

The New Immortals

20 February – 20 March, 2106

Curated by Judith Alder

“What difference would it make if we never died?” That is the question artist Judith Alder set out to explore many months ago when she embarked on the research that has come to fruition in this exhibition.

The process has involved countless conversations with scientists, philosophers, medical researchers, gerontologists, ethicists, artists and the wider public. It has prompted her to engage with the leading edge of scientific enquiry, delve into the quackish ways of the anti-ageing industry and immerse herself in the immortality stories and myths with which human-beings have sought to explain and stave off the worrying prospect of their own extinction. Above all, it has led her to discover and bring together in this show work by other artists who are interested in the physical, emotional, scientific and philosophical implications of the age-old quest for ways of extending human life.

Intimations of mortality have preoccupied artists down the centuries, from the still life tradition of the ‘vanitas’ painting, with its symbolic references to transience and decay, to more recent instances of the same theme, most notoriously Damien Hirst’s *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, in which a shark suspended in a tank of formaldehyde, dead yet seemingly alive, serves as a menacing and inescapable reminder of the fate that awaits us all.

In facing up to what philosopher Stephen Cave has called the “shadow of a personal apocalypse”, we need all the help we can get. Narratives, symbols and rituals relating to eternal life, resurrection, the soul and the legacy we leave behind are the common currency of every culture and religion. The ancient Egyptians set about securing their passage to the after-life with elaborate funerary practices; Methuselah in the Bible, with his 969 year life-span, exemplified the possibility of life well beyond the biblical norm of three score years and ten; the Greek goddess Eos gave her handsome young lover Tithonus eternal life, but without the guarantee of eternal youth that might have made that life worth living. Weary of immortality, he eventually yearned for death. It seems that we need these reassurances, role models and cautionary tales to help us manage the inevitability of physical decline and death.

In this exhibition **Rachel Cohen**’s *24 Saved Apples* remind us that in the Christian story of the Fall, mortality is the price man pays for original sin. Half-eaten apple-cores, lovingly arranged in accordance with museological convention in a glass-topped display case, convey something of the preciousness of life. But they also register the futility of our desperate need to salvage what we can of life, put it into some kind of order and make it last forever.

At its most extreme this need drives some people to spend large sums of money on having their body frozen in the hope that advances in biomedical science might one day enable

them to be brought back to life. **Murray Ballard**'s photographic investigation of the practice known as 'cryonics' takes us on a journey through the technical processes involved, while documenting the individuals who invest hope and money in their quest to overcome death. A fantasy world of science fiction? Or genuine scientific innovation? Ballard himself remains studiously neutral.

Angela Smith's new suite of etchings examines the history of miracle cures and rejuvenation therapies, with a surreal and deadpan detachment that leaves questions hanging in the air. *Fishing for an answer* is inspired by 19th century French scientist Charles-Edouard Brown-Séquard, a pioneering figure in the development of endocrinology who often experimented on his own body. In old age he sensationally claimed that he had arrested the ageing process by injecting himself with liquid extracted from the testicles of freshly killed guinea pigs and dogs. His demise five years later proved him sadly mistaken.

If clues as to how we might stop the ageing process are ever to be found, it is perhaps through the study of lichens, the colonies of fungus and algae or cyanobacteria whose lives are often measured in hundreds rather than tens of years. Photographer **Fleur Aston** has assembled *17 Species of Lichen* into an exquisite, mandala-like still-life arrangement that draws attention to the beauty and tantalising longevity of these mysterious organisms. The scriptural significance of the number 17 brings a spiritual dimension to a work that is otherwise constructed with painstaking, almost scientific exactitude.

