A disturbing cinematic moment haunted my childhood dreams. In Ealing Studio’s *Dead of Night* (1945) a ventriloquist is driven to the edge of madness and to an act of attempted murder by his seemingly conscious dummy.

Whilst incarcerated for his crime, the ventriloquist is reunited with his dummy on the orders of a prison psychiatrist. He snaps, first smothering the dummy and then crushing its head beneath his boot. The camera cuts to the dummy’s head, which is displayed in all of its visceral horror, caved in and smashed, the ghoulish effect heightened by the dummy’s impeccable attire of dinner jacket and smart bow tie.

It was not so much the film’s narrative that disturbed me, but rather I felt a tangible shock and revulsion in response to this one scene - the dummy’s crushed skull is an apt substitute for the flesh and blood of a real human head.

In his essay on the Uncanny, Sigmund Freud develops Ernst Jentsch’s ideas about the ‘intellectual uncertainty’ that arises in the face of animate objects that might, in fact, be dead or lifeless objects that appear to be animate; for example, waxwork figures, dolls, automatons and, in this case, the ventriloquist’s dummy.

The heads’ fabrication might appear to be crude and improvised, however, there is real craft in their painterly representations. These paintings provoke an empathy in the viewer through our recognition of this most human of subjects. We recognise the inanimate nature of the model heads but their pictorial representations provoke a sense of uncertainty, as they hover between still lives and portraits, inert matter and sentient beings.

Often Meade’s work takes its cue from the death rattle, concerning itself with the very moment that the living body reverts to inanimate matter, the slim boundary between life and death.

In her seminal essay *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva describes the effect of beholding a dead body as ‘abject’, suggesting that ‘the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life’.

A number of paintings made in 2007, for example, depict what appear to be small clay heads - diminutive death masks with sunken eyes and pallid skin. The authorial application of paint echoes the form of the hand-fashioned clay it represents, creating a memento mori that calls death into life.

The head is a persistent motif in Meade’s work, often appearing decapitated, physically disfigured or incomplete. In the catalogue for *Undercover Surrealism* (2006), the Hayward Gallery’s exploration of Georges Bataille’s radical surrealist magazine *DOCUMENTS* (1929/30), Michael Richardson describes a ‘significant shift’ between ancient and modern relationships to the head. He writes: ‘ancient peoples maintained heads as energy sources through which the active power of the dead remained potent. In modern times, in contrast, relics are maintained to dispel or annul the actuality of death, to render it harmless by pretence that the dead are still alive’.

In *Pier* (2011) a black, featureless
head sits on an indistinct surface. The subject references both the form of the traditional sculptural portrait and the gimp’s mask, creating an unsettling and disturbing effect. The work’s composition is tightly cropped, however; reflections on the object’s smooth surface reveal the world beyond the painting’s edge, a world that remains tantalisingly elusive.

The head’s sculptural modelling asserts its objectness and yet the proximity of the canvas edge, where the painted surface has been sanded and scuffed to reveal a number of layers reasserts the physicality of the stretcher, pulling the rug from beneath the work’s pictorial illusion.

As viewers we oscillate between these two positions, both embracing the illusion and yet understanding the mechanics of its contrivance.

As much as there is a sense that Meade’s subjects are in a state of decay or collapse we are also aware of the artist’s process of modelling and production. In conversation, Meade often refers to the Jewish story of the Golem, an automaton created from clay or mud. It reminds me of the references to the Golem myth in Bruce Chatwin’s novella *Utz* (1988) in which the central protagonist recounts a mediaeval text apparently discovered by Gershom Scholem that describes Jesus Christ modelling birds from clay which, ‘once He had uttered the sacred formula, would sing, flap their wings and fly’.

More pertinently, he also recounts the well-known story of Rabbi Loew of Prague who controlled his Golem, Yossel, with a shem, a sliver of metal inscribed by the word ‘emeth’ or ‘Truth of God’. Removing the first letter would spell ‘meth’ or ‘death’ and signal the Golem’s demise.

The Golem seems to embody both the living and the dead and in *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (2001) Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey highlight a number of examples of memento mori in which the body is also depicted ‘simultaneously preserved and decaying’. For example, medieval transi tombs would incorporate two representations of the deceased in carved stone: the subject as lifelike and ‘alive’ and the body in a state of decomposition. Meanwhile, inscriptions would call upon the viewer to look upon the decaying body, ‘to see themselves in the other’.

The corpse, Kristeva writes, ‘tends to us and ends up engulfing us’.

Occasionally, Meade makes direct references to specific people in his work. For example, *The Information* (2011) is a loose portrait of the artist’s late father and painstakingly depicts a skull-like form shaped by a complex web of twisted wire. Given the reference to clay modelling in Meade’s other paintings it is tempting to think of this as a mere armature. However, a trompe l’oeil cigarette has been ‘inserted’ where the mouth should be. Smoked down to the butt, one senses that the final drag is providing the mourn pause before the anecdote, tall story or killer line.

Meade often utilises a form of trompe l’oeil, for example, inserting pairs of eyes to animate the most lifeless of material such as the grey modelling clay that he favours. These eyes are almost certainly human, their circular form and the placement of shadow and reflective light locates them in an ambiguous pictorial space both hovering on and, peering from behind, the work’s surface; like the watchful voyeur positioned behind the picture peepholes of countless horror films.

