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Richard Purdy

Dental Alphabet, exhibition view, Galerie Bellemare Lambert, Montréal, 2023.

Photo: Guy L'Heureux, courtesy of the artist

Galerie Bellemare Lambert, Montréal

December 2, 2023 – January 27, 2024

In recent years, the idea that the body plays an active role in the manifestation of cognition, a notion sometimes referred to as *embodied knowledge*, has become popular among those who write or theorize about art. Proponents and antecedents of this somewhat broad notion—Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Alfred North Whitehead, Rudolph Steiner, and the godfather, Merleau-Ponty—have come to populate the bibliographies of many an artist's graduate thesis. One has the sense, however, that this attractive notion does not run very deep in general practice as we go about our piteously Cartesian lives: working by the clock, measuring our steps with FitBits, and sitting in waiting rooms in clinics devoted to Western medicine. Mostly the notion calls to mind our weekly Pilates class or speaking to our plants as we water them.

Occasionally, however, something pops up to show us that there is something to the embodied knowledge concept that reveals our own bodies to us in ways we could not anticipate. Such a case is artist Richard Purdy's new exhibition, *Dental Alphabet*, on view at Galerie Bellemare Lambert.



Richard Purdy

Dental Alphabet, exhibition view, Galerie Bellemare Lambert,

Montréal, 2023.

Photo: Guy L'Heureux, courtesy of the artist

In 2020, Purdy developed an acute case of tinnitus—an incessant ringing sound—in both ears. Tinnitus is not medically treatable. Soon, however, Purdy discovered that he could modulate the sound by touching various teeth with his tongue. Each tooth yielded a different tone.

He began a series of drawings to explore his affliction, touching first an upper tooth, then its lower counterpart. Purdy drew in white pencil on black paper, moving his hand without looking at the surface. These exercises resulted in a set of sixteen pairs of drawings, corresponding to the thirty-two teeth in the human mouth. Each pair is presented as a sort of diptych: an unusual frame attaches the two drawings, with that of the upper tooth on top and the bottom below. Or perhaps a triptych—a small dental panorama x-ray of the teeth in question is framed alongside each pair.



