JOHN A DOUGLAS

THE VISCERAL GARDEN – LANDSCAPE & SPECIMEN

"The Visceral Garden" takes a darker turn. To create this work Douglas used macro photography of tissue specimens that mirror his own medical history – lungs constricted by asthma, nephrotic kidneys with blood vessels knitted together, compromised parathyroid, bone and immune system. The list continues as the collaborative nature of the body is unveiled. Douglas collaborates extensively with other artists in the realisation of his works – choreographers, sculptors, video and sound artists. In this way his practice enacts the kinds of collaborations that sustain life, those from organ to organ and cell to cell, in which decisions are made during molecular conversations in the rapidly unfolding conditions of the new. The body constantly emerges based on these decisions and, like a work of art, their cumulative effect determines the shape of our selfhood.

However like life, death also emerges. Death is not a moment but an extended durational process. Life and death are folds that perpetually fall into and through each other. The shuffle between life and death takes place inside all of us in ways we are rarely aware of. For Douglas this shuffle is explicit and deconstructed – Douglas has seized the insights his condition of being have offered up, and faced with the daily struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable – illness and recovery, wellness and unwellness, rejuvenation and decline – he performs the alchemical transformation of despair into gold, or at least works of art that arrest with the force of the questions they prompt and go to the heart of what the creative act is capable of, its political agency and its ontological significance.

Helen Pynor (originally published in ‘Thick Threats: Notes on the Work of John A Douglas’ for Body Fluid II (redux) for Performance Space, Carriageworks and ISER 2013)

UNDERWORLDS

After finishing high school I spent the summer alone in the basement of a major hospital, in a place called Secondary Files. This room, the size of a football pitch contained row after row of patient records that had fallen out of active use. Cold cases, you could say. A massive library of the accidents and diseases of myriad individuals, whose pages you were forbidden to open. But it was enough just to see their quantity, put them in archival order and make sure they were neat and tidy on the shelves. Some patients had files so thin, you could envisage a sharp, sharp visit to A&E – overdose, foreign objects, giant splinters, broken toes. Others had volumes, all of the files inches thick, stretching across the full width of a shelf and flowing on to the next. Tears of treatment, hundreds of hours of waiting, multiple surgeries and pain, all bound up and notched in institutional off-white.

Down the narrow hallway from Secondary Files was Morbid Anatomy, where I caught glimpses, passing-by, through a tiny window, of organs floating in formaldehyde and encased in resin. Organs removed from bodies and experiences removed from personae – this holiday job was a lesson in the consummate, in an underworld where individuals coming through the hospital doors on daylight levels, were picked-apart and preserved in the bellows of the building.

John A Douglas is an artist, and a chronically ill patient with volumes of medical records and multiple ailments, principally renal failure. He is on a waiting list for a kidney in the context of a wealthy, healthy country where organ donor rates are low and attitudes are blithely unaware. He sleeps in an interrupted pattern through ten-hour peritoneal dialysis treatment every night, and for the last two years he has spent a considerable amount of his waking life observing the specific nature and appearance of his particular diseases and other pathologies, as artist in residence at the Museum of Human Disease at the University of New South Wales. Presently, he is professionally assigned to the photographic documentation of their entire collection. Unlike the hidden rooms in my hospital basement, this underworld catalogue of diseased organs, grouped into pathological taxonomies, is above ground and open to the public.

In his installation "The Visceral Garden – landscape and specimen" Douglas presents a photographic essay including images of specimens from the museum both as whole examples of organs and as macro, detailed sections. These images flank all four walls of the "Visceral Garden" which constructs a landscape comprised of organs, bones and body-parts that become botanical in variations, and geological in size. In this work, Douglas conceives of the diseased body – of his diseased body – as a vast and opically proportioned inner-space as complex as its outer opposite. The spaceman he portrays within these landscapes is ensnared and struggles within the disease – eventually becoming indistinguishable from it. The photographs that face this work however, have an unflinching and scientific perspective on pathology as something to be confronted, studied, understood and overcome.

As a classic journey to the underworld, "The Visceral Garden" begins on the surface of the earth, in this case an Australian desert landscape upon which Douglas – on life support – is also alien. Involving and entwining the tales of Arachne and Orpheus, where Orpheus is bound to his environment, Douglas animates an arcane, fatalistic vision that is cinematically looped and seemingly impossible to escape.

But every day in real terms, Douglas enters and returns from the morbid organ-banks and the fascinating, disembodied specimens of the museum. He connects to the machine and descends into sleep. He climbs further up the list of donors. He more than just survives. In his photographic and video installations, Douglas presents this psychological tension between the struggle with and resistance against disease, embodied by his Red Man and Gold Man figures which are entangled within his photo essay. They are equal parts the make-up of patient and artist, of unconscious and conscious self, of descent and reemergence, of hosting disease and living through it.

Bec Dean

The artist would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the following Aboriginal Nations: Eora, Gadubanud and Wiljali, on whose land the works were recorded and performed. Special thanks to Bec Dean at Performance Space, Su Edelholt at 10-10 Mer UNSW, Derek Wilkesnes at the UMR Museum of Human Disease.

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, and the Australia Council, the arts funding and advisory body of the Australian Government. This project has been assisted through auspices of the Australian Government's Australiaunes. ISEA 2013)

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