

## INSTALLATION

### Helen Sear

John Hansard Gallery

27 September–12 November 1994

Paul Virilio's remark on vision as a field that is 'comparable to the ground of an archeological excavation', serves as an appropriate introduction to the recent work of Helen Sear. In *Gone to Earth*, Sear investigates a number of themes concerning the body and vision through a series of large scale colour works and a slide installation. Here the body is described in anatomical and metaphorical terms that are extended by the references to clinical observation and philosophical introspection. Such contrasts provide, at times, an enigmatic account of the body from natural and cultural perspectives that resist simple classification.

Moving between the two distinct but overlapping sections of this show immediately sets up some basic oppositions. The installation consists of a triptych of slide projections depicting body scans that gives a sense of the panorama, a form which traditionally embraces a notion of the all-encompassing view of things from a fixed position. The interior of the body illuminated by the sweep of the scan presents, on an exaggerated scale, the experience of seeing beyond the surface through computer aided tomography. Though these images are opaque and unfamiliar, we are led to believe that they represent a biological truth authenticated by the authority of modern medicine. But this authority is disturbed as the scans appear to have been discarded or defiled, being heavily marked on the surface. Having been blown up, rephotographed and removed from their familiar patterns of consumption, these images become monuments to a way of mapping the body through photography that has its roots in a mid-nineteenth century scientific investment in the photograph; an investment whose legacies are still very much with us. What can be drawn from this work are the contingencies and limitations of the medical gaze.

As if to confront the viewer with their own mortality, Sear interposes a Perspex screen which details the nervous system through a network of lights and circuitry. A silhouette of this anatomical map occupies each frame of the triptych. Ideas concerning the influence of technology on the body turn toward a more sinister intervention, presenting what could stand as an allegorical figure for the post-modern subject. It becomes evident the degree to which the body is being reconfigured and fragmented through technology. These images begin to touch on questions of identity, as to be literally permeated with light is to be seen, named and classified.

In contrast, a series of colour works moves away from the material body to introduce images that suggest a more symbolic cartography of the

psyche. The psychological reality of the subject poses different sets of problems as images in terms of diagnosis and interpretation. Dream scenarios are suggested in the set of seven colour photographs entitled *Gone to Earth*. These works are constructed, their artifice is clear as fragments of animal bodies are rephotographed, enlarged, illuminated by insipid colour or are literally pierced with small lights. All interventions into the photographic space being recorded in a final image. The magnified view of animal skin or fur, altered through light and superimposition, gives them a sense of the uncanny, while removing the security that certain definitions of Nature had put in place; that of an underlying essence, truth, or idyll. Such layering of visual elements has an interesting relationship to the formation of dream material in Freudian psychoanalysis, while traces of the supernatural equally mark the return of something, signifying a presence that stands between death, visibility and invisibility. On the whole there is an attempt to map a psycho-geographical terrain, or to tap an interiorised vision of the psyche, one that is concealed behind a displaced, potentially dead and re-animated nature. What results from this layering of images is also a reference to a surrealist vocabulary and though overworked in this particular piece, there remains a compulsion to look as they retain a simmering significance.

