

# Exhibition Review: *A Picture of Health: Art, Medicine & the Body* – Needs More Room to Breathe

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*A Picture of Health: Art, Medicine & the Body* addresses the concept of health in 2021 – but not all is well. The exhibition is a rehang of over 20 years of accumulated works relating to medicine, with several pieces reflecting the location of the exhibition at the Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum, Royal Pump Rooms in Leamington Spa – historically, a site for drinking and bathing in natural saline waters, and later a hydrotherapy centre, which closed in 1999.

Occupying a single room with a high arched ceiling, the walls of the exhibition are a combination of exposed brickwork alcoves and pale clinically green walls reminiscent of hospital wards; cool, calming and non-intrusive.

You would be forgiven for thinking only one disease existed in the last two years; the world has been fixated on Covid. It is all-pervading, even within this exhibition, where floor markers guide you through the space and box you in around pieces. The art is a tonic to this obsession and provides a holistic view of other causes of illness and disease that are being overlooked, as well as the experiences of those who live them. It asks the viewer to consider: What does it mean to be healthy in 2021?

Not an easy question to answer. The rehang features a plethora of contemporary works, with a few historical pieces and artefacts added in. The collection is eclectic, covering multiple themes, from The Royal Pump Room's history to explorations of addiction, psychological illness and physical disease. It continues the trend that has endured in contemporary medical art since the 1960s, where health and sickness are viewed from perspectives outside of mainstream medicine and works are as much an exploration of identity in the context of illness as a representation of disease itself.

Among the works is Marc Quinn's marble statue of *Catherine Long* (2002), which is a study of unconventional physicality. In one corner, two oversized brightly coloured prints of altered pharmaceutical packaging from Damien Hirst's *The Last Supper Series* (1991) are hidden behind a pillar, dissected away from another four of Hirst's prints inexplicably located on the far side of the room. In a group of pieces comprising resin-set plants, ceramic bottles and pictures of hydrotherapy spas sits Lyndall Phelps' *Silence* (2001). A series of four knitted surgical masks created long before the pandemic, this piece has taken on new meaning, now a reminder of the initial fear of Covid and the loss that came with it. The exhibition ends on pieces specific to the spa town, including a set of hydrotherapy slings and electrodes reimagined by Phelps as luxury items and displayed against their historical counterparts. They do not quite feel like they fit within the discourse, just adjacent to the topic at hand.

Felicity Boardman's *I:DNA* (2019) is listed as a separate installation yet occupies a significant portion of the space. Brightly coloured bags hang on spikes of sculpturally reimagined DNA with a permeating soundscape looping endlessly. It disturbs the tranquil feel of the exhibition and makes it impossible to view the delicate photographic prints and pencil mappings of Jacqueline Donachie's *Weight* (2008) and *Susan's Eyes* (2008), and the four stranded Hirst prints at the necessary distance. It all feels cramped, compounded by permanent displays of china and a children's play area. Necessary, perhaps, but a downfall of The Pump Room's layout.

Sometimes the groupings of work make sense: a collection of historical portraits of physicians, a cluster of pieces around Leamington Spa's history, a meditation on genetics. At other times it feels confused; exploration of addiction alongside a reflection on dysmorphia directly next to a cryogenic memento mori. I am left with the impression that everything from the archive has been thrown into this exhibition, and that a pared-down selection would have provided more space to meditate on the pieces included.

It is a shame, as the works within *A Picture of Health* are a compelling combination of pieces addressing health and medicine. There is little to be gained by striving towards a singular definition of health; such varied experiences cannot be packaged up so neatly. The choice of pieces successfully convey that what it means to be healthy is multifaceted and tied to personal identity, even if they could use more room to breathe.

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