

NATURAL ORDER

The traumatic loss of her partner has provoked vellum and leather artist Laura Youngson Coll into producing some extraordinary new work, says *Imogen Greenhalgh*. Portrait by *Trent McMin*

Laura Youngson Coll is talking to me about the difficulties of display. Until recently, she explains, she would surrender her creations without any conditions attached. The trouble was, this approach left her feeling dissatisfied: 'I've decided the cases are going to be part of the work,' she says, referring to the sleekly minimal cabinets her vellum and leather sculptures have lately been presented in. 'I've had them displayed not how I want, and the pieces can get lost. They need proper lighting, they need space within the case, and space within a space. That's becoming more and more important to me.'

Though her resolve is clear, Youngson Coll delivers this stipulation modestly, as if she is reaching a full decision while she talks with you. Recently, she's had plenty of cause to consider what it means to exhibit work, with her graceful, often painstakingly realised sculptures earning her nominations for both the Jerwood Makers Open and the Woman's Hour Craft Prize, both of

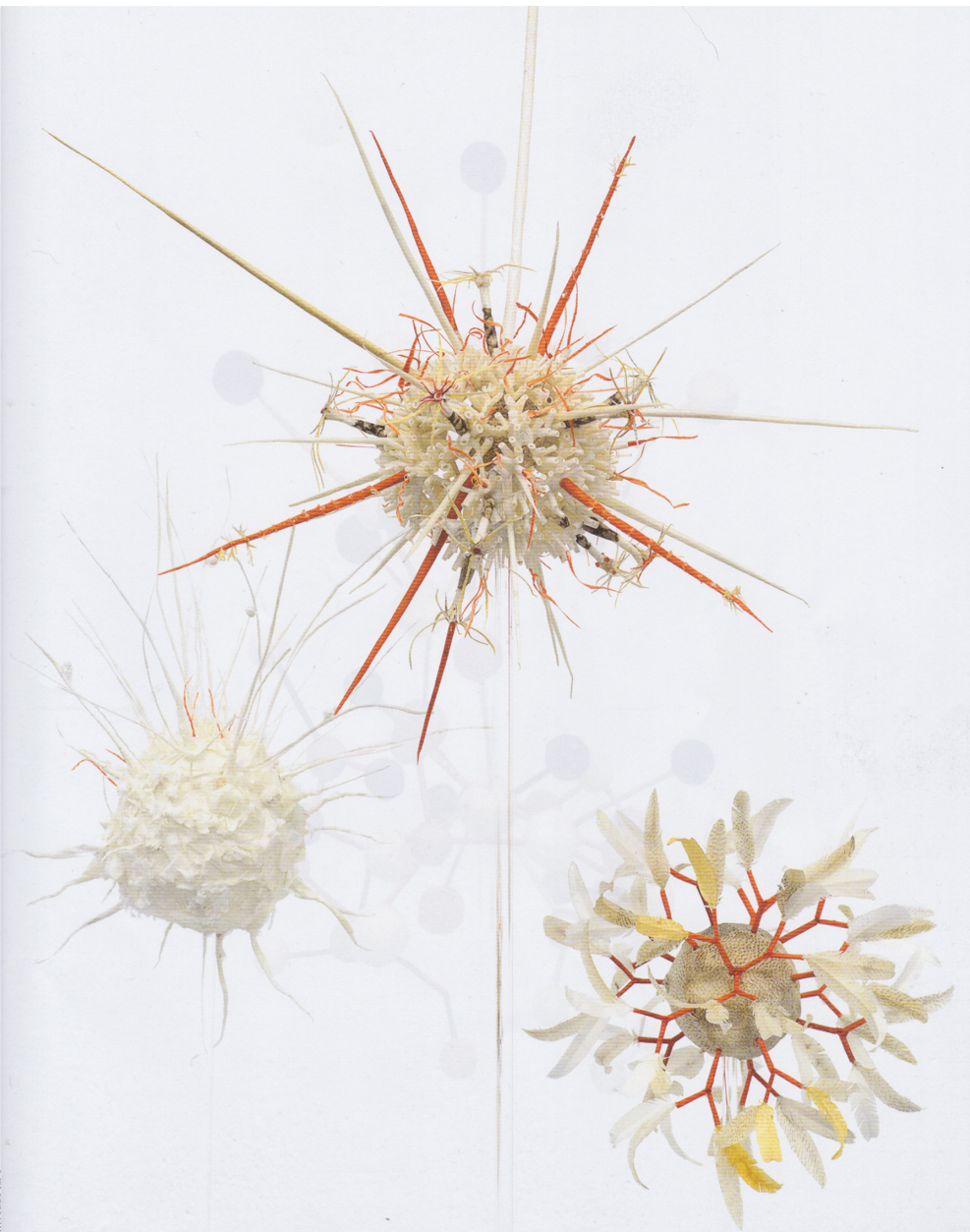
which entail public shows. And, if that were not enough, she is one of seven artists and designers selected to go to Basel with the Crafts Council this September, as part of its international showcasing programme *A Future Made* at TRESOR, the new contemporary craft fair. 'I think I got the display right with the Jerwood pieces,' she says, visibly pleased. 'I don't want it to become Victorian or that type of thing.'

