

## PARADOXES OF PARADISE

24 June - 24 September 2023



Dylan Mortimer AIRWAY CLEARANCE 2015. Glitter and Paint on Paper.

Paradoxes of Paradise is an exhibition curated by Creative Hybrids Lab (CHL), an international collective of artists who are also organ transplant recipients critically engaging with their lived experience of chronic illness and transplantation.

Organ Transplantation, also known as the Gift of Life and a Second Chance of Life, frequently has an aura of paradisaical mystique surrounding it. With good reason: transplantation is truly transformational. Yet there is much more to transplantation than what is conveyed by mass media and medical professionals.

CHL seeks through a variety of mediums to hold space for and elevate the voices of the vulnerable. Sometimes a transformation can be so overpowering that one can never 'return to normal.'

We live within the context of a culture which perpetuates gaps between stories told about illness and disability, and actual lived experience. Our culture wants us to say that our transplants have returned us to normal life, but the reality is different. Transplant recipients depend on toxic medication to stay alive, and exist permanently immunosuppressed, which inevitably takes a physical and mental health toll.

Paradoxes of Paradise features works exploring the various paradoxes of the paradise that is transplantation, created and curated by CHL members: Andrea Barrett (UK), Bianca Willoughby (AUS), Dominic Quagliozzi (USA), Dylan Mortimer (USA) and Tereza Crvenkovic (AUS). Touching on environmental sustainability, facets of medical trauma, spiritual influences, and more, it is a show not to be missed for those with an open mind, and the curiosity to step into the mindscape of organ recipients.

## **Reflecting on *Paradoxes of Paradise***

We are in an age dominated by visualisations. They accompany over us via our devices, apps and wearables, informing us of our battery life, sleep, and/or heart rate. In the medical context, the visualisations span more traditional images like illustrations, to more data-centric representations like read-outs, graphs and digital displays. While our familiarity with data visualisations predates the COVID-19 pandemic, it undoubtedly fuelled their cultural and social pervasiveness. During the pandemic lockdowns, a panoply of visualisations representing new infections, mortality rates and other statistics abounded, which promised to cast insight into a collectively uncertain experience.

The visualisation and the artwork have a somewhat uneasy relationship, particularly as they relate to health and medical imagery. In art, representation has been increasingly fraught since the advent of photography. Yet conversely, our faith in technical images has increased. Visualisations are somehow untainted by the effects of semiotics, post-structuralism, and abstraction, which constitute the background knowledge of the visual arts. Artworks that flirt with representation often do so as a seductive trap which belies more complex motivations.

In contrast to the visualisation, artworks are more conspicuously associated with the viewpoint of an individual artist, which emerges in response to specific exhibition spaces and cultural contexts. As informed by site-specific and land-art practices of the 1960s, contemporary installation art is a particularly entangled affair. Contemporary installation art serves as a document of complex relations—an assemblage of artistic labour, cultural institutions, physical sites and materials, which becomes animated by diverse audiences and communities of practice. Artworks (particularly installations) seem particularly hard to read, with interpretative panels and spatial exploration by audiences offering brief glimpses and paradoxical clues from artists and curators.

In contrast, the visualisation seems untarnished by this complexity. In their simple graphic forms, visualisations promise us direct access to one of the commodities of our era, data. Both historical and contemporary medical visualisations use a variety of techniques to render the body legible. In more traditional medical illustration, complex networks of veins and nerves become segmented, and body is made to appear like a map. Similarly, false colouring is used to aid the memory of the clinician and/or medical student, producing eerily depictions of floating and eviscerated anatomies. Contemporary data-centric visualisations of body work in a similar capacity. While earlier illustrations used colour to highlight muscles, bone and/or soft tissue, brightly coloured data visualisations perform different acts of decontextualization. Graphic depictions of our health/illness abound in smart devices— colour graphs, charts and numbers promise to provide insight into our wellbeing. The pleasingly coloured graphs of our sleep, heart-rate, endless screen-time and location data purport to make our bodies more knowable. However, what is missing in this push towards datafied bodies is something of central concern for contemporary art; *context*. Despite the intimate qualities of this data, it somehow seems detached from the unruly nature of our everyday lives. What we choose to track, and the data extracted and aggregated from our activities, is producing a culture in which our own lived experiences are often in tension with quantified metrics and opaque data systems.

