

PITCHFORD Jo

Form and Function: The Image on the Inside of the Eggshell.

Abstract

My Masters Research project focused on Genetic Engineering (GE) research practises and applications. As a visual expression of my concerns about the misuse of GE technology I used manipulated photographic images, actual (as opposed to metaphoric) images on the inside of eggshells, and a bone shadow installation to indicate the 'foreshadowing' of aberrant life forms.

My paper deals with the visual concepts, the methodology involved and the thinking behind the creation of my images and installations, and also examines other artists whose work, while not specifically about GE practices, influenced my thinking on the type of images I presented for my Masters assessment.

Biography

Born in New Zealand.

Immigrated to Australia 1977, lived in Hobart, Launceston, Bicheno, St Helens and now residing in Launceston.

Gained Associate Diploma in Art, Craft and Design at TAFE Launceston 1995.

Bachelor of Fine Arts, School of Art, University of Tasmania Launceston 1998

BFA Honours (First Class), School of Art, University of Tasmania. Launceston 1999

Master of Fine Arts, School of Visual and Performing Arts, Academy of the Arts, University of Tasmania. Launceston 2003

Awarded APA scholarship to study Masters Degree 2001.

Solo Exhibition, Café Show, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston 2000

Participated in various group exhibitions in Launceston and Hobart from 1995 to present.

Interests: History, archaeology, paeleoanthropology, bioanthropology, psychology, reading, oil painting, photography, drawing and animals.

Form and Function: The Image on the Inside of the Eggshell.

Introduction

My paper discusses the visual concepts of the work I completed for my Masters Degree, the title of which was 'Form and Function: The Image on the Inside of the Eggshell.'

My visual and written work explored aspects of Genetic Engineering technology and expressed my personal concerns about the possible physical and psychological outcomes of these practices, and questioned the moral and ethical issues involved. In spite of the research being carried out, little is known about the long-term results of Genetic Engineering applications. Cloning (animal and human), xenotransplantation (the transfer of human genetic material into animals and vice versa), GE crops, eugenics and the patenting of human genetic material could all have unforeseeable and potentially hazardous outcomes concerning human and environmental viability. The more I researched these issues, the greater my unease about these practices, which resulted in my venturing into a field that I personally found difficult and challenging.

My visual work consisted of manipulated photographic images, twelve halved ostrich eggs with photographic images on the insides displayed on light tables; and in a separate darkened anteroom I constructed an installation of bones hung around a light source to cast shadows on the walls. Using these techniques I explored the possible effects of GE and hoped to create awareness in the viewer of the potential risks inherent to GE applications.

Visual Concepts and Methodology

In planning my visual work my first concern was the 'type' of images I would use. I did not want to create 'grotesques' that were reminiscent of 'Star Wars' or science fiction characters. I feel that many people have become inured to these sorts of images through exposure to the many popular movies over the years. Nor did I wish to make images that would appear to be more the result of birth defects or physical handicap, although either of these could be the possible results of GE. I found that there was very fine line between the 'grotesque' and the 'aberrant,' which resulted in many unsuccessful attempts on my part to find the right image. The clay model was one such unsuccessful exercise, however, I was successful with another clay figure (with a tail) that I made, photographed, made into a slide, which I superimposed over a model who I then photographed. This many -layered method of working was time consuming and labour intensive but indicative of the way in which I continued to work. In a perverse kind of way I get a great deal of satisfaction working like this, and solving the technical problems that arise with using so-called 'old fashioned' darkroom techniques in trying to achieve a 'seamless' image.



'Grotesque.' Clay figure.
Jo Pitchford. 2001.



'Torso.' Black and white
photograph.
Jo Pitchford. 2002.

As a literal interpretation of part of the title of my project I created a series of twelve images on the inside of eggshells. I accomplished this by painting the insides of the halved ostrich eggshells with a light sensitive photographic emulsion. I then exposed an image on to them, using a film negative in an enlarger in exactly the same method used to print on photographic paper. I used the images on the inside of the eggshells as a visual and physical manifestation of a metaphor expressing the origins of life, and the concept of the egg itself as a symbol, metaphor and object to inform my work and the ideas on which my project was based. A residue of yolk was left in some of the shells, a 'shadow' of the former occupant that impinged on the 'new' image/life form, staining some of the images. These imperfections, an integral part of the eggshell, were not visible until the eggshell was altered with the application of photographic emulsion. This manifestation fell in nicely with the basic concepts I was working with, i.e. the alteration of a basic material without realizing how underlying and unseen factors can affect the final result. The eggshell images were also a reference to the historical scientific concept that life forms were contained whole and complete, but in miniature form inside the egg or seed they originated from.

