

Brainstorm: *investigating the brain through art & science*

BY LIDIJA LIEGIS

A brain is perhaps not the first thing that comes to mind when you think about modern art. But this was the case at the exhibition Brainstorm, shown recently in London Marylebone's GV Art gallery. A unique collaboration between fine art and neuroscience, it was the first time human brain tissue has been displayed in an art exhibition in the UK.

Controversy was not curator Robert Devic's intention at all. Slices of a healthy brain were displayed, as well as a brain with multiple sclerosis (MS), an autoimmune disease affecting the central nervous system. The brain was both the central reference point for other works and the source of the artists' inspiration. But the works and mediums used were diverse and included sculpture, painting, drawing, etching, photography and lenticular painting, an ancient process involving the layering of several images to create a two-dimensional effect.

The works were by seven London-based artists: Susan Aldworth, Annie Cattrell, Helen Pynor, Andrew Carnie, David Marron, Katherine Dowson and Rachel Gadsden. What unites them is their use of science as part of the investigative process. Some have worked as artists-in-residence at hospitals, some have suffered from brain disorders themselves and others have studied the brain and brain disorders in depth. One also works as a paramedic.

The idea for Brainstorm came after Devic was invited by Dr. David Dexter from the Centre for Neuroscience at Imperial College, to see a brain being dissected. A film of the dissection was shown at Brainstorm, with artists Katharine Dowson and David Marron making sketches for some of the works they would later show in the exhibition.

Some of the works showed an artist's interpretation of a particular brain state. One is Helen Pynor's photographic work 'Headache'. Some of Susan Aldworth's etchings are also based on her own brain scans. Visually fluid, in bright acid colours, Aldworth chooses to work in white line etching to suggest x-rays.

Andrew Carnie has worked closely with neuropsychologists and epilepsy sufferers. An academic as well as an artist, Carnie holds degrees in chemistry, zoology and psychology, in addition to painting and fine art. His piece Echo Pearl Delta is based on temple lobe epilepsy. The title, he says, came from the idea that for some people epilepsy is a lesion comparable to a 'pearl' in their brain and it gives them a *raison d'être*. For Carnie, who went to art school in a period where art talked very much about itself and was lead by form, without content, it is very important that art relates to people. Annie Cattrell has worked with neuroscientists for nine years. "When I look at a beautiful object, it can stir certain feelings. But when I know it came as result of a collaborative process and is just one of several projects it means there's a great depth of information if you want to discover it."

The public response to the exhibition, says Devic, was probably the best GV Art has ever had because the comments book was so densely packed with positive comments. For many people it was a very personal, perhaps even a cathartic experience, as a lot of the visitors live with MS or know someone who has it. Devic described



"Headache" by Helen Pynor of GV Art London © GV Art London & the artist.

how one woman, who had been living with MS for three years, came down from the north of England especially for the exhibition.

He said: "She spent a lot of money on a train ticket and she spent two and a half hours in the gallery. She said that after seeing the MS lesion in the brain tissue and other artists' celebrations of the beauty and function of the brain she felt she'd gotten her life back and could separate herself from the disease."

Devic is proud of being able to bring science out of the laboratory into the public arena. After all, the more public knowledge and participation, the more support science will gain. He says scientists can at first be reluctant to collaborate with artists but often they say that artists give them an emotional and visual vocabulary. Sometimes artists can ask the questions that scientists wouldn't dare ask and open their minds to issues they otherwise would not consider.