Troubling the Self

*Helen Chadwick:* *Life Pleasures*, Laura Smith (Thames & Hudson)

*Dreaming of Dead People*, Rosalind Belben (And Other Stories)

Helen Chadwick's subject for her art was herself: her physical body and its situation within society, its relationships with others. At times her work considers the domestic and mundane, at other times it can be strange and surreal, the body recontextualised and considered anew. Elements of what appear to be autobiography are present but in an egoless way that is applicable to many; and in a similar way, sexuality and bodily functions feature too. Many find the latter erotically charged, which I confess I don't. Chadwick is clever enough to maintain a distance between her art and the viewer, this is not confessional or titillating work.

What makes Chadwick's work so brilliant and different is its wit, its quirkiness and often its sense of form and beauty. 'In the Kitchen', an early work, is a performance piece with Chadwick dressed as kitchen appliances, whilst 'The Labours' presents photographic images on sculptural forms such as a gym horse or piano, each one a key memory for the artist. I saw this work at Riverside Studios and remember how strange it was. The book explains how Chadwick had to make her own photosensitive paint to create these and shows them *in situ*. Why they work so well is of course that even without understanding what is going on they are visually impressive and aesthetically intriguing. They are not from the read-the-label-and-get-it school of conceptual art.

This also applies to what is perhaps Chadwick's most famous (or infamous), certainly her best known, work, 'Piss Flowers'. These strange, fantastical eruptions of sculptures were cast from the spaces made by pissing in the Canadian snow when she was on a residency. The title explains rather than provokes, the work is both about and not about bodily functions. Other works such as 'The Oval Court' play with notions of cornucopias, of the human, with 'cyan-toned photocopies of her own naked body posed [...] amidst a fantasia of animals, plants, botanicals, drapery, fruit, ribbons and ornaments all swirling around her.' The pool constructed from blue xerox images is about considering the self, about Narcissus, the self, death, futility and transience; a critique of vanity but one that celebrates life in the present.

Whilst some of the work here seems a little obvious and facile in the 21st Century – cushions with female genitalia embroidered and patchworked on them, pictorial allusions to body parts (a kind of visual innuendo) – there are also many other works that still disturb. The chocolate fountain remains sickly and lascivious, an overstimulating pleasure; the 'Viral Landscape' series of photographs concerning AIDS are still as thoughtful and relevant as when made. Echoing the shape and format of medical slides for the microscope, Chadwick's original photos were printed on canvas then taken to the sea, where the currents distributed colour pigments over them. They were then re-photographed and overlaid with images of cells from the artist's body. The tension between inner and outer, private and public, landscape and bodyscape is clever and provocative in a subtle and considered way.

Chadwick was ahead of her time. She was a feminist who used her body to explore the world, making art from the situation she found herself in, subverting it through collage and juxtaposition, re-presentations of herself, playfully drawing attention to the world we live in, obsessively questioning and considering both the personal and communal. Some questioned her use of nudity as though it somehow compromised her critical position, others shied away from the use of bodily functions and fluids to make art. Until now, her work has always been pushed to the edge of contemporary art narratives and criticism but with the publication of this monograph and [a major exhibition at The Hepworth Wakefield](https://hepworthwakefield.org/whats-on/helen-chadwick-life-pleasures/) she is rightly receiving the attention and consideration she deserves.

Lavinia, the narrator of *Dreaming of Dead People* is obsessed about herself too. She mostly lives inside her own head, by turns melancholic, angry, obscene or caught up in the world of Robin Hood. Something, it's not quite sure what, has triggered a kind of mania that causes her to declare 'I am stumbling into the future, wondering what to do with my life', with 'fuel enough to blaze alone.'

Yet something has previously quenched this fire. Even at its most passionate or angry, the fire burns brightest either as a character the woods with Robin Hood or when obsessing over sex: the possibility and impossibility of desire, a confession about not having orgasms, the desire to fuck or be fucked once more, the awareness of aging and 'of becoming dulled', a fear 'of a lessening of intensity, of feeling less. Where do roses go when they fade, where do old roses.'

It is unclear if the six sections add up to a story here, if we are given cause and effect or just six moments of remembering, emotional fragments from a life. The first part is a melancholic amble along the canal in Torcello, to the 7th Century Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta with its huge religious mosaics. Despite Lavinia's sense of isolation, there is what appears to be a very ordinary encounter with a family of tourists here and then back in Venice itself, yet the chapter ends with a minor accident and a realisation that events 'would be left to float in the memory, like an unblinking eye looking upwards.'

Yet the eye is mostly turned inwards, as desire and the imagination, longing and lust, induce a kind of sexual madness in the second section that is then momentarily sated by Robin Hood in the greenwood of the third part, a story where Lavinia inserts herself as Hilda into a new version of the tales, and Robin Hood inserts himself into her bed and body. Here, however, it is Robin who becomes melancholic, wistfully remembering their coupling.

'Owl', the fourth section, is still obsessive but in a calm, religious manner. Dealing with and finally accepting the loss of a pet is at the heart of this part, ending with a kind of epiphanic vision of flight, before the next part, 'The Search for Goodbye', presents us with a reflective biography of Jess, the daughter the narrator never had. This, however, slowly mutates into despairing timeslips, recalling further moments of loss and being lost.

The titular sixth section gives us new glimpses of grief and loss that sometimes link back to what we have already read. But it's hard to know if it is death, desire, abuse or breakdown which has informed and underpinned this book. 'No break, no warning, between calm contemplation, and mopping tears. I want to cry not in grief, in sadness, but with life and sheer pleasure', declares Lavinia, but it is unclear if she will ever be able to move away from her memories, the incidents and events which seem to have caused these breakdowns, these passionate revisitations and emotional outbursts. 'There are places in my dreams I have been acquainted with for years', she says moments later, and now we too are haunted and involved.

Rupert Loydell (1190 words)