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## BODILY SENSING

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## BODILY SENSING

Jackie Ryder

*Moving through the landscape ... feeling, hearing, seeing, touching, through the mind,  
the eye and the hand – the touch and texture of things*

Barbara Hepworth

My Master of Visual Arts project explored connection between the body and immediate surroundings. The investigation was based on 'lived experience' of place, an idea associated with phenomenology and philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). He suggests the human body is the centre of our experiential world, providing us with knowledge and understanding of our surroundings through its multiple sensory systems.<sup>1</sup> This applies as much to an audience's experience of an artwork as to the artist's experience that generated the work in the first place. Before considering how an individual might connect with an artwork, I investigate my connection to St Clair Beach. I frequently go there to walk my dog, the perfect activity to allow an increased awareness of my surroundings, particularly focusing on the non-visual senses of sound and touch.

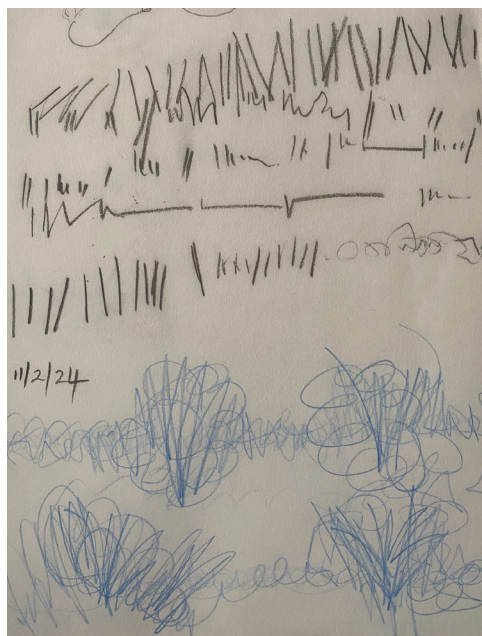


Figure 1. "Blind drawing" mark making in response to sounds heard around me at the beach.



Figure 2. Close up of the graphic elements and stitch used in *Sea banners* (2024) to suggest repetition of natural cycles such as tidal movement (cotton, linen, screenprint and stitch).

## THE NON-VISUAL LANDSCAPE

During the time spent on my visual art project, it was difficult to ignore the dominant role of sight in my connection to the world. I became keenly aware of the ocular-centric basis of the culture we live in. Although our sensory systems work together providing information and connection, vision has long been held at the top of the sensorial hierarchy and therefore at the height of our consciousness. To eliminate this visual input I began to practise 'blind drawing,' closing my eyes and drawing marks in response to the sounds around me. This was an interesting exercise. Without the usual visual critique, my drawing became freer and more gestural, the marks a physical response to the layers and qualities of sounds of the beach (Figure 1).

UK multimedia artist Debbie Lyddon explores the use of sound notation, offering the viewer a chance to imagine what a landscape sounds like when experiencing her visual work. She uses repetition of elements, marks, shapes and tonal variations, creating rhythmic compositions, her visual interpretation of sound.<sup>2</sup> In its most basic form rhythm could be described as a pattern of sounds with gaps or silences in between, occurring over time. I have responded to the sound of waves surging and retreating as part of my interpretation of the beach environment, evident in *Sea banners* (2024), where repetition of elements and shapes mimics the rhythm of natural cycles (Figure 2).

## OUTER SENSING, INNER SEEING

Another way to interpret connection to place is to rely on the memory of feelings and images following walks at the beach. Lyddon uses this approach in her work, "as I make work I draw up memories of these images and experiences – outer sensing turns into inner seeing."<sup>3</sup> She is influenced by British artist Wilhelmina Barns-Graham (1912–2004), who would make faithful sketches on location to become familiar with a place, but back in the studio used these to feed and inform her imagination to capture the essence of a place, often producing a non-literal representation.<sup>4</sup> I have adopted this approach, supplementing it with the use of found objects that provide a physical link back to the site

### *Haptic perception*

Haptic perception is involved in the conception, making and installation of my work. This can be described as the interaction between sensory systems used to absorb information by way of movement, touch and vision, producing feelings and emotions, often before conscious awareness. Jennifer Fisher defines the haptic sense as extending from "actual touch, to include the auto tactility of physical comportment and perambulation."<sup>5</sup> In other words, tactile information through direct pressure is combined with an awareness of the body moving through space to provide a haptic experience in both the making and reaction to art.

