

The Conservatorium

Catalogue Essay by Lisa Carrie Goldberg

In a scientific setting, glassware is ubiquitous. It is a vital component of laboratory life, one which serves to protect, contain and sustain. Highly sensitive materials found in biological labs, for instance, are easily susceptible to contamination. The dangers of exposure to media can be found everywhere and come in all forms, as a sneeze to a spec of dust, all constitute as pollutants. To contain the materials, scientific grade glass has been chosen for its antiseptic properties, its transparent quality serving observational purposes, and its ability to withstand extreme temperatures. Objects such as pipettes, petri dishes, beakers and graduated cylinders offer mediation between two worlds: the world looking in and the world looking out.

Is the glass protecting the people from the contents or is it protecting the contents from the people?

Both parties can contaminate and affect each other.

As in the laboratory, the art gallery implements preventative measures to protect, contain and sustain its contents from deterioration caused by environmental factors and atmospheric conditions. These protection mechanisms may appear as ropes or lines taped to the floor in front of a work. In particular circumstances, as with *Mona Lisa* in The Louvre, the painting is encased behind a transparent shield. The security can also be a human barrier — a personalised restriction in the form of a gallery attendant — advising its spectators against standing, breathing or even peering too closely at the artwork. The notion that art on display needs to be protected from its audience is nothing new. However, with some forms of art, the converse may also be true. In the case of three particular artworks, which were composed of living materials and formed using scientific methodologies, ill confinement could pose a hazard to both artwork and audience.

Marc Quinn's *Self* (1991–2001) is a series of sculptures of the artist's head moulded out of his own blood. On view in gallery settings, the cast is secured inside a see-through, refrigerated perspex box. This enables the blood to maintain its solidity and form. Art Orienté Objet's *Culture de Peaux d'Artistes* (Artists' Skin Culture— 1996–1997) is comprised of small samples of pig skin that have been mixed with the artists' own cells. Thereafter, each tissue was tattooed with illustrations of various endangered species and placed in glass jars, thus encouraging visibility. Tagny Duff's *Living Viral Tattoos* (2007–2008) presents pieces of dissected pig derma and human breast tissue inside clear

jars. The tissues were transfected with a virus and thus bear a trace of a bluish hue, a bruise, on the epidermis, making visible where the virus has travelled.

These examples share certain features in common. Each piece is contained within a translucent vessel or jar for the purpose of display. All three contain 'controversial' materials (living substances) which, when placed outside the confinements of their respective sterile environments, can be considered as a biological threat or health hazard to the public. Additionally, they are examples of art that needed containment in order to be conserved as an artwork. They require protection against exposure by viewers; if unconcealed, the work could become contaminated, dry, decay, cease to exist in its sustained state, a state deemed worthy of general viewing, of art accolades and of monetary reward (in Quinn's case, £1.5 million).

The Conservatorium exhibition invited artists to submit 'art-in-jars'. These objects, acting as repositories or artefactual time capsules, hold within them a story and a living element, an appendage of the artists themselves. Perhaps they are used as a storehouse, keeping something fresh and preserved. They could also serve as a depository for disregarding and forgetting. Unlike the examples mentioned above, the works in this show are permitted to expose their contents beyond the sealant of their container. This freedom enables an engagement where contents inside the jar and elements outside the jar meet. In each artist's rendition, these jars serve as a skin or interface common to both spaces. What will happen when the potent contents inside and outside interact? Each reaction will be different with every object, but the openness and awareness of interactive possibilities is what remains significant in this exhibition.