

NATALIE RYAN

> *IMAGING THE DEAD*



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ART

Natalie Ryan's latest body of work is based on a residency she undertook with the Veterinary Anatomy Collection at the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Veterinary & Agricultural Sciences. A place in which animals in every detail are examined closely so as in order to understand their inner workings to better care for them. This is a space for hypothesis, testing and learning; and with Natalie's input it becomes a space in which artists provide opportunities for new ways of seeing the animal world.

Skeletal remains jostle against specimen jars filled with formaldehyde on shelves in laboratory conditions. They lie in waiting for students and academics alike, to focus their attention onto them, as they seek to learn more about the animal world. These fragments of animal become disconnected to their past living and instead become necessary items of learning.

INTRODUCTION

For Ryan, the entry into the space was foreign and confronting. It fuelled a new way of looking and seeing for her practice. The works on display are at once beautiful and also uneasy. A cow's stomach lining floats majestically on a black background, as if it has temporarily come adrift. A cross section of skeletal remains allow us as viewers to look inward, beyond the surface to take a rare peak inside.

Ryan then tenderly forms sculptural representations of the animal forms, seeking to recreate an absent surface reminiscent of the Japanese technique of Kintsugi which means "golden joinery". It is a centuries old Japanese art of joining two surfaces with a special lacquer dusted with powdered gold. Ryan highlights the imperfect surface, transforming it into a new albeit slightly different whole again.

Melinda Martin
Director
August 2018



IMAGE > Natalie Ryan, *Untitled (blue sheep head)*, 2016, resin & synthetic polymer, 30 x 26 x 21cm.
Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

The photographs and sculptures presented in *Imaging the Dead* have been inspired by Natalie Ryan's life-long fascination with death and her on-going mission to grapple with the way death is represented and discussed. Ryan is motivated by a desire to open up conversations about death and to explore the ways in which our perception of death is governed by the context within which we encounter its forms.

These works are a result of Ryan's study of animal specimens in the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Veterinary & Agricultural Sciences. The superb technical skill and the compelling beauty of Ryan's works come from a deep engagement with the subject matter and her extensive technical training. In 2005, Ryan undertook a course in facial reconstruction

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headed by a forensic sculptor at the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine. Following this, Ryan taught an anatomical drawing class at Monash University using human cadavers from the Anatomy Museum at Clayton Medical Department. As well as

completing a PhD in 2013, titled *Imaging the Dead: The Cadaver in Western Culture and Contemporary Art*, Ryan has sculpted tombstones and worked with taxidermy.

A childhood illness resulting in lengthy hospitalisations followed by the sudden death of her father also contributed to Ryan's drive to immerse herself in the study of death. For Ryan, this focus was a way of trying to relieve the fear and silence around the topic, as well as better preparing herself and others for the difficult but inevitable event that someone close to us will die.

*"I have a huge respect for life and I've always found death incredibly confronting ... there's so much emotion there and I'm trying to get close to it, but also to keep a distance, it's a weird contradiction and a push and pull that's a way of coping with death."*¹

Whereas certain death-related industries, such as funerary services, medical research laboratories, or museums often seek to sanctify, sterilise or dehumanise death in a way that can be alienating, Ryan aims to make artwork that embraces the emotional, subjective and varied responses that death evokes.

Ryan has not publicly presented photographs of this kind before. Previous to this exhibition, photography has been more of a tool used in the process of planning the construction and form of her sculptures. Her sculptural practice is informed by hundreds of images of the skeletal and muscular structures of specimens, as well as encounters with living animals. Ryan can spend over 100 hours on one work, and days just on one aspect such as the nostrils or eye sockets. She develops an intimate relationship with each sculpted animal and the rendering of the animals' features is both sombre and tender.



IMAGE > Natalie Ryan, *Untitled (gold horse head)*, 2018, ceramic, composite gold leaf & prosthetic eyes, 55 x 21 x 30cm.
Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

Ryan's deep love and respect for animals is palpable when encountering her sculptures, which appear almost as deities, immaculately embellished with gold and other lustrous finishes. The works are above all about honouring the animals that they depict. Ryan has said, "I have always had complete admiration for animals. If I wasn't an artist, I would have followed a career path that involved their welfare in some capacity."² In line with Ryan's veneration of animals, her works also aim to raise questions about the use and abuse of animals. The photographs particularly, allow us to see with great clarity that we are all made of the same stuff, a fact that incites a reassessment of the inequitable relationship between humans and animals.

Though she embraces the scientific genesis of her works, Ryan's primary motivation is emotional. Her transformative sculptural process of re-embodiment demonstrates an urge to give back what has been taken away. The photographs and the sculptures provide an intimate counterpoint to one-another in that the sculptures present the whole animal, its innards once more concealed beneath their skin. Their reconstruction allows a sense of connection, as their representation comes closer to that of a living creature. Their individuality is returned along with their missing body parts, and so Ryan reconstitutes the animals in more ways than one. She returns the physical parts that are missing, but she also returns sentience to our encounters with them.

Though the sculptures provide a more approachable incarnation of the specimen photographs, they still bare an underlying disquiet. In *Untitled (sheep with gold tongue)* (2018), the tongue is finished in gold, which is a reference to the photograph *Untitled (sheep jaw)* (2018), where only the tongue, jaw and teeth remain. In its tense gape, the open mouth of the sculpted sheep evokes the sound of pained cry. Likewise, the sculpture *Untitled (gold horse head)* (2018) partially reforms the specimen. But whilst the beautiful golden lustre and full form of the sculpture give a sense of opulence, the two halves are still separated. Hence, the sculpture bears witness to the slicing that is manifest in the photograph *Untitled (horse heads)* (2018), which presents each side of the same segment.