Textiles have a special affinity with the haptic. The maker draws on tactile properties not only in choice of materials, but also during their manipulation and alteration. Touch is often a subliminal repetitive activity such as that seen in hand stitching. During the project I became aware of the similarities between this process and the automatic rhythm and repetition of cycles witnessed in the natural world. Touch can also be used to explore the limitations of a material, such as pulling threads to expose the warp and weft – destruction and repair, fragility and strength, expressed in a textile language (Figure 3).

Just as the environment 'touches' us through the skin envelope that covers our body, I imagine the surface of a fabric to function in the same way. My studio research included burying fabrics at an old dump site at the beach, exposing them to earth and rusting artifacts, leaving marks and stains as a visual trace of decay (Figure 4). In this process I am an intermediary, instigating the conditions for a reaction to occur. I was influenced by New Zealand artist Pauline Rhodes, who also allows air and water to alter her palette with rusty stains and marks. Christina Barton writes of Rhodes' work that it "enacts process and literalises time."<sup>6</sup> The artist becomes as much a conduit as a creator.



Figure 3. Close up of pulled threads exposing the structure of cloth (buried linen and machine stitch).



Figure 4. Cloth buried amongst old rusting artefacts at dump site found at the beach.

### ***Bodily sensing***

I began the second half of my studio research mindful of Fisher's definition of haptic perception, which combines touch with an awareness of our body position in space. To address the tactile experience, I invited the audience to touch my work. The term 'aesthetic touch' can be used to describe this engagement, defined as a way to explore textures, materials and forms for their tactile qualities and characteristics.<sup>7</sup> It represents a gradual recognition that touch deserves equal theoretical consideration alongside vision in the aesthetic experience of art. The word 'aesthetics' is derived from the Greek word *aisthesis*, "the science of sensory perception" based on optical perception rather than intellect.<sup>8</sup> Historically, it is often concerned with the nature of beauty. But the visual bias bound up in the phrase 'aesthetically pleasing' fails to account for non-visual modes of interaction, appreciation and understanding of art.<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues for the multisensory nature of aesthetic experience, which includes our capacity for feeling (being affected) as well as sensing (to perceive).<sup>10</sup>

My research confirms the importance of aesthetic touch in the experience of art, revealing qualities and information about the work that are inaccessible to sight alone. Comparing sight and touch, artist Rosalyn Driscoll suggests that "each embodies a different way of knowing."<sup>11</sup> Seeing is a distance sense, positioning us as an observer with a link to comprehension and reason, while touch involves intimate contact, providing us with sensory information that connects us to the maker and potentially igniting memories of past tactile encounters. Our tactile perception begins in early childhood, where touch is used to gain knowledge about our immediate world, and continues throughout life contributing to our internal library of tactile experiences. These individual memories and experiences will influence our perception and understanding of future engagements with art.

In a gallery exhibition, visitors tend to have an in-built reluctance to handle objects, even when invited to do so, because artworks are perceived to be precious and for visual consumption alone. Introducing touch demands a new way of working and thinking for the artist. The material properties, methods of display and potential engagement



between work and audience must all be considered. In my MVA exhibition, an invitation to physically handle the work was communicated to gallery visitors through subtle signage on the walls (only partially successful), while a further tactile experience was offered at a 'stitching station,' a table with choices of thread and fabric, connecting visitors to some of the processes used in my work. In an age when virtual reality is increasingly prevalent, this 'hands on' experience seems especially valuable as a way of learning.

Keeping in mind Fisher's suggestion that the other part of haptic sensibility is an awareness of one's own body in space, in *Kelp Forest* (2024–2025) I suspended 23 cylinders from the gallery ceiling (Figure 5). The freely hanging objects surrounded the viewer, stimulating their sensitivity to body shape and position in relation to the cylinders as they navigated a path between them. A conscious decision to use low light levels encouraged people to slow down, allowing time for eyes to adjust in the course of closer examination of the details.

