

Helen Pynor - Breath at GV Art



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Tom Jeffreys delights in the fusion of art, science and history in Helen Pynor's solo show at GV Art.



The conceptual abyss that had hitherto existed between the worlds of art and science is currently providing the curious and creative on both sides of the divide with very fertile ground indeed. It's now a long time since 1996, when the YBAs were in full vacuous swing, and the Sokal Affair seemed to crystallise a series of differences between the arts and the sciences that would perhaps never be reconciled. These days, thankfully, things are changing.

The [Wellcome Collection](#) must take a lot of credit for this, but there are others – places like Marylebone commercial art gallery [GV Art](#), who consistently put on shows that examine ideas of cross-pollination between the arts and the sciences. Their current exhibition, [Helen Pynor – Breath](#) – is a case in point: Pynor trained initially as a biologist, before completing a BA in Visual Arts from the University of Sydney, and much of her work involves extensive archival research and close collaboration with a variety of scientists.

Pynor's work has spanned a range of styles and subject matter, but two central continuous themes are water, as source of life, and the body – both as biological entity and social or cultural construct. For *Breath*, these two

elements combine. Although, here, the river becomes more a cause of death than a source of life, as the exhibition takes for its starting point archived newspaper reports of the hundreds and thousands of people who have drowned in the River Thames. Several of these cuttings are on display downstairs at GV Art and their presence provides a kind of contextual footing for works themselves.

What is striking here is the relationship between identity and anonymity that Pynor's large-scale photographic works bring out in typically crisp fashion. Information is pretty scant in some of these news pieces, which date back as far as 1804, while in others we learn the full names, ages and social positions of the deceased. The same is true of Pynor's Liquid Ground series: shot in large aquarium tanks, white shirts and dresses float, ghost-like, in darkly shimmering, greenish depths. Empty, they hint at bodies once within – individuals with their own unknowable narratives and identities. The only clear evidence of life are the various organs suspended, weightless, in the water: intestines, entrails, even a testicle. This is not the body as vehicle for individual identity, but nor is it something simply anatomical. What's more, in Pynor's hands, there's nothing grotesque here; these are images of great grace.

Similar ambivalence is evident in the attitude towards the Thames. Yes, it's caused all these many deaths – as I told me when [I visited her studio](#) a couple of weeks prior to the show opening: “I find the river very fearful, and kind of daunting as well. It's such a dangerous beast” – but water, is, of course, also essential to

A series of four works downstairs make this aspect clear: maps of London but painstakingly cut out to leave only roads and waterways, like the vital veins and arteries of our capital. It's no coincidence that the Thames runs imposingly through the centre – big and blue and blank.

The final part of the exhibition, and one of the most intriguing, is a pair of desks set up in a corner like in Helen's own Woolwich studio. Here, amid the bacofoil and models, diagrams, Polyfilla and laser-cut balsa wood, the artist's investigations into hearts, lungs and traditional ship-building techniques are presented as a work in progress. After researching nineteenth century blueprints in the Boat Plans Archive of the National Maritime Museum, Helen is producing a series of sculptural works of the human heart and lungs that incorporate these old processes.

These new works – which will be unveiled over the course of the exhibition – epitomise Pynor's ability to bring together the historical, the architectural and the scientific; all within a fresh, accessible, and innovative project. They also provide a clear forward drive, a hint of the future – for Pynor as for GV Art, and, one hopes, for cross-disciplinary thought in general.

[Helen Pynor - Breath](#) is at GV Art until 2nd July 2011.

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Liquid Ground 6 and 1, Helen Pynor ©2010. C-Type photographic prints on glass 160x11cm. Edition of 5 +1AP. Courtesy the artist and GV Art

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