always invisible: it is not what we see.”  

The photographic image has an inherently deictic nature due to its inherent tautology: “the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of ‘Look’, ‘See’, ‘Here it is’; it points a finger at a certain vis-à-vis, and cannot escape this pure deictic language.” Arguably, the photographic quality of the painting by Reynolds transforms the whole visible surface, including the frame into a deictic “Look!”

**Un-Framing**

Presentational devices are often an invisible, yet crucial part of images. Titles, frames and stands are the elements that have the power to transform an object into a work of art. They are the location of power of an invisible presenter or the authority of the museum that determines which objects will be seen and in what way. Next to that, presentational devices are very similar to what linguists call deictic words, the medium of address in language. Frames and stands are the cause we often feel addressed – they have power to say “you!” in an irresistible way. As such they function as media of inter-subjectivity, because they enable an artwork to “look back” and address its beholders.

Marin addresses the role that frames play in visual artefacts by making a distinction between reflexive and transitive aspects of the representational sign. While the

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28 This use of the frame as a presentational device destabilises representation itself and makes the painting by Reynolds paradoxically close to an abstract painting by Frank Stella (Gran Cairo, 1962), discussed by Marin: “If the frame is one of the means through which representation presents itself representing something, this painting by Stella represents its own presentation. The painting is entirely reflexive and its transitive dimension consists in representing its reflexive dimension ... we are witnessing an iconic *mise en abyme* of the opacity of the representational sign in its transparency, or else the inverse, an iconic *regressus ad infinitum*, through the frames of presentation to its representation and from the representation to its presentation,” Ibid., p. 372. 29 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), p. 6.

30 Ibid., p. 5. 31 “*Voici*” (literally, ‘see this’) is a verbal presentational device ... Deictics are presentational words under guardianship; behind them hides the authority of the presenter who appropriates them ... Yet the word ‘*voici*’ definitely does present. It is the supreme presentational word, for it means ‘see this; look; everything to be understood has first of all to be seen.” De Duve, *Look!*, p. 39-40.

transitive dimension is related to the fact that the iconic sign represents an object, what is termed as the transparency of the mimetic sign, the reflexive dimension is related to the fact that the sign also presents itself and thus “the very act of presenting constructs the identity of what is represented, identifies the thing represented as such.”34 Within that distinction Marin identifies the frame with the reflexive dimension of the representational sign. The operation usually performed by frames consists in displaying: “it is a deictic, an iconic ‘demonstrative’: ‘this.”35 The frame is never confined to the material margin of a painting, or an image, and includes all the processes and procedures of framing, the dynamics of power and positioning that puts the object in a state of exclusive presence.

The artifact of the frame thus displays a remarkable polysemy, between supplement and complement, gratuitous ornament and necessary mechanism. ... In a word, the frame is a necessary parergon, a constitutive supplement. It autonomises the work within the visible space; it puts the representation in a state of exclusive presence; it gives the appropriate definition of the conditions for the visual reception and contemplation of the representation as such.36

The frame, then, has a power over its object as well as the beholder. It fixes the object whose main function is to be seen, and addresses the gaze. Marin also points out that the meaning of the word “frame” varies in different languages. While the French meaning of frame (cadre) emphasises the edge, the extreme limit of the geometrically cut-out surface of the canvas, the English frame designates “a stretcher that extends the canvas so it will be suited for receiving pigments.”37 It is not exactly a border, or ornament at the outer limits of the painting, but a substructure of the support mechanism and also refers to the surface of representation. Marin points out that the painter is torn by a violent relation constituted by “the desire to enclose the visible within the frame of his picture and his fascination with what eludes that space, the reality of the visible.”38 In other words, the frame, especially in the case of figurative painting, establishes a double relationship between the inside and the outside. First, it makes the painting different from its immediate context, and second it draws a decisive line between visual representation and its referent situated in the world.

Jacques Derrida argues in his book The Truth in Painting that the frame stands out with regard to the two grounds that it separates – the context of the artwork and the space of the painting.39 It “stands out” from two grounds merging alternately with one

or the other: “With respect to the work which it can serve as a ground for, it merges into the wall...With respect to the background...it merges into the work which stands out of the general background.” Frames make the objects they present visible, themselves withdrawing from visibility and produce a necessary division between inside and outside. They have “a thickness which separates them not only (as Kant would have it) from the integral inside, from the body proper of the ergon, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung.”

The frame separates not only the visual object from its background; it also separates the reality of the referent from the reality of the representation. Parergons “augment the satisfaction of taste” – frames, draperies, colonnades of palaces, yet their function is secondary as they merely “recommend” the painting with their charm. In this sense the supplement of the frame can “injure” the genuine beauty of the artwork, which should be able to stand on its own. For Derrida the supplement of the frame simultaneously indicates and institutes the truth of the object it presents, itself withdrawing from visibility. Precisely at this moment it deploys its greatest power.

The frame of For the Carnal is visually similar to the central area of the image. This destabilises the opposition between centre and margin usually established by the frame. The striated fibres of the muscle and the whitish patterns can be seen as flowers and knots of lines, fantastic leaves, and the other way around, the floral ornaments of the frame can be seen as patterns of fat and muscles. The visual resemblance between the central and the marginal area of the image and the enlarged structure of painted flesh result in transforming the detail, that is the smallest unit of the image that presumably has representational value, into an ornament, that is an object that does not have a representational function. This similarity then paradoxically results in a clash between a visual element that claims the objectivity of the detail and the frame as an element that introduces the fictional space of the image. The ornament, that which is supposed to support the procedures showing, but not show itself, spreads over the represented object. This is to say, the frame un-frames the image and the image decentres itself. There is nothing inside or outside the frame. This painting becomes an image that is excessively visual but offers nothing to see; it employs many devices to show, to attract the gaze but becomes a nearly abstract image. The correspondence between the real world, the material reality of the flesh and that of its pictorial representation, is severed. What remains is the near claustrophobic emphasis on the inside of the image. For the Carnal, then, juxtaposes two relationships between inside and outside: the inside-outside of the skin and the inside-outside of the frame. The frame becomes more and more an opening into an interiority that is not usually...
presented to be seen – the interiority of the body. The image loses its allegorical dens-
ity; it does not represent or speak of another meaning external to the image and ac-
quires an opacity that is material, and similar to that of the empty frame.

There is no showing without making, fashioning or framing – operations at the
heart of the practice of making art. It is significant that the verb “to invent” is etymo-
logically related to some other terms that might seem unrelated as for instance “to
figure”, “to fashion”, “to frame” or “to make.” With her paintings Reynolds takes the
frame out of its position of quasi-invisible object to show how frames produce and fig-
ure the objects they frame, how they produce them as objects to be seen. For the Carnal,
which quotes past images, can be considered as embodying visual genealogies,
and by exposing the procedures of their making takes a critical stance with regard to
the past images they quote, and thus destabilises their fixed meaning. Reynolds bor-
rows the frame, the picture plane, the title and the hyper-realistic detail as pictorial
devices to show critically the techniques of staging and of presenting, or finally of in-
venting an origin.