



# BREATHING SHADOWS

HELEN PYNOR

## Breathing in the Shadows of Aporia

Breath is, like the motes that appear in rays of sunlight, always there, but rarely seen. The shadow of breath is firmer than breath itself, one cannot see it, but one feels it. Shadow and breath are caught in webs of haecceity and passages of aporia – visceral, imperceptible, inveterate. Such are the processes and objects of Helen Pynor.

On encountering unfamiliar territory one grapples with the light and colour of the day, the strangeness of sounds and smells, and the flow of crowds and traffic. This new place is always judged against the cloth of home. Home is like a favourite suit. Worn in a new city its arms and legs can seem embarrassingly short, its buttons uncomfortably tight.

Artists travelling abroad often attempt to acclimatize as quickly as possible, it is not wise to dwell in the dangerous and uncharted too long. One dissects the unfamiliar with the navigational tools one carries; in the case of Helen Pynor's *Canal St Martin* project these are her specific 'sensitivity to the elemental dimension of lived experience',<sup>1</sup> the eye of the camera and her use of diaristic, chronological time. The Canal St Martin, constructed in the nineteenth century is, like the visitor, an unnatural part of Paris' history. Yet in its slow and steady flow from the Marne to the Seine it has become an ecological haven for many insignificant urban dwellers – plants and animals that are often lost to the city. The canal is unnatural, but it is also a space of refuge and survival. It is no wonder that Pynor chose this inbetween space as her subject as it reflects her initial experience of Paris. Its creation spanning a year of time the *Canal St Martin* project involved Pynor's continual return to the same positions, recording the subtle and often imperceptible changes of specific moments. The act of creation becomes the artist's refuge from the unfamiliar.



*Exhale*, 2005, knitted human hair, 198 x 165 x 75 cm



However, though Pynor's process is born of the desire to provide anchorage for the artist, it results in a relentless need in the viewer to reorient oneself, to find a fictional solid ground.

The photographs of *Series 1* act in such a manner that orientation is tenuous – simultaneously one peers down into the canal's reflections (the world melts, one cannot grasp it) and looks up into a cold treescape (watery images become arborescent vapours). Again, in *Series 2* one is constantly displaced – the waters of the canal become dust devils that command the fallen leaves (the world inverted). One revisits the artist's experience of a new city – disorientating and foreign. If one does not feel at home, there can be no comfort.

The coats of *Exhale* suddenly appear out of empty space, tricks of vision, hallucinations, spectres. They hover solidly, consuming the space they barely inhabit. One is drawn to them as to other bodies. At an intimate distance one becomes aware they are made of human hair. Like discarded teeth and bones, they have entered the realm of Kristeva's Abject,<sup>ii</sup> neither object or subject, repelling one's desire to touch yet compulsively attracting the same. Like the *Canal St Martin* photographs Pynor denies the viewer a comfortable position; for the coats are before and after language, their matter is fragile and ephemeral yet remains long after the body's death. The body, like our sense of home, becomes a secondary skin, a garment infused with personal meaning birthed by experience.

Woven with a spacious knit the garments of *Exhale* are barely there and yet, coloured from a rich deep auburn or black to transparent grey, the hue seems to drain from them like life from the dying. They mirror the vaporous qualities of the photographs, but here it is as if a slow heat has been applied, not the coolness of water. This, coupled with the space-between bound to the weave, is the process, time passing – the hours of the artist's



*Untitled*, 2006, knitted human hair, 76 x 71 x 30 cm



*Two Hands*, 2005, knitted human hair, 40 x 25 x 15 cm

labour come to entwine with the memory of voice, smell, touch of a life lived, of a life spent. These are coats of memory – ethereal, capillaric, gaseous and changeable. Resembling avian motes, they settle gently on shoulders and one is cocooned in memories of absent bodies and the endurance of loss and belonging. Bound to the tactility of memory Pynor's coats marry the drives of Eros and Thanatos – the artist's obsessive toil is an evocation of the space of serene non-existence (it is here one breathes shadows). A long exhalation or a slight breeze shatters this revelry; memory is set adrift and flows off to settle elsewhere.

Throughout Pynor's work there is a doubling up, a juggernaut device intensifying one's experience, producing an affective awareness of her deliberate layering of realities. There are two coats, not one, so the viewer is forced to remain outside this relationship – it is only the space-between one is allowed to inhabit, a strange, tense space that is simultaneously comforting and dislocating. The coats of *Exhale* draw one into an intimate space only to be denied it. The viewer's experience of the *Canal St Martin* photographs is not dissimilar. It resembles the narrative of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* in which Marco Polo refuses to give Genghis Khan the one thing he wants – a description of Venice. Strangely, fragments of Venice are hidden in Polo's accounts of all the fictional cities he visits.

In all the works exhibited in *Breathing Shadows* Pynor's suspension of dichotomies leaves an unconscious undertow that at any moment and always threatens to transport one to *Elsewhere* – where shadows reside.

Jan Guy

<sup>1</sup> Note from Helen Pynor

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection* (trans Leon S. Roudiez), Columbia University Press, New York, 1982



*Canal St Martin, Series 1, 2004* (Detail from series of 41 images), c-type photo on Alupanel, 9 x 6 cm



*Canal St Martin, Series 1, 2004* (Detail from series of 41 images), c-type photo on Alupanel, 9 x 6 cm

Front: *Exhale, 2005* (Detail), knitted human hair, 198 x 165 x 75 cm  
Back/Left: *Canal St Martin, Series 2, 2005* (Detail from series of 44 images), c-type photo on Alupanel, 6 x 9 cm  
Back/Right: *Canal St Martin, Series 2, 2005* (Detail from series of 44 images), c-type photo on Alupanel, 6 x 9 cm



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