Sitting on stools in her workspace, a secluded corner of Crystal Palace's bespoke leather-workers Rooks Books, our surroundings seem outlandishly at odds with Youngson Coll's new minimalist decree. Around us, stacks of samples spill from shelves, and papers sprawl across the available work spaces. 'The cabinets need to be very sleek, almost scientific, clinical, because the work is so intricate,' she explains. 'They allow an intimacy with the work, but there's still a kind of barrier.'

This tension is rooted in all of Youngson Coll's output, between a living, breathing, multiplying

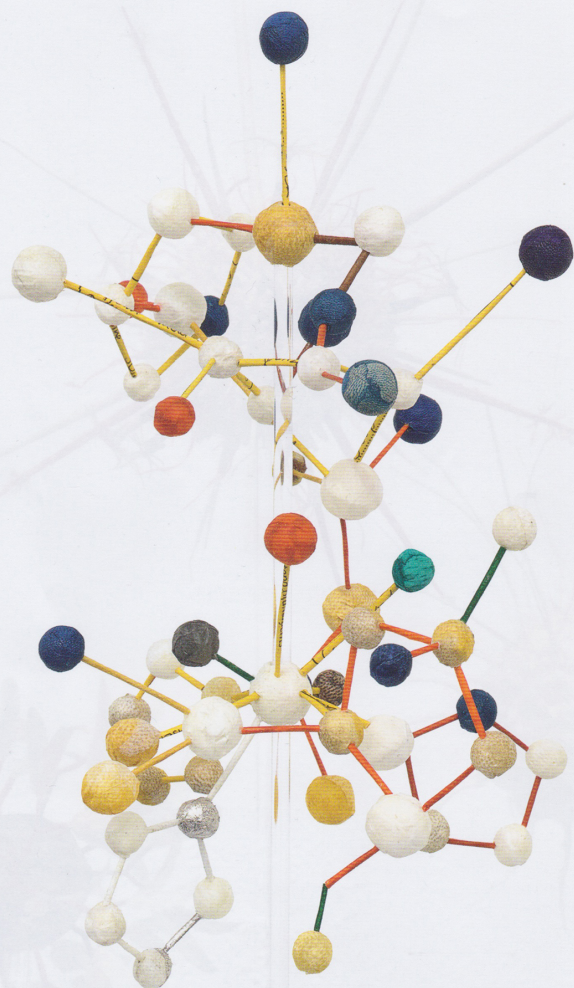
world and a human mind that selects, alters and cultivates it, building in a kind of distance. The artist works solely in leathers and vellum, and, though they are worked to buttery softness, close examination of their textured, porous surfaces reminds you they are skin. Formally, too, she bases her pieces on the organic world. 'I find the isolation of biotic systems so interesting. We have to isolate them in order to understand them – it's a scientific approach,' she muses, 'but it's the same for the way we portray the natural world: as an isolated artifice. Even in a garden – it's constructed, a human construction of nature.'

