Polymath Exhibition

by RUTH GARDE on 2nd Mar 12 *3 Comments*

Polymath is not only the title of GV art's latest group exhibition; in many ways the word is an expression for the gallery's raison d'être, championing as it does artists whose work exists at the nexus between art and science, exploring the overlapping relationship between the two and thus of necessity exploiting knowledge across the disciplines. At its most literal level, the exhibition proposes the artists as polymaths – intensely heuristic, well-versed in broad realms of knowledge across the art/science boundary, and interrogating how the two fields can inform each other in subtle, creative and thought-provoking ways. On a deeper level, many of the works exhibited here explore and reveal different forms of knowledge itself, and whilst polymath is an ennobling term celebrating knowledge, it is interesting that many of the works on show actually scrutinise the limits, loss, discrediting and even misuse of knowledge, how knowledge or pseudo-knowledge can be used to construct narratives that are often damaging and destructive.

Reassembling the Self 1, Susan Aldworth Lithograph, 2012 Image courtesy of the artist and GV Art

On the upper floor, **Susan Aldworth**'s *Reassembling the Self 1 and 2* are lithographs from a new series of work, born from her residency at the **Institute of Neuroscience at Newcastle University**, and based on her collaborations with schizophrenia patients and the scientists researching it. The works consist of a collage of medical images – drawings, diagrams, scans – of human body parts, including organs, skeletons, tissue, crania – distributed disjointedly over the picture surface. It gives a sense of the discombobulation produced by this most anguishing of mental illnesses. The cranium visible in lithograph 1 is divided up diagrammatically and numbered, according to the **phrenological** 'discipline' of attributing certain regions of the **brain** to specific human characteristics. It is a suggestive illustration, identifying how one (now completed discredited) branch of medicine produced a specific series of narratives entangling quack scientific evidence and human identity. In its time, the pioneers and followers of phrenology believed that their knowledge could neatly classify the physical brain and thus explain the self. If any disease disproves this simplistic categorisation, it is schizophrenia, about which so many public misconceptions (and much stigma) still exists.

While the enormity and complexity of the disease of schizophrenia and its many jumbled narratives is the subject of Aldworth's lithographs, placed adjacent to those works is a tiny, jewel-like work by **Katharine Dowson**, a paper-weight sized laser etching of her brain encased in a glass cube entitled *My soul in your hands*. This exquisitely diaphanous work, appearing like a tiny, brain-shaped cloud, is a world away far from the viscous, grey jelly reality of the physical organ and all its neural complexity. Here Dowson inscribes the brain in a material denoting visibility and transparency, yet here it represents her soul, an ineffable, evanescent object, an unknowable thing of beauty that contains the kernel of her self.

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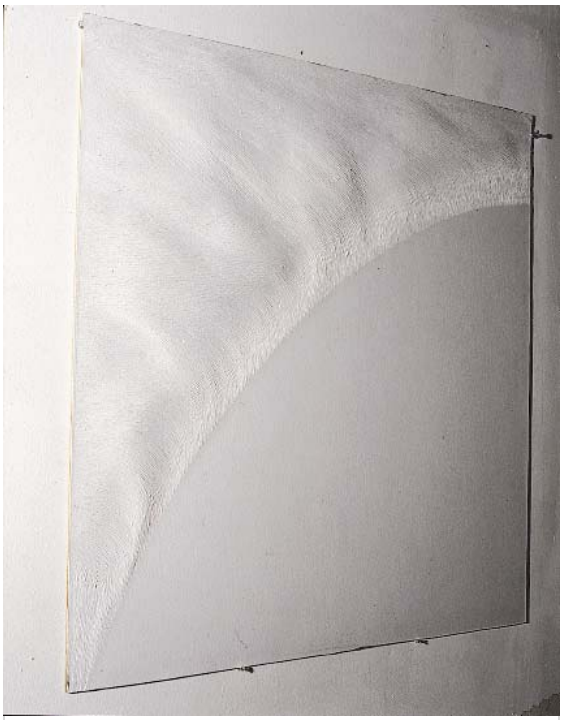
paper bark
headache

Milk 9 (Paper Bark), Helen Pynor C-type photographic print face-mounted on glass, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist and GV Art