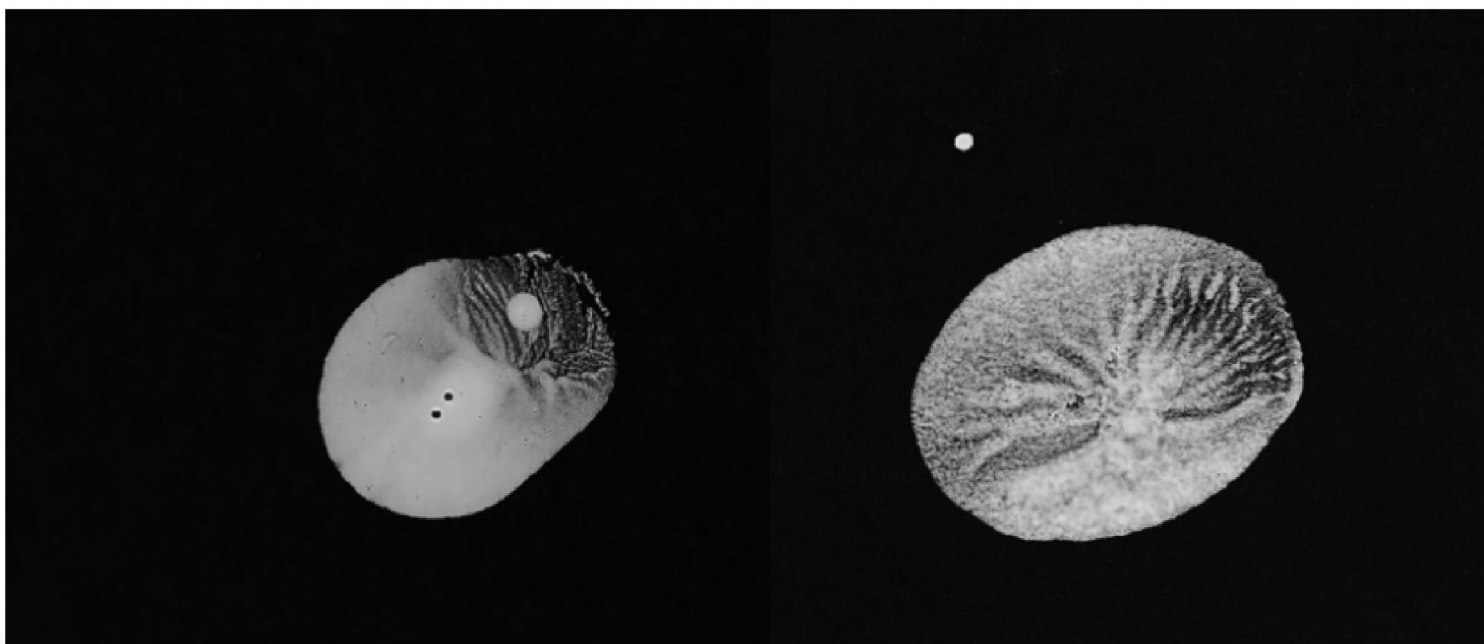
Richard Purdy

Dental Alphabet, exhibition views,
Galerie Bellemare Lambert, Montréal, 2023.
Photos: Guy L'Heureux, courtesy of the artist

The results of Purdy's free drawings are abstract, freewheeling, and often surprising. For instance, those corresponding to the various molars range from meandering compositions of squiggled lines to geometrically regimented sets of markings. The designs for the main incisors form complex tracteries of delicate scribblings. In contrast, the canines are represented by bold, horizontal painterly swipes: dynamic, even a little aggressive. Against the urge to assign possible meanings to these various markings via sociocultural associations or registers, the drawing pairs evince an inner opacity that resists such accountings.

The exhibition's centrepiece, however—a large work depicting twenty-five teeth, arranged five by five in a square formation—is in a different vein. Here, the teeth come across as remarkable, numinous forms that complicate our sense of scale. Against the black background, each tooth seems to glow—a ghostly, radiant object with soft, subtle textures. One may doubt that they are even really teeth; they might be pulses or corn kernels in some kind of scientific or museological display, or asteroids bathed in unfiltered sunlight against the blackness of space, or maybe single-cell organisms existing somewhere within the darkened spaces of the body.

This larger work looms over the exhibition like an altarpiece. Further, its appeal to the viewer's imagination through such extremes of scale—micro and macro—which delimit the range of our sensory awareness and the parts of reality from which we are excluded, has the effect of bringing together these elusive, seemingly opposite sensory realms as corresponding regions of an unknowable, spiritual world. Existing in sensory regions that we cannot apprehend directly without machines (such as microscopes and telescopes), the basic cells that form our bodies are united conceptually with planetary bodies in distant space; the “spheres” reflect one another. As the medieval alchemists put it, as above, so below.



Richard Purdy
Dental Alphabet (details), 2023.
Photos: courtesy of the artist

In this way of thinking, we contain the universe within our bodily selves. In her essay in the accompanying catalogue, the exhibition curator, H el ene Brunet-Neumann writes, “With his gaze turned toward private inner realms, Richard Purdy’s work reminds us of the unusual gifts we carry within our anatomy: the unexpected in the simplest things, the strangeness of the body.” Indeed, it is hard to imagine a viewer contemplating Purdy’s work without pondering their own inner worlds.

We, as physical, mortal beings, tend to miss one of the human body’s key features, especially in our earlier years: its sheer *excellence*. But as we age, each new cause for suffering recalls our attention to this quality. The dentist refuses to pull a tooth until absolutely necessary because, despite the latest advances, the best dentures cannot compare to the qualities of natural enamel. The arthritis sufferer yearns for artificial cartilage—just a little scrap of manufactured padding, neatly popped in between two angry vertebrae to solve all the problems—yet, despite the billions devoted to medical research, no humanmade substance can stand in for genuine cartilage, its elasticity, toughness, and versatility.