

**HUMID
TACITA DEAN
CHRISTINE BORLAND
JUAN CRUZ
MARIE-ANGE GUILLEMINOT
JEAN-JACQUES RULLIER
NARELLE JUBELIN WITH
MARCOS CORRALES LANTERO
SONYA HANNEY
& ADAM DADE**

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Fallen Spirits

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Fallen Spirits



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Christine Borland's Fallen Spirits

Geraldine Barlow

And by death do we not mean simply the departure of the soul from the body? Being dead consists, does it not, in the body having being parted from the soul and come to be by itself, and in the soul having being parted from the body, and being by itself. Can death possibly be anything other than that?¹

AS WE BREATHE OUR LAST BREATH, when does our spirit begin the leaving of the body? If we choose to believe a separation of spirit and body, soul and body, how do we understand this process? Imagine, the last breath to be exhaled, the silence and passing moments as no new intake of air occurs. Perhaps the heart continues to beat, but the capacity of this heartbeat to measure time has become uncertain. And if one was able to look into the brain during these moments, perhaps with the gaze of a scan surveying electrical activity, would the images before us be akin to an aerial view of a city falling strangely dark?

When the time has come for the spirit to leave, how does it pass? Does it depart gently through the mouth? Drift on above our bodily remains? Exit covertly through an ear or tread a path of light beyond the body?

The body exists, and most of us would describe something close to an idea of the spirit as existing also. What occurs when they separate? When the lungs no longer draw oxygen into the body, when the heart no longer pumps the freshly oxygenated blood out into the veins, when the arteries no longer cycle this blood back to the lungs to be replenished with a new intake of oxygen. Are these extended moments, moments on a mortal precipice, the seconds in which spirit and body part company?

Christine Borland's work *Fallen Spirits* offers us fragile mementos of this divide between soul and body. Life and the systems which support it. Across the floor of the gallery are constellations of

leaves, each separate leaf a fine pale membrane. Bleached and preserved remains of leaves floating in reflective pools of water. Shallow, everyday puddles like those we might encounter on the street, treading through the aftermath of a storm. The leaves themselves are white, no longer green with chlorophyll, they are not functional in the way they once were. Their role as recyclers of carbon dioxide is over, these leaves are no longer participants in the creation of oxygen. In a functional, or systemic sense, plants are a mirror image to human beings. We live with them symbiotically, our systems working in finely calibrated reverse cycles. Oxygen in, oxygen out.

Against the grey concrete of the gallery floor Borland's *Fallen Spirits* is like an aqueous collection of x-rays spread across the ground. Fragile, even while growing and supporting a tree, these leaves are now like pale shadows; stripped back and transformed by the bleaching process. Each leaf is a separate web of connections with all its mechanism and structure revealed. With sublime geometry the tracery of veins and filaments form the essential life systems of the leaf.

Leaves, and in particular the deciduous leaf, has long been a symbol of mortality. The Greek writer Aristophanes described mankind as 'feeble-lived, much like the race of leaves'.² Similarly in *The Iliad* Homer speaks of 'mortals, who are as leaves are, and now flourish and grow warm/with life, and feed on what the ground gives, but then again/fade away and are dead'.³ Shakespeare begins *Sonnet 73* with a similar melancholy: That time of year thou mayest in me behold/When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang/Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,/Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang ...

And so the leaf functions as a kind of humble *memento mori*, life may be abundant, but it is fragile and death is close. We see yellowing leaves with over-ripe fruit and wide-open flowers in Dutch still lives, the bread has been broken, a fly settles on the remains of the meal. Short-lived as they may be, leaves and flowers carry the beauty and abundance of life, when death touches our lives we are most likely to respond with a tribute of flowers and leaves. The processes of grieving unfold in floral memorial, requiem in wreaths, posies and elaborate botanical displays.



Leaves also a play key part in the *tangi*, or mourning ceremonies, of the Maori peoples. *Pare kawakawa*, or *taua* - wreaths of leaves, are worn on the head, leaves may also be carried in the hand by mourners. 'It is said by our ancestors that our natural, physical eyes are unable to see the spirit of a deceased person unless we wear a pare kawakawa or taua. Only then can we see the spirits of family and relatives who have died'.⁴ It is thought that wearing leaves allows mourners to perceive, and in this sense accompany, the spirit of those who have passed away as they begin their journey beyond death, moving the leaves held in the hand from left to right is said to create a pathway or current to assist the spirit as it travels north along the spirit paths back to the Gods.

