In my undergraduate years and the beginning years of my life as a professional artist, I looked closely at Plath's life, at her interests and obsessions and at the intense and evocative imagery which characterised her poetry. I always felt that she was a kindred artistic spirit and I believe that my work benefited from the ideas and images I found in
her poems and in the valuable analysis of sensitive critics like Edward Butscher. Late at night, whilst studying, I would sit up in bed reading Ariel or Butscher's Method and Madness, fascinated by the issues, ideas and images. Blue Moles, Lady Lazarus, Daddy, Tulips, Cut, Fever 103 and The Colossus all threw up resonant images and symbols which percolated in my art practice and still haunt me to this day.

Figure 2: image courtesy of www.tenafly.k12.nj.us/~lhaslach/BellJarStopperType_M.jpg

My early interest in Plath was a very intimate and natural one: I was drawn to the ideas and imagery of her poems. As I became more acquainted with her life and with the responses of critics and theorists to her work, I started to analyse my interests more thoroughly and to look at the symbolism and thematic resonances within my own imagery. My feeling was that the coruscating anger and intensity of the late works were (and still are) inspiring as much through their extremity as through their formal qualities and imagery. How did a seemingly conventional girl from a nice middle-class home come to a position of such rage?

As a model for how to be a woman and an artist, I came to the conclusion, however, that Plath’s path wasn’t the one I wanted to follow. In my 20s, I had drawn the inevitable parallels between the early death of Plath’s father and my own father’s death when I was a teenager. The life she examined and explored through her poetry seemed similar, but
very, very different. Attracted, at first, by the "romance" of her suicide and lifelong suicidal behaviour, I slowly began to acknowledge that no, I didn't want to die and that suicide wasn't a career choice for female artists.

Figure 3: Image of Plath courtesy of dearkitty.blogspot.com

Figure 4: Amanda Robins *Little Smiling Hooks*, 1989
Charcoal and pastel on paper

1 All other images courtesy the author, unless otherwise stated.
The imagery and symbolism of Sylvia Plath’s poetry inspired many of my early drawings and paintings and I used Plath’s ideas as a catalyst to examine my own life and the issues which excited me through my creative process.

In these early works I drew threads and connections which are visible in the more obviously referential imagery of drawings such as *Little Smiling Hooks*, and *The Doctors of Boston have thrown up their hands*. I was attracted to the “confessionality” of the poetry of Plath, Ann Sexton and Robert Lowell – could I make powerful works which drew on my inner life and also spoke to the viewer? Plath’s resonant, rageful late works gave intimation that, yes, it was possible for those who tempered their rage with craft and experience. Her dark, gothic imagery, the purity and shocking abruptness of her last works, helped make me feel that it was legitimate, and creatively fruitful for a woman to be both extremely angry and to express her rage through art.

In *The Doctors of Boston have thrown up their hands*, I used my responses to the ideas and imagery of Plath. I was intrigued by the idea that Plath was able, through her poetry, to create a persona which could adequately express her longing for release, escape and freedom - the ability to voice the rage and rebellion underlying her own and my middle class conformity.

Figure 5: *The Doctors of Boston have Thrown up their Hands*, charcoal and pastel on paper
I would now like to explore the links between Plath’s use of the idea of containment through the metaphor of the bell jar and my own interest in the psychologically resonant imagery of containment and what it might tell us about the underlying issues. I would like to posit the idea that Plath’s journey, as symbolised by the image of the bell jar, was one of grasping, grappling with and expressing the reality of her inner life, rather than working through it (as therapists say).

My current studio work is based around the idea of containment, being contained, and the self-reflexive nature of the art process in which we, as artists, draw on our inner lives in order to create. The works in the Bell Jar series are inspired by Plath’s only novel. I was (and still am) intrigued by the character of Esther and by her acknowledgement that she was “stewing in her own foul air” – that her work and style of being were fixed or fixated on those inner processes which, in the end, contributed to her isolation.

The bell jar is a container, but it is also a stage, a shield and a vacuum. The protagonist “trapped” in the bell jar is visible, almost painfully so, but separate, blocked off from human contact by smooth, implacable glass. The symbolism of the bell jar is one of powerlessness, the image of a set persona served up for public consumption with little or no exchange of “air” in the form of ideas or (varying) world views. Entranced as I have been with the Plath persona and legend, I missed the most obvious, and in the end, the most relevant point for me. I discovered that it was not so much her relationship with her father that we had in common, (although it was an important and primary connection) but the relationship she had with her mother and with her own inner life. My feeling was that the helpless rage and destructive imagery encased (and I use this word advisedly) in the poems were an expression of what was left over from a childhood dominated by the need to maintain facades. The bell jar was the enabling carapace, which both allowed expression and contained the intensity of overwhelming emotions. Without the containing presence of ongoing therapy, Plath formed a second self through her poetry. I am not trying to suggest that Plath was not self aware, or that her poetry was purely
therapeutic. She was, of course, a consummate craftswoman. Her poems are, however, an attempt to form an alternate narrative of her life.