Displaying the eggshells on light tables gave them a luminescence and brought them to 'life' in a way that was not otherwise apparent.



Eggshells on light table.
Jo Pitchford. 2002.

My photographic work consisted of a series of manipulated black and white images (16x 20 inches) unframed, on the walls in the room in which the light tables were set up. I prefer black and white photographic images because I feel that they are starker and more direct than colour images. I feel that the eye is not seduced by the array of colour to the point where the image can lose its impact. Black and white images are visually 'direct' and there is no ambiguity about where colour ends and the image begins. I feel that the images have a richness with the contrasts between the velvety blacks, the range of soft greys, and the bright highlights which gives them an immediacy that I feel is lost with colour images.

Many of my photographic images were created by sandwiching – or 'splicing' – two negatives of different images together resulting in double or superimposed images, thereby creating new 'realities' from unrelated parts. In some cases I retouched the image by hand and re-photographed it to get a 'stable' negative to work with.

Ultimately, I wanted my images to instil in the viewer an awareness of aberrance or 'wrongness' in the forms I depicted as a visual extension of the unease that I feel about the applications of GE technology. This is why I used some human embryo forms, (photographed from medical texts), as the sense of sanctity and vulnerability associated with human embryos evokes a strong response from most people.



'Embryo eye.'
Black and white
photograph.

Jo Pitchford.
2002.

While GE foodstuffs are probably more of an immediate threat to us than any other form of GE, I did not venture too far into that area because I am botanically ignorant, and the subtleties of botanical form and structure tend to escape me. I did however use some plant forms in conjunction with other images, such as 'Leaf Foetus' and 'GErl,'(an Arum Lily superimposed over a girls face).

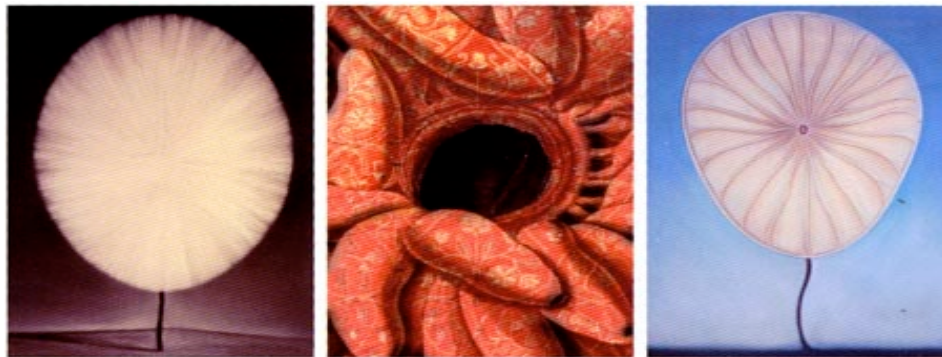


'Leaf Foetus.'
Black and white photograph.
Jo Pitchford. 2002.



'GErl.'
Black and white photograph.
Jo Pitchford. 2002.

However, Tasmanian artist Helen Wright drew my attention with her 'Frankenflower'¹ series. Working with both pastels on paper and digital imaging, she created a series of works that are strange and beautiful, rather than unsettling or frightening. Her giant flower forms, often in a minimalist, barren landscape, give a suggestion that they have taken over and conquered their environment. While essentially non-threatening, they appear to loom towards the viewer, with the implication that, in spite of their beauty, they could perhaps be dangerous if they really wanted to be. In my work I have used plant forms as canvases, providing surfaces for other images as means of 'blending' separate entities. While Helen Wright's images are obviously 'flowers,' even though aberrant, my images are obvious constructions of different entities. Perhaps Helen Wright's flowers have fully evolved into an entirely new species, while mine are still in the process of evolving and working out which evolutionary path of their different entities they will eventually follow.



