

DOMINIK
MERSCH
GALLERY



LIQUID GROUND
HELEN PYNOR



On *Liquid Ground*

Anne Ferran

Very close to the end of Jane Campion's 1993 film *The Piano*, Ada and George are in the waka, on their way to a new life together, when Ada suddenly insists that the piano be jettisoned. The Maori who are paddling the canoe heave it over the side—a splash—and now you see it from underwater, its great weight bearing it down. There is the rope they didn't bother to cut, only to loosen, paying out over the side. Next, in a sequence almost too swift to recall, Ada is snatched out of the canoe, the rope wrapped around her foot. She's being dragged down, her skirt ballooning above her like a parachute, the piano rushing to the bottom as if it can't wait to get there. At first she does nothing, it seems like she'll drown, twice bubbles rush from her mouth. But finally she reacts, reaches down to untie herself. She can't, she kicks and kicks herself free of her shoe. We see it empty and the rope wound around it, sinking. Then the camera is out of the water and Ada is rising to the surface, the image broken, swirling. She breaks the surface and they are alongside, in the water, to help her.

Remembering that sequence from the film, I realise that in my mind the rope connecting Ada to the piano has become, or always was, the cord. It is drawing her back to a fluid time, before memory, when she and her mother were united. Until the moment when she finally breaks free it is not certain that she will choose life. Afterwards she seems surprised—her will chose, she says, but she might just as well have said her body.

Australian artist Helen Pynor's new work, *Liquid Ground*, takes drowning as its point of origin. She began the series while living and working at Woolwich, beside the River Thames. Under the circumstances it is not hard to imagine that turbulent river finding its way into the artist's consciousness and lodging there. As

it happens one of the worst disasters ever to occur on the river took place at Woolwich in 1878; seven hundred people died. Pynor's newspaper research turned up a litany of other accidental or unexplained deaths by drowning in the Thames. In these accounts boats collide, capsize, sink, individuals fall overboard, become caught in weeds or are swept over weirs. At times a stranded or floating body is the first and only sign of anything amiss. The language of those reports vividly conveys the river's menace: *the black swirling waters, racing currents, dense fog, vicious undertows, the mile-wide stretch of water.*

Pynor's photographs unexpectedly render—or should it be rend—the drowned body as an uncanny pairing of garment (second skin) and organs, suspended in water. The elements are entwined, the bodily organs floating out through various openings in diaphanous cloth. Every picture is beautiful yet they make uneasy viewing. To see the body thus depicted—turned inside out—is a surreal experience, made all the more uncanny by the dispassionate eye of the photographic medium. While the clothes are life-like, and the entrails amazingly so, as a pair they are surprising and strange. There is a faint whiff of forensics in the way each image is centred in the frame; a police photographer might have done it this way.

Two other memorable recollections of the dead come to mind: Susan Hiller's *Monument* (1980–81) and Roni Horn's more recent *Still Water / Another Water* (2000). In *Monument*, the artist's voice breathed in the seated listener's ear, telling the stories of individuals whose deaths were memorialised on the photographed plaques behind. Hiller's declining to represent the body in this work was reasoned and strategic; she chose instead to insert the viewer's body at the

physical centre of the work. Captivated by the intimacy of her recorded voice, it was easy for them to forget how prominently placed they were. In *Another Water* Roni Horn's double-page colour spreads of the Thames show the river's surface in close-up detail. This format is ruptured every so often by a full page text relating details of a suicide by drowning. The photographs are beautiful and varied but they necessarily conceal more than they reveal. It is left to the intricate textual embroidery of footnotes, clustered at the bottom of the photographs, to supply the depth the images lack. Pynor subscribes, intuitively one suspects, to a similar imperative to conceal or to absent the body but she goes about it quite differently. There is an echo of the other artists' restraint and visual reticence, but a visual bravado and a strong sensory pleasure are at work as well.

Her use of water as a medium is key here. In the past, water has allowed her to perform extraordinary aesthetic feats, comparable to pyrotechnics in the air-world. In a past series, *Milk* (2008), exploding clouds of pigment—swirls of intense colour shading to milky white—unfurl in the heavier (and slower) than air medium. In *Liquid Ground* light falling from above creates a sense of watery depth which, being vertical, is quite different from the receding depth we see in air.

With water all around, no vantage point, the view occluded, these images offer no clue to identity or location (unless you count the occasional passing shoal of fish). The absence of markers is a departure for Pynor. *Milk* included texts (European plant names

and their Indigenous Australian medicinal uses) intricately woven from strands of hair. Those texts were tiny, a punctuation point in an expanse of greenish grey. Now they have vanished. Their disappearance suggests that these new images are only lightly tethered to specific circumstances, that the facts were more of a prompt or pretext for her ongoing concerns with the intertwining of biology and culture.

Pynor's intricate objects are in a state of double suspension, caught in the moment of their photographic capture and in the watery medium they inhabit. This may explain a sense of the precarious about them: either a current will carry them away or they will fall prey to the next shoal of hungry fish. Yet they seem oddly calm, and calming, as well. There is a sense in all Pynor's work that water is the familiar, old element, and air the new one in which we humans have had to learn to breathe and to live. By choosing water as her medium Pynor has given her work an added measure of beauty. That would be contribution enough, but I think she intends the water to do quite a lot more than this. She means it to engage the viewer on a deeper level, for the water molecules in our bodies to respond to the watery medium in the pictures, an appeal to a sensory process we do not even know is available to us until it happens, and perhaps not even then. The eye sees and the mind registers the object immersed in water, but something else conditions the response, a sensorial sympathy is awakened. It is for the viewer to decide if this awakening arises from a deeper place, or a much older one.

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Front cover – *Liquid Ground 1*
Middle panel – *Liquid Ground 3*
Far left-hand panel – *Liquid Ground 2*