

Jerwood Makers Open

A project made possible through funding and support from the Jerwood Foundation. A departure for my work, given the highly personal subject matter, it has been an extraordinary project for me both personally and professionally. Here I have detailed some of the stages involved

Initial proposal

In August 2014, when our daughter was 8 months old, my partner was diagnosed with Non Hodgkins lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphatic system. Initial prognosis was good but after a disappointing response to first line chemotherapy treatment, and the identification of a particular gene mutation of the cancer cells, the outcome became much less certain. Five months of attempts to treat the cancer into a state of remission, and allow a stem cell transplant, were not successful. In June 2015 he died at the age of 37.

I propose to create a piece examining the cellular morphology of the disease. This microscopic perspective is a familiar visual language in my practice. This not only reflects the idea of assimilating such incomprehensible events in a way which is highly personal but also examines the wider issue of the interpretation of medical language; the reconciliation of scientific explanation with the experience of serious illness.

I work in leather and vellum, adapting traditional leatherworking techniques to create both fictitious and more scientific depictions of the natural world. Making the work is an ongoing process of experimenting with paring and saturated gluing techniques to create form. The detail I am able to create using these materials and techniques lends itself well to the representation of the microscopic and cellular. However, for this piece I would like to explore new areas of material use, specifically the integration of paper into my vellum forms. I have reams of medical notes; their inclusion would be of personal significance. I have enough material knowledge of paper to know it can be integrated into the work and be manipulated in a similar way to finely pared vellum.

I propose a dynamic work of small component parts based on the uncontrolled proliferation of cells characteristic of the disease. I imagine cellular structures, which on closer examination reveal dysfunctional form. Normal cell division appears in the visual imagination as perfect symmetry, DNA is faultlessly replicated. Conversely, the mutations of cancerous cells take on a random, immature morphology and undergo rapid multiplication. Aesthetically this provides a strong starting point for the work but the piece will be far from a scientific, cellular model. It will be tempered by the subjective nature of personal experience and the scientific ambiguities of treating a form of disease not yet fully understood.

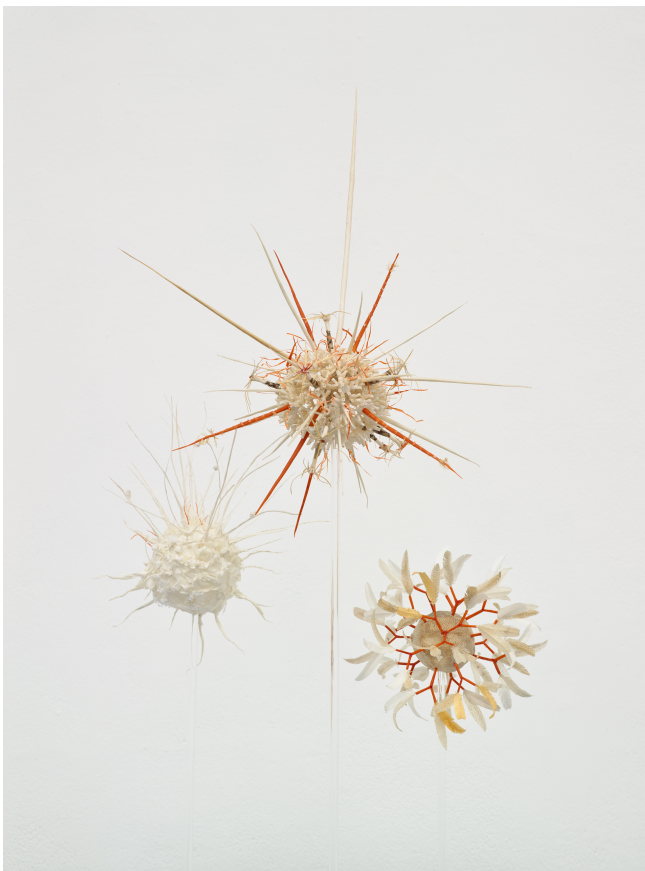
New advances in cancer treatment are about not just targeting cancerous cells with drugs (chemotherapy) but reprogramming healthy cells to recognise cancerous cells and destroy them. This seems extraordinary and is of particular significance as my partner experienced severe side effects as a result of chemotherapy. It potentially adds another component to the piece; examining contemporary experience and future scientific potential.

