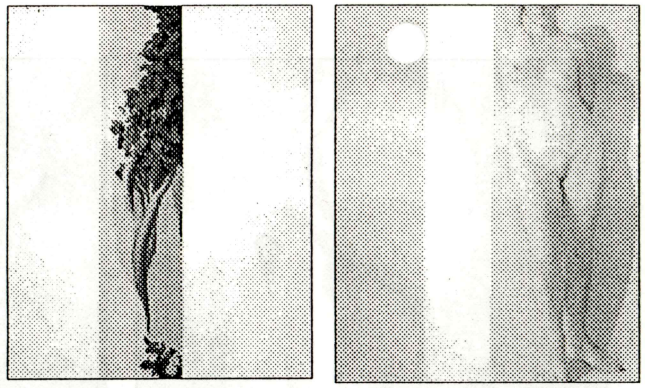

Alison Watt *Venus* (left) *Fragment III* (right) 1997 (lower gallery)

Figure 3
J. D. Ingres *La Source* (1820)

narrative; and whereas before the figure in her painting was central and pivotal, now it has been tilted and displaced:

"These bodies are awkward in their nakedness, trapped in their own self-consciousness. The shallow relief of the picture plane is unable to sustain their weighty forms. As a result, they float like spectres on the picture surface. These images present the naked female body in isolation, and the apparent simplicity of their form is, in fact, a disturbing deception. The viewer might be seduced into believing they are symbols of perfection, but they are not objects for amorous contemplation: they are abberations."

Furthermore, her most recent pieces, such as *Madame Moitessier, Fold I* and *Fold II*, represent Watt's first decisive move away from figuration. These studies of drapery work as a punctuation to the other figurative canvases of ***Fold***, but simultaneously suggest further possibilities for the future development of her work.

Further Reading:

Alison Watt: Fold (New Paintings 1996-97), catalogue accompanying this exhibition (available from the bookshop)
Duncan MacMillan, *Scottish Art in the Twentieth Century*, Mainstream Publishing (1994)
Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Today*, Phaidon (1995)
Alison Watt, Flowers East exhibition catalogue (1995)
Carol Ockman, *Ingres' Eroticised Bodies*, Yale University Press (1995)
Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, Phaidon (1995)

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fruitmarket the gallery exhibition guide

Alison Watt: Fold

(New Paintings 1996-97)

4 October – 15 November 1997

Born in Greenock in 1965, Alison Watt graduated from Glasgow School of Art in 1988, and has exhibited in London, Glasgow and the USA. ***Fold (New Paintings 1996-97)*** is her first major public solo exhibition. The result of a new body of work created over the last two years, ***Fold*** includes seven diptychs, an untitled series of six studies, and three single pieces commissioned by The Fruitmarket Gallery. In addition, there are two earlier works from 1995. These are *Source III*, and the sixteen separate studies that make up the series *Bodyparts*.

Watt's primary area of interest lies in the study of the female figure. In ***Fold*** she used her own body in conjunction with a life model to diffuse the autobiographical element in her work. In the diptychs, the deliberate isolation of the female nude from its traditional surroundings serves to create two images. In the first, the nude's isolation is emphasised by the physical limits of the canvas which at times truncates the extremities of the figure, while the absence of any covering or support is highlighted by the painting of a flat rectangle or oval where the cover, or drapery, would normally be. This illusionary support is then realised and increased in scale to form the second part of the diptych.

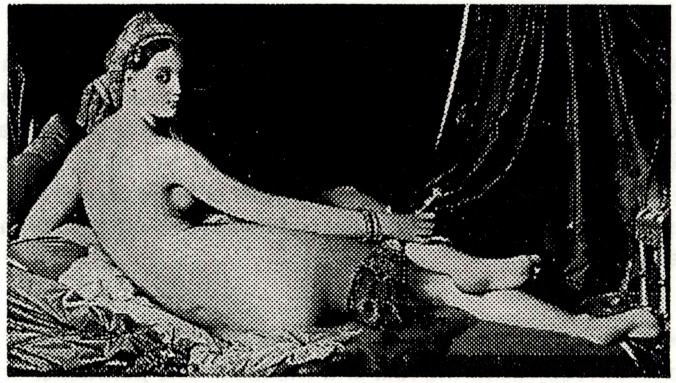
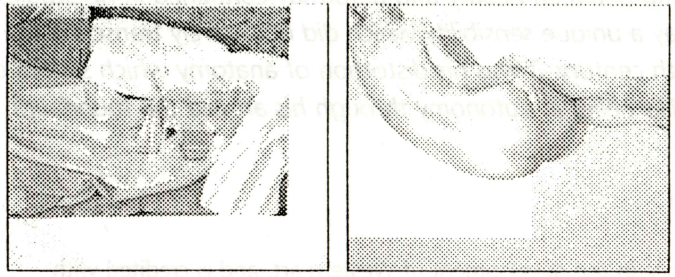