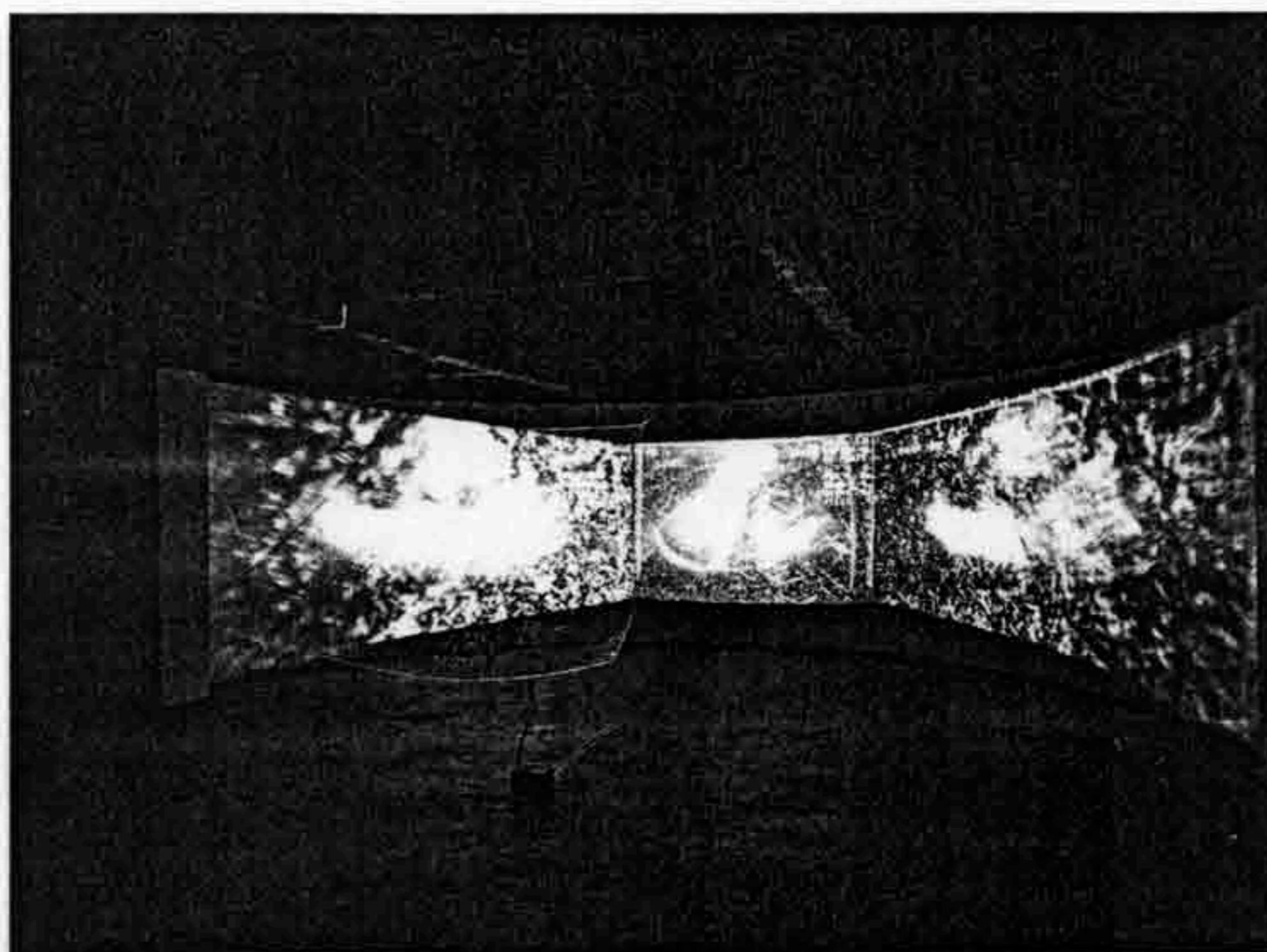
Considering this excavation of how extended photographic practices can shape our understanding of human physiology and psychology, Sear offers a number of alternatives. Works which also appropriate medical imagery, such as *Severance*, imply a causal narrative

containing bodily sensations, whereas *Uncharted Terrain* refers us back to attempts to map those recesses of the mind that resist representation.

The mixed format for the show involves a repositioning of the body in each section, a repositioning that requires the viewer to lose the safe ground offered by the rationale of medical knowledge in the installation, to an exploration of the body as a generating mechanism of vision. As a result photography's status as a heuristic device, veritable document and organising principle is utilised and questioned throughout in ways that question the extent to which natural or technically informed perception (if one can speak of the natural here at all) actually reaches. One piece of work, *Untitled*, serves as a pertinent summary to the show, offering two small lightboxes representing what may be read as either eyes or wounds. At one level these images are a poignant reminder of our own lens-based perception but they retain a visceral element which recalls the physical response which often accompanies what we see and remember.

Throughout there is an absence of polemic to question the institutional framing of the body. By contrast, there is a preference for the photography of a private, constructed language, an element which at times renders interpretation (intentionally) difficult. Presenting the body as both the subject and object of vision in such disparate contexts, avoids the anonymity which a scientific gaze often imposes. Whether medicine looks at us or touches us, this show makes quite clear the impact that such images have on the formation of social and cultural identities.

Russell Roberts



The body mapped:  
Helen  
Sear's *Gone  
to Earth*.  
Installation  
picture by  
Steve  
Shrimpton