Plath’s use of the bell jar image could be seen as a response to the internal desire to form boundaries and safely house the poetic persona. The bell jar image is one of unyielding containment. The therapeutic space can be seen alternatively as a space of flexible individuated containment - ideally through the empathic attunement of the therapist - a holding environment to make up for what was not provided in childhood.

In “The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*”, Diane S. Bonds\(^2\) suggests that the heroine, Esther, “purchases her new self by the discontinuance of any relations that might threaten by means of intimacy or tenderness the boundaries of a self conceived as an autonomous entity, as a separate and separative self.” The potent and recurring imagery of dismemberment and the assault on bodily integrity implied through incident and image in *The Bell Jar* suggest an obsession with wholeness, boundaries, containment and, as Bonds puts it, “the separative self.” In *The Bell Jar*, Plath appears to be grappling with the idea of presenting a whole self to the world – a self that is viably present and flexible enough to engage in authentic contact. Bonds argues that such a self cannot exist outside of the relational. Plath uses the bell jar to symbolize the creation of a separate self defined outside of relationship – a seemingly untenable, and, as evidenced by her suicide, unlivable position.

Looking back on my art practice over the last twenty years, I can see more clearly that I have been grappling with some of the ideas and themes which motivated Plath’s poetry. I moved from works such as *Little Smiling Hooks*, with its more overt narrative, into the more distilled and controlled self-portraits of the 1990s and then onto painting and drawing objects, specifically garments and drapery. The empty garments of drawings like *Linen Dress* can be seen as attachment figures, empty skins loaded with potential. Through these focal apparitions I explored and experimented with the construction of a new self.

In my most recent studio practice, I have moved on to drawings and paintings of the linings of coats which are held and pinned to the studio wall and, in the last few years, opened up to the viewer, indicating, perhaps, a more relational (and vulnerable) position. What was inside is brought to the front – as much as the imagery could be seen as referencing a sexual or visceral and body-based symbolism. It is also undoubtedly a forum for psychological projections and follows in a meandering way the possibilities...
inherent in artworks for mirroring the psyche. I use nets, strings, bags and other containers to indicate the idea of being held (or pulled?) together; lightly, but securely contained and shaped through the mediation of the flexible net: containing, connecting, holding, binding, supporting. This new body of work consists largely of images of drapery and garments, remnants which have been scrunched and stuffed into string nets, fishnet stockings and other containers. The containing nets hold and contribute to the shape while allowing the surface of the fabric to show through.

In *Playing and Reality*, Donald Winnicott tells the story of a boy who is separated from his mother and communicates his need to feel connected through the medium of string: …the boy had become obsessed with everything to do with string, and in fact, whenever they went into a room they were liable to find that he had joined together chairs and tables; and they might find a cushion, for instance, with a string joining it to the fireplace.\(^3\)

The string draws together and holds the object. The objects created through the process of being held are reminiscent of pods or chrysalises, teardrop-shaped and bulbous, compressed and contained, heavy and ponderous with enclosed potential. That which covered and skimmed, concealed and covered is held and contained, becoming a shape, a new creature, creating and reforming itself within the safety of the net. Just as the body is a container for the organs and the skin contains the (otherwise amorphous) self, so the nets can contain the potentially formless, defining, creating and delineating. The paintings and drawings in my new body of work are a symbolic apprehension, an expression of the desire for coherence and joining through the material process of seeing and making.

The image of the net is one of support rather than protection. The objects contained by nets in my still life images are dresses and surgical garments (caps, gowns, booties), things which ordinarily provide a barrier between the body and the outside.

world, found at the interface between the body and the process of entering the body through surgery. For Sylvia Plath and for her heroine in *The Bell Jar*, the containing object, unlike the flexible net, is redolent with ambivalence – a glazing apparatus serving up the stillborn poetic persona. What protected her and kept her from flying apart was also, for her, a barrier to real contact – a bell jar.

In reading for my PhD (in Visual Art), I came across the literary theorist Susan Kavaler-Adler, who looks at Sylvia Plath and compares her to other women writers, seeing her as an example of an artist who used her writing to try to facilitate what Adler (using Melanie Klein) sees as the process of mourning – working through issues from early childhood. She sees Plath’s œuvre as hermetic, a closed system, a bell jar where there is no transforming input from the outside world. Through my current work, I hope to see where the creative path might lead if air and sunshine are allowed through.

Fig. 7 Amanda Robins, *Coat of Nets* Work in progress 2008