When other parts of the body are depicted by Meade they appear physically mutilated. For example, *Foot* (2009) depicts a dismembered foot, pallid and bloated with disfigured toes and blackened nails, propped up like a relic or trophy. A single toe ring signals the humanity (and perhaps vanity) of its Opposite page: *Foot* 2009 Oil on linen on board (66.5 x 54.5cm)

Previous page: *The Information* 2011 Oil on linen on board (66.5 x 46cm)

Both courtesy of the artist
DAMIEN MEADE: A HISTORY OF FEAR

Piri
2011
Oil on linen on board
(64.5 x 49cm)
Courtesy of the artist

Trail of Blood
2011
Oil on linen on board
(66.5 x 49cm)
Courtesy of the artist
owner. According to Freud: 'Throned limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist ... all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when ... they prove capable of independent activity in addition' (11). The possibility of animation is perhaps suggested by Meade’s facility with process and materials. I think of Ron Muek’s (perhaps only truly convincing) sculpture Dead Dad (1996–97), where the sense of the uncanny, the frisson of uncertainty about the figure’s mortal status is contingent on the work’s public display of death, something to be witnessed rather than hidden.

In Zafán (2011), grey, hand-worked clay is formed into a head, towering shoulders that have been modelled in a black reflective material. This boat resembles the mummurapi heads that can be seen in the window displays of the numerous butchers in Ridley Road market, North East London, the location of Meade’s studio. Although the head is turned from the viewer in a coy pose, make-up and false eyelashes can clearly be seen - a vain attempt to beautify the lifeless ‘flesh’.

This, perhaps, references a central idea of momento mori and the Sixteenth- Seventeenth Century vanitas still life painting traditions: the notion that earthly world is nothing but a mere fleeting vanity. Indeed, we could apply this reading to Foot, which juxtaposes the toe ring (a signifier of earthly riches) against the disfigured leg (a reminder of the inevitability of death and decay).

The market in Ridley Road, with its plethora of Halal and West African butchers where offal, poultry feet and hooves make fascinating displays, seems to have exerted a significant, if initially unconscious influence on Meade’s work. Indeed, when I first visited him there in 2007 I was painting a hand crafted clay model of a goat’s head and rows of dismembered human fingers.

We recently discussed this issue in relation to Eli Lotar’s photographs of the abattoir in La Villette, Paris that accompanied Bataille’s text Atmoattar in Documents (1929). Neil Cox describes their inclusion as ‘an avant-garde shock tactic’ designed to expose the ‘parasitic-hygienic bourgeois’ to the abattoir, whose occurred nature Bataille interprets as a symptom of the sclerosis of polite society’ (9).

However, he also notes Lotar’s ‘poetic impudence’, which is expressed in the image of a row of calves feet propped against a wall, apparently attempting to stand once more. In another image, we see the pathetic spectacle of a recently flayed cow skin that appears to have been ‘crashed’ across the pavement trailing smeared of blood. This propensity to anthropomorphise the products of the abattoir or, indeed, the butcher’s stall may well have shaped Meade’s approach to the subject of the body.

In On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, Susan Stewart writes about the body as both container and contained which continually focuses our attention upon its ‘boundaries or limits’. She identifies what Jacques Lacan termed ‘eroticogenic zones’, areas of the body where slits or gaps are located, for example, the lips, anus, eyes and so forth. Stewart writes that according to Lacan, ‘…it is these cuts or apertures on the surface of the body which allows the sense of “edge”, borders, or margins by differentiating the body from the organic functions associated with such apertures’ (3). Meade seems to explore this idea in Untitled No. 3 (2008) where a crudely modelled vagina/ anus is fashioned from the pathetic remains of a disembodied body, the grotesque orifice turning the inside out, making the visceral bodily interior visible.

The heads depicted in Meade’s most recent painting appear to be constructed from a more robust material, perhaps bronze, cast iron or even a smooth black ceramic. They are assigned melodramatic titles such as Trail of Dead, Cold Blood and Iron and A History of Foot (all 2011). The pathos and modesty of his death mask works of 2007 has been replaced by motifs that find echoes in the historic sculptural portraits of noted dignitaries. Hallam and Hockley explain how memorial sculpture and portraits largely represent the corpse as a living body creating ‘a cultural translation that seeks to render invisible the material reality that is the dead body’ (10). This seems utterly at odds with Untitled No. 3 or Foot and marks an intriguing development in Meade’s practice. My thoughts return once again to Dead of Night and the haunting image of the ventriloquist dummy’s shattered skull. Perhaps it has stayed with me for so long because, as the critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss suggests: ‘To produce an image of what one fears, in order to protect oneself from what one fears – this is the strategic achievement of anxiety, which arms the subject, in advance, against the onslaught of trauma, the blow that takes one by surprise’ (11).

Notes
(8) Cumming, Laura 2009. The Observer.
(9) Cox, Neil in Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS, Hayward Publishing.
(10) Kristeva, Powers of Horror.
(12) Kristeva, Powers of Horror.