Across the floor, almost under our feet, Christine Borland's pale scattered ghost leaves are found. Like bleached bones in the landscape they speak of a tragedy come to pass. The moving on of souls, on a grand scale. There is something disquieting in a whiteness too white, as Herman Melville notes when he writes of Moby Dick:

There yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of a panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood ... not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul ... why it is at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things ... and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind. Is it by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?⁵

White is a colour of mourning as well as of innocence and purity. An impossible symbolic load, perhaps. Are Borland's small leaves memorials, or harbingers of disasters to come? Are they the canaries in the coalmine, or like frogs - barometers of the health of our ecology? Are we to be the 'future eaters' as writer Tim Flannery has proposed?⁶ Such questions multiply when considering Borland's *Fallen Spirits*. Ironically the gallery is at once almost empty and abundantly full. Appropriate when considering spirits. With simplicity this collection of leaves engages both the melancholy fragility of the human condition as well as concerns of a more expansively global nature. *Fallen Spirits* is at once quiet and vast, it is a memorial to both the environment and humanity.

In revealing so poignantly the body-ness of the leaf Borland creates an explicit sympathy between the botanical and hu-

man corpus. The leaves she has bleached come from a plane tree, *Platanus orientalis*, which grows in the grounds at the medical school of the University of Glasgow. Originating in Asia Minor, the oriental plane was grown widely throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East, primarily as a shade tree. Early accounts recommend it as an ideal tree to plant in order to provide shepherds with shelter from the sun, as well as a fine tree under which to walk, to talk and to philosophise. The tree at the University of Glasgow is a part of an international family growing at medical schools around the world. Each tree was propagated from one tree on the Greek Dodecanese Island of Kos. It is believed that it was under the shade of this tree that Hippocrates taught his students some two thousand five hundred years ago. Regarded as the 'father' of modern medicine, the Greek physician Hippocrates expanded upon early studies of disease to create a base for the contemporary study of epidemiology. He is fondly remembered as a student of natural processes and a great teacher.



Hippocrates was innovative in looking for the natural causes of disease. In understanding the relationship between the body and the world he nurtured a philosophy so holistic it is, in large part, now deeply alien to the contemporary practice of medicine. Health, or ill health, was thought to be determined by the balance of four essential fluids, or humors - blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These fluids correlated with the four elements - earth, water, air and fire, and with the four qualities - hot, cold, moist and dry, which, it was suggested, determined temperament.⁷ Elaborated by Latin and medieval thinkers, treatment regimes based upon the 'sympathy of humors' were intended to manage the body in relation to its environment. This integrated approach held sway through the nineteenth century, and herbal compendiums based on ancient medicinals such as the *De Materia Medica* of Dioscorides, were still the basis of the apothecary's trade. Pharmacology was on the cusp of a period of rapid development. With the discovery of salvarsan to treat syphilis a new paradigm was established for the development of a range of targeted and highly effective treatments - drugs. The body, which had been considered as whole, became a mechanism comprised of parts - a machine of infinite complexity to be tended and mended.

Contemporary advances in vitro fertilisation, genetic manipulation and even pseudo-sciences such as cryogenics raise ethical questions which have always been inherent in the practice of medi-

cine and which require us to return to the body as more than just the sum of its parts. The social body and the body of the individual each have both independent and shared ethical/moral landscapes. And whilst bodies are the stuff of medicine they are also, at the very least, the location of the self. Corporeal changes, such as the loss of a limb, or a pregnancy, must effect the self and prove the permeability of self and body. 'By attending to the body as if it were a thing rather than attending to its rehabilitation, medicine risks doubling the objectification and alienation of the body inherent in its collapse', proposes ethicist Roslyn Diprose.⁸ Looking towards the phenomenological understanding of the transcendent self, what Heidegger calls the ecstatic dwelling in the world, Diprose argues for a reintegration of body and self in biomedical ethics. As palm-sized, collapsed bodies Christine Borland's *Fallen Spirits* create paths between the human body and the ecology of the planet which supports us, between the symbolic potential of leaves as memorials and the evolution of medicine as it sways pendulum-like between distance and intimacy when considering the relation between self and body.

Disease, body, ecology and history. Borland's art is a carefully arranged constellation of connections, evoked with a worldly and often melancholy pathos. In her work of 1994-7, *From Life* Borland tied together the processes of the international marketplace with forensic reconstruction and remodelling, the exhibition of artworks and our understanding of portraiture. The project began with the artist's purchase of a skeleton from a medical supply company. Located from an unspecified 'Asian' source the transaction to purchase the skeleton was easy and legal. Says Borland, 'after purchasing the skeleton, I drew loosely on police procedures, and with the help of forensic scientists, osteologists and medical artists, produced a missing persons portrait of the type made when unidentified human remains have been found in suspicious circumstances and cannot be traced'.⁹

From this information a formal bronze cast of the woman's head was made and exhibited, together with the small cardboard box in which the package of bones was initially delivered and slide documentation of the forensic investigation and 'reconstruction' process. An unusual passage between market commodity and respectful portrait of an unknown individual had been negotiated. The mute anonymity of the box for the bones, the practised deductions of the forensic professionals and the solid heroic of the bronze all strange and unsettling companions.

