Uterine Dreams: Sculptor, Heal Thyself Sarah Danays

The heart has its reasons, which reason knows not of
Blaise Pascal

Uterine Dreams

Sculptor, Heal Thyself

Sarah Danays

Sculpture | Photography | Essays

3rd June 2021 – 16th January 2022

Thacker Gallery of Ancient Egypt
Oriental Museum
Elvet Hill
Durham
DH1 3TH

The artist direct carving intertwining arms in alabaster for *Sarah Danays' Arms of the Portland Vase* installation.
The last two arms were finished live in the gallery
Credit: The Harley Gallery, Nottingham, 2016

The Institute of Advanced Study
Durham University
Cosin's Hall
Palace Green
Durham DH1 3RL

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For Marc
Love of my life, nightmare of my dreams

With enduring thanks to Francis Hoyland
Course Director of Fine Art, Camberwell School of Arts
1989 - 1992

Remembering John Berger, who as I left for LA told me
be worthy of the greatest outcome


Life after death
Mummification: preparing for eternity

Unknown maker, postpartum fertility figurine, showing recumbent mother and child,
New Kingdom period, pottery,
10.6 x 4.4 x 4.5 cm
Archive no EG5277, Oriental Museum
Previous page: Thacker Gallery of Ancient Egypt. Oriental Museum, Durham University

Uterine Dreams

Foreword

Curating a collection as varied and wonderful as the one held at Durham University's Oriental Museum is a privilege. Sharing objects from the collection with artists who are then inspired to create their own original works is an even greater joy.

It has been a pleasure and privilege to work with Sarah Danays, Ludmilla Jordanova and all of the other contributors to *Uterine Dreams*. Our plans for this exhibition and publication have been utterly transformed by the global pandemic that intervened, but I believe the results are actually better than anything we had hoped for when we embarked upon the project.

Sarah's works will sit among the treasures of our magnificent ancient Egyptian collection. Some visitors may not even notice them, reflecting the way that women's pain and loss has so often gone unnoticed.

At the centre of the gallery in which the pieces will be displayed lie the remains of an Egyptian woman. Despite the fact that she is seen by thousands of visitors each year, she remains invisible in many ways. Her name is lost to us and we know very little about her life except what we can glean from the study of her body. For much of the time she has spent at the museum she was not even described as a women. Only in recent years has 'he' become 'she'.

We do know that this woman suffered hunger and pain. The evidence of that suffering is etched still in her bones.

Perhaps she also suffered the loss of a child as so many women did in ancient Egypt? We will never know.

The topics that Sarah grapples with in her work are important. I hope that including her work within the displays at the Oriental Museum will give visitors pause for thought, prompt reflection and perhaps start conversations. This is pain that has remained hidden for too long.

Rachel Barclay
Curator, Oriental Museum

For an introduction to the Museum, see Craig Barclay et al eds, *Treasures of the Oriental Museum Durham University*, Third Millennium, 2010

Introduction to *Uterine Dreams*

Mungo Campbell

Across almost every facet of our lives, both public and private, the global events of the last year have forced us to adopt unfamiliar methods of learning, of shaping ideas, of communicating our individual and shared humanity. Hitherto, we probably viewed them, at best, as poor substitutes for our being present in the room where it must all happen. For decades, as the practicalities of our being in that room have met with ever-fewer barriers of time and place, so the imperative to be there has become ever greater. If the right people are not going to be in the right room at the right time, we have become accustomed to postponing actions and events, feeling constraints in forming and shaping ideas, and waiting for a better moment to share them.

A year that has offered no possibility of getting together in the room has allowed us to appreciate that while the experience of learning and the creation of empirical knowledge is often most successful when undertaken in social proximity as a shared process, there are exciting and unanticipated opportunities to be explored through our new tools for remote social interaction. We discover that being in the room, present in time but remote, opens a creative dynamic between shared and personal experience. In overcoming some of the physical challenges of time and distance it is as though we start to understand things differently. Most particularly, if we happen to be engaging with the physical materials of knowledge through these new ways, we ask new questions and, possibly, reach new answers.

It is some two years since Ludmilla Jordanova introduced me to Sarah Danays in the sociable context of a richly stimulating event organised by the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture in Durham. If *Uterine Dreams*, the publication, and its associated events are now manifesting themselves in unanticipated forms, the material presence of the exhibition, in the University's Oriental Museum represents a physical conjunction of objects and ideas that were themselves made to be together, in the right room, at the right time.

The perfect material context of the Thacker Gallery establishes a point of departure for an encounter with *Uterine Dreams* that is both universal and deeply personal. By the same token, *Uterine Dreams* could not be more timely: Jordanova points out in her essay that the questions explored by Danays are fundamental to our humanity. To be human in 2021 is to face questions about ourselves as individuals and our place in the world that few of us could have anticipated in 2019.

Both Danays and Jordanova are explicit that a key point of departure for *Uterine Dreams* is the work of Dr William Hunter (1718-1783), the founder of the museum at the University of Glasgow that bears his name.

Hunter's professional reputation was formed first and foremost as an anatomist and a teacher. His social and financial status came from a career as a successful obstetrician. While The Hunterian's encyclopaedic collections form the most obviously material part of Hunter's intellectual legacy, it is through the plates of his 1774 publication, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, that he sought to secure his reputation in perpetuity. The *Gravid Uterus* only appeared towards the end of Hunter's teaching career.

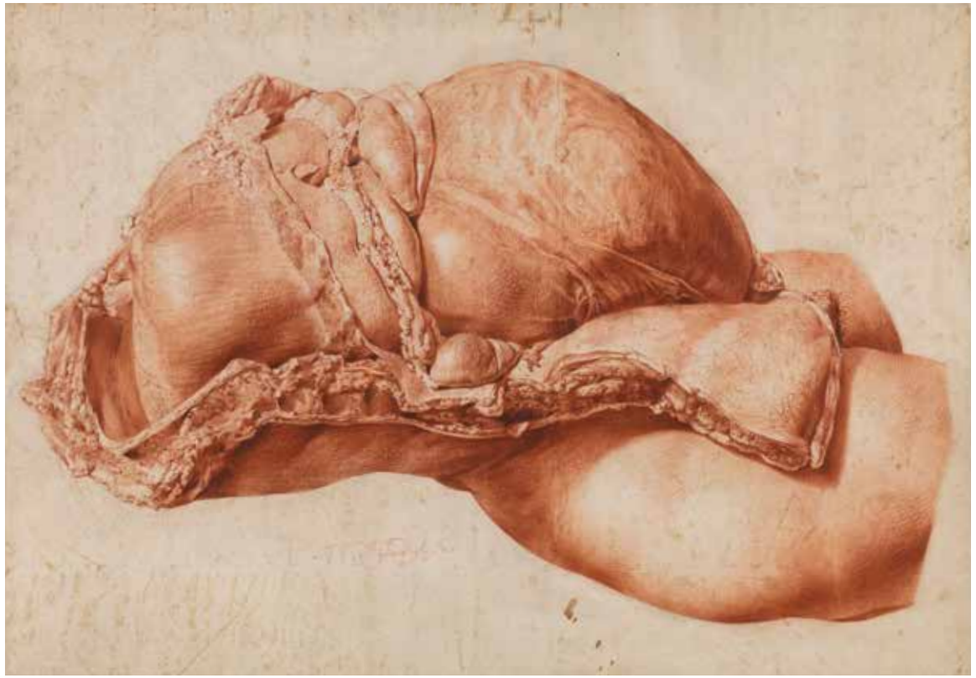
While it was eagerly awaited by practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic, the 34 engraved plates were never intended as practical tools for classroom teaching. For some two decades before the appearance of his magnum opus, Hunter had taught in his private anatomy school, with beautifully made plaster casts and anatomical preparations elucidating matters often obscured amidst the physical realities of the dissecting table.

As the Royal Academy's first professor of anatomy, Hunter performed dissections for aspiring contemporary artists. In turn, a small army of draughtsmen, sculptors, engravers, and other skilled craftsmen was central to the materiality of his pedagogy, and the wider collecting that informed that teaching. For Hunter the empiricist, at every turn the act of making was central to the business of knowing.

Hunter's engraved plates were accompanied by brief captions. There is very little text. The generation and communication of knowledge and ideas in the anatomy class could not be delivered by any means other than the empirical experience of visual and material evidence encountered in the room. Hunter explained to his students that they should

> *Learn… whenever you can by your own examination in living and in dead bodies rather than in books.*

Hunter's collections, initially housed, along with his anatomy school on Windmill Street in London, were not formed to create a modern public museum in our terms. Rather, they were a material repository of knowledge for teaching and research, highly regarded by contemporaries as much for the efforts that went into the preservation of the objects and specimens, and the careful ordering of the knowledge retrievable from them, as for specific things they contained.



Jan van Rymsdyk (d. 1790)
Drawing for plate II in William Hunter,
The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus (London, 1774)
c. 1750
Red Chalk on paper
53.9 x 37.6 cm
Inscribed: J.V.Rymsdyk Fec.
University of Glasgow Library, Archives and Special Collections, MS Hunter 658 (Az.1.4)

William Hunter (1718 - 1783) and assistants
The uterus at the end of the ninth month of pregnancy
c. 1750
Polychome plaster
56.5 x 23 x 45.5 cm
The Hunterian, University of Glasgow,
GLAHM 125628 (48.1)

Louis Gérard Scotin (1690 - c. 1745) after
Jan van Rymsdyk (d. 1790)
Proof after letters for plate II in William Hunter,
The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus (London, 1774)
1750
Engraving on paper
Sheet: 68.87 x 49.5 cm
Plate: 58.9 x 44 cm
University of Glasgow Library, Archives
and Special Collections, Hunterian Az.1.1

In the formation of these collections – from geology and natural history to paintings and ancient coins – lay the understanding, founded on the practice of anatomy, that the generation of ideas and of knowledge and their subsequent dissemination was best achieved through empirical experience of the material world. Plaster casts representing whole dissected torsos offered students one permanent form of material encounter. Anatomical preparations, astonishingly complex to preserve and to render 'legible', offered insights unavailable elsewhere. Students came to Hunter's anatomy classes from Europe and North America precisely to be in the room with both the teacher and his collections. However, while the craft of making those preparations as useful and long-lived teaching tools was comparatively new, and Hunter would probably be astonished that so many of his specimen jars have continued in daily use for over two and a half centuries, he could not rely on their longevity.