Ryan considers both the photographs and the sculptures to be portraits of the animal, even the depictions of the cow stomach. Portraits traditionally aim to capture an essential quality of their subject and part of Ryan's work is to strip away the layers of what that might be. Why is it that the face is understood to be a more valid representation of a subject, what makes certain parts more important than others? Ryan describes the cadaver as "a secondary image of the once living form, an image that is familiar and yet foreign"³ and the poignancy of Ryan's works relies on their embodiment of both presence and absence. Ryan's coupling of the sculptures with photographs encourages viewers to cross the boundary lines between the living and the dead. What is it that death takes away from the body that remains, and how much of the body has to be removed before the animal becomes just a specimen, or an abject piece of meat and bone?

Within the gallery, our experience of death imagery is modified and codified, and Ryan's works purposefully distort



IMAGE > Natalie Ryan, *Untitled (sheep with gold tongue)*, 2018, ceramic, resin, composite gold leaf & prosthetic eyes, 35 x 20 x 21cm. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

semiotic boundaries to raise questions about why we respond negatively to some images and not others. Although Ryan's photographic images of specimens are very different from those that we might find in a biology textbook, there are some similarities, which allow the works play with our expectations and responses. The specimens float within the picture planes, as they might in formaldehyde, they are disembodied and isolated in time and space. Yet, these specimens have been freed from their jars and boxes, liberated from the laboratory and taken away from the medical context that confined their purpose to objective study. As artworks, these images are imbued with a broader purpose, they ask more of us as viewers, and they take on a metaphysical urgency as they push us to confront our own existence as mortal flesh.

Juliette Hanson
Curator
August 2018

¹Interview with Natalie Ryan & Juliette Hanson, 25 June 2018

²Interview with Natalie Ryan & Juliette Hanson, 25 June 2018

³Ryan, N. *Imaging the Dead: The Cadaver in Western Culture and Contemporary Art*, 2013, p.1



IMAGE > Natalie Ryan, *Imaging the Dead* [installation view]. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.



IMAGE > Natalie Ryan, *Imaging the Dead* [installation view]. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.



IMAGE > Natalie Ryan, *Imaging the Dead* [installation view]. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.



IMAGE > Natalie Ryan, *Untitled (sheep heads)*, 2018, C-type print, 76 x 150cm. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Theresa Harrison Photography.



IMAGE > Natalie Ryan, *Imaging the Dead* [installation view]. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

Natalie Ryan's practice explores themes that surround the aesthetic representation of the cadaver and natural sciences throughout Western history and their inclusion in contemporary art. Drawing from existing methodologies used for displaying these elements, she is interested in the process of imaging the natural world and the exchange between science and art that has allowed this.

Ryan has worked with anatomical collections held in the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Veterinary & Agricultural Sciences and has lectured in Anatomical Drawing, working with human cadavers at Monash University. Ryan holds a PhD at Monash University *Imaging the Dead: The Cadaver in Western Culture and Contemporary Art*.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The artist would like to thank Brendan Kehoe and the Veterinary Anatomy Collection at the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Veterinary & Agricultural Sciences for generously granting access to their collection.

Untitled (internals), 2018
C-Type Print
76 x 60cm

Untitled (sheep jaw), 2018
C-Type Print
76 x 60cm

Untitled (horse heads), 2015
C-Type Print
100 x 200cm

Untitled (sheep heads), 2018
C-Type Print
76 x 150cm

Untitled (internals front), 2018
Resin
25 x 23 x 5cm

Untitled (internals profile), 2018
Resin
25 x 24 x 4cm

Untitled (sheep with gold tongue), 2018
Ceramic, resin, composite gold leaf & prosthetic eyes
35 x 20 x 21cm

Untitled (gold horse head), 2018
Ceramic, composite gold leaf & prosthetic eyes
55 x 21 x 30cm

Untitled (blue sheep head), 2016
Resin & synthetic polymer
30 x 26 x 21cm

LIST OF WORKS

MEET THE ARTIST: NATALIE RYAN

04.10.18 > 6PM to 7.30PM

COST > FREE, bookings preferred

VENUE > Linden New Art, 26 Acland Street, St Kilda

BOOK ONLINE > bit.ly/meet-natalie-ryan

Join this artist-led conversation with Natalie Ryan to discover more about her solo exhibition *Imaging the Dead*.

EVENTS

Imaging the Dead presents a series of photographs that depict anatomical veterinary specimens alongside corresponding sculptural works. These

works explore the idea of the specimen as portrait and further the artist's investigation into the connections between art and science.

IN CONVERSATION: JULIA deVILLE & NATALIE RYAN

26.10.18 > 6PM to 7.30PM

COST > \$22 PER PERSON, Includes a bespoke Hendrick's Gin cocktail

VENUE > Linden New Art, 26 Acland Street, St Kilda

BOOK ONLINE > bit.ly/TBC

Join Linden for a unique artist-led talk with Julia deVille and Natalie Ryan as they discuss how their solo exhibitions work in conversation with one another.

Both artists address themes of life and death through the use of animals, science and technology, helping us to explore and highlight how we perceive the natural world around us.



IMAGE > Natalie Ryan with *Still 1,2,3*, 2010, silicon, prosthetic eyes, dimensions variable. Photograph by Neale Stratford.



IMAGE > [L-R] Julia deVille. Photograph by Luzena Adams. Natalie Ryan with *Still 1,2,3*, 2010, silicon & prosthetic eyes, dimensions variable. Photograph by Neale Stratford.

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COVER IMAGE > Natalie Ryan, *Untitled (horse heads)*, 2015, C-Type Print, 100 x 200cm. Image courtesy of the artist.