



**Milk**  
Helen Pynor

23.10 – 22.11.2008

Opening reception 25.10.2008, Saturday 3-5pm

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**Front cover** – *Milk 1 (sweet pittosporum)*, 2008, 100 x 66cm, c-type photograph face-mounted on glass. **Middle panel** – *Milk 5 (tea tree)*, 2008, 100 x 66cm, c-type photograph face-mounted on glass. **Far left-hand panel** – *Milk 2 (Sydney red gum)*, 2008, 100 x 66cm, c-type photograph face-mounted on glass.

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## Pynor’s Lore

By Ashley Crawford

Helen Pynor’s latest body of work is unerringly beautiful. Budding native plants float in the ether, seeming to gently sway amidst the clouds, tenderly cocooned in fragrant tissue, romantic bouquets of red gum and wattle, a lover’s carefully arrayed gift.

But, as always with Pynor’s work, there is something amiss in these timelessly elegant works. In the past she has utilised the tissues and organs of the human body to suggest traditional means of attending to illness – at times, in this age of pharmaceutical-obsession, seeming so archaic as to sound like fairy-tales, in other eras no doubt perfectly sensible. In those works the organs hung in some form of viscous fluid, like the results of a painstaking autopsy. For all of the spooky materials, the love with which her work is arrayed made those works oddly palatable. Words were stitched from hair and tendrils appeared to drift and float into the surrounds, freed from gravity.

There are similar tendrils floating in these new works, but in this case they are the plants’ roots, not so much torn from terra firma as delicately removed. It is nigh impossible not to feel the delicacy of these root systems and to be reminded of the similarly complex structures of the human nervous system. Pynor herself has described the exposed roots as being almost the equivalent of “nakedness” but it is hard not to feel that the root systems are more than that. To be naked suggests a degree of vulnerability, but these root systems go far deeper, these are organic filaments that were never designed to be exposed, that have been flayed from the earth. They have been designed over millennia to dig deep into the soil and seek out the moisture from the darkness and to give succor to the leaves and flowers above.

For all of the intellectual curiosity that feeds into Pynor’s work, the results are always far more sensual than academic. There is a decidedly feminine sensibility at play here. While research may be the core initial motivation, it is the appearance, the delicacy, that remains tantamount. Simultaneously there is a distinctly surreal and almost alien aesthetic that arises. These could well be specimens collected by an alien race, delicately removed from terra, roots undamaged, somehow still flowering in their alien atmosphere.

Pynor’s works are somewhat reminiscent of the final scenes of the 1972 film *Silent Running* in which Earth’s last remaining forests are secured in greenhouse-like geodesic domes outside the orbit of Saturn. It is hoped to return them to an apparently barren Earth in order to reforest the planet, but such a plan becomes economically unfeasible and the resident botanist, played by Bruce Dern, is ordered to destroy the forests. He refuses and manages to jettison one dome to safety, dying in the process. In the sequel, released in 3008, the botanist is played by Helen Pynor who is trying to secure the dying traces of a fore-gone world.

Pynor’s choice of plants was guided by Dharawal medicinal remedies, passed on to her by the Aboriginal botanist and Dharawal man John Lennis (The Dharawal are the Indigenous people of what is now southern Sydney and the Illawara region). As with her previous work the embroidery at the top of each image gives us a more concrete interpretation, balancing out the ethereal nature of her floating world. For the Dharawal each of these plants has a very real function in the very real world. Pynor’s *Milk 4 (wattle)* is captioned “wattle – dysentery.” Sweet pittosporum, we discover, is used as a



poultice for swellings, Sydney red gum as a treatment for diarrhea. What we may casually put in a vase on the window-sill has distinctly pragmatic uses in the Dharawal world.

This is, perhaps, where the creeping sense of melancholia infuses Pynor’s work. Hers’ is a system of memory retrieval, an archeology of frayed knowledges. Throughout her oeuvre she has dredged for and then suggested the past, prior knowledge of how to treat the human body for its inevitable physical and psychic ailments.

Despite their literal subject, the human body is deeply imbedded in these works. The fluids that her plants float in have their strange genesis in digestive juices, mucus, bile and blood, the fluids that circulate in the body to absorb whatever goodness they can. But when things go terribly wrong the surrounding bush could supply succor to the suffering. Numerous solutions could be found to ease many ailments; menstrual problems treated with false sarsaparilla; headaches attended to using the paperbark plant – possibly a healthier solution than the contemporary addiction to Paracetamol and Neurofen.

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Helen Pynor wishes to thank:

The Dharawal Elders and people, and John Lennis, for providing information on Dharawal medicinal practices; Richard Luxton for his expertise in the realisation of this project; Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney for support of the project through Helen Pynor’s PhD candidature; Danny Kildare; Dominik Mersch.

**Middle panel** – *Milk 3 (bird’s nest fern)*, 2008, 100 x 66cm, c-type photograph face-mounted on glass.