For me, it is against this broader milieu of datafied bodies that the exhibition *Paradoxes of Paradise* is particularly compelling. *Paradoxes of Paradise* is an exhibition curated by Creative Hybrids Lab (CHL), an international collective of artists who are also organ transplant recipients. The artworks of Andrea Barrett (UK), Bianca Willoughby (AUS), Dominic Quagliozi (USA), Dylan Mortimer (USA) and Tereza Crvenkovic (AUS) speak of the lived experience of chronic illness and transplantation. Against a broader cultural context saturated by images exalted for their claims of accuracy and objectivity, the artworks of *Paradoxes of Paradise* serve as documents of specific lived experiences.

Occupying the Hopper Gallery, *Paradoxes of Paradise* speaks of the complex experience of organ transplantation. Known as the 'Gift of Life', organ transplantation occupies a mythical place in the popular imaginary. Yet the artworks in this exhibition tell more intricate stories of pain, fragility, strength, and vulnerability. For the exhibiting artists, a transplant does not signal a miraculous return to 'normal' health. Rather, toxic medication and permanent immunosuppression accompany their transplant experiences.

Given their intensive experiences of hospitalisation, it is understandable that many of the artists of CHL actively rework medical materials and imagery in their works. Presented as a grid which scales the gallery walls, Dylan Mortimer's 'Forever Pillbox' is a series of paintings of pills. It is a work both exuberant and sombre, depicting the daily medication required by transplant recipients. For Mortimer, pills represent a ground-breaking medical technology, but also chemical dependency, trauma and loss.

Andrea Barrett's also explores the impact of ongoing pharmaceutical dependency. Reflecting on the plastic waste accidentally left in the artist's heart during a transplant, the sculpture 'Infinite Reminders' is an acrylic vessel shaped like an anatomical heart, filled with empty medication blister packs. Paradoxically, Barrett suggests that the plastic waste created by the medication crucial to her survival is likely causing organ failure elsewhere, as plastic waste is burnt due to inadequate recycling practices. The work serves as a timely reminder that human and planetary health are inevitably intertwined, though often at scales which can be hard to fathom.

In Tereza Crvenkovic's 'Liminal Series', the artist uses multilayered digital imagery, combined with the artist's MRI, ultrasound, angiogram and CT scan imagery. While Crvenkovic acknowledges transplantation as the 'ultimate gift of life', she asserts that transplant surgery has a somewhat ritual quality, as the recipient passes from one phase of life to another. This work probes the liminal qualities of this transition and speaks to the artist's experience of episodic hospitalisation and chronic illness.

This sense of listlessness persists in Dominic Quagliozi's 'The Transient Nature of Being (homesick)' series. Quagliozi's intricate textiles rework hospital gowns with both intricate stitching and gestural marks. For Quagliozi, these altered medical artefacts speak of the tension, homesickness and fragility of their experience of a double-lung transplant.

Finally, Bianca Willoughby offers grand and poetic works which are characteristic of their 'Circles of Fire' series, which have been their focus since her kidney transplant in 2014. In this trilogy, Willoughby intimately explores her firsthand encounters with chronic, enduring illness, as well as the medical procedures and interventions performed upon the abstracted patient's body. Willoughby's work speaks to the artist's experience of illness to health, to ongoing chronic illness— a recurring motif for the artists of *Paradoxes of Paradise*.

In an age where datafied depictions of the body abound, the artists of *Paradoxes of Paradise* offer perspectives largely missing from how organ transplantation is cultural imagined and represented. The artworks of *Paradoxes of Paradise* offer situated perspectives on the contradictory experience of organ transplantation.

While this exhibition celebrates the miraculous qualities of transplantation, it is tinged with loss and uncertainty, as the exhibiting artists come to terms with experiences of ongoing illness and trauma through their art practice. As such, *Paradoxes of Paradise* offer new perspectives and contexts to create more comprehensive and multifaceted understandings of health, medicine, and wellbeing.

**Words by Dr Vaughan Wozniak-O'Connor  
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