

Harley Weir

Sins of a daughter

9 April — 7 May 2022

Interview by Riccardo Pillon

Riccardo Pillon: *Sins of a daughter* at Hannah Barry gallery is the first solo presentation of a series of works where you approach the medium of photography in a radical way. What is the process behind the creation of these pieces?

Harley Weir: I started experimenting with different body fluids on photo paper to see how they would react when processed in the darkroom and that developed into a whole host of different ingredients and ways of working. I use mainly waste products... From the body or things that lurk at the back of my cupboard yearning for a new lease of life.

RP: The techniques you use are quite atypical. They result in a multisensory experience for the viewer, who is surrounded by images, materials, and smells. Would you give us some examples of the media you use and mix with the traditional chemicals in the darkroom?

HW: Some ingredients are spit, pee, probiotics, perfumes, contact lenses, tears, ingrown hair lotion... The list is long and winding and, though I have tested them over and over, the results are rarely the same. The erratic nature of how they come together really excites me. The anticipation of a new recipe, even an old one, has yet to disappoint in being a complete surprise!

RP: In our conversations you refer to these elements applied on the photographic paper as “sicko”. Why this name and why does it emphasise their repellent nature? Do you think there is a strong creative force in the disgusting?

HW: The products I use often smell and because I apply them in the dark the bottles are covered in one another’s juices and are rather repellent to look at and touch. A lot of things are sicko to me though, I like sicko. If I were to label someone as sicko it would be a compliment. It doesn’t necessarily represent sickness. It’s hard to describe but, perhaps my grotesque and my happy place are a little too close together in the brain.

RP: The process you explore steps away from the conventional figure of the photographer. You remind me more of a modern alchemist, a witch that conjures enigmatic images with mysterious potions. Do you relate to that? Does this emphasise your sense of agency in the creation of a work?

HW: I certainly feel like a witch in the dark. washing paper with smelly potions. It very much feels like a ritual. There's something ancient about it too. I think about people in the past experimenting with local solutions to discover new ways of doing things, octopus’s ink to write with, things like that. The time in the dark often goes on until very late and there's a lot of frustration relieved, though also a-lot created. It can be difficult to navigate things in the dark and I often spill things or trip over, and it can quickly go from a cathartic process to a very frustrating one.

RP: Once invented, photography was initially perceived by the sceptical and superstitious ones as a form of dark magic. Your works have that sort of aura, as obscurity prevails on clarity and the image is transfigured, distressed, and distorted. Could you explain why you wanted to redefine your practice and language with this series of works?

HW: My work is very personal so it's finding a way to share it that doesn't divulge too much. I have a lot of hesitation in showing my personal work. The photograph can be too real, too close to home, if it was a painting people wouldn't take things so literally. I feel the darkness allows me to create more freely and tap into a part of myself that I really miss. The marks made are intentional but the feel of making a wrong move is taken away in the dark. You can fuck up, the whole experience is a fuck up, which is very empowering.

RP: You mentioned that creating these images is always a gamble, you can never predict what will happen in the dark room. Therefore, the unexpected plays a big role in their final configuration. What is your relationship with this important element of your practice?

HW: The element of surprise almost keeps me addicted to the practice. You can never quite satisfy yourself, so it keeps bringing me back.

RP: It feels like you are now exploring a new phase of your practice and liberating yourself from your previous work with aesthetics and techniques that are more experimental and abstract. Has your focus in this exhibition shifted from the gaze, the body and the sexual to a more intimate and personal dimension?

HW: Art can be seen as creation. I think photography can feel like taking or simply watching, but it's generally a very collaborative medium with lots of minds involved. I suppose that's why self-portraiture often lives happier in the art realms. I would call a lot of these works art therapy. There's a lot of feeling in them, which, funnily enough, were very frowned upon when I was at art school, though I see that's changed a lot over the years. It feels like there's been a pull back to emotions over conceptual art which mirrors the state we are in now. It's good as I don't feel ashamed of working from the gut.

RP: I believe the prologue to this exhibition is your 2019 book *Father*. Has paternity, in all its multifaceted expressions, influenced this exhibition? Moreover, the title of the exhibition, *Sins of a daughter*, also speaks of a paternal relationship — what were the reasons for the title and what is the message it holds?

HW: The title of the show comes from the saying "sins of a father". I think about history inherited through gender or, more personally, bloodlines, illnesses, past traumas, and other ways of being passed down from our parents.

RP: The selection in the exhibition presents new works, some favourites from a build-up of work that you created during lockdown as well as revisited images from your archive. You described to me the selection process from the archive as "a homoerotic experience". Why is exploring and exposing the archetypal male important and why did it become so present in this exhibition?

HW: When I started out taking images a lot of them were of the male form. Initially I was very attracted to taking these images, quite simply because I found the male body very beautiful and wanted to acknowledge and praise that. At the time, it was rare to see men in a sexy way from a woman's point of view, so people became drawn to them. At art school I went further with this topic and realised as a woman there was a lot to think about when it came to desire. At the time, everything sexy in the porn and media seemed to come from the male gaze so it was important for me to try and carve out my own sexuality.

RP: Where do you do your research in terms of new techniques and aesthetics, and who inspires you to push your practice towards the unconventional and the subversive?

HW: Everyone and everything that touches my life inspires me. Often mistakes. As long as I'm learning things will come.

RP: Does this exhibition have a special meaning for you, as it presents your personal, secret work for the first time and on the physical front, not on the pages of a magazine or online?

HW: Since lockdown especially I have really yearned for a more physical element to my work. When I was younger, I was always making things, painting, or drawing. I felt I lost that part of myself, and I really needed to step away from the jpg and view my work in a different light.