The plates of the *Gravid Uterus* offered a guarantee of some form of universal permanence for the knowledge he had generated and communicated within the confines of his Windmill Street domain.

The complex black and white images of the *Gravid Uterus* made from Jan van Rymsdyk's drawings are astonishing feats of engraving that, in their very abstraction heighten a sense of shock at the depiction of apparently de-humanised encounters between a male medical practitioner and the female body – and unborn child. In whatever way we try to rationalise Hunter's quarter-century-long endeavour to provide a ground-breaking visual analysis of conception and gestation however, we are inevitably left reflecting that the material presence of this luxurious embellishment to the bookshelves of his wealthy subscribers may well be characterised primarily as the self-conscious formation of a legacy created in the service of his own ambition.

Viewed in isolation from Hunter's teaching and collecting, it is easy to consider that the bodies of the women and babies represented in these elegantly abstract matrices of black lines were ultimately subjected to this reductivist and de-humanising process not simply to propagate medical knowledge, but overwhelmingly to advance Hunter's posthumous reputation.

In stark contrast to the medium and intent that shaped the publication, the plaster casts that Hunter prepared for teaching had no other purpose than to be present in the room as pedagogic tools. Recent research shows that painted surfaces of the casts made in London in the 1750s, recreating in detail the appearance of actual dissections, were regularly refreshed for use in teaching at Glasgow as late as the early 20th century. Like the anatomical preparations that accompanied them, the casts are derived from exactly the same encounters between male practitioner and the mortal remains of a woman and her unborn child, formed through exactly the same processes of dissection. These products of Hunter's tireless pedagogic ambition do not seek to disguise the harsh empirical realities of their making; their continued utility was sufficient testament to the necessity of their very existence.

Unlike Algernon Percy, 4th Duke of Northumberland, or Sir Henry Wellcome, from whose collections the Egyptian holdings came to Durham, Hunter never undertook a 'Grand Tour'. He was neither a traveller nor a proto-archaeological antiquarian. It is entirely a matter of accident, albeit a happy one, that the conjunction of Wellcome's medical pursuits, his instincts as a collector, and his archaeological interests so perfectly reflect those of Hunter. By the same token, while Percy was among the first British visitors to Egypt to amass a collection of Egyptian antiquities in the mid-19th century, in the context of *Uterine Dreams* it is an equally happy coincidence that the duke's illegitimate uncle, James Smithson (his mother a patient of Hunter's), was the progenitor of an institution - the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. - similarly founded for the pursuit of enquiry through objects.

Taxonomies that sought to elucidate an understanding of nature through visual analysis and order formed the bedrock of Hunter's understanding of the material world and humanity's place within it. Throughout three or more decades of anatomical research, and across Hunter's whole collection, certain larger, more broadly encompassing themes can be detected. In medicine, whether in his pursuit of the very first stages of human life in the womb, the operation of the placenta, mechanisms of lymphatic systems, or processes of calcification within the body, and in natural history, in the growth of corals and shells or the chemistry of minerals, Hunter spent a career seeking knowledge about the ways that liquids transform into solid materials, whether living or inanimate.

While the tools and processes of modern chemical analysis would only start to emerge in the years immediately after Hunter's death, important questions and ideas that drove those developments were formed by those who knew and used his collections. Like many contemporaries who studied the material world in the decades before the modern understanding of geological time was developed, Hunter expressed deep curiosity at apparent inconsistencies between historical narratives of human history and the growing material evidence to be found in his own collections that time should be measured across altogether unimaginable chronologies. A lifetime's enquiry into the processes of human conception and gestation could not but prompt equally challenging questions about the origins of humanity and its place in the world.

And here we return to *Uterine Dreams*.

For all their individual quality and aesthetic impact, behind what might first appear an unlikely conglomeration of knowledge and materials, discerning some form of coherent order among the objects in William Hunter's museum is rewarding, but requires considered elucidation. Beyond the gathering of collections, the making of objects remains as much a part of research and the creation of knowledge as it did in Hunter's practice two and a half centuries ago.

The processes of making and knowing equally underpin the work of the Egyptian people that prompt Danays' carved alabaster sculptures as compelling and personal expressions of her own inquiry. Through the presence of *Uterine Dreams* within the Thacker Gallery, twenty-five centuries of empirical practice challenge us to consider more acutely the questions Danays asks about who we are, who we have always been.

As she has written in her essay, Danays' work frequently manifests a profound collaboration with makers long dead. Their humanity, their identity as individuals, has become obscured by time. So, frequently, have the objects they made suffered material trauma through the passage of centuries. *Uterine Dreams*, placed alongside the work of Egyptian makers whose individual humanity and identity might otherwise be considered irrecoverable, takes the very substance of their work, and the damage and decay that comes with antiquity, and asks us to draw on a profound sense of human empathetic understanding to engage with the material evidence of lives long passed – whether in Hanoverian London or ancient Egypt.

In their essays, all the contributors consider the processes through which Danays' practice traverses the territory between subject and object, between the fluids that characterise the human body, both living and dead, and the way that the soft and water-permeable properties of gypsum alabaster, her preferred medium, resonate so eloquently with her subject matter. A remarkable echo of this can be found in the material that Hunter's artist collaborators used in their transformation of the visceral relics of trauma on the dissection table into the empirical objects of learning and pedagogy. Hunter's brittle polychrome casts are made from plaster of Paris, itself a form of processed and powdered gypsum. Through the alchemical properties of water briefly transforming powdered plaster into liquid, Hunter's artists rendered in permanent and unforgiving detail the fugitive, vulnerable and violated evidence of human flesh and fluid set before them.

Danays observes that neither the passage of time nor the accumulation of knowledge have entirely eliminated the mortal perils of pregnancy. Those perils are inextricably bound up in the relationship between mother and child, born or unborn. She describes the application of William Hunter's learning, his 'empiricism', as a balm for her own experience of trauma and loss. In our responses to the objects we encounter in museums, we are generally unaccustomed and ill-equipped to construct our interpretation around forms of empirical knowledge that fall outside our own experience. Even when we are provided with the materials to construct such an interpretation, we struggle to privilege knowledge embodied in artefacts by makers who may be distant in time, place or both. In doing so, we diminish our ability to understand their humanity, and with it, our own.

In our engagement with *Uterine Dreams* amidst the collections of the Thacker Gallery, we are asked to consider forms of shared knowledge fashioned across centuries of our common humanity and the personal experience of our own histories.

Whether present in the room, in the company of makers, people and objects, or bringing to bear perspectives afforded across the remoteness of time and distance, the creative processes of learning, constructing knowledge and making objects are born of empirical experience. They are, as Danays says, *personal*.

Inspiration, Myths and Artistic Practice

Ludmilla Jordanova

Where do artists get their ideas from? How are artworks made? These two questions are complementary and they are akin to others that express widely shared curiosity about processes of creation and production: how did life arise; have human beings been created by God; how are babies made; where does genius come from? Thinking about marvellous works of art, whether literary, visual or musical, prompts the desire to know how they came about. Excitement about big ideas can go hand in hand with an understanding of processes and techniques that underpin artistic practice.

Cosmology has wide appeal - it helps people explore a fascination with the origins of the universe. Whether our earth is the only location of intelligent life is a similar issue. Responses may well invoke a deity of some kind, a creator. This is the realm of myth, as well as science. Generations of artists have been inspired by dense stories that speak to big questions, stories that can be told and retold, kept alive and made to speak to more or less any period or place. Many people reflect on and use myths. They do not provide clear answers, rather they are an inexhaustible cultural resource capable of providing nourishment and inspiration for artists, who enjoy the freedom to use them as they wish. Similarly, the past provides artefacts, images and stories capable of feeding the imagination of later generations. It is in these contexts that the making of art needs to be located.

'Creative' as an adjective or noun is to be found all over the place, even if it has an imprecise meaning. Artists are expected to be 'creative', to come up with new ideas and innovative works. No tension exists between originality and indebtedness to myths and histories. There is a further fertile seam to be mined. In the twenty-first century it is fully accepted that personal experience is a rich vein to be tapped for themes, materials and conceptions no matter how intimate or transgressive these may be. At the same time, artists are in conversation with contemporaries and predecessors from whom they draw inspiration. Anything may be mobilised, transformed and re-imagined and in the process the past and the present, the fictional and the actual, words and images, intermingle. This is not a new phenomenon, nor should it be surprising that artists still want to engage with myth, with big stories about human lives and their meanings, with experiences that are so profound and far-reaching that they take on mythic proportions.

These are the contexts in which Sarah Danays' works may be placed, and in so doing we affirm that motifs addressed in ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt, that engravings made in the eighteenth century can, through art, speak to complex experiences now. Representations of the human body are of central importance in Danays' work, especially of the female body. Thus she can experience a strong affinity with an artefact made hundreds or thousands of years ago and through her art invite us to participate in that sense of affinity. These are not simple experiences, rather they are intricately embodied ones; they may occur in responses to portraits as well as to many types of sculpture. Being in front of a work of art involves viewers' entire beings, not just eyes and brain. Scale, for example, is frequently registered almost viscerally - it is unnecessary to take out a tape measure in order to respond to a huge statue or canvas, or a tiny work, say a miniature of an eye. It is impossible for artists to control or predict whole-body reactions to their work, but they can aspire to generate in spectators sympathetic responses to their thoughts, intentions and designs in undertaking it.