Figure 1
J.D. Ingres *La Grande Odalisque* (1814)



Alison Watt *Odalisque* (left) *Fragment I* (right) 1996 (upper gallery)

The use of drapery and material in art history is particularly rich in meaning, and psychoanalysis also has much to say on the subject. As a formal and symbolic device, drapery has been used both as a compositional tool for balance and structure, and as a metaphor denoting pliability, softness and sensual richness in connection with the female form.

"The great failing of M. Ingres, in particular, is that he seeks to impose upon every type of sitter a more or less complete, by which I mean a more or less despotic, form of perfection, borrowed from the repertory of classical ideas."

Baudelaire *The Painter of Modern Life*

Figure 2
J.D. Ingres *Madame Rivière* (1805)

The point of reference throughout these new works is the 19th century French painter Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867). In the diptych series Watt quotes extensively from some of his most famous works, such as *La Grande Odalisque* of 1814 (figure 1), the portrait from 1805 of *Madame Rivière* (figure 2) and *La Source* of 1820 (figure 3). Her engagement with Ingres is complex, one which both affirms and negates elements of his work, and it provides the ground for fresh departures which resituate the traditional representation of the nude in a contemporary practice of painting.

"The appropriation of the images of Ingres is intrinsic to my exploration of beauty and the problems of reconciling the real and the ideal. The paradoxes so evident in the work of this artist have become integral to my own. The exploration of the complex relationship between beauty and deformity contained in his studies of the female form display a unique sensibility which did not merely transcend the aesthetic taste of the 19th century. It was his distortion of anatomy which separated him from the Academy. His belief in autonomy through his art laid the foundation for his successors."

(Alison Watt, September 1997)

Ingres is of central importance in the development of Western art, and is credited with formal innovations in painting which anticipate the work of artists such as Matisse and

Alison Watt *Madame Rivière* (left) *Fragment V* (right) 1997 (lower gallery)

Picasso. At the same time, his techniques – controversial enough in their day – have provided a rich terrain for feminist art criticism. He is especially famous (and infamous) for his erotic nudes, and his technical distortions of the female form. In the painting *La Grande Odalisque*, for example, Ingres distorted the female nude by adding vertebrae and elongating the back of the Odalisque in order to retain the curve of the back and keep the figure's head up. What we see is therefore an anatomical impossibility, a masculine idealisation. In Ingres' work the depiction of reality comes second to the formal requirements of the 'serpentine line' or 'line of beauty' (roughly the form of an 's') which he developed following the example of his mentor, Jacques–Louis David (1748–1825).

This 's' line is also particularly evident in Ingres' portrait of *Madame Rivière* (figure 2), where it is emphasised by the sweep of drapery which envelops the sitter. Ingres is not concerned with naturalism of any sort, but with the creation of an abstract design. In portraits such as this one, considered revolutionary in their time, natural forms are given an unreal near-geometrical smoothness in order to conform to an ideal. It is this dichotomy which Alison Watt addresses in ***Fold***.

"It is the issues raised through the distortions in Ingres' painting which I am attempting to address in my own. In quoting Ingres I hope to challenge our notion of what is real and what is ideal."

(Alison Watt, September 1997)

The quoting of Ingres reaffirms Alison Watt's engagement with the art of revolutionary and post-revolutionary France. Already in 1989, in her painting *Marat and the Fishes* which hangs in the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, she had quoted David's famous *Death of Marat*. But ***Fold*** also shows her developing other formal and theoretical concerns. Here we find marked strategic points of change. In comparison with *Marat and the Fishes*, ***Fold*** is stripped of