Scientific accounts of activity on a cellular level provoke curiosity about the role of visual imagination in scientific research. I found a description of cells too small to be individually observed; their morphology based on conjecture. In order to explore these ideas I am in the process of finding out about the possibilities of working with research scientists, ideally in the area of lymphoma. Initial enquiries have elicited a positive response primarily because the project offers a personal narrative, and perspective, on their work.

Jerwood Makers Open

The Project

A series of three works exploring the cellular morphology of lymphoma (DLBCL) significant because of my partner's death of the disease in 2015. This microscopic perspective offers a basis for an exploration of the making processes, and visual language, of my chosen material; vellum. Personal and scientific narratives weave through the work, attempting to examine the reconciliation of scientific knowledge with personal experience, the microscopic with the macroscopic. The narrative of the three pieces loosely follows the progression of my partner's disease, as well as my own shifting understanding as the work has been researched and made. Each work deliberately exists in isolation, or within a closed system, clinical in presentation; the microscopic often takes us beyond the visceral but the work aims to unsettle in its isolated beauty.



Pathogenesis

2015-2017

Vellum, dyed vellum, Supernatural vellum, fish skin, armature

Pathogenesis starts the narrative of the three works, the first cell form (tallest) in this work originates from just after Richard's death and I have been working on it ever since. It is my imaginings of a cancer cell, a spiky aggressive form but non-the-less contained and highly detailed; a emotive response writ small in my making. In contrast, the second cell introduces an attempt at a more accurate depiction of the cells involved in the disease; a b cell. More objective making, afforded by the depiction of scientific detail, is introduced in this piece. The third piece uses the graphic symbolism of the antigen, a key signifier of a b cell, and the feather; a reference to both historical and personal narratives.



Angiogenesis, 2017, Vellum, dyed vellum, Supernatural vellum

Angiogenesis explores the progression of the disease at a cellular (and chromosomal) level. I think of this piece as a reflection of the time when it became apparent my partner's lymphoma was more complex, and less treatable, than first thought. During the making of this piece I worked with haematology consultant, Dr Graham Collins, and gained a greater understanding of the biological mechanisms involved. The dynamic nature of this piece, and the insidious intrusion of the vascular systems, hint at the often terrifying efficiency of biological systems in cancer. The components of this work, sequentially, refer to the following:

Origins of disease

A dendritic cell introducing a pathogen to a b cell; the b cell then starts a complex process to produce antibodies to fight the pathogen. To enable this process the DNA of the cell undergoes a mutation; a vulnerable point at which cancerous mutation can begin.

Diagnostics

A chromosomal test called F.I.S.H (fluorescent in situ hybridisation) helps to diagnose DLBCL. The translocation of chromosome 8 is involved hence the eight chromosomes configured to make the form. The red and green dots in this test indicates the translocation of chromosome 8 and the presence of the disease.

Growth

The resultant tumour made up of polymorphous cells expressing confused and diverse antigens on the surface of the cells; the result of the uncontrolled proliferation of immature and mutated cells. This piece is similar in size to the tumour removed during an operative attempt to control Richard's disease. The operation was undertaken after chemotherapy had failed, two weeks later it was found that the disease had spread and my partner's treatment became palliative; this piece represents a point of no return.



Regimen,
2017,
Vellum, dyed vellum, Supernatural
vellum, veg tan leather, medical card,
platinum leaf, birch bark, wire

Regimen shifts scale into the molecular and returns to the graphic symbolism of biological structures. It refers to the attempted treatment of the disease, with material reference to the personal and the medical; platinum leaf as platinum is a component of one of the chemotherapy drugs and birch bark, a personal reference. Many of the molecule 'stalks' are made of a bright yellow medical card given to Richard and detailing each medication, on close examination text can be seen.

The confusion of molecular structures in this piece are indicative of the vast amount of different drugs needed in chemotherapy treatment, many administered to counter the effects of others. I wanted to convey the complexity of this treatment both emotionally and physically; chemotherapy, although now much more targeted, poisons healthy cells as well as cancerous ones. Regimen is not so much an end to the narrative as an intimation of the complexity and confusion often felt in assimilating such an experience.

Jerwood Makers Open



Installed in the Jerwood Space in London. The Jerwood Makers Open 2017 will also tour to the following venues:

New Brewery Arts, Brewery Ct, Cirencester 15th Sept. - 5th Nov. 2017

Devon Guild of Craftsmen, Riverside Mill, Bovey Tracey, Devon 20th Jan - 11th Mar 2018

Pier Arts Centre, Victoria St, Stromness, Orkney 24 Mar - 9th Jun 2018