Helen Wright 'Frankenflower' 2000.

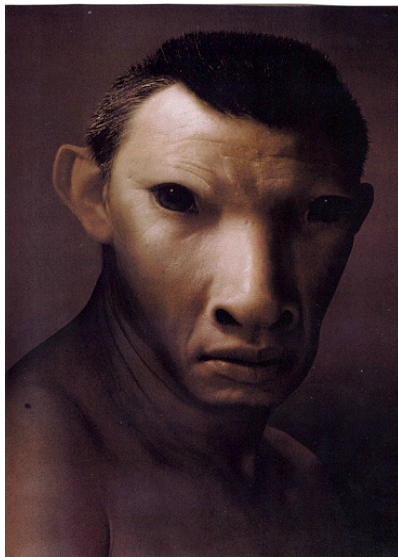
I feel generally that plant forms lack the emotional and psychological impact (for me anyway) that human and animal forms have. I felt that the animal/human images I used, particularly 'Seal/Man' have an impact that is just not found with plant forms.



'Seal/Man'. Black and white photograph.
Jo Pitchford. 2002.

Because I am basically computer illiterate, I avoided computers and digital imaging and relied solely on my SLR camera and darkroom techniques. My personal feelings are that digital images lack a certain depth and richness that is evident in black and white photographs. I wanted my images to give an impression of 'reality,' which is what photography used to be about - 'the camera doesn't lie' - before the advent of digital technology.

However, many of the artists I researched in relation to my work use digital techniques. I found Daniel Leeⁱⁱ and Murray McKeich's images particularly interesting, as although they were not about GE, they certainly suggested the type of imagery I had in mind for what I was trying to evoke in my work.



New York - based digital artist Daniel Lee's image '1949 - Year of the Ox' visually exemplified the animal/human - human/animal mix. His aim, in his series *Manimals* was to explore our connections with our evolutionary past and express his concepts of the animal that resides in all of us. He drew on his Chinese background, and a belief in reincarnation, and based this work on the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac (Horse, Ox, Rabbit, etc.) and the behavioural and personality traits that people born under these signs are supposed to exhibit. While this work is not about GE I found his 'Year of the Ox' a particularly effective image in visualising the possible results of mixing animal and human genetic material.

Another digital artist, Murray McKeich'sⁱⁱⁱ works, 'Untitled 1999' and 'Untitled 1998,' are examples of digital imagery at its seamless best. 'Untitled 1999' is an almost-embryonic form with a hint of scales and truncated limbs that appears

to be struggling for breath and life. It is an image that helped to give a 'form' to my thoughts and ideas on the type of imagery that I was searching for. McKeich's digital images in the book 'Memory Trade: A Prehistory of Cyberculture' that he co-wrote with Darren Tofts are more in the science fiction genre and perhaps not quite as evocative of a life form 'gone wrong' as the 'Untitled 1999' image. However, the rather unsettling, eerie beauty of Murray McKeich's images, particularly 'Untitled 1998,' that I think of as 'Cyber Baby' has a powerful response mechanism. With reference to GE technology, this image could be interpreted as expressing a cry of helpless rage against the forces that created it.



Murray McKeich
'Untitled 1999'.



Murray McKeich
'Untitled 1998.'

Of particular relevance to me was Patricia Piccinini's work addressing the dangers of cloning and genetic engineering - 'Synthetic Organism 2, The Siren Mole,'^{iv} and 'The Young Family,' shown at the 2003 Venice Biennale. The Adelaide Biennial's 2002 'conVerge: where art and science meet' exhibition highlighted the collaboration between art and science, two fields that apparently have no common meeting ground. However, they do have 'research' and 'discovery' as a common denominator and basic discipline. Patricia Piccinini's work exemplifies the science/art collaboration with her piece *Synthetic Organism 2 (SO2) The Siren Mole*. Her 'Mole,' a created physical entity, was set in a zoo situation, complete with droppings and artificial background and accompanied by three large photographs depicting it in a laboratory setting. The laboratory image is particularly poignant, as the scientist cradles the Mole in his arms, almost in a protective, parental attitude. (This is in a way appropriate, as he is represented as its 'father/creator'). This work takes the viewer beyond the 'what if' concept of GE technology and presents the technology as a *fait accompli* and the Mole as the end product of this process, in its 'natural habitat' of the laboratory.