Artists are eclectic. Inspiration comes in many guises and the drive to pursue insights, feelings, moments of curiosity results in works that can be deeply personal as well as shaped by reading and looking over long periods of time. Again, this is a way of placing Sarah Danays' work in broad contexts that help us to appreciate it more deeply and to grasp how it fits into larger cultural patterns. She herself is articulate about forms of inspiration, types of reading and looking that shape both her sculpture and her photography. It is vital to appreciate that she is an artist working in two and in three dimensions, and in a range of media including photography, terracotta modelling and stone carving. The content of Danays' art is, furthermore, palpably gendered, by virtue of arising from and speaking to her experiences as a woman. While there is much debate about female artists in the past, and the extent to which artefacts they produced are distinctively feminine, in this case the artist is perfectly open in affirming that they are not 'feminine' in some superficial sense, but speaking with one woman's voice about her own experiences.

Among many other sources, Sarah has been inspired by a book published in 1774. Its author was the Scottish anatomist, collector and man-midwife William Hunter. He is a fascinating figure who has begun to receive the attention he deserves in recent decades, and above all through a magnificent exhibition mounted in 2018, and shown on both sides of the Atlantic to mark the bicentenary of his birth. Engaging with William Hunter is a complex business. He collected on a vast scale, so that grasping

the ways in which he bought, used and displayed the things in his possession is quite an undertaking. He exemplifies the many Scots who moved south in the eighteenth century, often becoming wealthy and successful in London. His interests were indeed wide-ranging, the collections, now in Glasgow, testify to the point, and so too does his close association with the Royal Academy of Arts, founded in 1768. Hunter was the first professor of anatomy there, and is present in both the famous paintings by Johan Zoffany, undertaken in the 1770s to record the early members. It is his 1774 book, however, that Sarah has engaged with most directly. This is an extraordinary artefact, not just for what it contains but for its physical attributes - large size, beautiful paper, high quality typography and engravings that could be called sumptuous were it not for the fact that this would jar with their subject matter - dissections of pregnant women and images of the foetus at various stages of development. The latter is the main subject of the volume. The drawings and then engravings were produced, under Hunter's attentive supervision, to an exceptionally high standard. Hunter worked closely with artists, engravers and the printer - the famous Baskerville - and he explored the nature of pregnancy with scientific and medical zeal.

Producing such a publication was a complex affair: Hunter dissected the cadavers, an artist drew from his dissections, rendering a messy three-dimensional object with precise lines and shading on a two-dimensional piece of paper. The engravers then made a plate from the drawing. In Sarah's case, inspired by the engravings, she starts with a piece of stone, works it, finally photographing it so that a three-dimensional object becomes a flat image on paper. In her practice two works of art are produced, and arguably they are of equal aesthetic importance. Both involve practices that may be inferred from the final product, but are not thrust into the awareness of viewers. The careful lighting, and special cameras used in the case of her photographs contribute to the quality of the image, but the drama and allure of the objects occupy a central position. With the carvings, those who appreciate their skill and beauty cannot easily imagine the nature and amount of labour they entail. This indeed is a common characteristic of art - it is possible to see that refined, time-consuming activities have made them possible, although the physical effort, the labour that goes into the production process is not fully registered. In this sense most of us who appreciate works of art are shielded from the realities of their actual production. While there is no easy way around this, one result is that 'artistic practice' is somewhat mysterious, and this allows free rein to be given to popular ideas about creativity and genius, that is, to myths about the ways things are made.

William Hunter's story has another chapter that is immediately relevant here. He also made casts from the dissections, and some of these three-dimensional objects featured in the 2018 exhibition. Making a cast and generating a piece of sculpture de novo are different processes. But they are also linked, since casts taken from the masterpieces of the ancient world permitted students especially to see, learn from and to draw works of art to which they would not otherwise have had access. Casts were also sold so that collectors could buy versions of, for example, busts of illustrious people to adorn their homes, gardens and especially libraries. Often these individuals were familiar to wide audiences from engravings. One theme that emerges, then, is the traffic between three and two-dimensional artefacts.

Among the most important aspects of Sarah Danays' artistic practice, I suggest, is the close attention she pays to making exceptionally beautiful photographs of her sculptures. By so doing she invites us to think about the perpetual conversation between flat representations, and those that have, if I can put it this way, body. It is apparent that she is preoccupied with the nature of human bodies - a preoccupation to which naturalistic sculpture is especially well suited. The body that is most fundamental to her work is her own. In this respect she is part of larger and longer movements in the history of art, and specifically in the history of women artists, which have taken on greater urgency in recent decades as bodily experiences have become central resources for aesthetic activities. These may be found in artworks produced by men too, and here we might think of a figure such as Marc Quinn. Yet there is an important difference to be noted between work that arises out of ideas, as Quinn's largely does, and Danays', which stem from grief, pain, rage and damage, that is, from embodied sensations.

Viewers are bringing their bodily experiences with them when they view works of art. These are necessarily diverse, and hence it is risky to generalise about audience's reactions to the display of somatic phenomena. It is clear that exhibitions about the human body are popular as responses to the Wellcome collection on London's Euston Road testify. Equally, displays connected with sexuality and reproduction elicit huge interest. In scholarly contexts too, these are significant growth areas. One way of gauging the nature of such interest is the magnificent volume produced by an interdisciplinary group of researchers at the University of Cambridge in 2018. *Reproduction from Antiquity to the Present Day* pays attention to visual and material culture, as well as to ideas, publications, experiments and policies. It reminds us how fundamental everything to do with human reproduction is for ways of understanding processes of making. The word 'conception' can refer to the making of life and to the genesis of ideas. Human reproduction is a kind of template, an arena that feeds the imagination.

The point brings us right back to myths - our culture is supercharged with stories about

how reproduction happens, including Athena springing from the head of Zeus and the Virgin Mary conceiving a child by receiving a message from God. The sophistication of reproductive medicine has not drained procreation of its mythic qualities, rather it allows new imaginative possibilities to arise, and to mix with established stories and artworks. Sarah Danays' oeuvre demonstrates that there are fresh avenues to be explored in areas that are fundamental to human existence, and especially to the lives of women: fertility, plenitude, emptiness, continuity, loss and generation. Such difficult and complex themes can be pursued in works of beauty and skill, the fruit of reflection and experience.

Further Reading

Mungo Campbell and Nathan Fliss, eds, William Hunter and the Anatomy of the *Modern Museum*, Yale University Press, 2018

Nick Hopwood et al, eds, *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day*, Cambridge University Press, 2018

William Hunter, *Anatomia Unteri Humani Gravidi Tabulis Illustrata/The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus Illustrated in Figures*, John Baskerville, 1774

Ludmilla Jordanova, *Nature Displayed: Gender, Science and Medicine 1760-1820*, Longman, 1999 chs 3 and 11

Martin Postle, editor, *Johan Zoffany R A Society Observed*, Yale University Press, 2011, esp. pp. 218-23

Sarah Danays, *Diviner* (2013) (For Mei)
Single Format C-Type
Edition of 10
71 x 36 cm, landscape
With guest photographer Sinisha Nisevic
Aluminium mounted with gloss finish

Left: Work in progress
Italian alabaster with c19 Chinese divining rod
Approximate dimensions 46 x 16 x 15 cm

Fragments and Healing

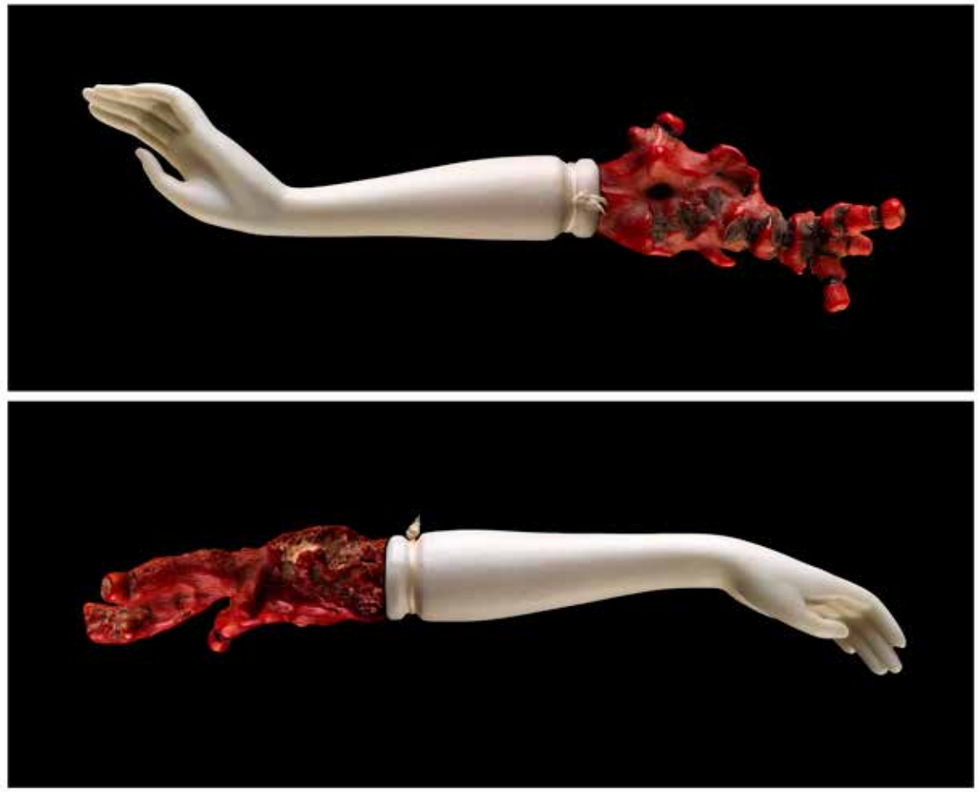
Livia Turnbull

I first met Sarah Danays back in 2017, while I was working as an Assistant Curator in the Sculpture Section of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. She had been in touch via the Section's public enquires inbox, with a request to view some medieval alabaster panels in storage at the Museum. Attached to the email were two photographs – artworks in themselves – of her 2007 work *Tourniquet*. The images capture a single sculpture – only a few centimetres long – of a forearm, cut off just below the elbow. It had been digitally manipulated to appear as a left and right arm with long elegant fingers, that held a haunting beauty.