This Dowson work has something in common with the **Helen Pynor** works downstairs, *Poisonous Sores, Constipation, and Headcold*, three of her red sea blue water series, and *Milk 9* in an adjoining room. Like Dowson's *My soul*, these photographic works are breathtakingly gorgeous, poetic renditions of the body's interior landscape (or in this instance seascape would be a more appropriate term). In the first three works, Pynor has **photographed** organs suspended in fluid (more or less life-sized and placed roughly contiguous with their physiological place in the body as you stand before them), above which a cursive text, drawn from traditional medical folklore, is handwritten across the image and whose ink appears to dissolve down through the liquid in sinewy, smokey lines. These real organs, floating in a delicate blue aquatic environment, could not be further from our usual experience of the interiority of the body – bloody, gorey, ghoulish. Here the organs possess individual, ethereal beauty, they are things to be looked upon, engaged with and contemplated, not objects of repulsion. They are designed, says Pynor, to explore our somatic reactions to our own interior, to focus attention upon the inside rather than the exterior – on which we expend so much energy and preoccupation. They explore the tangle of narratives – cultural, biomedical, social – that determine our relationships with the subcutaneous world.

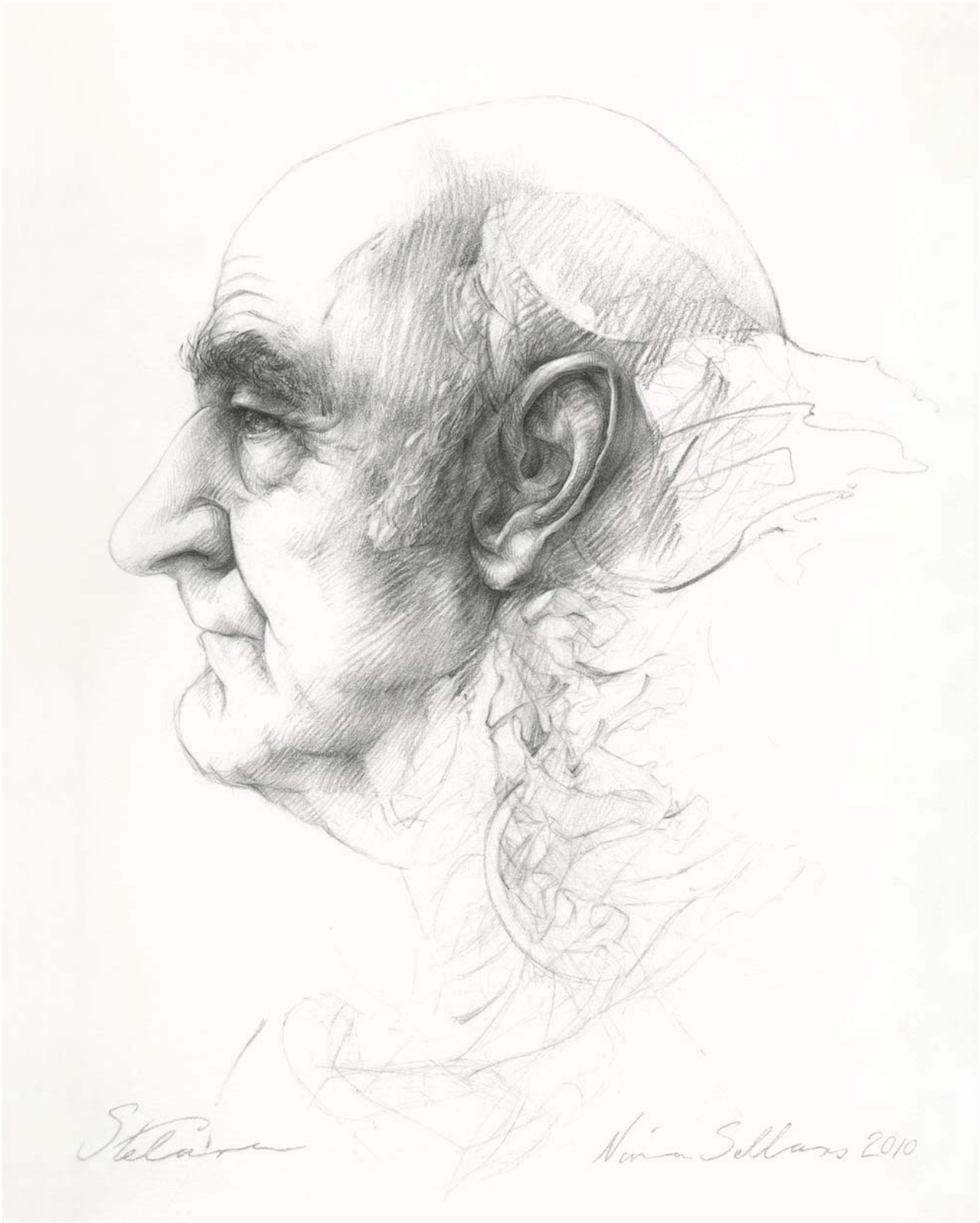
The conjunction of physical organs and folkloric remedies throw up some fascinating meditations. While the **organs** seem to exist in a timeless, dreamlike state, the remedies seem to hark back to a time when people were more directly in touch with their bodies and how to deal with infirmity or disease. Are we now more distanced from our bodies and the conditions that affect them? Are we losing touch with the medical lore possessed of our forebears to ease their bodily pains? Have we relinquished control over our own well-being in favour of the all-powerful corporatized pharmaceutical industry – who themselves mine and distil many traditional treatments for their products? If such baldly political concerns can be drawn from Pynor's work it is achieved in the most delicate, subtle and sublimely beautiful way. In *Milk 9* Pynor has photographed an indigenous Australian plant, paperbark, used by the **Dharawal people** to ease headaches. The green leaves of the plant, soil still adhering to its fine, delicate root tendrils, floats before a pinky red plume, which could be confused with a flower-like organism and yet could also indicate the red of the pulsating blood vessels provoking the headache pain against which the plant is employed.