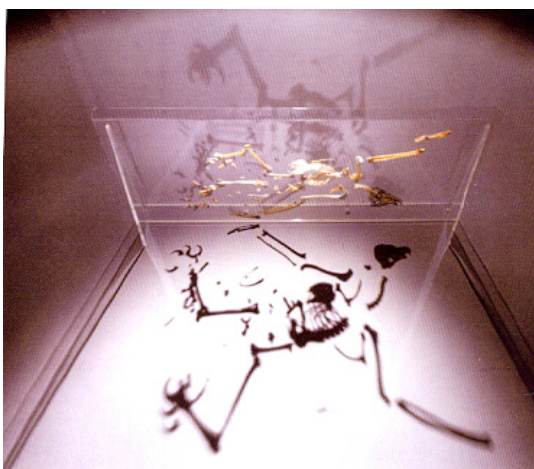
Piccinini's Moles in a zoo setting



Patricia Picinini. 'The Siren Mole'.

The inspiration for my Bone Shadow installation came after seeing Samantha Clark's work in an exhibition at the University of Tasmania's Newnham campus and Cornelia Parker's images on the internet. Clarke's installation 'Dislocation 2000'^v and Parker's 'Cold, Dark Matter - An Exploded View'^{vi} both used shadows to create visually stunning effects and I was particularly taken by Clarke's work that also incorporated bones. Clark's installation, now owned by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, consisted of bones displayed on a Perspex shelf and lit from above. The bones appear dislocated, disparate, and although arranged to give that effect, they in essence appear to have been carelessly discarded and dislocated in every sense, out of place and out of time. The shadows give the work an extra dimension, in that they create a conflict between the 'substance' of the physical object (the bones) and the transient qualities of the shadows, which after all, rely on the presence of the physical object to exist in the first place.

Cornelia Parker's installation was created by getting the British Army to blow up a garden shed then hanging the pieces around a light bulb to create the shadows. The resulting effect is eerie and intimidating, very apt for the title and concept behind her work. ('Cold, Dark Matter' is a scientific term used to describe the substance that exists in the universe yet remains mysterious and unquantifiable). It was these images of Parker's and Clark's installations that inspired me to create a 'shadow room' using bones as the physical objects to represent my concepts of the failed experiments of GE applications. It also allowed me to indulge in my fascination with skeletal remains and bones in general.

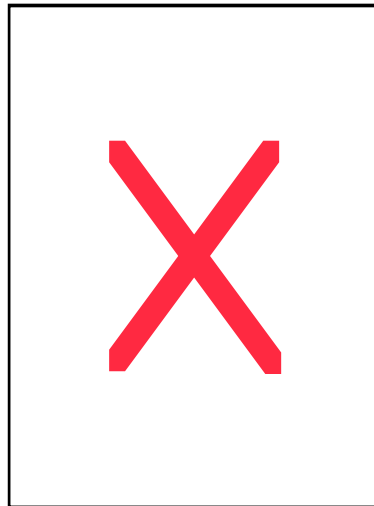


Samantha Clark
Dislocation. 2000



Cornelia Parker
'Cold, Dark Matter. An Exploded View.' 1991

I fashioned my bone shadow installation by joining together the bones of different species to create individual 'marionette' forms. I also acquired a replica of a human skeleton from the School of Life Sciences at the University's Newnham campus, which I also 'altered.' Using pliers, glue and a lot of wire in the manufacture of these forms I suspended them from the gallery ceiling around a light bulb. I used the bones to symbolise the 'foreshadowing' of the jumbled results of the mixing of genetic material from different species and as metaphors to suggest the remnants of failed experiments long since discarded and forgotten, with only their shadows as a reminder of their now lost physicality. In the sense of 'foreshadowing' they could also have been interpreted as a glimpse of future life forms, as yet insubstantial, unclothed, dysfunctional, but structurally there, formed, but not yet functional - the shadows of aberrant life forms that may rise to haunt us yet.