My interest in Danays' work had been piqued, not just because of its visual impact. I had recently finished a master's degree in Sex and Violence in Post-'60's Art, which had focused on using feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks to analyse artworks, addressing themes that were calling out in this work! Unsurprisingly, when we met to look at the alabasters she was interested in, we found we shared a lot of similar interests. When, the following year, a call for papers for a conference on 'Bodies Re-formed' at Durham University landed in my inbox, it felt like an invitation to talk about fragmentation and trauma in Danays' work.

The paper I proposed – and later gave – was on the work that Danays developed in response to one of the medieval alabasters we had seen in store. She was particularly interested in a panel showing the martyrdom of Catherine of Alexandria, which once belonged to a church in Brittany, as part of an altarpiece depicting the saint's life. The martyrdom was particularly violent, and gendered – even as martyrdoms go. The account of it told in the *Golden Legend* pays much attention to the saint's virginity, as well as to the gendered nature of the torture.

The saint is stripped – for the humiliation of exposure – and her breasts are 'torn' off. In the alabaster panel the violence is abundantly clear, four men standing above the blindfolded saint, two pushing her further down with their feet and the end of a key staff waiting for her execution. While not fully exposed in this particular scene, the parting of her garments, and the outline of her breasts alludes towards indecency – reinforcing the violence of the image itself.



Sarah Danays, *Tourniquet*, (2007)
Large Format C-Type Diptych, Edition of 5, 150.5 x 61 cm x 2, landscape
Small Format C-Type Diptych, Edition of 10, 30.5 x 12.5 x 2
Aluminium mounted with gloss finish

However, it was because of, not despite, the violence and fragmentation in this object, that Danays was drawn to it. In addition to what were (through our contemporary eyes) traumatised subjects, she was interested in what she calls 'traumatised objects'. The alabaster itself is fragmentary, having once belonged to a broader narrative, and additionally the arm of the saint is missing, damaged in some unknown event. Looking at Danays' oeuvre, damaged and fragmented objects are a recurrent theme. They are central in her *Arms of the Martyrs* series, which reforms broken objects. This is also the case with *Stigmata*, which combines a 16th century carved hand showing a stigmata wound with a 19th century bronze stupa, made to fit together with a carved shim of alabaster. Although a recent work, broken objects have long formed part of Danays' creative inspiration, as she explained in a lecture at the Institute of Advanced Study, Durham University, from childhood she would seek out sacred broken bodies at the annual church fête.

Psychoanalytic frameworks are often used in the analysis of images of the broken body in contemporary artworks, where corporeal trauma is commonly seen as a visual stand-in for emotional trauma. Typically, though, the image of the body in parts is discomforting, and might even inspire revulsion, as Julia Kristeva explains with the concept of the 'abject' in her 1980 book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. The corporeal body is the primary site of abjection and it is as its boundaries are crossed that it is epitomised. Sarah's work has all the hallmarks of the abject, with the limb being a dissected limb - as the name *Tourniquet* certainly suggests it is - traversing the neat boundaries between object and subject. *Tourniquet* even references bodily fluids - in its flowering coral blood - considered a key site of abjection when they slip past the boundaries of leaky bodies. However, while these works are at times unnerving, they don't inspire the abject quality that might be expected.

Danays' practice isn't about making the viewer uncomfortable, instead, it is about examining violence or trauma, the fragments that remain, and finding ways to make them whole again. As she explains:

> *These pieces in their stillness speak not only of damage and loss - physical, emotional and psychological - but also of rebuilding, through their conspicuous repair and new associations.*

Interestingly, the displacing, or distillation, of trauma is consistent with how bodily trauma is often processed. Phenomenological theorist Edward Casey has argued - drawing on Lacan's theory of the body in pieces - that trauma is experienced as a fragmented body. When recalling a trauma, it is condensed into a specific area of the body, not necessarily related to the area impacted by the initial event.

Sarah Danays, *The Arms of the Martyrs*: *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (2018/19)
C-Type, Edition of 10
(Photographed panel transposed and composited)
31 x 45 cm, portrait

The Legend of Saint Catherine: the beheading
Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London
medieval polychrome alabaster devotional panel, archive number A119b-1946, 25.8 x 40.2 cm circa 1450-70

Sarah Danays, *The Arms of the Martyrs: Stigmata*, (2013)
Unmounted sculpture details: polychrome carved wood hand, circa c16, European (Italian or German) with circa c19 bronze stupa secured together by Danays' carved Japanese alabaster shim.
Approximate unmounted dimensions 41 x 15 x 13 cm
Last exhibited in 2018 at the Medici Crypt, Basilica di San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy

We see this understanding of trauma visually manifest in Danays' sculpture made in response to the medieval alabaster of Saint Catherine. It is an arm, carved of alabaster/anhydrite, to replace the saint's lost arm. It is not searching, as you might expect from the execution scene, where she is blindfolded, but extended in a gentle and accepting gesture. Although it is much larger than the one lost, in a second, photographic work an image of the sculpture is transposed onto a photograph of the medieval alabaster to show the saint made whole again. The brightness of the freshly carved stone stands out, as does the gesture, drawing attention to the healing and to the redemption awaiting the saint. In acknowledging the trauma, and making a gesture towards healing and wholeness, the violence becomes less affronting, and makes the image a contemplative one for the viewer.

This healing sentiment is communicated by the works, without any additional context needed to appreciate them. However, the layering of meaning in the work can only be fully appreciated with an understanding of the historical contexts Danays is inspired by, draws on, and refers to in her work. For this piece, she was not just inspired by the apparent suffering of the saint, but also by the redemptive power of the female body in the medieval period. The female body was typically a site of miracles – seizures, trances, levitation, virginal lactation, 'incorruptibility' (not decaying after death) were frequent, but almost exclusively female miracles.

The body was seen to offer redemption for women, which was not more formally available to them as it was for men through the priesthood. The images of female saints, in particular, enduring bodily torments were therefore understood in complex terms, and readily commissioned and consumed – especially by women themselves. With this understanding, Danays' work is, in a sense, returning some of the complexity and nuance – of both torture and redemption – for a contemporary audience.

The themes of fragmentation, trauma, and the female body, which I wrote about for the *Arms of the Martyrs* series, are also present in her latest series *Uterine Dreams*. The works are focused again on the body in fragments – a uterus with nine-week miscarriage, a uterus carrying a four-month pregnancy, a seven-month pregnancy with placenta, and a full-term swollen womb, all modelled first in terracotta ready for carving in alabaster to complement the truncated torso of the title piece. However, the trauma explored here is something more deeply personal, as it also draws on her own bodily experiences, of pregnancy and miscarriage.

The healing theme of the work is pointed at through the symbolic selection of alabaster, which is associated with healing across several cultures. It's a very soft stone, so much so that it can be scratched with a fingernail when it is freshly mined: it then reacts with the air, causing a 'scab' and becoming darker

Danays' metaphysical surgery for *The Arms of the Martyrs: Saint Catherine of Alexandria* addresses the missing right arm of the saint in the Victoria and Albert's devotional alabaster panel, depicting the young, scholarly virgin at the point of her beheading

Medieval belief maintained that only a complete body, that housed the soul, could gain entrance to heaven

With Catherine's body surgically complete, significantly by her new betrothal hand - the artist carved the saint's missing left arm and composited it into the transposed photographed panel - she, Catherine, may now take up her place as bride of Christ

and harder. In our conversations, Danays told me too that because of its porous nature, it can hold water and was, in some cultures, understood to be a soothing stone. Tombs were carved from it for this reason, and containers were made from it to hold healing ointments and precious oils for burial. It's the stone she chose to carve the arm for Saint Catherine because of these very associations. The coral too is important. Despite the vivid red recalling blood, it intuitively seems like a protective talisman. Indeed, it has associations as a protective gem. The materials used acknowledge the pain of this small, wracked, figure and gesture towards healing.

And yet, like Danays' other work, it also draws on historical sources for inspiration, this time from a 1774 book by William Hunter, based on his experiences as a man-midwife. The volume contains detailed – if at times disturbing – images of foetuses in utero, as well as truncated pregnant bodies. When I've spoken to Danays about these new works, she returns often to the frustration she has felt about the lack of artistic and visual representations of pregnancy, miscarriage, and childbirth. Although a theme more commonly represented in feminist art since the 1960's, it is still underrepresented in contemporary culture – and in the history of visual culture. In the context in which they will be displayed, the Thacker Gallery of Ancient Egypt at Durham University's Oriental Museum, these objects imagine the untold stories and unrecorded pain of women. In doing so, they aim to inspire visitors to contemplate the histories we cannot easily see through the surviving fragments of sculpture and stelae. They offer meaningful representation, too, for the contemporary visitor who may have experienced the physical and emotional pain of the loss of a pregnancy. The works themselves do heavy lifting for their modest sizes, illustrating the first-hand experience of the trauma and feelings of bodily fragmentation that often accompany the loss of a pregnancy, as well as reaching towards healing and wholeness. Danays' work is therefore both personal, and, as ever, deeply sympathetic to the past.

