

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

Undercurrent

Helen Pynor and Bronwyn Thompson

Curated by Noella Lopez



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In our increasingly ocularcentric culture, we've come to assume that by visualising the body, internally and externally, we will access the truth of the person. We photograph ourselves obsessively and build and confirm our identities by reference to the images that surround us; we try to assuage our anxieties about the internal workings of our bodies by using ever more sophisticated medical imaging devices to look at it. Yet, rather than bringing us closer to the truth of what it means to be human, this fixation on the image may serve to distance us from the pleasure and wonder of embodied experience. 'Undercurrent' brings together two artists intrigued by the question of how to render the image flesh. Experimenting in different ways with the spatial possibilities of the image, each artist is informed by the broad feminist project that critiques the privileging of mind over matter, and that explores alternatives to the objectifying power of the gaze. The body - with its inherent discomforts and desires - and its representation take centre stage, as do the aesthetics of beauty and wonder.

Helen Pynor's *red sea blue water* (2007) comprises seven life-size panels of dark green glass leaning against the wall. Embedded in each is an eerie photographic image-composite: a hand embroidered text whose tendrils reach like plumes of smoke towards a bodily organ - lung, heart, intestine - apparently suspended in water. Pynor is interested in exploring ways to represent the intersection between cultural memory and the body, to trigger the somatic recognition of the past (with its implications for personal accountability). In this work, she brings together home remedies for common ailments - the names, such as 'Constipation' and 'Tooth Abscess' connote the everyday

indiscretions whereby our bodies insist on their material presences - and the afflicted organs rendered with clinical realism, juxtaposing the dispassionate language of science with the personal language of anecdote and folklore. However, there is not always a direct match between organ and remedy, a slippage that suggests the imprecision of language, even that of science. As the viewer is drawn in close by the work's intricate aesthetics, the imaged organs appear to jut into their real life equivalents, yet they remain insubstantial, translucent and ethereal. The work thus evokes the question of the relationship between how we see 'the body' and how we experience our own bodies.

Given the exhaustive visual mapping of the body's interior facilitated by technology and medical specialisation, we trust less in what we ourselves feel and increasingly discount the homespun community wisdom captured in Pynor's text. As Walter Benjamin so astutely observed, the work of the camera is analogous to the surgeon's scalpel, cutting deep into our reality. In one sense, Pynor is attempting to disassociate the work of the photograph with that of the reality-wielding scalpel, to remind us of alternate ways to access the truth of the human subject. In her sculptural photo-installation, the certitude of science as represented by the realistic photographs of actual bodily matter is compromised by the cultural heritage of traditional medicine, as well by the aesthetic treatment that accentuates the constantly shifting nature of reality, its perpetual diffusion, drift and porosity.

While Pynor's work invites us to consider the objectification through the image of the body's interior in the discourse of science, Bronwyn

Thompson brings us back to the body's exterior, and the role the image has played in fixing notions of self. As an image maker who cut her teeth in commercial photography and its demands for fully constructed identities – the blushing bride, the happy family - her quest (however elusive it might prove) is for a way of representing that does not embalm the subject and reify being. In the video installation *I'll be your girl* (2006) Thompson eschews the photograph as fetish. Instead she aims to let the image flow and stimulate the viewer's full sensorium, through the low frequency soundscape that resonates in the chest, the white drapes that envelop the body, and the unsettling imagery that is not at all as it first appears.

Thompson's video deploys aesthetics familiar from representations of childhood innocence: tutu tulle, white linen, sunlit interiors. Sitting on the edge of a bed, a little girl whose waist long hair partly covers her naked upper body gently caresses a smaller doppelganger. Her languorous movements suggest wistfulness, but as they gradually grow in purpose, her caresses transform into smacks. The action climaxes with the revelation of the doll's limblessness, before the denouement sees girl and doll collapse together, hair intertwinning.

In this work, Thompson creates a metaphor for the violence that the image wreaks on the body. She denies us the anticipated pleasure of this idyllic scene of tender child's play, instead asking that we consider how the image necessarily reduces and ossifies the infinite complexity of our being from earliest childhood. While this metaphor is strongest around the construction of the girl-child through identification with, followed by abjection of, the mother, Thompson's concern

is for the broader phenomenon of identity formation and the central role the image plays in the process.

The goal may be elusive, but the process of exploring alternatives to the image that abstracts us from incarnated lived experience has inspired Pynor and Thompson to some body-jarring works. Pynor's installation moves from visceral to ethereal, evoking the moment where cultural memory collides with the lived body. Thompson's video installation attempts to complicate the gaze and its expectation of control, to create an aesthetic experience where we face the possibility of having to give up the image as a fetish used to ward off the frightening instability of the self. The artists' sophisticated visual language allows them to achieve a rare feat: to mount a critique of looking and visualising while simultaneously offering us visual pleasure.

Jacqueline Millner
2007

Helen Pynor gives special thanks to Richard Luxton for his work on the *red sea blue water* project, and also thanks Danny Kildare for his input.

Left: Helen Pynor, *Ear Ache* (detail) from *red sea blue water* series, 2007, 173 x 39 cm, c-type print on Fujitran, face-mounted on glass, Courtesy the artist and Dianne Tanzer Gallery.

Ear Ache

Heat glycerine, olive oil or laudanum in a
spoon and when warm gently pour into the
ear and plug with cotton wool





Above: **Bronwyn Thompson**, *I'll be your Girl*, 2006, still from single channel video and sound installation, 3 mins 19 secs loop.



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