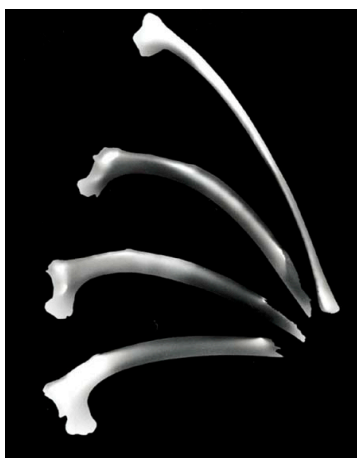
'Bone Shadow Installation.'
Jo Pitchford. 2002.

As an extension of the bone shadow installation and as part of the photographic display, I also photographed bones that had been treated with photographic emulsion and had images exposed on to them. These images took on a life of their own, and became in a sense, separate, physical entities, removed from being merely photographs of bones.

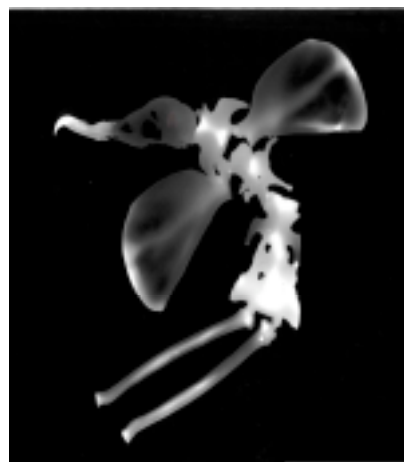


Part of an animal pelvic bone imprinted with a horse's eye.
Black and white photograph.
Jo Pitchford. 2002.

As a parallel to the Bone Shadow installation I made twelve photogram images by forming bones into shapes that echoed the marionette forms of the installation. I displayed the photogram images in three sets of four at the beginning of the photographic exhibition. These images, entitled 'Structure, Form, Function' embodied part of the title of my work. (Photograms are made by placing an object on to photographic paper and exposing it to light, creating a 'shadow' image of the object.) I found bones particularly satisfying to work with as photograms because the differing densities of the bone create beautiful variations in the light and shadows of the image. These images in fact resemble X rays, lending an aspect of medical or scientific 'inquiry' to the work, or a 'seeing' beneath the surface to that which is generally hidden from the gaze. The photogram structures ranged from the simple 'Structure' to the more complex 'Function,' echoing in a sense the evolutionary processes through which all life advances.



'Structure.'



'Function.'

Bone photograms.
Jo Pitchford. 2002.

My images and installations were created as an outward expression of my personal concerns regarding the possible future results of GE technology, and my images were deliberately created to cause a sense of unease or discomfort in the viewer. I am not a 'greenie' as such, but I have a deeply personal 'gut' feeling that the manner in which GE applications are currently being developed and utilised are inherently wrong. The attempts to redefine 'the image on the inside of the egg shell,' in fact redefining life as we know it and as it has evolved and existed for millions of years, are, I think, rash expeditions into largely unexplored territory, and the further I researched this topic the greater my concerns. These issues provided the motivation and driving force that fuelled my research and the creation of the visual work for my Masters degree.

'Foetal Hand.'
Black and white
photograph.
Jo Pitchford 2002.



End Notes

- i Helen Wright. *Frankenflower* Dick Bett Gallery, Hobart. 2000.
 - ii ⁱⁱ Cotter, James A. 'Daniel Lee.' *Photo Insider*.
<http://www.photosinsider.com/pages/lee/lee.html> 2001.
 - iii Tofts, Darren. *Memory Trade: A Prehistory of Cyberculture*.
<http://www.swin.edu.au/sbs/media/staff/tofts/mt.htm> August 1998.
 - iv Hall, Fiona. 'Cell Culture,' and Piccinini, Patricia. 'Synthetic Organism 2 (SO2): The Siren Mole.' *Art Monthly Australia*. No. 146, April 2002.
 - v Samantha Clark, *Dislocation 2000*. In *Pivot V. About Photography*. A national touring exhibition curated by Simon Cuthbert. 2000.
 - vi Parker, Cornelia. *Cold Dark Matter, An Exploded View*. Tate Modern. 1991.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/colddarkmatter/elements.htm>
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