



By Lela Nargi

They are wispy and fine, the exact opposite of actual, weighty, sloppy organs: brain, heart, gut, lungs, all knitted up of single strands of human hair by Sydney-based artist Helen Pynor. "It's an act of madness," she admits.



Untitled (brain heart gut), 2007, 94 x 34 x 30 cm, Courtesy Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

When she conceived the whole, mad pursuit, Pynor thought she would knit garments. But, “These ideas gradually moved closer and closer to the internal body, going from coats, to hands, to lungs and a heart,” recalls the knit-anatomist, who holds a bachelor’s degree in biology. “With the knitted organs there is an element of paradox. Hair is a symbol of beauty, but is being used to represent internal organs, often considered ugly and distasteful. The organs [also] allow me to create very intricate structures that take on a kind of visual magic when made from something [this] ethereal and subtle.”



Untitled, 2007, 64 x 19 x 18cm, Courtesy Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

Before sitting down to knit, Pynor consults a combination of photographs, textbook anatomical diagrams, and, occasionally, real preserved organs in an effort to understand the organs' forms and how they might be translated into sculpture. "Some structures, such as the heart, have a quite complex three-dimensional form, and it is important to understand this form before I knit it," Pynor says. "Once I understand the form and scale of an organ (all are knitted approximately to human scale), I make a pattern."

Let me interrupt this excursus for a moment to address the question that is surely nagging you by now: Never mind the research and patterning, where does she get all that hair? Pynor's works may appear as weightless as air, but quite a lot of locks are employed in accomplishing them. And this ain't the kind of fiber stocked by your local yarn shop.



Two Hands, 2005, 60 x 25 x 14cm, Courtesy Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

Explains Pynor, “When I first worked with [felting] hair some years ago, I collected it in weekly rounds from all of the hairdressers within walking distance of my home at the time—Surry Hills, Sydney.” The result was masses of hair of all varieties—long, short, thick, coarse—in every shade imaginable. The later knitted works required, according to Pynor, “long lengths of very high quality hair.” The answer was to source from a hair dealer who purchases high-quality, silken tresses in many different shades from women in Spain, Eastern Europe, China and India. The hair is sold to wig makers and theater companies, but Pynor finds it to be a suitable base material for knitted hair sculpture.

The hair Pynor purchases is trimmed from the heads of Spanish ladies, particularly. There's something evocative and weirdly personal in this detail, despite the anonymity of the donors. As Pynor admits, “At times while I’m knitting these works, I wonder about the lives of the women who spent so many years growing these locks, and I think about how much personal history is tied up in the strands I’m knitting.”



Inhale, 2006, 76 x 128 x 25cm, Courtesy Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

Once the hair is in her possession, Pynor makes yarn of it by tying strands end to end. She usually makes a long section of yarn, then knits for a spell. Sometimes friends make the yarn for her, sitting alongside Pynor in her studio while she stitches away.

Despite the pattern she has earlier gone to pains to draw, Pynor finds that the process of knitting with single strands of hair is “organic,” so that much of a sculpture’s construction winds up being improvisational. “The organs offer unexpected prompts as they begin to emerge,” she says. At this point she may dispense with or modify the pattern by incorporating these new features into the finished piece. Working with 3.5mm to 9mm needles, Pynor, who is a self-taught knitter, calculates gauge and casts on—just like the rest of us. But her challenges are a little less mundane than those encountered by the average sweater stitcher. The main one is hair breakage, although Pynor claims, “I now have a good feel for the tension of the hair and rarely break it.” The other is simply seeing the hair, a problem solved by placing different colored papers on the desk underneath her knitting, to provide contrast with the color of the hair. Naturally, throughout, good light is also essential. When all’s working smoothly, the knitting is like “a moving meditation. But if my mind is agitated, I inevitably end up in a hair tangle at some point. It’s a pretty accurate gauge of my state of mind at any given time.”





Underneath, 2006, 23 x 68 x 9cm, Courtesy Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the quirks and extremes of her chosen medium, Pynor knits only in stocking stitch. She's able to create different textures, densities and translucencies by varying needle size and hair color. Still, a certain amount of flexibility on Pynor's part is critical. "Hair has a habit of becoming very disobedient when I become willful with it, but it becomes magically cooperative when I work 'with' it," she says. "Constructing these pieces demands a willingness to be observant of, and responsive to, what is unfolding and emerging."

The completed hair pieces, which are best exhibited in UV-proof containers made of an inert material in order to maintain their color and strength, amazingly require no sizing to achieve their distended shapes. "Hair," muses Pynor, "Whilst being a very delicate material, is also remarkably strong and resilient. Its natural spring, in combination with the hundreds of cross-over points that knitting creates, renders the forms quite strong and stable."



Exhale, 2005, 197 x 130 x 70cm, Courtesy Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

As a final poetic act, a finished work is suspended inside its display case, from multiple strands of blonde hair.

Learn more about the work of Helen Pynor at helenpynor.com.

*This article has been adapted from an entry in Lela Nargi's upcoming book for Voyageur Press, **The Greatest Knitting of All Time**, Spring 2011. Visit her at lelanargi.com*