

Laos. These desolate landscapes are the consequence of trauma. If there is little hope in the land, which is riddled with cluster munitions, there is hope in a literal elsewhere: the realm of the spirit. We see a plaster Buddha statue being worked on in a sculpture workshop. The otherworldly white sheen of the statue's smooth surface is tenderly worked with sandpaper – devotion is given to a body that is beyond the human and earthbound.

This brings us to the third film, which is perhaps the oddity of the installation but also its key. The camera focuses on the arms of a surgeon as he mimes a surgical procedure. Blue-gowned and standing in a darkened space – this gallery space, it transpires – the surgeon performs with his hands a mesmerising dance, deliberate and precise. The fingers are long and articulate like a pianist's, and we imagine the meaning of each action: the parts of the body that are being cut, probed, examined, tested, repaired. This combination of elegance and horror is compelling because so much is missing from the scene: not only the patient but also the surgical implements and the other members of the team; the surgeon pauses for phantoms to carry out their own actions as part of the invisible procedure.

The hands we are watching belong to Roger Kneebone, who learned his trade as a trauma surgeon treating stab victims in 1980s apartheid South Africa. He is now the professor of surgical education and engagement science at Imperial College London, and, as engagement fellow for the Wellcome Trust – which has supported this exhibition – he has an interest in documenting the surgeon's craft at a moment when the profession finds itself on the cusp of a wholesale shift to robotics, and his contribution to this piece is an attempt to pass on fragile bodily knowledge.

Slowly, then, the work as a whole is revealed as being not so much about the effects of humans on the environment but rather how those environmental effects are absorbed back into the body generationally. How the self grows not only from an embryo – and the story of species evolution that this remarkable process reveals – but history too, a cultural evolution that incorporates its own tales of desperate life-and-death adaptation to periods of devastating change. The wooden rods are perhaps best understood not as mangrove roots or suspension poles holding the building up but rather as a connective tissue of protein strands or neural networks holding the imaginative space together; not a barrier or mechanical strut but a meshing generative growth. This is trauma and hope absorbed – and thus embodied. ■

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Magic Mirror: Claude Cahun and Sarah Pucill

Nunnery Gallery London 17 April to 14 June

With a film, a book and 29 photographs, all black and white, Pucill has staged a partnership with deceased surrealist photographer Claude Cahun, who was active in 1920s Paris before moving to Jersey in 1937. In film and photographs Pucill re-enacts motifs from Cahun's surrealist self-portraits. The book accompanying this exhibition is an important component of Pucill's installation, not least for its extensive selections from Cahun's visionary 1930 text *Aveux non avenues* that comprise the voice-over for *Magic Mirror*.

Cahun is not the only remote collaborator with whom Pucill is working. As Cahun collaborates with her lesbian



Sarah Pucill
Hand Mirror 2013

partner Marcel Moore, similarly Pucill's *Stages of Mourning, IX* features her face enclosed by mirror and picture frame while embracing her deceased lover, the filmmaker Sandra Lahire. A paean to loves lost, the film frequently traverses the surface of skin as if caressing. A pronounced morbidness comes from its chiaroscuro and mannequin-like figures, as if statues made fluid and spectral, dissolving one into the other. Pucill is convinced that given adequate resources Cahun would have made films. Bringing to life Cahun's photographs redoubles their uncanny qualities in ways that advance the formulations in Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay on the subject. A contemporary paradigm for the uncanny might be science-fiction films like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, in which a planet replicates characters from the guilt-ridden pasts of the astronauts observing it. As Pucill is doing, the planet is raising the dead. Freud's personal encounter with the uncanny involved irritation at his own reflection in a swinging train door that he had mistaken for an intrusive passenger. Mirrors, lenses and eyes are central to Pucill's film, as if the uncanny is most readily located at the juncture of the self-directed gaze where sexual curiosity and revulsion are equally likely encounters.

The precision of the film's affect comes from Pucill's commitment to a working community that includes Lahire, Cahun, Moore and the various performers in *Magic Mirror*. Pucill forms this community as a vibrant interchange where the living collaborate with the dead and the dead surge into the present gifted with inventive energy. Ideas and images flow through this interchange as if these were newly charged entities of different modes of being. It's as if Pucill acquires the force that Deleuze and Guattari recognise in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, where she 'made of her life and work a passage, a becoming, all kinds of becomings between ages, sexes, elements, and kingdoms'.

The possibility of a text becoming uncanny is explored by Cahun's experimental *Aveux non avenues*, valuable for its fierce imagery and texture of language as it engages with lesbian desire, lust, self-love and estrangement from the straight world. In this way it critiques the heterosexual subjectivities of André Breton's *Nadja* and Luis Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, the great urban narratives