

HELEN PYNOR

# Shadowbreath



**Catalogue Essay** Jan Guy

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**Cover Image** Two hands (detail) 2005 Knitted human hair 480 x 270 x 150mm

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# Shadowbreath



Linden - St Kilda Centre for Contemporary Arts  
Gallery 2

**25 March - 17 April 2005**

26 Acland Street St Kilda VIC 3182 Phone 03 9209 6560



# Shadowbreath

An Exhibition by Helen Pynor

## [Breathing Shadows]

A catalogue essay by Jan Guy

We do not see it start, and yet it always starts the same way, that is, it flees the object nearby and right away it is far off, elsewhere, in the space of elsewhere.

What is Shadowbreath, what is the shadow of breath? Except on a crisp winter day breath is translucent. Like the motes that appear in rays of sunlight, it is always there, but rarely seen. Perhaps the shadow of breath is firmer than breath itself, one cannot see it, but feels it. Shadow and breath are caught in webs of haecceity - at times visceral, at times imperceptible. Such are the objects of Helen Pynor.

Coats 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 neither object or subject, repelling one's desire to touch yet compulsively attracting the same. [I remember stroking the hair of my mother, as she laid not long dead ñ the hair sparse and softly damp with sweat.] They are before and after language, their matter is fragile and ephemeral yet remains long after the body's death. The body becomes a secondary skin, a garment infused with personal meaning birthed by experience. If for Pynor clothing is the language of the body, clothing is the body; then in these coats there is elegy and living monument.

Woven with a spacious knit these garments are barely there and yet coloured from a rich deep crimson to transparent grey the hue seems to drain from them like life from the dying.

They vaporise as if a slow heat has been applied. This coupled with the space-between bound to the weave is the process, time passing - the hours of the artist's 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; reminiscent of Deleuze's lines of flight. Resembling avian motes, they settle gently on shoulders and one is cocooned in memories of absent bodies and the endurances of loss and belonging. Anchored 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 breathe shadows). A long exhalation or a slight breeze shatters this revelry; memory is set adrift and flows off to settle elsewhere.

Photographs are like empty clothes, they are the trace of time, an echo of the past they hold a space that is imaginary that is no longer there, but ever there. In Pynor's case, the space they hold seems to infinitely recede. [I am reminded of an anonymous nineteenth century photograph of a shark's egg. The small, cool, blue photograph *Poisonous Sores* appears as a window and conduit to the elsewhere space where the coats, revelry and memory reside. The embroidered handwritten text seems to float in a pre-embryonic fluid before time and space, yet a space that seems more real than the Real. This is the space of Bachelard's miniature - a topophilic experience. Pynor captures the initial movement of the act of writing, like the knitting of the coats she unravels the quotidian and its history. The experience of the image is vertiginous, one is thrown into a weave of the present, one's own past and a past seemingly outside oneself. One is asked to bare witness to the first recording of the formulaic script, to the physicalities of the words' meanings in a similar manner to the way the coats' knit evokes absent labouring bodies. And then to futilely watch as the text dissolves into the elsewhere space like the use of a poultice to cure death. Meaning is washed away and the signature of the individual is erased by a collective scribe.

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. While the coats draw one into an intimate space of personal memory, the photograph *Poisonous Sores* transports one to an eternal expanse. But at any moment these positions are likely to be reversed. The photographed threads of handwritten text, heavily laden with moisture, mirror the calcified, brittle material of the garments.

The body parts: heart, hands, lungs hang like clothes drying on a line; again reflecting the coats - connecting inside and outside, spirit to body. This doppelganger affect reveals the themes of life and death as cyclic and endless.

In this exhibition everything is fossilized yet everywhere allusions to water. Where there is barrenness there is also abundance. Pynor's suspension of dichotomies leaves an unconscious undertow here that at any moment threatens to transport one to Elsewhere - the place of knowing, the place of loss, the place of belonging.

Gaston Bachelard **The Poetics of Space** Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, p.184

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

A line of flight is a rupture in a rhizomatous line. While still connected, it allows new lines to be formed (the processes of thought, memories, imaginings could be said to operate in this way). See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari **A Thousand Plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia** (trans.B.Massumi), Athlone Press, London, 1988. Bachelard, pp.148-182.

