

JO HOLLAND

Dissected Beauty

Jo Holland works on the border between photography and painting, employing the techniques of both to create images that belong to neither medium. Born in England in 1971, Holland studied photography at Staffordshire University, completing her degree in 1993. Since then she has exhibited both nationally and internationally, including solo shows at the Nancy Victor Gallery, London (2006), Leeds City Art Gallery (2001) and Dean Clough Galleries, Halifax (1998), as well as group shows at the Florence Trust Studios (2005), Proud Gallery (2004) and Trumans Brewery (2003). In the final year of her studies Holland began to develop the process which largely defines the work she has produced in her fourteen years as a practising artist. Holland makes photographic prints without the intermediary of either camera or negative, directly exposing the object through the focusing lense onto what becomes a unique ilfochrome print. In this respect her work goes against the grain of much of contemporary photographic practice, which is dominated by the reproducibility of the medium and its digital manipulation. The following year she began to experiment with positioning the photographed object on a glass plate, which takes the place of the absent negative, and which facilitated more complex compositions. And as recently as 2005 she began introducing glazes and blocks of colour onto these 'positives', creating a hybrid form of image-making between photography and painting. Rather than the repeatedly-cast shadow of the photographic negative, this process registers the absent presence of the object, conferring upon the resulting image the aura of a unique work of art.

The peculiarities and uniqueness of this process are closely related to the objects Holland chooses to photograph. These include dried and fresh flowers (*Inflorescence*, 1993-97 and *Florescence*, 2000-01), sheep and pig eyes (*Eyne*, 1995), Chinese pears (2004-05), lamb hearts (*Darkness of the Unknown*, 2005), and her recent images of the human placenta (*Combined Unity*, 2006-07). What determines her choice of object is less their symbolic meanings within the language of still-life photography and painting – and which one could trace back through Robert Mapplethorpe, Georgia O'Keefe and Karl Blossfeldt to the *vanitas* and *memento mori* of seventeenth-century Dutch still-life – but rather its fragility, transience and eventual putrefaction. The temporality of the photographic process – the existential presence of image to object – is ideally suited to capture the decay of the once-living object, which the exposure arrests. Because of this, Holland typically works in series, which document different stages in the natural deterioration of one type of object. Following a largely intuitive decision about when to intervene in the process of its decay, Holland dissects the eye, pear, heart or placenta, and arranges the resulting cross-sections on a glass plate. The spatial slice through the object, therefore, parallels the temporal cut into its decay – both of which are revealed by its magnification in the image.

Holland's early series, *Eyne* (1995), is paradigmatic of this process: the different components of the eye (iris, lense, vitreous humour and retinal wall) being dismantled like the parts of a camera to reveal the mechanics of vision. Driving this process, however, is not a pseudo-scientific investigation into the internal structure of the object but the resulting image. The formal effects of light and colour, the variations and repetitions in the motif, are of greater importance than the clarity of its presentation. Equally, the number of prints in each series is not conceived in advance according to a given taxonomy but determined by what the decaying object yields to this dissection before it passes into putrescence. The dissection of the object, therefore, is not preliminary to the making of the work, but the first of the operations leading to its final appearance: determining not only what part of the organism is exposed but, in the varying thicknesses of the cross-section, its resulting opacity or transparency, the changing depths of field and focus across the surface of the image.

What these images seek to capture, however, is not the decay of the living object but the life passing out of it: in the petals of a flower, the flesh of a pear, the arteries of a heart, the umbilical chord of a placenta. The corresponding relation – which is the focus of Holland’s work – between the biological function of a particular object and the beauty of the images it generates, poses questions about the parallel relation between the sexual reproduction of the vegetal or animal organism and what one might call its erotic language. This is first apparent in Holland’s later flower series, *Florescence* (2001). Just as the flower lures the pollen-carrying insect onto its stamen, so the seductive beauty of these prints draws the viewer into the base materiality of a pandemic sexuality. The subsequent series, *Beyond Porn* (2000-2003) – which is unique in Holland’s oeuvre for being conceived around a variety of objects (apple, onion, cherry and bishop’s ball) – explicitly stages this uneasy meeting of seduction and repulsion; but the relation itself runs throughout her work. Dissected eyes become a Rorschach test of the unconscious; magnified flowers expose the internal structure of their genitalia; the sliced core of a pear reveals the secret of its reproduction; and cross-sections of a placenta open onto a filigree of blood vessels at the origin of human life.

The magnification of the object, the increasingly large scale of the prints, and above all the cropping and framing of the image are all crucial to these operations. In two of Holland’s later series – the ten images of lamb hearts, *Darkness of the Unknown* (2005), and her second triptych of a Chinese pear, *Dignity / Devotion / Compassion* (2005) – the hearts are arranged in slices of flesh on a painted blood-red ground which just fails to contain them within its black border, while the core of the pear, by contrast, is positioned within the frame so that the uncontained flesh surrounding it appears as ground to its figure. The resulting images affect a disturbing displacement between organisms: the skeins of heart muscle seem to open like the petals of a fleshy flower; while the core of the pear offers an internal view of the moment of conception that is the key to Holland’s metaphors. The analogy rapidly made in *Eyne* between eye and camera begins here with the metaphor core/uterus, followed, further along this chain of associations, by vagina/eye. From this perspective, the luminous flesh of the pear becomes the photo-sensitive material of the image, registering its exposure to the light in bruised shadows and bleeding colours.

But beyond the diversity of these objects, which resist unification into a subject matter, the real object of Holland’s work is its beauty: what it is, how we recognise its presence, to what extent it is an individual or collective perception, culturally or biologically determined. Above all, whether beauty is a function of the life of the organism or the form of its excess, and as such the image of its death. What is it about these initially seductive images that also repels us, both arousing our fascination and provoking our disgust? These questions are brought under her knife in Holland’s latest series, *Combined Unity* (2006-07), over the course of which, in twelve large-scale prints, she dissects the human placenta. Belonging neither to the mother’s nor to the child’s body, the placenta has one function, which is the creation of the human being – after which it is discarded, like the used mould of a cast sculpture, or indeed the glass plates from which these unique prints are made. Retrieving this and other discarded objects (wilted flower, rotten pear, enucleated eye, stopped heart), arresting and capturing the life that has so recently left them, and exhibiting the resulting images within a series whose formal variations are the grammar of their semantic possibilities, Holland reveals a beauty hidden in the residue rather than the sublimate of the creative process, both biological and cultural. Although not explicitly feminist, therefore, in this sense her work opens onto the broader context of a sexual politics, and of the subjection of the human, and specifically female, body to an aesthetics of sublimated beauty. It is not by chance that the metaphoric register of these images is the female body. Speaking of the sudden appearance of this body in a crowd, the German critic Walter Benjamin wrote that the erotics of modern life is a love not at first sight but at last sight; and so it is here, in the unique trace of a hidden, fleeting and often violent beauty where we least expect to find it.