Further reading:

Jacobus De Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, Princeton University Press, 2012

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Le Seuil, 1980

Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, Indiana University Press, 1987

Sarah Danays, *The Arms of the Martyrs*: *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (2018/19) was created for The Binchois Consort's CD and accompanying scholarly booklet on Late medieval English music and alabaster (Universities of Birmingham and Nottingham).

Music for Saint Katherine of Alexandria, is a contemporary recording of Latin plain chant polyphonic music dedicated to the saint. (Hyperion Records, 2019)

Opposite: The hand tools used for carving the saint's replacement arm

Sarah Danays, *Uterine Dreams* (front)
Sculpture work in progress, 2019/20
Italian alabaster
Approximate dimensions 9 x 18 x 10 cm

Sarah Danays, *Uterine Dreams* (profile)
Sculpture work in progress, 2019/20
Finished sculpture includes branch coral, previously mounted on a Victorian brooch

Sarah Danays in her Venice Beach, Los Angeles, studio undertaking her metaphysical surgery
Credit *Sinisha Nisevic, (2013)*

Uterine Dreams : *The Unravelled Knot of Isis*
Sculptor, Heal Thyself

Sarah Danays

There is a part of us that is unknowable even to ourselves. The sixth century BCE Greek philosopher Heraclitus knew this when he wrote:

> *You will not discover the limits of the soul by travelling, even if you wander over every conceivable path, so deep is its story.* (Fragments. 35)

He also knew that if a journey were to be made to find this unknowable part, with any arrival unlikely, that it would be downwards.

I have been climbing down towards this unknowable place for a long time. Why? Because I believe it is there - down there - that I will be able to address and correct damage. My singularly personal practice, which I describe as my metaphysical surgery, is a byproduct of this journey. On 1st February 1945 Carl Jung described the road to individuation to his dying friend Dr Kristine Mann, explaining:

> *Whatever you do, if you do it sincerely, will eventually become the bridge to your wholeness, a good ship that carries you through the darkness of your second birth, which seems like death from the outside.* (1)

The metaphysical surgery I undertake is that bridge to my wholeness. It is where, and how, I address that which is not whole in me; that which has been broken.

My art has become the mechanism by which I reach to the core of myself. It winches me down to as close as I can get to that unknowable part, the rock-face, and then with unyielding discomfort, shines its beam to reveal the fault lines; my many fissures. In this light a fragile condition is evident.

But to make effective any repair, a correct assessment of the damage, and how it came about, must first be made. Who possibly could provide such a service; a correct diagnosis? No one, at least not yet. So I take a look at the damage myself, and slowly devise a method of care. Sculptor, heal thyself.

The parallels between my artistic process and the ways in which psychotherapists work with their patients are suggestive. The research I refer to, into an object's past to better inform

my approach to its repair, is similar to that of a therapist. As I strive to make whole a broken object, so I address my own repair - and the work it requires.

There are several disciplines involved in my process, but only two core elements: research and antiquarian objects - notably broken ones. I work with the broken. The broken spirit, the broken home, the broken body, the broken mind, the broken marriage, the broken heart.

For *Uterine Dreams* I have had to stare into a place that I would rather not look: a broken marriage and my inability to hold a pregnancy - my broken womb. This endeavour has proved to be the most demanding of my career. Why? Because my work can be summed up in just two words: it's personal. This work, the journey towards wholeness, has acted as a vehicle for me to make objects and images that address difficult subjects with stealth and subtlety. The continuing *Arms of the Martyrs* series, which began with *Tourniquet* in 2007, addresses violence against women. Coercion, the silencing, isolation, removal of financial autonomy and personal agency is addressed in works such as *Bluebird*, and sexual predation in *Oisillon*. The difficult subject that I now address in *Uterine Dreams* is miscarriage.

Sarah Danays, *Bluebird*, (2012)
Large Format C-Type, Edition of 5, 173 x 67 cm, landscape
Small Format C-Type (2013), Edition of 10, 57 x 23 cm
Aluminium mounted with gloss finish

Sarah Danays, *Bluebird*, (2012)
Work in progress. Italian white alabaster
Approximate final dimensions 31 x 7.8 x 7.5 cm (height with blue bird 9.2 cm)
Finished sculpture includes early c20 cold painted bronze blue bird

Acquired by Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery
with a Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund Award

Sarah Danays, *Oisillon*, (2010)
Small Format C-Type
Edition of 10, 45 x 34 cm, landscape
Aluminium mounted with gloss finish

As well as what I work with - the subjects and the objects - I am also selective about who I work with; it has to be a respectful and enduring fascination. I have always worked with collaborators, mostly dead ones. They are the makers of those once-complete antiquarian objects I now work to strangely rebuild. It is these sculptors, who laboured hundreds and thousands of years before me whom I publicly thank here. Such thanks are fitting, as I have three rather tough requirements for any artist wishing to collaborate with me: you have to be dead, your work anonymous, and it has to come to me already broken or as a fragment. Ouch.

To create *Uterine Dreams* I enlisted the help of a number of collaborators, and broke two of my own rules. Not only are two of my collaborators famous, but one of them is still alive; the historian Professor Ludmilla Jordanova. My famous dead collaborator in this endeavour is the Scottish physician, anatomist and obstetrician William Hunter (1718 - 1783).

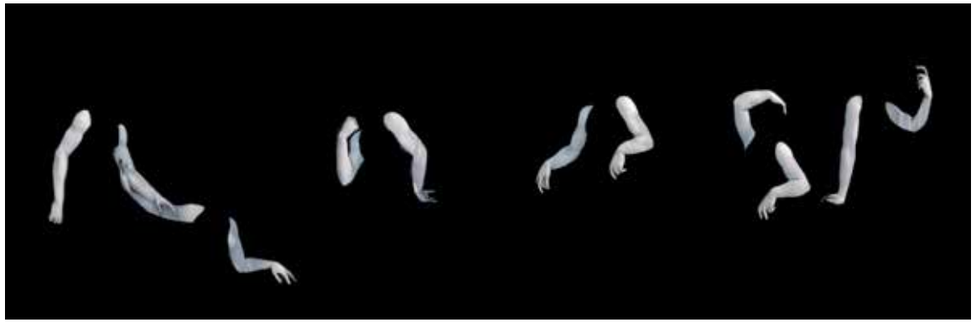
They make appropriate allies, as my work involves extensive research. Learning about an object's history and cultural and social contexts; and the religious, philosophical and aesthetic ideas of its time, is an essential part of my process. In this I'm led to archives, curators, artists - usually dead ones; to ecclesiastical libraries, antique dealers, gemologists, geologists, writers; to mystics, scientists, psychologists and academics.

I search for insights into a subject and object's history to allow me to develop new interpretations for significant museum pieces - the British Museum's Portland Vase, for instance - and to inform the treatment of broken objects, antiquities, from my own collection.

Why broken antiquities? Because like humans, objects break. And I believe, like humans, objects break - or are broken - both physically and emotionally. Broken-ness is all summed up in fragmentation. It is the poignancy of a part removed - forcibly or accidentally - from something that was once whole.

I believe that an object, particularly an old broken one, carries with it (whether documented or not) all its history and associations from when it was made. That is, those contemporary to its time, as well as the residue of the experiences of its existence - its life span.

These experiences can sometimes be seen in the patina of age - chips, dents, missing pages and pieces. But sometimes they cannot. I like to think that certain objects absorb their experiences. What might make one object more absorbent, give it more resonance or connection with a human, than another? Perhaps it is the amount of concentrated attention an object receives - a build-up of devotion that has seeped in - or the integrity of intention present when it was made.



The artist's drawing of the isolated arms of the adjoined *Sarah Danays' Arms of the Portland Vase Frieze*, (2014). Template created for carving the vase's twelve arms in alabaster. Ink on canvas 304.8 x 100.33 cm

Tara was my first Los Angeles patient, whom I rebuilt in 2011. The piece is named after the yellow female Bodhisattva Tara, also known as the mother of liberation. The arm's provenance indicates that it came from a life-size bronze gilt statue forged in seventeenth-century Tibet. During the Cultural Revolution she was knocked down by Red Guard Troops, her body dismembered under caterpillar tank tracks. Two arms were rescued; this is one of them. The other, I understand, was similarly sold to a private collector.

For more than ten years I've been carving metamorphic marble and sedimentary alabaster. When I came to carve an appendage to dam up the trauma experienced by *Tara's* severed arm, I chose a small, rare, piece of gypsum agata alabaster for her metaphysical surgery.

Alabaster is low on the Mohs scale of hardness, (1.5 - 2 with diamond at 10). It is a stone so gentle that it grazes into powder, dissolves in water, disintegrates when heated and breaks easily along its many fissures. Fragile, powdery, porous, with a propensity for bruising, the nature of this stone is in rhythm with the broken objects I apply it to.

Its nurturing female associations and history are also in rhythm. The fragility and sensitivities of this complex material have a kinship with skin. Just as skin when grazed forms a healing scab, alabaster oxidises when exposed to the air. Each new, freshly carved surface is soft and vulnerable until it grows its patina; its scab.

For all these reasons I work it with the utmost respect, carving only with hand tools.

My consultant gemologist and precious metals expert informs me that the enlightened ancient alchemists knew of the stone's capacity to hold water within its structure. This allowed it to carry the soothing therapeutic properties of water, as well as water's sacred metaphysical and esoteric associations. Alabaster was deemed, therefore, capable of absorbing emotion and offering peace to troubled hearts and minds - the two places we most readily associate with emotional disturbance. Marble may have made a more enduring tomb, but alabaster a more certain place to rest in peace.