Hung nearby to Pynor's three red sea blue water works, are two pieces by **Annie Cattrell**, *Pour* and *Brink*. Like Pynor, Cattrell's work is also preoccupied by aspects of the body and the natural world that are usually **invisible** and thus largely unknown to us, the unseen movement of life at a cellular level. At a certain distance, the thick white paper of which these works consist appears to have metamorphosed into animal fur, as if tiny individual hairs have somehow pierced the surface of the paper. It is as if the surface of the paper is becoming animated; a sense that something is stirring beyond the visible layer. It is only when you approach the works very closely that you discern that the patterns have been produced by incisions in the paper. The patterns take on a particular direction and flow, as actual fur would do if brushed with or against the grain, but these are unplanned beforehand and it is only as the work is underway that they emerge reactively. The rhythms and flow of the cuts is an attempt to portray visually the physiological properties about which we generally know little and see even less, the constant movement and change at the **microscopic level**.



Brink, Annie Cattrell Unique paper cut. Image courtesy of the artist and GV Art

When the word polymath is bestowed, it invariably brings to mind the greatest exemplar of them all, namely Leonardo da Vinci, who lived in an era during which the acquisition of knowledge across the boundaries of the arts and the sciences was a commonplace and highly prized method of learning, unlike our intensely specialized knowledge acquisition today. For all the show's contemporary feel, and much **cutting edge technology** employed in the service of art, two practitioners exhibited here seem consciously to hark back to that époque and could hardly be more appropriate for the polymath theme. **Rachel Gadsden**'s *Anatomical head 5 and 6* are reminiscent of the visual conceit, introduced by the Flemish anatomist **Andreas Vesalius**, of depicting skeletons, écorchés and partially dissected bodies as if they were living, feeling beings. *Anatomic head 5* is a profile portrait of a skeleton, whilst 6 depicts a flayed head grimacing as if still a feeling, sentient being. **Nina Sellars'** splendid drawing of ***Stelarc***, unlike so much of the art elsewhere in the show, is resolutely focused on the body's exterior, in the depiction of the living, individuated face through fine draftsmanship. This portrait exemplifies Sellars' current research into the role played by light in the visual representation of the flesh, and the relationship between light and **anatomy**. Central to her work, she observes, is how knowledge is enacted and conveyed – a theme, I would argue, at the root of much of the absorbing work on show at Polymath.



Stelarc, Nina Sellars Pencil Drawing on paper, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist and GV Art

*If you live in London, or are visiting, the exhibition is well worth the visit. For full details view the press release **here**.*

ABOUT RUTH GARDE

I am a writer and curator based in London. I write about art, architecture and history, including the history of medicine. I am passionate about many forms of art, history and architecture. I have recently become particularly interested in the...

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