Other works were anchored by slender threads extending from the wall. The use of handmade eyelets randomly placed along the fabric edges allowed for flexibility and multiple hanging options for each work (Figure 6). Spotlights highlighted the forms and resulted in shadows, solid to the eye but elusive to touch, evident in *Dancing in the sea breeze ... bending like skinny limbs* (2025) (Figure 7). The combination of rust-stained cloth, silk and shadows suggested vulnerability and strength co-existing. The rusty cloth is in fact punctured with holes that are strengthened with stitches running around the margins, halting the process of degradation for some time at least. In contrast, the light touch of blue silk winding its way through the utilitarian cloth indicates movement and agility (Figure 8).



Figure 5. Installation of *Kelp Forest* (2024–2025) at Dunedin School of Art Gallery.



Figure 6. Close up of hand stitched eyelet (hand-dyed silk and string).



Figure 7. The transient shadows produced using a spotlight on the work *Dancing in the sea breeze... bending like skinny limbs* (2025).



Figure 8. *Dancing in the sea breeze... bending like skinny limbs* at Dunedin School of Art Gallery (hand-dyed silk, cotton sheeting, and stitch).

Both sides of a textile work are important to me; I consider the 'other' or non-worked side to generate aesthetic touch too. In the work *Desire lines* (2024–2025), it shows another rendition of the randomly stitched pathways snaking their way across a material landscape (Figure 9). The term 'desire lines' refers to informal pathways created by the continual, wandering and spontaneous movement of people, as distinct from the official pathways imposed upon us by authorities. This aligns with my thoughts about the other side of the fabric, where things happen despite rather than because of conscious thought. The centres of the screen-printed images on the 'front' side are filled with seed stitch, a labour-intensive task that contrasts with a separate layer of cloth hanging behind (Figure 10). The surface of the latter was transformed by a natural time-based process while it lay buried at the dumpsite for six weeks. I resisted the urge to add stitch to the disintegrating, decaying surface of this cloth, opting instead for the residue of the process to speak for itself.



Figure 9. The just as important "other side" of fabric part of *Desire lines* (2024-25).





Figure 10. Installation of *Desire lines* at Dunedin School of Art Gallery  
(hand dyed cotton, screen print, stitch and buried sheeting).

My research has reimagined my art practice, which now more systematically considers the sensing body during the conception and making of work. As Merleau-Ponty suggested, human perception, be it visual, aural, olfactory, tactile or gustatory, is our connection to the world. This perception may be constituted by description rather than analysis, by direct experience instead of distant or passive understanding and by wonder rather than acceptance. My investigation has shed light on the importance of haptic perception and multisensory experience as part of our perception and understanding of art. Through aesthetic touch, a gallery audience too might be stimulated to use imaginative transformations of ideas and perceptions about the world around us.

Jackie Ryder completed a Masters in Visual Art at the Dunedin School of Art in March 2025. Her practice is process driven, where experimentation and pushing materials beyond their utilitarian function is her *modus operandi*.

- 1 Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203482896>.
- 2 Debbie Lyddon, "Notations – Seeing Sound," accessed 12 June 2025, <https://debbielyddon.wordpress.com/2015/05/18/notations-seeing-sound/>. This blog post provides information about the application of 'auditory visibility' in Lyddon's work.
- 3 Debbie Lyddon, "Debbie Lyddon: Responding to Environment," accessed 26 June 2025, <https://www.textileartist.org/responding-to-environment/>.
- 4 Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust, accessed 12 June 2025, <https://www.barns-grahamtrust.org.uk>.
- 5 Jennifer Fisher, "Tactile Affects," *Tessera* 32 (Summer 2002): 19-20, <https://doi.org/10.25071/1923-9408.25273>.
- 6 Christina Barton, *Ground/Work: The Art of Pauline Rhodes* (Wellington: Adam Art Gallery & Victoria University Press, 2002), 17–18.
- 7 See Alberto Gallace and Charles Spence, "Tactile Aesthetics: Towards a Definition of its Characteristics and Neural Correlates," *Social Semiotics* 21, no. 4 (September 2011): 569–589.
- 8 Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics Affects and Technologies* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 83–84.
- 9 Jenni Lauwrens, "Touch as an Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 18, no. 4 (2019): 323–341.
- 10 Paterson, *Senses of Touch*, 81–83
- 11 Robyn Driscoll, *The Sensing Body in the Visual Arts: Making and Experiencing Sculpture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 16.