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## LIQUID GROUND

INTERVIEW JULIET GAUCHAT

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Helen Pynor is an Australian artist whose practice incorporates sculpture and more recently photography. Drawing on her dual backgrounds in Biology and Visual Arts, Pynor's works explore the interiority of the body and other living organisms. In her recent photographic series, *Liquid Ground*, Pynor has created a suite of Type-C prints that are face mounted to glass, creating a cool, watery atmosphere. Her images of visceral bodily organs floating through gossamer garments underwater are unerringly beautiful and melancholic, in narratives past and present.

Pynor was the winner of the RBS Emerging Artist Award 2009 and also the joint winner of the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award 2008. *Liquid Ground* was on show during November/December 2010, at Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney.

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- Helen Pynor  
*Liquid Ground 2* (2010)  
C-Print, diasec on glass,
- *Liquid Ground 1* (2010)  
C-Print, diasec on glass
- *Liquid Ground 4* (2010)  
C-Print, diasec on glass

All images courtesy the artist  
and DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY

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**Science and the human body play a fundamental role in your works and your research. You have completed a Bachelor of Science (Hons), a Bachelor of Visual Arts and a PhD in Philosophy. Do you see yourself as an artist, a scientist or both?**

You could say that both of these disciplines are motivated by a sense of curiosity and spirit of enquiry, although the constraints and methodologies used in each discipline are entirely different. In my case my methodologies and the questions that I ask are very much framed within an artistic practice, not a scientific one, hence I see myself as an artist.

**Most of the materials in your works are organic, including human organs, hair and blood. When did you first become interested in using these materials?**

I've been using organic materials ever since I studied sculpture at undergraduate level. I've always been drawn to organic materials or forms, even before I had a fully formed notion of what I was dealing with in my practice. I've always been interested in working with the meanings and implied histories embedded in these materials, and for me there's a tactile pleasure in these materials, even in some of the more squeamish ones.

**What is the inspiration behind your most recent series, *Liquid Ground*?**

There are several layers to this body of work, some which came earlier and more consciously and some which crept in later. The initial inspiration was my experience of living and working besides the Thames River in east London over the past year. Although sometimes pictured as a benign and picturesque river the Thames is extremely dangerous and treacherous, especially in its tidal reaches from east London to the coast. I became interested in the thousands of people who have lost their lives through drowning in the river, especially in the case of accidental drowning. I spent time in the newspaper archives of the British Library researching incidents of accidental drowning over the last two centuries and turned up a litany of stories and circumstances in which the river becomes an animated character in a human tragedy. I was interested in the collective experience of this, rather than in any particular incident.

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As the work developed it became more loosely tethered to this material and began to address my ongoing concerns about the ambiguity of our status as biological and as cultural beings, and the impossibility of drawing a clear line between these. Even at the cellular and genomic level there is no clear line between the influence of cultural and biological processes in our bodies or psychological selves.

Another concern that emerged was with the way we perceive and experience the interior of our bodies. Evocations of the interior body tend to be either shocking and bloody, or hyper clinical. I'm interested in rendering the interior body in ways that avoid these representations, which I think distance us from our interiors. In this work I attempt to foster a sense of wonder about our interior selves without avoiding their biological nature, which can be confronting.

**Your images are beautiful and alluring but at the same time morbid and disorientating. How do you construct them?**

I try to maintain some kind of balance between something that is alluring and something that is biologically 'real' enough to take the images beyond being simply attractive. My engagement with fabrics, water, and biological materials during the construction of the images is important to me as it lends a tactile and sculptural dimension to the making of the work. It's important to me that the final works depict something that is possible in the real world, so that they don't hover in the space of pure fantasy.

**You have won a number of prestigious grants and artist awards over the years, which have enabled you to travel and conduct research. You recently received the Australia Council Visual Arts New Work Grant and an Interarts Project Grant in collaboration with artist Peta Clancy. This grant will be used to fund your joint project, *The Body is a Big Place*, exploring the phenomenology and medicine of organ transplantation. How did this project come about?**

This project began as conversations between Peta and myself, when we identified many sympathies between our conceptual interests and our aesthetic sensibilities. We began quite speculatively with the intention of exploring the complex and ambiguous responses people have to organ transplants, especially people who have received donated organs. We were interested in the ontological and phenomenological questions raised by organ transplants. Since starting the conversation the project has attracted good interest and support, and we are currently at SymbioticA in Perth undertaking a residency to further develop the project. We will be exhibiting the work to date at Performance Space in Sydney at the end of 2011.

**Finally, what would you like your legacy to be?**

Ultimately I'd like my work to contribute to the re-imagining of our own interior bodies and the re-imagining of other life forms. I believe that our culture has inscribed many distortions about the nature of our visceral selves, and those of other organisms, that have had profoundly damaging consequences to our own physical and emotional health, and to the way we relate to the world around us. In my PhD thesis I drew heavily on a number of philosophers of biology who are contributing to this re-imagining, by emphasizing the enormous inventive and improvisatory capacities of biological organisms, from microorganisms through to us. I hope that my work can embody some of these notions and, alongside my own imaginings, to contribute to the reframing of our understandings of life. I want to present a notion of living beings that affirms their capacities without avoiding or sanitising the pain inherent to the experience of being alive. ●