Tara (2011/13) and *Stigmata* (2009/2013) demonstrate the eclectic mix of objects and ideas that come together in my studio, where I undertake my surgery. Here, fragments of sacred and secular objects, previously separated by different countries, cultures, centuries and religions, are intermingled with marvels from nature and my own alabaster and marble carvings, or work of past anonymous sculptors - my dead collaborators. Together we create complete sculptures, or sections of sculptures. These combinations generate a unique fusion of energies and symbols. It is this fusion that provides the metaphysics - that which is beyond everyday experience or knowledge - to my surgery. The results are then meticulously photographed to create an object's photographic counterpart.

Tara work in progress. A piece of agata alabaster was carved to dam up the trauma experienced by *Tara's* severed arm, while the sculpture's photographic counterpart used a 5 cm long raw yellow sapphire for the arm's metaphysical surgery. The photograph's arm also holds a pearl

Sarah Danays, *Tara,* (2013)
c17 Tibetan bronze gilt arm, with agata alabaster
Approximate unmounted dimensions
42 x 12 x 9 cm
Private collection

Creating a sculpture's photographic counterpart engages with ideas around Baudrillard's Simulacra and Simulation, where physical objects and actual experience are exchanged for representation and voyeurism. With the real thing swapped for secondary visual stimulus and assumed experience, it is no longer of consequence whether the original exists, as our relationship is only with its copy. These 'copies' are available as limited edition chromogenic (C-Type) prints and operate as contemporary amulets. Some photographs capture exactly a sculpture; others work with scale and perspective, while in others the photography itself constructs the sculpture. Since 2007 the artist has called these constructs her fictional objects.

Sarah Danays, *Tara,* (2011)
Large Format C-Type, Edition of 5, 122 x 122 cm, square
Small Format C-Type, Edition of 10, 25.5 x 25.5 cm
Aluminium mounted with gloss finish

The photographic counterpart for *Stigmata* shows the difference between the sculpture and its image. The polychrome wood hand has been transposed, and there is no connecting alabaster shim

Sarah Danays, *Stigmata*, (2009)
Large Format C-Type Triptych (2013), Edition of 5, 127 x 76.2 cm x 3, portrait
Small Format C-Type Triptych, Edition of 10, 40.5 x 28 cm x 3
Aluminium mounted with gloss finish

Coral, branch coral in particular, has had powerful and complex associations for thousands of years. Ovid wrote that the severed head of Medusa, cut from her body by Perseus, turned the plants onto which it fell into coral, while alchemists linked it to blood, because of its colour.

Christian iconography from the twelfth century onwards encouraged the idea that coral offered spiritual protection. Its believed capacity to live both underwater and on land energised its use in powdered form as a treatment for sleeping problems. We are reminded of the soothing effects of water.

In its entirety, as a spiritual talisman to wear in bed, coral was thought to protect its wearer from supernatural attack and accompany the sleeper as they passed from the waking world into the world of sleep. Meanwhile its sixteenth-century popularity as a teething stick continued unchecked, and by the nineteenth century coral had become Europe's most effective infant soother. But its associations with fertility, childbirth and protection date back to the ancient Egyptians, who believed a coral amulet could stop the fluxes of the womb. (2)

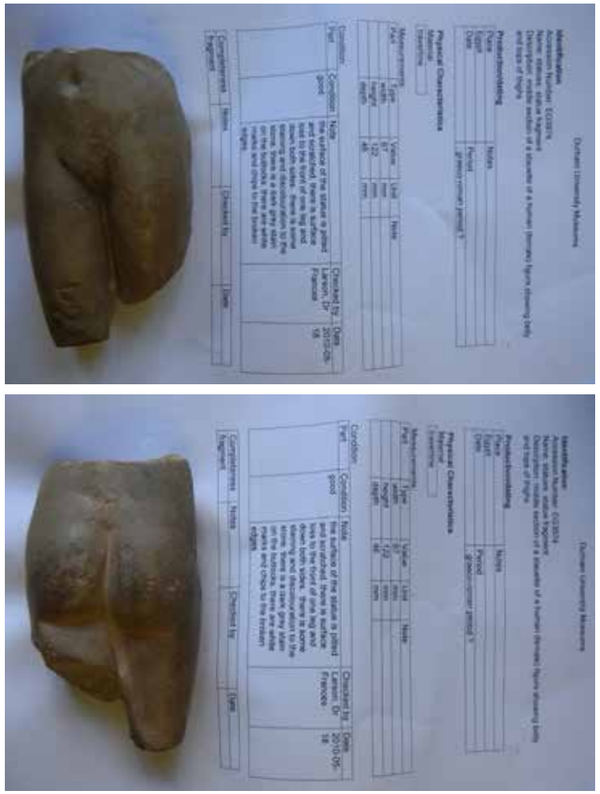
The title piece for *Uterine Dreams* is a self portrait. It shows a fragmented alabaster female torso accompanied by a piece of branch coral, whose form resembles a uterus. Such an amulet would have been considered particularly powerful by the ancient Egyptians, as its natural form encloses and contains what was considered a sacred space, the womb. It was not, however, a powerful enough amulet for me.

My small torso mirrors one of the two objects in the Oriental Museum's collections which inspired this body of work and its supporting research. My carved fragmented body and the Museum's Greco-Roman torso make reference to William Hunter's engravings, and the life size plaster casts of the women whose lower legs were removed during anatomical investigation.

The *Uterine Dreams* torso and her unborn children at various stages of their development (three held fully within their mother's uterus) find a fitting temporary resting place in the surroundings of the Oriental Museum's Thacker Gallery of Ancient Egypt.

It was in Lower Egypt, near modern Lahun, that in 1889 Flinders Petrie found Egypt's oldest medical text, which dates from the late Middle Kingdom period (1850–1700 BCE). Its thirty-four incantations, preparations, counsel and treatments concentrate exclusively on women's health, specifically her reproductive health. For this reason it was named the Gynaecological Papyrus, but is also known as the Kahun Papyrus or UC 32057. (3)

In life the Thacker Gallery's female mummy, dating from the Ptolemaic Period 332-30 BCE, might have been familiar with the content of



Unknown maker, fragment of Greco-Roman torso (front and back)
Travertine, approximate dimensions 6.7 x 12.2 x 4.6 cm
Archive no EG3974, Oriental Museum

the Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus, and that of the seven other extant medical papyri.
Their combined one hundred and six cases address the individual care of women and children and include recurring instruction on

> *how to recognise a woman who will give birth and a woman who will not give birth.*(4)

The ancient Egyptians positioned family at the core of their sophisticated dynastic and social structure. Childlessness was considered to be a great tragedy, a much-feared malady justifying divorce, not least because of the absence of descendants to enact the rituals required for the care of the soul in the afterlife.

The essential continuity of life - of birth, death and re-birth - is emphasised by the use of the same sacred knife, the Pesesh-kef or fishtail knife, for both the opening of the mouth ceremony at death, and the cutting of the umbilical cord at the beginning of a new life. This ceremonial tool is described as a sculptor's tool because, Dr Susan Walker explains, the knife was used on:

> *statues as well as mummies, hence it was regarded as a sculptor's tool.*

Representations of death and birth, infertility and miscarriage remain as rare in contemporary art as they were in ancient Egypt and antiquity in general - these being liminal places of private suffering and danger.

The re-forming of Osiris by his sister/wife Isis remains ancient Egypt's most important myth and is perhaps the ultimate example of metaphysical surgery. Osiris was drowned in a box and later dismembered by his maleficent brother, Set. His body parts were scattered across Egypt. Isis found every piece but one, swallowed by a Nile catfish - his penis. She reassembled Osiris' body and sculpted a phallus. The myth has many different versions, though the conclusion is fixed: Isis momentarily gave breath to the whole, re-formed body of Osiris and conceived a son, Horus.

She then hid from Set in a thicket of papyrus for the duration of the pregnancy. This was a dangerous time for her and her unborn child. The chances of miscarriage, the flood, or flux, associated with spontaneous abortion, for her and all women in ancient Egypt, were high. The tied textile inside Isis to preserve her pregnancy continues to be called the Knot of Isis.

Complications during pregnancy, and high levels of infant and maternal mortality likely account for the many deities whose mythologies were associated with fertility, reproduction and protection. Sexualised descriptions of the ancient land- and skyscapes of the pharaohs in relation to these deities further amplify the ancient metaphysical understanding of the life-giving workings of the cosmos.

The human uterus, in the unimpregnated state, commonly has one triangular cavity.
The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus by William Hunter, 1774 (page 6).

Sarah Danays, *Uterine Dreams diptych*, (2020)

Sarah Danays, *Uterine Dreams*, (2020)
Large Format C-Type Diptych, Edition of 5, 91.5 x 91.5 cm, square
Small Format C-Type Diptych, Edition of 10, 20 x 20 cm
Aluminium mounted with gloss finish

Each new day's rising of the sun saw the rebirth of the sun god Ra as a solar child from the sky-womb of the goddess Nut. In the third millennium BCE, with the advancing summer solstice, the skies would be searched for the Dog Star (Sirius). This was the manifestation of the goddess Sopdet, whose heliacal rising with Ra, the solar child, marked the Nile's approaching inundation, upon whose fecund foundations three thousand years of civilisation were built.

Of Ra's four daughters three are associated with fertility. The least known is Khensit whose mother's name is absent from records and whose own name means placenta. Having its own hieroglyph - a circle with horizontal lines - betokens the importance of both mother and child, *and* the child's placenta. Bovine goddess Hathor was called upon in childbirth; and feline Bastet was synonymous with precious alabaster and also the vessels and jars carved from it to contain healing ointments and medicines.

A woman's body was either open, bleeding, or after coitus closed and with child - and if necessary, secured with Isis's knot. Ancient papyri, as we now know, record medicines, rituals, incantations and practices to keep the womb - the container - closed. These notions of the sacred vessel and container lead to another fertility deity.

From the Ethiopian Nile silts of the annual inundation came crops, and from its cargo of clay the later gods of ancient Egypt. These were thrown, turned and moulded by Khamut, the god of the source of the Nile, on his divine potter's wheel. Having finished giving form to and manifesting the deities, he then turned to modelling humans.

In his Nile studio, tiny terracotta children emerged, and were placed inside human wombs. A single drop of blood from the mother's heart would create the heart of the child - the seat of emotion, thought and intention, and the part of the soul called ib. Meskhenet, the goddess of childbirth, whose name is also given to the birthing bricks squatted on in delivery, filled fleshy lungs with her life-breath, thereby passing the essence of life, a person's ka, into its little body.

For these Egyptians, birth in this world and the netherworld occurred in parallel. The nine facets that made up a person (including their physical form) remained with them in day-to-day life. All except one, their ba, which existed simultaneously but separately in the netherworld.

The ba was not only the personality of a person, their uniqueness, but the eternal element of a person destined to live on after death. Ba was the only element of a person not housed within the body, and which could be associated with - indeed embodied by - inanimate objects. Tombs, for example, were considered to be a pharaoh's ba. Here we remember those ideas around the resonance of objects, where I asked:

> *What might make one object more absorbent - give it more resonance or connection with a human - than another? Perhaps it is the amount of concentrated attention an object receives - a build-up of devotion that has seeped in - or the integrity of intention present when it was made.*

When the physical body died, the opening of the mouth ceremony was performed to release the essential essence of a person, their ka. This was done so that the ka and ba could be re-united in the afterlife.

For the re-united, eternal and essential nature of a person to live on after death, and pass over into the afterlife, they needed an earthly home, an object or physical base, and one made possible by correct familial practices: for the wealthy and the pharaohs it was the mummy, the preserved physical body, or a tomb. The hieroglyph of the ba is a bird with a man's head; sometimes depicted flying out of a tomb. For the poor, little boxes of remains were often kept under a home.

The ka and the ba have been likened to the conscious and the subconscious in psychoanalytical thinking. The young Carl Jung, who had hoped to be an archaeologist, specifically an Egyptologist, worked towards his concept of the Universality of Archetypes after studying an ancient Egyptian papyrus archived in Paris. It described a vision shared with him by an asylum patient four years previously, that of a vacillating sun with a tube hanging from it. Writing to Johanna Michaelis on 20th January 1939 Jung suggests 'The ka is probably a descendant of the placenta'. (5) Great importance was ascribed to the placenta. It was considered the second self or double of the new-born individual, which after birth was often dried and kept as a talisman. Strouhal explains:

> *The placenta and the umbilical cord were considered as the residence of an alter ego or double of the child. Egyptian villagers to this day call the placenta al-walad al-tani ('the second child'). They sometimes preserved the placenta in a dried state for an entire lifetime, and it occasionally even followed them to the grave.* (6)

Incantations were addressed specifically to the placenta, deeming it as important as the birth of the child itself. Bes was the dwarf god of childbirth and home:

> *Come down, placenta, come down, placenta, come down! I am Horus who conjures in order that she who is occupied with birthgiving becomes better than she was, as if she were (already) delivered! ... To be recited four times over a dwarf of clay placed on the brow of a woman who is giving birth while suffering.* (7)

The status of the placenta is also indicated by the siltstone Narmer Palatte, dating from 3,200 BCE. It depicts a pharaoh preceded by five attendants, four of whom carry tall poles holding high two hawks and a jackal. The pole closest to the pharaoh carries what

was considered to be the royal placenta, the pharaoh's second soul. It was not uncommon for a pharaoh to build a separate tomb for their placenta, such was its importance. As I examine this bas-relief carving, I am reminded of the man in the asylum, and his vision of the unfolding sun and its hanging tube.

Although the form depicted on the Narmer Palatte was later associated with the god Khonsu, it was first understood as the royal placenta, and placenta-worship was widely observed throughout ancient Egypt. This unusual form has also been considered an animal skin - Jung in his letter to Michaelis refers to Alexandre Moret's 1922 *Mystères égyptiens*, saying that

> *the pharaoh was enveloped at the Sed festival in an animal skin representing the uterus from which he was born.*(8)

However, Anglo-Indian Egyptologist Margaret Murray (1863-1963) suggested that this skin actually contained the pharaoh's placenta. Murray made convincing connections between this and the Old Testament's 'bundle of life' (I Samuel 25:29) suggesting a Judaist belief in the placenta as the 'seat of the external soul'. (9)

In 2018 the excavation of a cemetery near the Dakhla Oasis in the western desert of Egypt revealed 200 premature foetuses, considered to be miscarriages, which had been individually buried. Susan Wheeler, a bio-archeologist and professor at the University of Central Florida, emphatically tells us:

> *It gets into the idea of personhood. Were they considered full people? They're being buried like they were.* (10)

The ancient Egyptians perceived the uterus, and its unborn contents, a secret: a hidden place of mystery. It was the need to have this secret place revealed to create *Uterine Dreams* that compelled me to break my own rule of only working with anonymous dead collaborators.

The anatomical pregnancies engraved in Georgian obstetrician William Hunter's 1774 *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* revealed these secrets to me. Hunter's engravings enabled me to study and estimate the sizes that my own spontaneous abortions - miscarriages - would have been, and two further stages of pregnancy, had my body allowed. These small memorials, carved in alabaster, remember also Hunter's long-silent women and their unborn children.

From Hunter's studies I was able to make Khamut-style maquettes to the scale of my own body, and also harness some of the ideas I had learned during my research. Research that elicited the metaphysical meaning of a spontaneous abortion - the ancient Egyptian word is the same as that for each day's rebirth of the sun god Ra. They enhanced for me the mystical significance of the placenta, now revealed and carved with a seven-month pregnancy, and informed a full term pregnancy, whose gravid uterus most certainly resembles a visceral, mystical egg - the place where the solar infant, itself the origin of all life, was created and nurtured.

With greater knowledge of the perils of attempting motherhood in ancient Egypt and indeed Georgian England - dangers that remain present today - three of the four engravings I chose to work from fully contain the child within its mother's uterus. It is a choice that embraces the deep intimacy and nurture of this most profound relationship: the one between mother and child.

The Hunter-informed sculptures for *Uterine Dreams* inspired a temporary but fundamental shift in practice, a departure from my own protocols. For these pieces the extra element chosen to effect healing was not another object, but instead the application of Hunter's learning. It is Hunter's empiricism that is the balm and object to dam up and attempt to heal the trauma of loss. His work has also allowed me to embody some of what I have learnt from the ancient Egyptians, now held within these alabaster forms, swollen with the stone's waters.

In the quiet of carving, I have reflected on the grief and loss of miscarriage in my own life, and experienced by countless women throughout history. And in the solace of looking through my new Egyptian lens, I have begun to wonder whether the placenta was the physical signal of the arrival of a person's ba, their second soul, in the netherworld: the arrival of a new being, with no need for breath.

If it was, I want to create a form where the essential and eternal elements of my unborn child can be re-united to become whole; and to live again in a netherworld. These carved harbours, heavy with devotion and intention, will be a home to return to, and to travel on from into the afterlife. I will need to carve three, and though each very small, will honour a whole *full* person.

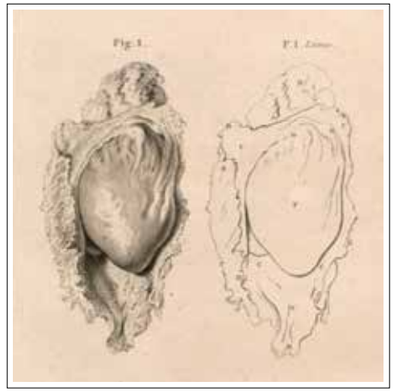


Fig 1 of Plate XXXIII of a spontaneous abortion at nine weeks,
from *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*
by William Hunter, 1774
Full folio page 35 x 46.9

Page 58
Sarah Danays, *Nine Weeks*, (2021)
Fauld alabaster, approximate dimensions 3.5 x 7 x 5 cm

Plate XIV of a uterus carrying a four month pregnancy, from
The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus by William Hunter, 1774
Full folio page 35 x 46.9

Page 59
Sarah Danays, *Four Months*, (2021)
Fauld alabaster, approximate dimensions 8 x 13 x 8.5 cm

The round projecting ball made by the child's head or buttocks, is commonly very perceptible, and in many instances smaller projecting parts are so distinctly felt through the containing parts of the abdomen, as to leave no room to doubt of their being knees or elbows.

The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus by
William Hunter, 1774. *(Page 5)*

Plate XXI showing a seven month child with placenta,
from *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*
by William Hunter, 1774.
Full folio page 35 x 46.9

Page 60-61
Sarah Danays, *Seven Months (Asclepius)*, (2021)
Fauld alabaster, approximate dimensions 14 x 18.5 x 14.5 cm

Plate XI showing a uterus with a full term, nine month pregnancy, from
The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus by William Hunter, 1774
Full folio page 35 x 46.9

Page 62-63: The artist's terracotta maquette of the gravid uterus carrying a nine month pregnancy, created to inform its carving in Fauld alabaster. Work continues on this final piece, which will join *Uterine Dreams* mid exhibition.

Notes

(1) Gerhard Adler, ed., *Letters of Carl Gustav Jung: Volume 1, 1906-1950,* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, 357-9

(2) Christopher Cavey, *Gems and Jewels: Fact and Fiction*, Studio, 1992, 106

(3) Held by University College London, in the Petrie Museum.

(4) Eugen Strouhal et al, *The Medicine of the Ancient Egyptians 1 Surgery, Gynecology, Obstetrics, and Pediatrics*, American University in Cairo Press, 2014, 158

(5) *Letters of … Jung: Volume 1, 1906-1950*, 259-61, 260. For the testimony of the asylum patient see: Carl Jung - Face to Face, 1959 at 23.00 minutes: https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p04qhvyj/face-to-face-carl-jung accessed May 6th 2021

(6) Strouhal, *Medicine of the Ancient Egyptians*, 2014, 170

(7) Susanne Töpfer, 'The Physical Activity of Parturition in Ancient Egypt…', 2014, Section 2.2 and note 62: http://dx.doi.org/10.4321/S0211-95362014000200003 accessed May 6th 2021

(8) Footnote 5 to his letter to Michaelis, see note (5)

(9) Roberto Romero, 'Images of the Human Placenta', 2015, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajog.2015.08.039 accessed May 5th 2021

(10) Susan Wheleer is quoted in Nina Strochlic's *This Ancient Egyptian Woman May Have Died in Childbirth*, National Geographic, November 2018

(11) E Croft Long, 'The Placenta in Lore and Legend', 1963, 241: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC197976/ accessed May 6th 2021

Further Reading

Mungo Campbell and Nathan Fliss, eds, *William Hunter and the Anatomy of the Modern Museum*, Yale University Press, 2018

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William Hunter, *Anatomia Unteri Humani Gravidi Tabulis Illustrata/The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus Illustrated in Figures*, John Baskerville, 1774

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David J Swan et al, Egypt: *the World of the Pharaohs*, Könemann, 1998

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Dr Eric Jauniaux, *An Introduction to Reproduction in Pharaonic Egypt*, Reproductive Biomedicine Online, 2001

Biographies

Mungo Campbell is Deputy Director of The Hunterian, University of Glasgow; he was a curator at the National Galleries of Scotland 1987-97. He served on the Visual Art Committee of the Scottish Arts Council and was formerly a board member of the Scottish Museums Council. He has been Board Chair of Edinburgh Printmakers since December 2018. At The Hunterian, he curated Allan Ramsay; *Portraits of the Enlightenment* exhibition in 2013, and co-edited *William Hunter and the Anatomy of the Modern Museum* (2018) accompanying the international touring exhibition staged in collaboration with the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven.

Sarah Danays is an internationally exhibited artist whose work is inspired by gesture and antiquities - notably broken ones. Her practice involves extensive research into an object's history and context to develop new interpretations for significant museum pieces, and to inform the treatment of broken objects from her own collection. A practice she describes as her metaphysical surgery. She holds a Joint Honours Degree in Fine Art and Art History from Camberwell College of Art (now part of the University of the Arts, London) and an MA in Textiles as Contemporary Art Practice from Goldsmiths. She studied Stone Carving for Contemporary Sculptors at City & Guilds of London Art School, and today works exclusively with hand tools and alabaster.

Ludmilla Jordanova is Emeritus Professor of History and Visual Culture, Durham University. She writes about the cultural histories of science and medicine, contemporary art, portraiture, and the nature of historical practice.

Livia Turnbull is an Assistant Curator at the V&A, London, working between the Sculpture section, and the Design, Architecture and Digital Department. She is currently working on the new 'Design: 1900 to Now' galleries, opening in 2021. Her Master's degree from the Courtauld Institute of Art focused on 'Sex and Violence in Post 1960s Art' and explored feminist art practices using psychoanalytical frameworks – standing her in good stead to analyse Sarah Danays' work. More information about her latest projects is available on her website: liviaturnbull.com

Artist's Acknowledgements

*Uterine Dream*s is a body of work that exists only and because of the brilliance and tenacity of my academic collaborator, the distinguished historian Professor Ludmilla Jordanova, who simply refused to let me fail.

A fellowship at Durham University's Institute of Advanced Study (IAS), 2020-21 has made *Uterine Dreams* possible. Warmest thanks are offered to IAS staff, and especially to the Director, Professor Veronica Strang for her generous support; to Professor David Harper, Principle of Van Mildert College, my host; Rachel Barclay, Curator, Oriental Museum and

the staff of the museum for their enthusiastic collaboration; to Alix Collingwood-Swinburn, Curator, Western and Contemporary Art, Durham University for her steadfast help and deep interest in this project; to the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture, Durham University for much assistance; to Dr. Susan Walker, Honorary Curator and formerly Sackler Keeper of Antiquities, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford for her advice on ancient Egypt, and to Mungo Campbell, Ludmilla Jordanova, and Livia Turnbull for contributing to this catalogue.

I extend my thanks to my creative collaborators, notably Howard Thundow of Thomas Neile Photographers and graphic designer Danielle Blyde at Vavoom.co.uk; to mentor Rosie West; ceramicist Carol Foster; jeweller Teresa Samson; and photographer Lalo Borja; gemologist and special metals expert Christopher Cavey and Jonathan Cousins of Cousins the Jewellers, Canterbury who provided the *Uterine Dreams* coral. Thanks also to Jim Daykin, mine manager at Fauld quarry British Gypsum/Saint-Gobain for the rare, gifted alabaster. In the US, to Weldon Colour Lab; Jungian psychotherapist John Ranyard; classicist Professor Anthony Corbeill.

Special thanks goes to the project's last collaborator. The digital version of this catalogue will feature original music conducted and arranged by Meena Ysanne, and performed by the City of Prague Symphony Orchestra, covering the song '*Perfect*' by William Patrick Corgan, performed originally by The Smashing Pumpkins.

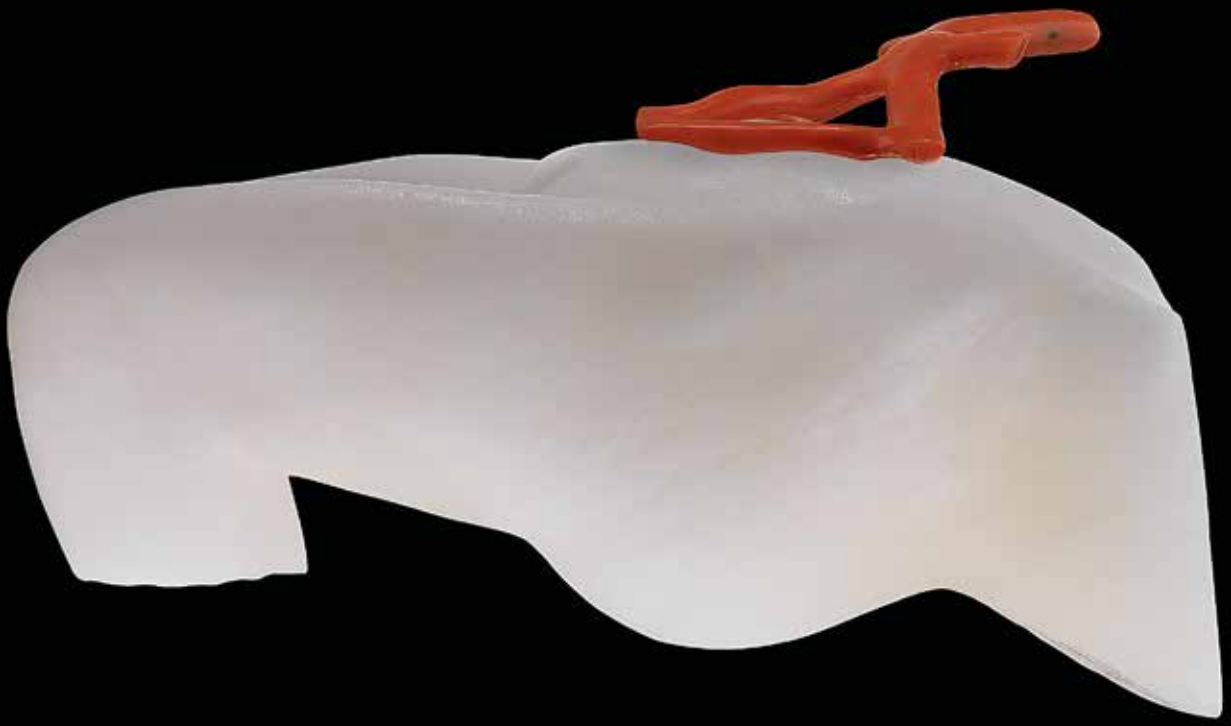
Gratitude is also extended to all those who helped me rebuild my life on my unexpected return to Britain after ten years in Los Angeles. Specifically, I wish to thank Esther and James Copeman, Sarah Willis, Rising Sun Canterbury; Nicky Crouch, Rubicon Cares, Kent and Medway; Canterbury City Council; Caroline Kates and Tina Hadlum, Canterbury Job Centre and all those at Universal Credit. Finally, my friend Dennis Cowie and my mother Jenny Forrester. Julia James, police community support officer, is remembered with warmth and sorrow.

Uterine Dreams is contributing to Miscarriage and Wellbeing: Performative Rituals for Visualising Loss, a University of Leeds pilot project led by Dr Jacki Willson of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures, Co-Researcher Professor Linda McGowan, Faculty of Medicine and Health and with Artist-Partner Dr Dawn Woolley (Leeds Arts University) which aims to improve NHS bereavement support provision for people who experience early miscarriage through rituals that narrate and visually represent experiences of loss.

Opposite: Amulet of Osiris, Isis and Horus
650 BCE-550 BCE, bronze
5 x 6.8 x 1.8 cm
Archive no EG5214, Oriental Museum

Understanding the antecedents of knowledge cannot fail to sharpen our perception, and whether these antecedents are religious, scientific, or metaphysical ultimately becomes insignificant. (11)

On the conclusion of the Institute of Advanced Study Fellowship and its associated exhibition *'Uterine Dreams'*, the artist began work on a new project to address femicide in collaboration with Durham University: *'Fragments of the Innocents: no recovery position'*. This is in partnership with its Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse.



Uterine Dreams: Sculptor, Heal Thyself Sarah Danays