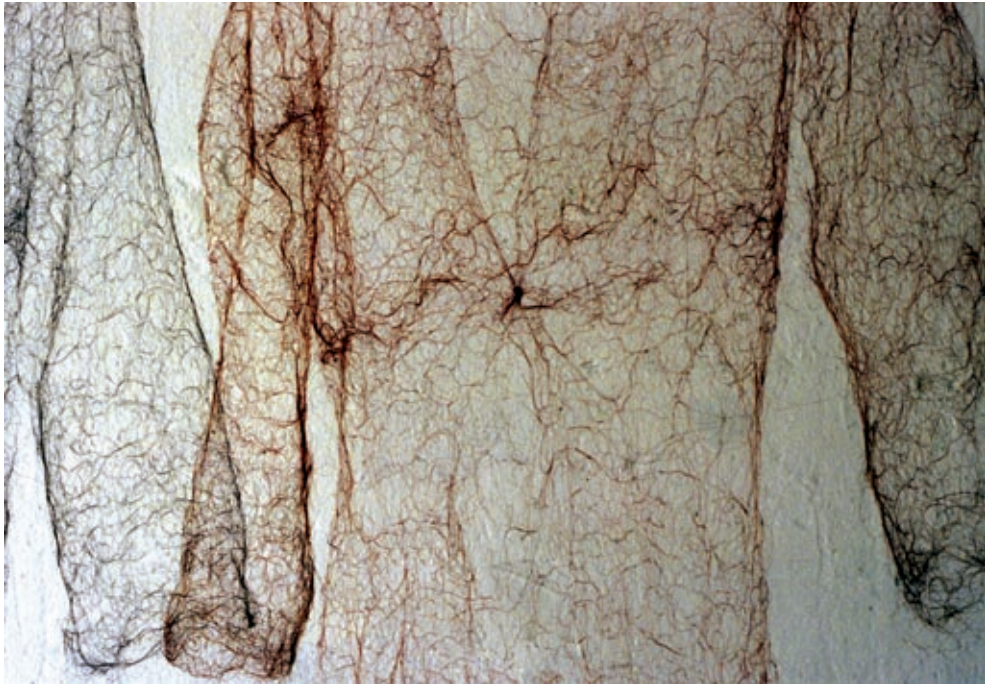
**Dust** (detail)

2005

Knitted human hair

300 x 500 x 250mm





**Poisonous Sores**

2005

Colour Photograph

240 x 360mm

Photograph by Andrew Worssam

Risonous sores

Put a poultice made from bread  
soaked in boiling water between  
two pieces of muslin and apply  
directly to the sore

## Helen Pynor

### SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

- 2005-7 PhD (Visual Art), Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle
- 2004-5 Cultural Projects Officer, Willoughby City Council, Willoughby.
- 2001-4 Studio-based practice at L'Imprimerie Studios, Paris.
- 1999 Guest Lecturer, School of Design, University of Western Sydney, Werrington.
- 1996 Tutor, Design Studio, Foundation Studies, Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle.
- 1995 Visual Arts Facilitator, Royal North Shore Hospital & Community Mental Health Service, Chatswood
- 1994 Tutor, Sculpture, Performance & Installation, Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle.
- 1990-3 Bachelor of Visual Art (Sculpture, Installation & Photography), Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle.
- 1988-9 Art Photography Certificate, National Art School, East Sydney.
- 1982-6 Bachelor of Science (1st Class Hons), (Biology) Macquarie University.
- 1964 Born in Sydney.

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 Shadowbreath, Linden Gallery, Melbourne.
- 2005 Site-specific project-in-progress, Canal St Martin, Paris, France. Collaboration with Cemagref (Paris) & CSIRO.
- 1996 Defence, Artspace, The Gunnery, Woolloomooloo.
- 1994 The Body Crypta, Selenium Gallery, Redfern.  
Worth It, Pendulum Gallery, Redfern.
- 1993 Untitled installation, 144 Cleveland Street, Chippendale.

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2006 Antipodes Paris Exchange Exhibition, l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris.
- 2005 Antipodes Paris Exchange Exhibition, Sydney College of the Arts Gallery, Rozelle.
- 2004 Première Vue, Passage de Retz Contemporary Art Museum, Paris, France.  
Curated by Michel Nuridsany, critic/writer for Le Figaro.  
Luxe de Luxe, Avenue K, Kuala Lumpur. Curated by Polyptyque Ingénierie Culturelle, Paris.
- 2003 Portes Ouvertes, L'Imprimerie Gallery, Paris, France.
- 1996 Enough, Bankstown Square, Bankstown.
- 1995 Artful Park, Centennial Park, Sydney.  
Sydney Alternative Art '95, Australian High Commission, Singapore.
- 1994 T.I.P., Bankstown Square, Bankstown.  
Artspace Open, Artspace, The Gunnery, Woolloomooloo.
- 1993 The Second Time I Lost My Leg, It Was Stolen, Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle.
- 1993 Unresolved, Airspace Gallery, Redfern.
- 1992 Brown Paper Show, Allen Street Gallery, Glebe.  
Value, Allen Street Gallery, Glebe.
- 1991 Natura Morta, NCA Gallery, Darlinghurst.
- 1990 Ask Iris, Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle.

#### RESIDENCIES & PUBLIC ART COMMISSIONS

- 2005-6 12-month research-based exchange project between l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, and Sydney College of the Arts.
- 2005 4 month Artist Residency, The Gunnery, Woolloomooloo. Canal St Martin Project.
- 2002 Stanton Library Foyer Project. Cm'd by North Sydney Council.
- 2002 Aqua-marine, Ernest Place, Crows Nest. Cmíd by Australia Council & North Sydney Council.
- 2001 Mental Health Project, Mt Druitt Community Health Centre, Mt Druitt. Cm'd NSW Dept Health.
- 2000 Gaining Ground, Traxside Health Centre, Campbelltown. Cm'd NSW Dept Juvenile Justice.
- 1999 Newtown Bin Project, King Street, Newtown. Cm'd by South Sydney & Marrickville Councils.
- 1998-01 Artist-in-Residence, The Children's Hospital, Westmead. Funded by NSW Dept Health.
- 1998 Imagine, Parramatta Road, Parramatta. Cmíd by Inner Metropolitan Region of Councils.
- 1997 Crossways, Ernest Place, Crows Nest. Cmíd by Australia Council & North Sydney Council.
- 1995 Waste Not Waste, EcoDesign Foundation, Rozelle & Kuring-gai Town Hall.  
Commissioned by the Australia Council & The EcoDesign Foundation.

#### AWARDS, GRANTS & SCHOLARSHIPS

- 2005-7 University Postgraduate Award, University of Sydney
- 2004 Marketing Grant, National Association of the Visual Arts (NAVA).
- 2002 Marketing Grant, National Association of the Visual Arts (NAVA).
- 1998 Community Cultural Development Grant, Australia Council for the Arts.  
Professional Development Grant, Australia Council for the Arts.
- 1996 Community Cultural Development Grant, Australia Council for the Arts.
- 1995 Community Cultural Development Grant, Australia Council for the Arts.  
Community, Environment, Art & Design Grant, Australia Council for the Arts.
- 1994 Marketing Grant, National Association of the Visual Arts (NAVA).
- 1993 Shirbin Bursary, University of Sydney.  
Cultural Grant, University of Sydney.  
Cultural Grant, University of Sydney.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY/PUBLISHED PAPERS & CONFERENCES

- 2005 avenue K Gone Luxe de Luxe, Adlin Rosli, Klue, Kuala Lumpur, Feb
- 2004 Helen Pynor, catalogue essay, Michel Nuridsany, Première Vue, Passage de Retz, Paris.  
Helen Pynor par Marc Perrimond, Marc Perrimond (unpublished essay).
- 2003 Art and the Language of Wellbeing in Adolescent Health Care, Penny Thwaite, David Bennett,  
Helen Pynor & Helen Zigmond, Annals, Academy of Medicine Singapore, vol. 32 (1).
- 2001 Art and the Language of Wellbeing in Adolescent Health Care, David Bennett, Helen Zigmond,  
Helen Pynor & Penny Thwaite, Invited paper, 7th International Congress on Adolescent Health,  
Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.  
Totally Mosaic, Ali Benton, SBS Web Magazine.

- 2000 Nurturing Creativity - A Hospital Based Adolescent Program, Penny Thwaite, Helen Pynor, Alison Marshall & David Bennett, Symposium paper, University of Newcastle Arts-In-Health symposium.  
Nurturing Creativity in Hospital - The Evolution of the Youth Arts Program, Helen Pynor, Penny Thwaite, Alison Marshall & David Bennett, Workshop paper, 3rd Pacific Rim Conference of the International Association for Adolescent Health, Lincoln University, New Zealand.
- 1997 Newtown Wants to Clean Up Its Act, Winsome Byrne, Sydney Morning Herald, Dec 9.  
Artful Protest: Review of the Tradition of Environmental Art in Australia, Julia Jones, Real Time, Aug/Sept.  
Smashing Tiles and Laying Pathways in the Crossways Public Art Project, Helen Pynor & Laudy Germanos, poster presentation, 7th THEMHS Conference Sydney.
- 1996 Waste Not Waste, Neil Blenkiron, Renew, Oct/Dec.  
Waste Not Waste, Caroline Pidcock, Architecture Australia, Sept/Oct.  
Defences, catalogue essay, Samantha Donnelly, 'Defence' installation, Artspace.  
Ecology, Design & Developing a New Thinking, Chang Jing Er, Sing Tao, Hong Kong, Mar 20.  
Mapping: Motions, In Waste Not Waste, with S. Donnelly, Eds. Tony Fry & Anne-Marie Willis.
- 1994 The Space of the Fold, catalogue essay, Mark Jackson, 'Ship of Fools' Exhibition Program, Selenium Gallery.

#### REPRESENTED

Represented in Paris by Polyptyque Ingèniere Culturelle.  
Private collections, France and Australia.

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