Over the past ten years Christine Borland has been consistently interested in studying the traces of violence. Her work, which has encompassed the techniques of forensic examination and ballistics has always held a place for the body. In projects such as .38

Colt Revolver, 1992 Borland has presented the impact of a bullet upon items including domestic crockery, shoes and plate glass. For her 1993 work *A Place Where Nothing has Happened* Borland nominated a location where ostensibly 'nothing' had occurred and processed the site and its accumulated debris as if it were a crime scene. A homage to the quotidian possibilities of place. A collection of acutely observed fragments of possibility.

Borland's works hum with an impossible articulation of absence, of silence. A vacuum described by its edges, by the fragments around the moment, by the traces after the act.

In *The Dead Teach the Living* 1997 Borland created 'portraits' from representations of heads in the collection of the Anatomy Institute of the University of Münster.

Situated in parkland where the anatomy theatre of the University once stood, Borland's collection of remodelled heads were presented as formal portraits on plinths. In the 1920s and 1930s the University was a centre for research into *assenhygiene* (racial hygiene) and eugenics. The heads in the collection were from people of different ethnic backgrounds and included death masks, shrunken heads, fragments of heads and portraits. Drawing upon these materials Borland used laser-scanning technologies to input information about the source heads and produce three dimensional data models. From these models molten plastic was used to mechanically rebuild copies of the heads which were then exhibited with the form, but not the matter of the originals. In taking a step aside from the resonant and tangible actuality of the artefacts of the collection Borland moves the focus of the work beyond the particular to encompass also matters more universal. The evolution of *The Dead Teach the Living* and the situation of the portraits, form part of a process of acknowledgment and acceptance of past practises on the part of the University. But the work was not just a player in its own local theatre of redemption, the history it sought to address was not that of one people or one century. Collected to study and categorise 'difference' the heads of the Anatomy Department have been remodelled in one material and one colour. Specimens of racial dissimilarity become portraits, homogenised in white plastic perhaps, but at least now something we can face to consider the motivation behind gathering such a grisly collection.



With leaves and diamonds, human beings share a carbon base. How we value, or devalue, a human life is the subject of a work which might be considered a companion piece to *Fallen Spirits* in Borland's practice. *Skull, Upper extremities, right, Upper extremities, left, Breastbone, Collarbones, Shoulder Blades, Ribs, Spine, Sacrum, Pelvis, Lower extremities, right, Lower extremities, left* of 1997 was installed at Lisson Gallery in London. The work consisted of twelve diamonds set into the gallery floor in the form of a body - as described in the title of the work. On the gallery wall were receipts for the diamonds as well as for a disarticulated skeleton bought for the same amount by the artist in New York. With its spare and splendid matter this project creates from the fundamentals of the human form an earthed constellation of discrete poetry. As with so many of Borland's works the empty space in the gallery, in the work, becomes part of a necessary absence that better allows the work to describe the complexities of the moments in which we find ourselves. *Fallen Spirits* likewise confronts us with a necessary emptiness. We are given enough to entrance, to enthrall but not so much that we are excused from ourselves, the work is not a spectacle which, in claiming our attention, absolves us of the responsibility to think.

In this necessary emptiness, and through the fragile body of the leaf we return to the question of a final falling away, the separation of soul and body. We know that the body faces decay. The existence of something more than the body, the journey of the spirit, the fate of the soul, is a matter of belief. Plato considered two possible relationships between the body and the soul, neither being mutually exclusive. One is that the immortal soul is imprisoned in a corruptible body, against which it struggles. And the other possibility, that the soul animates and controls the body, having a positive influence on its base characteristics.¹⁰ Either way, after death, it is the task of the soul to travel beyond the body into Hades. Here, accompanied by guides, the soul journeys until it finds its proper resting place, or, if connected to some 'impure deed', it wanders without guidance and in distress until delivered to its appropriate and eternal dwelling place.¹¹

Similarly the Islamic faith proposes an escorted journey after death. As the body is consigned to the earth the soul is borne by angels to visit Allah, meeting with friends and family on the way who ask after the wellbeing of those who remain on earth. The soul is then returned to the grave and experiences the interspace, a time and place of questioning, testing and waiting. Next the soul passes into the everlasting domain, and there is destined for either the garden or the fire.¹²

