

On the Body: Paul McClure

In the world of Paul McClure, viruses, DNA mapping, Dr. Seuss, and molecular biology are all fertile sources of inspiration. While themes have evolved over the twenty-five years of his professional practice, a desire to pair the seemingly incongruous, and to draw attention to that which is invisible or overlooked, endures throughout. Viruses are simultaneously playful and foreboding; tumours become delicate pearls embedded in sterling silver; human veins are elegant branches with whimsical garnet red tips. The body becomes the site that unites all.

The illustrations of American artist-activist Keith Haring, and the provocative critiques of the art collective General Idea were key early influences, reminding McClure of the powerful role that wit and irony can play in cultural critique. As a young gay man in the early 1990s, McClure knew he was living in a pivotal time. The AIDS epidemic dominated public discourse, yet it was simultaneously shrouded in mystery and stigma. Giving physical form to that which was culturally silenced or tacitly shamed became the focus of his early work.

Echoes of General Idea can be seen in McClure's elegant silver pendant of bundled branches from his Corpus series. Modernist and spare, the pendant is entitled "Faggot," alluding to homosexual men and their historic referent: the dried branches used as fire starter (Fig. 1). Its female counterpart, "Broomstick," references those condemned to death by burning in the 17th century. The social condemnation that characterized past judgment becomes eerily prescient; the pendants are elegant, while simultaneously offering a grim reminder of the collective intolerance that can be worn as a second skin.

McClure both exposed and removed the social judgment placed on disease. Like cancer, AIDS was neither a curse nor a punishment. Rather, once disentangled from the myths and metaphors in which it was embedded, it could be reconsidered as part of a new visual language "within the conventions of jewellery." As McClure discovered with his subsequent work, the DNA sequencing that makes human beings distinct is, in fact, shockingly similar from one individual to the next.

The Cells Series he began in 1999, stemmed from the desire to "visualize smaller and smaller things within the body." The forms of human cells lent themselves to stylized shapes using sterling silver, resin, and neodymium magnets. In producing their structures, McClure saw the connections that existed between the artist's studio and the laboratory; both were places in which original knowledge was constructed, and which offered a means of "seeing" previously unobserved phenomena.

And the scope of such phenomena is vast: stem cells divide and multiply in a series of sterling silver and 18K gold brooches; cell mitosis is captured in a neckpiece of the same materials; and antibodies fight pathogens in rings of all types, including that of sterling silver and garnet (Fig. 2) as well as 3D printed laser sintered nylon (Fig. 3).

McClure acknowledges that the perception of our physical world on an ever-decreasing scale has captured growing interest. Our new frontier as humans is “not only the grand outer limits of the universe but also the invisible nano scale of the world around us.” This microscopic subject matter can entice us with its beauty and deft use of materials. At the same time, it tells a larger story: a story of life and death, of the microscopic commonalities we share, and of the subtle mutations that can spread throughout the body. We are at once entranced, and also confronted with existential questions about mortality, chance, a world beyond the visible, and eternal beauty.

Paul McClure was the Fall speaker at the Material Art and Design (MAAD) Speakers Series, at OCAD U in Toronto. This series was launched by faculty members in MAAD with a desire to bring important artists working in craft media to the larger OCAD U community. It is funded through the generous contributions of MAAD faculty members from the university’s Project 31 fundraiser.