Over the years, Youngson Coll has recreated numerous natural forms, from a specific species of lichen to extraordinary pieces inspired by the drawings of the 19th-century biologist Ernst Haeckel, whose diagrams are pinned above her desk, alongside dried flower cuttings and a few photographs. On occasion she has worked from her imagination, but, she points out, so much of



PATHOGENESIS

2016-17, vellum, dyed vellum, supernatural vellum



REGIMEN

2017, vellum, dyed vellum, supernatural vellum, medical card, birch bark, platinum leaf

nature remains mantled in mystery that people often do not notice: 'Though they're fictitious, [they] could be fact.'

Leather came into Youngson Coll's world by chance. Following a degree in sculpture in Dundee, she came to London to study at the Royal College of Art in 2002. Needing some part-time work, she was put in touch with Rooks Books through a friend. Although her newfound leather-working career had started on a slightly inauspicious note – 'this woman was trying to teach me to pare and I managed to stab her,' she recalls, with a giggle – she continued working there in the years that followed.

As time passed, her longing to make art again grew. 'The work is really interesting, and it is creative, but the majority of your working time is spent doing technical stuff,' she confesses. In 2013 she finally returned to her practice, crafting sculptural objects from left-over scraps and offcuts collected from the workshop. 'There's a slight irony

in that I'm a lifelong vegetarian, so there was a conflict there. But I'm heartened by the fact I'm using the bits that would get thrown away.' Armed with expert knowledge of this versatile material, she explains, 'transformed' her practice, and she decided to confine herself to the medium: 'I don't find it restrictive, there's still so much to experiment with, with that in-depth knowledge as a basis. It's not conceptually restrictive either, it's almost like the material is shaping your work... It's changing what you might have in your mind's eye into something different.'

Before long she was spotted by Birmingham-based charity Craftspace when she had still made, she confesses, very little by way of actual artwork. Despite this, it invited her to take part in an exhibition at Barrington Court, a grand Tudor manor in Somerset. From there, further recognition followed in the shape of the Perrier Jouët Arts Salon Prize, which Youngson Coll won in 2014. 'That was pretty crazy as my daughter was

only four months old when I found out I'd won,' she laughs. 'I think they assumed that I had more work than I did... I had about three months to make everything for this solo show.'

It was this same year, in August, that Youngson Coll's partner Richard Sharpe was diagnosed with an aggressive strain of lymphoma. He died in June 2015, shortly after she presented some pieces based on the drawings of Haeckel at the Crafts Council's Collect. For her Jerwood Makers Open commission this year, she has produced a delicate series of work dedicated to him, representing the difficulty of trying to 'reconcile' the neutrality of the science behind the disease with the human experience of it. Set within three vitrines, like species from another world, the sculptures stand for discrete aspects of the illness, and the devastation it wreaked on a microscopic scale. The initial piece, a spiked sculpture no bigger than a fist, was made soon after Richard's death, an imagined cancer cell, she explains, 'not scientific' but



ANGIOGENESIS

2017, vellum, dyed vellum, supernatural vellum



‘[In Regimen] I’ve used the medical card Richard was given. It was the list of all the drugs he had to take’

LAURA YOUNGSON COLL

‘immediate, emotive... quite raw’. The following year, she decided to create work about the disease and applied for the Jerwood Makers Open: ‘I didn’t think I was going to include that piece... but then as things progressed I thought, “No, this is a good starting point to the narrative”.’

As Youngson Coll talks, we leaf through images and she carefully expands on the different meanings behind the individual forms, each a layered and often anguished response, a material grappling with the experiences the couple endured at each other’s side. One, studded with feathers, is a symbolic representation of a B cell, the cell involved in Richard’s cancer, and touches on the phenomenon of immunological memory, the way the body can, if it’s healthy, remember a virus for its future defences. The B cell gets its name from an organ found in birds, the bursa of Fabricius, she explains: ‘There were bird references between Richard and me, so there’s a personal reference woven in too.’