Clearly there are close parallels between Muslim and Christian beliefs in the afterlife. In the early Christian church, and

indeed throughout the middle ages, belief not only in the afterlife but in the resurrection of the body was manifest in the understanding that when the day of judgement came, bringing with it the end of the world, each soul would be reunited with 'its own' body, to thereafter enjoy either the pleasures of heaven or the torments of hell. The idea that each body would be resurrected, in its entirety, recovered from decay and with all its essential matter intact sparked debate on some curious issues, what form would the souls of unborn children take, for instance? And would the relics of the saints dispersed throughout Europe and beyond be gathered together again to form an integral whole? What would the impact of cannibalism be in relation to such a theory? Despite these questions the assumption that material continuity would provide a vehicle for the soul in its passage into the afterlife runs throughout medieval culture. The apparent capacity of the body to 'live' beyond death was seen as evidence of this fact, fingernails that continued to grow after death, and stories of the incorrupt bodies of saints who sat up momentarily to revere a crucifix, all supported the possibility of a link beyond death between body and soul.¹³



Borland's *Fallen Spirits* draws upon these traditions, but through its simplicity and the essential nature of its relationship with the human condition - engages universally human questions. *Fallen Spirits* is both a lens and a mirror, the fragile leaves with their skeleton structure of veins remind us not only of our own mortality but of the fragility of the world around us. The frailty of our environment, the vulnerability of our values and finally, of our own fragility.

¹ Plato, Phaedo, *The Philosopher's Detachment from the Body*, 64C, Cambridge University Press, London, 1972, p.44

² Aristophanes, *Birds*, 686

³ Homer, *The Iliad*, 21. 463-66

⁴ Ngati Rehia of Te Ti, Manganui in Cleve Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro, Key Concepts in Maori Culture*, Oxford University Press New Zealand, Auckland, 1991, p.91

⁵ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Norton & Co., New York, 1967, p. 169

⁶ Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People*, George Braziller, 1994

⁷ Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 96

⁸ Rosalyn Diprose, 'The Body Biomedical Ethics Forgets', in *Troubled Bodies*, ed. Paul A. Komesaroff, Duke University Press / Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1995, p. 210

- ⁹ Christine Borland, quoted in *The Turner Prize*, The Tate Gallery, 1997
¹⁰ Eric Alliez & Michael Feher, 'Reflections of a Soul', ed. Michael Feher, *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Zone Books, New York, 1989
¹¹ Plato, op.cit., *Myth of the Afterlife*, 107E, p. 168
¹² Ibn Al-Qayyim, Kitabar-Ruh, in Layla Mabrouk, *The Soul's Journey After Death*, Dar Al Taqwa, London, 1992
¹³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, Zone Books, New York, 1990, p.266

Tuatahi, e mihi ana ki te waahi ngaro,
 nana nei nga mea katoa.
 E mihi ana ki a ratou ma kua wehe i te tirohanga kanohi,
 moe mai, moe mai koutou.
 Ka hoki mai ki gna kanohi ora e purea nei a nga hau o te ao.
 Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa

He tohu whakamaharatanga tenei ki a Sue Nairn, aha ko kua wehe atu i o tatou kanohi, kei roto tonu ia I o tatou whakaaro, a o tatou whatumanawa. E mihi ana ki te iwi o tenei whenua taku kainga, Ahitereiria, te kainga o oku tupuna, whakawhiti atu ki Ingarangi, ki Airini hoki mai ki Aoteoroa ki taku iwi ko Ngapuhi, ki nga Tupuna ratou ma I waiho mai nga taonga tuku iho hei tikitiki hei whakakakahu I a tatou. Ki oku iwi, oku hapu, hoa, whanau aku tino mihi ki a koutou. Ki oku matua I awihina mai a wairua a tinana.

Arohanui ki a koutou katoa na Geraldine

Works

Bleached plane tree (*Platanus orientalis*) leaves in solution

Photo credits:

1. detail, *Fallen Spirits*, 2001 photo:the artist courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London
2. detail, *Ebolic Garden, Winter*, 2001, photo: Dave Morgan courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery London
3. detail, *The Dead Teach the Living*, 1997, photo: Arendt/Dilger courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London
4. detail, *Fallen Spirits*, 2001 photo: the artist courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London

Christine Borland

lives and works in Scotland where she was also born. She is currently developing a public work for the University of Glasgow. Christine has had many solo exhibitions and exhibited recently at the Hayward Gallery and Lisson Gallery, London; Sean Kelly Gallery and Exit Art in New York, and was a participant in the recent Lyon Biennale, France. Her forthcoming projects include: *Time and Memory*, in Orkney, Scotland; a one-person show at the University of York in Toronto, and another at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia.

Christine Borland is represented by Lisson Gallery, London and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

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