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Breath, body parts and what lies beneath

15:10 6 May 2011

Art Exhibitions

Catherine de Lange, contributor



(Image: Helen Pynor)

One Monday afternoon in August 1804 a young woman decided to take her life by throwing herself into the canal in London's St James's park. "She was apparently about 20 years of age, is tall and beautiful, finely shaped and a delicate skin, auburn hair, and blue eyes; she had on a muslin gown, a chip hat, with a pink handkerchief about it," reported *The Observer* newspaper later that week. "Insanity, originating in a disappointment of a tender nature, was the cause of the rash act."

Detailed newspaper descriptions like this one, of people who lost their lives to the river Thames, have come to haunt artist [Helen Pynor](#). Missing the powerful landscapes that dominated the scenery in her native Australia when she first moved to London, Pynor found herself drawn to the might of the river, powerful and moving, yet she was "overwhelmed" to discover the huge

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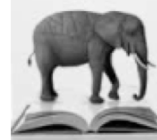
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number of lives that were lost to it. She began to research these stories, trawling through newspaper cuttings in the British Library, and couldn't help but imagine who these people were. Copies of some of these articles now feature in Pynor's latest exhibition, "Breath", at the [GV Gallery](#) in London.

Although drowning was the starting point for "Breath", Pynor's work is about life, not death. The best part of the exhibition is a series of striking photographic images called *Liquid Ground*. Each one depicts an underwater scene, in which bodily organs drift out of waterlogged clothing. The melancholy images are at once shocking and peaceful, intimate but anonymous. By placing an organ alongside an item of clothing, Pynor seeks to give back some form of cultural identity to our internal body parts, which we tend to view in a detached, clinical way. Instead, she wants to personalize these organs, to give them a history, to remind people of what they have inside whilst staying away from gory details or sensationalism. The photographs also evoke questions about identity - to whom do these floating clothes and organs belong? Do we even own our organs? And if so, what part of our identity to they represent and do we lose this if we give one away?



(Image: Helen Pynor)

We are accustomed to experiencing organs preserved and stiffened by formaldehyde, which makes the strong resonance between the flowing garments and fabrics in the images all the more surprising. In *Liquid Ground 1*, for example, a stomach emulates the soft fabric qualities of the chiffon dress out of which it floats. In other works, strings of intestines seem to intermingle with the loose threads on torn clothes. The still images capture the delicate movement of these objects as they were photographed sinking into the water. This fragility and movement in the images evokes a sense of lives lost, and of the delicate nature of these hidden organs that keep us going.

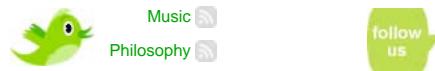
It would be easy for an artist to construct crude metaphors between some of these themes - rivers and lungs for example. Pynor manages to steer well clear of these, and instead uses her genuine passion and unique insight to make subtle and thought provoking connections. In a week when the world considers what it means to view images of death, and why relinquishing bodies to the sea makes death all the more permanent, this exhibition frames these issues in a whole new light.

Exhibition Information

Breath
GV Gallery, London
Until 2 July 2011



tags [drowning](#) [Helen Pynor](#) [organs](#)

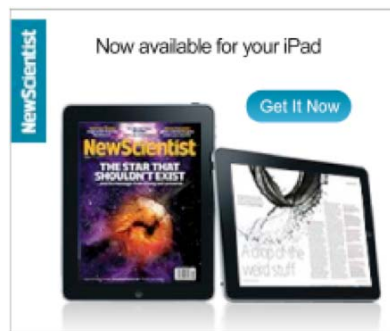


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