Systems of belief are central to the work of **Guyan Porter**, whose art takes place across a range of media in ways that respond to site and context. *Species* purports to be a complete Neanderthal skull, possibly the only complete Neanderthal skull in existence, presented as a relic of our nearest extinct human relative and the earliest known hominin species to engage in symbolic rites of passage. Of course the human skull is also itself an emblem of death or 'memento mori', employed by artists since classical antiquity to instil a heightened consciousness of time passing, mortality and the after-life. But how secure is our understanding of where we have come from, let alone where we might be going to next? Like its companion piece, Porter's *De Conditioning Chamber*, with its challenging message, seems designed to make us question the basis of what we know and what we believe, using an experimental device housed within a specially designed architectural structure.

To a haunting Chopin piano accompaniment, **Duncan Poulton**'s *No Body* charts the Promethean struggle of a virtual entity condemned by the artist who created it to dwell infinitely in digital space. This virtuoso video compilation of computer-generated imagery, culled from the internet, offers its own version of a creation myth, in which a tragic male figure is little by little embodied and then painfully dissected before dissolving again into the primordial void. In the artist's words, his creature is "infinitely bound to its domain, unable to die or delete itself". In the world of digital make-believe, it seems that eternal life may indeed be possible.

Anna Macdonald's film *Falling for Everything* confronts the opposite reality, as a woman gently talks through the process of coming to terms with an illness that might limit her life. Slowly the camera pulls back to reveal a diagram explaining the practical and ethical protocols involved in carrying out a clinical trial, with its carefully prescribed procedures for verification, peer review and decision-making. However much the science of not dying progresses, the question of how we live a finite life remains. One answer, perhaps, lies in our ability keep on hoping, sometimes in defiance of circumstance. Macdonald's *I will not hope* shows a group of people endeavouring to catch autumnal leaves as they fall from a tree, a process in which luck, persistence, uncertainty and laughter are equally at play.

Photographer **Gabriella Sancisi** is concerned less with the prolongation of life than with what happens before it even begins. Since making a series of large-scale baby portraits for Dorset County Hospital in 1999-2000, she has been fascinated by the aftermath of birth and the earliest stages of life. In her video piece *How do I know whether my world is not a five-channel synchronized hallucination?* she combines film footage of a new baby with a reading from R D Laing's book *The Facts of Life*, in which the famous Scottish psychiatrist speculates about the impact of pre-birth experience on who we later become. The result is a multi-layered meditation on the cycle of life and death that contrasts the baby's vulnerability and physicality with Laing's metaphysical musings.

In the 21st century advances in bio-medical science hold out the very real possibility of greatly extended, if not indefinite, life. Technological innovation also means that we are better informed than ever before, with advice, data and debate rarely more than a click or internet search away. But are we as a consequence more confused? **Cat Ingrams** puts this to the test by offering visitors the opportunity to browse cuttings, magazines, books and videos about the science of longevity in a specially constructed, office-like installation. Perhaps our reading and viewing will bring enlightenment. But it seems at least as likely that bureaucratic information overload will instead leave us in a state of intellectual and ethical perplexity, with no clear indication of where salvation lies.

Instinctively we want to put our faith in something. **Judith Alder's** new film *In Praise of Renewal* juxtaposes footage of an operating theatre, medical laboratory and church interior with the stirring performance by the Brighton Festival Chorus of a hymn by Charles Wesley, cleverly re-worded by the artist to express our 21st century conviction that science will safeguard us from the ravages of illness and age. As the camera lingers over the paraphernalia of medical science and religious faith – dials, test-tubes, syringes, vestments and stained glass – the steady bleep of a heart monitor gives way to vigorous choral singing, which builds to a final verse with descant accompaniment in a climactic paean of praise to the redemptive power of medical science.

With this chorus ringing in our ears, we might well be tempted to believe in the prospect of everlasting life. But the ancient Greeks, once again, offer sage advice. Writing approximately 400 years BC, Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine and originator of the oath that continues to guide clinical practice today, reminds us that: "Life is short, art long, opportunity fleeting, experience treacherous, judgment difficult." Uncertainty, he suggests, is a necessary and productive state of mind. Perhaps, indeed, it is the job of the artist to remind us of this precautionary principle and also, in the process, to have a stab at achieving a version of the immortality to which we all aspire.

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