The second vitrine contains *Angiogenesis*, a collection of pieces linked by twisting branch forms. ‘This is about when the first tumour begins to generate its own vessels to supply it with blood. I found that really horrific,’ she observes. ‘The piece became dynamic, which I was pleased with, because it is dynamic. A multiplication of cells, this spreading.’ One form, the third and largest in the cabinet, appears quite monstrous up close, an agglomeration of barbed spheroids in white, orange and blue vellum. ‘This is the tumour,’ she explains, with a gentle matter-of-factness. ‘They removed it at one point after chemotherapy had been unsuccessful. The surgeon showed us a photograph. It was shockingly large... This is actually quite an accurate size.’ After we meet she sends more thoughts about each piece; of this one, she states simply it ‘represents a point of no return’.

For her third and final vitrine, Youngson Coll deviated from her original plan for the series. Through the process, she’d been collaborating

with a haematologist Graham Collins, of University Hospital, Oxford, whom she had been put in touch with through the charity Bloodwise. ‘He could be candid with me. It was retrospective, so we knew the outcome.’ The consultant and the artist discussed at length the manifold complexities of Richard’s strain of the disease, and Collins introduced her to pioneering treatments including immunotherapy – something she expected would provide her with the subject for her final piece. ‘I think I will make a piece about it,’ she says. ‘But for this, it just didn’t seem appropriate. I’m not there yet. This was not the outcome for Richard. This was not the reality of it.’

Instead, she created something quite different to her previous work, moving from organic, cellular forms to ‘a confusion of molecular structure’, as she puts it. The work, *Regimen*, represents her own bewilderment at the enormity of the diagnosis and what it meant in real terms, but also the complexity of the medical science, of struggling



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to make sense of this esoteric new world. On examining its spokes closely, you notice traces of writing. ‘I’ve used the medical card Richard was given,’ she replies. ‘It was this list of drugs he had to take, and the side effects. Chemotherapy drugs, and drugs to counter the effects of the chemotherapy drugs. There was a heartbreaking amount.’ Elsewhere, you glimpse a component gilded in platinum leaf, a reference to the metal’s mysterious presence in one of the drugs; another includes birch bark, a private reference shared with Richard, a hidden material link.

Though her work on the Jerwood commission is complete, with the project on its way to Cirencester for the second leg of its national tour, it seems fair to say it has proved seminal for Youngson Coll, laying the ground for the work underway when we meet. One sculpture, an enigmatic cluster of pale pods, makes the most of a new casting technique she has developed, which involves paring vellum as thin as sugar paper,

almost to translucence, and moulding it to make lightweight husks. The sculpture, *Alpidium*, is based on sea squirts, she tells me, a rather humble-looking marine invertebrate that scientists are using to extract a cutting-edge cancer medicine. She plans to show it at the Woman’s Hour Craft Prize exhibition as part of a triptych, alongside her earlier Haeckel sculpture from 2015.

‘There’s this dialogue with the Jerwood commission and my imagining of the cancer cell, and this Haeckel piece,’ she explains. ‘I was making it when Richard was really ill, and people who know me and my work have since said to me they assumed it was a cancer cell. It surprised me, as quite a few people said it, but it wasn’t a conscious thing.’ The sea squirts, she explains, are her latest biological fascination, and their newfound scientific fame takes the work ‘right into the contemporary from the 19th century. So there’s a kind of narrative which is my own personal one, then one of my work developing, but also this

historical, scientific narrative.’ As with her Jerwood commission, broad themes – science, nature, time – become profoundly personal, a step towards that reconciliation she searched for following Richard’s death.

Alongside these preparations, Youngson Coll has started to turn the lens on her own practice, as an artist and maker, in preparation for *A Future Made*. ‘It’s interesting as [A Future Made] is all about process and materiality,’ she says, and she intends to present something uniquely self-reflexive. Through a sequence of forms based on cellular evolution, ‘perhaps bacteria, something that evolves in itself as it grows’, she will tell the story of her craft, from unworked vellum through to a delicately wrought final piece. It’s a project suffused with ideas of organic growth and transformation, but here, one senses, the burgeoning is the artist’s own. A self-portrait of sorts, affirming her place in nature’s family of things.

See *Woman’s Hour Craft Prize Supplement*, page 40.