

WHAT NOW?

HELEN PYNOR

Your recent time in London has had a profound influence on your new body of work. Can you tell us about the ideas or places that captured you?

For 12 months during 2009 and 2010 I lived beside the Thames River in east London and more recently I've worked in a studio besides the Thames Barrier. Here the river is very wide and has a tidal range of about six metres. I watched the daily appearance of vast mud flats followed by the river swelling to completely cover the barrier walls at high tide, occasionally spilling over them. I became beguiled by the moody and dangerous nature of the river, which has treacherous undercurrents in which many people have drowned. I was fascinated by the presence of something wild and unpredictable in the very centre of this highly urbanised city.

How have you brought this experience into your new work?

Like other artists before me, notably **Roni Horn**, I was moved to make a work about the river but in my case to explore the underwater spaces, in particular incidents of accidental drownings in the river ... My new works are large-scale photographic pieces. I use garments of clothing as a kind of surrogate for the body in its cultural sense, and bodily organs drifting out of the garments to refer to our visceral or biological selves. However, I'm attempting to highlight the absolute permeability between these realms, and ultimately our visceral fragility. At times details from the garments such as torn threads become almost indistinguishable from small anatomical details in the organs.

Biology and the body have been recurring threads in your work – particularly the frailties and vulnerabilities of the human form.

I'm interested in working against the two dominant modes of presenting the internal

body: the first being very clinical, rationalised and scientific modes of representation; and the second being very hysterical, shocking and gory presentations. In both cases we're distanced from relating to these images and from making links to our own internal bodies. With my work I want to restore some of the interior body's mystery and power without making it terrifying, to stimulate curiosity by balancing its strange, alien nature and its capacity to inspire revulsion, with its beauty and wonder. I believe it's important to build a relationship with the interior body, whether as an imaginary realm or in a lived experience sense, because to a large extent we're very obsessed with the surfaces of the body but very estranged from its interior.

I understand you recently completed a Doctor of Philosophy. What was your thesis about?

My thesis relates strongly to my practice and underpins many of the questions I aim to address in my practice. I undertook a critique of the current neo-Darwinian paradigm in the biosciences and its commitment to the idea of gene dominance. Simultaneously I critiqued cultural theory dialogues that have largely ignored the physical materiality of the body ... I drew on a number of philosophers of biology and contemporary feminist scholars, and my own original training in the biosciences. I used these arguments to demonstrate the depth of permeability between cultural and biological processes within the human body – in which neither cultural or biological processes prevail – and I explored a range of artists, myself included, who have engaged with the biological.

Jane O'Sullivan

Helen Pynor's new work will be exhibited in *Liquid Ground* at Sydney's Dominik Mersch Gallery from 4 November to 4 December 2010.

Helen Pynor, *Liquid Ground 2*, 2010. C-print, diasec on glass, 160 x 105cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY

