

The poetic voice is strong in Helen Pynor's art; perhaps because she continually seeks to retain and meld qualities of the acutely visceral with notions of ethereality and the infinite. This approach results in objects and images that are, today, uncommonly fascinating; precisely because they persuade the viewer to enter a space that seems untimely to the contemporary eye that is habitually focused on the facade and an Absolute Now.



TIDES OF HAIR

Head Cold (detail), from red sea blue water series
2007

C-type photographic print on Fujitran, face-mounted on glass
173 x 39cm

Courtesy Dianne Tanzer Gallery

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Art

A series of hair sculptures was the first work of Pynor's I had seen in a decade, though an early photograph of the artist's, hanging in the hallway outside my bedroom door, is engrained in my memory. The artist was nearing the end of a residency at the Gunnery studios above Artspace in Sydney when I visited her. Seeming to float in the centre of the room were the two coats of Exhale, painstakingly knitted from human hair ranging in hue from brunette to Titian to silver grey. A gentle, occasional breeze moved them as if still inhabited by bodies and the combination of their emptiness and the hours of repetitive, silent labour that produced them created a deep sense of melancholy. Very little contemporary art has this kind of emotional power and in all honesty the last work to have this effect on me was Anselm Kiefer's installation Women of the Revolution exhibited at the 1992 Sydney Biennale.

Since this initial re-encounter, Pynor has continued to knit the body and its metaphors, each work a deeper layer - from clothing to external structures like the empty skin of hands to the internal organs including heart and lungs. And while the coats evoke melancholy, others, such as the matching 'his and hers' undergarments, seem humorous, but strangely the response comes from the same place. All are made with a compassion for the process of living - the quotidian effort of existence, the body's wear and tear and ultimately, the debris we leave behind, our personal and cultural histories. Their intensive labour coupled with their ephemeral quality captures the duality of human existence - the brevity of an individual life and the longevity of cultural memory.

HELEN PYNOR

Story_Jan Guy

Constipation, from red sea blue water series
2007

C-type photographic print on Fujitran, face-mounted on glass
173 x 39cm

Courtesy Dianne Tanzer Gallery

Constipation
Helen Pynor, 2007
www.linomagazine.com.au



Materiality is perhaps the most important aspect of Pynor's work and the artist freely admits that it is often the material that comes before the form. It is the associations she links to matter that become the catalyst for ideas and ultimately the finished work. This desire to find primary, elemental meaning through the physical, also ties much of the artist's work to a sense of place.

Pynor lived in Paris for several years. Prior to this move she had been working on public art and community cultural development projects in Australia for five years. Now, in France, this was an impossibility, relying as it does on a deep knowledge of specific histories and spaces. Pynor took this as an opportunity to return to her personal art practice and conceived what would later become the Canal St. Martin project.



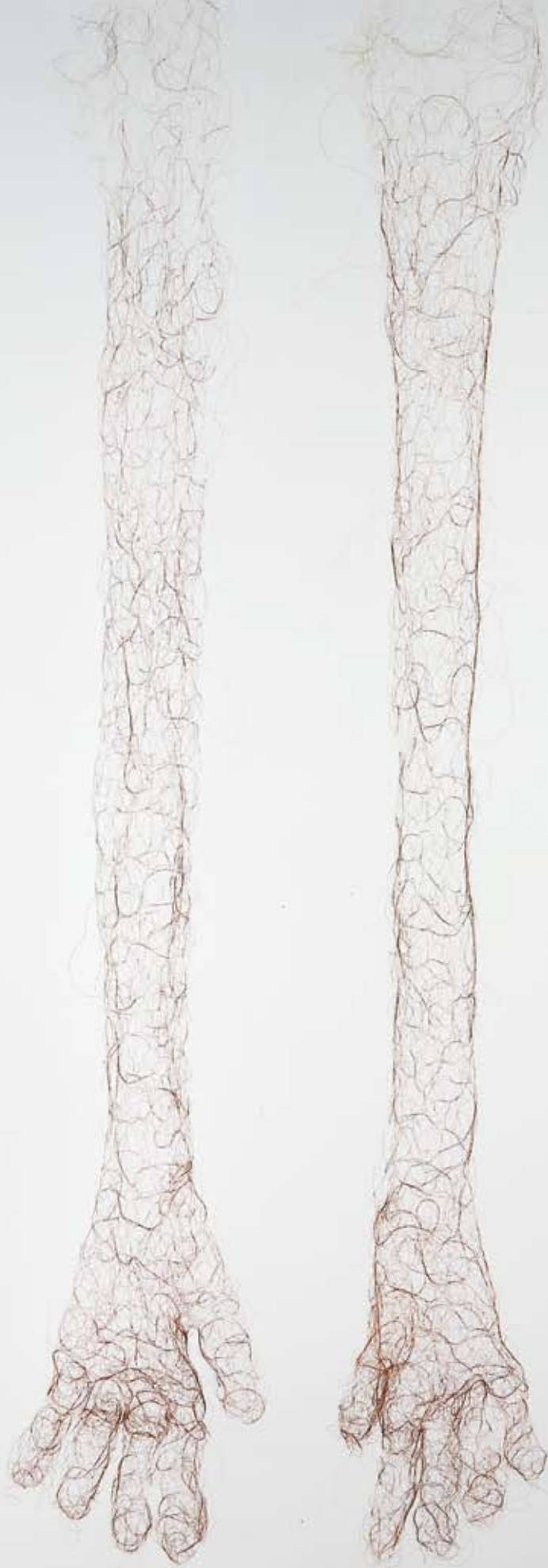
Exhale
2005
Knitted human hair
198 x 120 x 70cm
Photograph Paul Green

The Canal St. Martin, constructed in the nineteenth century, is an unnatural part of Paris's history, but it is also a space of refuge and survival, an ecological haven for many insignificant urban dwellers - plants and animals that are often lost to the city. It is no wonder that Pynor chose this inbetween space as her subject as it reflects her initial experience of Paris. Its creation spanning a year, her continual return to the same positions and the process of recording the subtle and often imperceptible changes of specific moments, became the artist's refuge in a foreign city.

This work is born of the desire to provide anchorage for the artist; for the viewer it creates a relentless need to reorient oneself, to find a fictional solid ground. Simultaneously, one peers down into the canal's reflections (the world melts, one cannot grasp it) and looks up into a cold treescape (watery images become arborescent vapours). Still in others, one is constantly displaced - the waters of the canal become dust devils that command the fallen leaves (the world inverted). The viewer revisits the Antipodean artist's experience of a new city - disorientating, reflective and foreign.



Exhale (detail)
2005
Knitted human hair
198 x 130 x 70cm
Photograph Danny Kildare



During 2005 - 2006 Pynor was involved in a collaborative exchange project organised by the artist Tom Arthur that included several young artists from Australia and France. The French artists visited Australia and in turn, the Australians went to France. In both countries an exhibition of works was held that emerged from their cultural exchanges. Pynor produced the photograph *La Réunion*. Aesthetically, the work with its crisp lines and vivid colour appears quite different from her other works, but the recurring motif of water dominates it and she has used this to speak eloquently and humorously about the difficult act of collaboration and dialogue.

Photographing the group of French and Australian artists (herself included) became a ritual of reconciliation and like earlier works, such as those involving the collection of water samples from Centennial Park in Sydney and her own menstrual blood, the process became as important as the final work. This is an integral part of all of Pynor's work - to begin with the unknown, for the process to make the unexplored familiar, and to find resolution by speaking the unspoken (both cultural and personal) through her art.

Two Hands
2005

Knitted human hair
60 x 25 x 14cm
Photograph Danny Kildare
Courtesy private collection

Pynor's series titled *red sea blue water*, recently exhibited at Dianne Tanzer Gallery in Melbourne, echoes past material obsessions, but here hair and water come together. Each of the seven glass panes holds a photographic image of an essential organ set adrift like a deadly jellyfish in a vast illusory sea. Staring into the reflective surfaces the viewer's interior is revealed, they too are unanchored, their grounding dissolved into the shallow depth of each hypnotic image.

Above each organ floats text written in tangled hair strands that spells out a cure or balm for a specific disease or illness connected to the disembodied organ that hangs below. The ancients prophesied by reading the organs of sacrificed animals. Today the medical professions, both East and West, use detailed maps of our inner structures, borne of millennium of fascination with the human body, to divine futures. Such prurient curiosity is partially sated in the strangely beautiful *red sea blue water*. Here, egotistical constitutions are stripped away to disclose our visceral fragility, our being in the world. We are examined meat, but also the flesh of mysteries. These are not images of surety, but the uncontrollable tides of existence - birth, illness, death and evolution. [GH](#)

www.helenpynor.com

Jan Guy is a lecturer in Object Art and Design at Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney



La Réunion
2006

C-type photographic print on aluminium
55 x 90cm