

Vivian Lynn

Spin

20 January – 25 February, 2023

Open 19 January, 6 - 8pm

The nuclei of my braincells are constantly spinning

¹
Vivian Lynn, 1997

Spin is an exhibition consisting of two major installations by Vivian Lynn (b. Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, 1931, d. Wellington, 2018). Never before seen in the UK, these two works radically reconfigure the tradition of self-portraiture, exemplifying Lynn's determinedly wayward and unreservedly personal approach to art-making.

In *Spin: Versor, Versari* (1995–97) large-scale MRI scans of the artist's brain encircle the viewer, who, by turning, can journey from its left side to its right. Inspired by Lynn's visit to Pompeii's Villa of Mysteries in 1992, each image is captioned with the Latin names for rooms of a Roman house, from *vestibulum* (entryway) to *peristyleum* (garden): a nod to historical mnemonic devices in which specific memories are mentally imprinted onto rooms of the house. Small globe lamps light the scans from below, casting them in a warm glow more evocative of the Dionysian rituals associated with the ancient villa than the cool, white light of the hospital ward. "Rather than submitting to the MRI's diagnostic function," notes Christina Barton (director, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington), Lynn "recodes its imagery as a sequence of mysterious chambers containing the dreams, memories and desires that science cannot catalogue."²

Writing in 1997, Lynn reflected on the "analogy between these once domestic spaces" of the villa, "now made public through tourism" and her own domestic space, its privacy compromised by the growing presence of the internet and other communication technologies. *Spin*, in its collapsing of interior and exterior life, envisions "the brain as a charged site at the interface between biology, technology and culture"; the self as multiple, serial, in motion.

...I create my cosmos

Vivian Lynn, 1998³

In *Mantles, Maladies, Mutations and Prussian Blue* (1981–2/1998), Lynn continues *Spin*'s layering of the internal self and the external world. Combining clay and earth from her garden, her own blood, other bodily by-products and hair, with canvas, glue, and fibreglass, amongst other media, Lynn created a series of 'pages' stored in finely crafted lacquered and gold-leafed boxes, that, when unpacked and suspended, form an installation down the centre of the gallery space. It is a self-portrait which – literally – unfolds and enfolds inside and outside, body and earth, language and matter, visceral materiality and vestigial traces of the grid. The space is clasped by photographic mirror images snugly backed into each corner: digital images printed in deep Prussian blue of Lynn's DNA and chromosomes juxtaposed with abstracted images of fern leaves and rolling surf, which echo and extend *Spin*'s blue-black brain scans.

The earthy, coagulated pages of this most material 'book' are framed by two pairs of blue-painted canvas rectangles that bear the title's list of words in stencilled letters. Ending with 'Prussian Blue' they settle on a pigment Lynn describes as 'sublime' and 'spiritual', a dye which carries associations of both intense beauty and extreme violence, cyanide being its lethal by-product. Drawn to something that is toxic yet can be used to heal the body, she uses her material as vehicle of meaning. *Mantles, Maladies, Mutations and Prussian Blue* speaks to Lynn's profound understanding of interdependency; her works vibrate with the disobedient energy of an artist set on dismantling deeply entrenched patriarchal structures to offer new ways of contemplating our relations with the planet.

Vivian Lynn (b. Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, 1931, d. Wellington, 2018) sought to construct and record an alternative tradition for art, one that had deep roots but was re-worked so that its symbols were no longer inimical to women. The retelling of classical stories and recalling of historical subjects repurposed the binary logic of nature and culture, mind and body, to revindicate a female language parallel to but critical of male dominated histories.

Lynn worked across and interwove a diverse range of media: sculpture, installation, collage, painting, photography, drawing, print and book-making, incorporating references to history, culture, politics, society, technology, and chemical, biological and medical processes. Her constant experimentation with materials and modes of presentation was as much a political as an aesthetic choice, exploiting the invested and inherited meanings embedded in materials, objects and contexts to offer a distinctively relational concept of female subjectivity.

Our bodies are mediated by cultural codes, as are our daily lives. My interest is in dislocating and transgressing these codes in a way that makes them tangible. The different bodies, the biological, imaginary, socio-economic, political and mythic, that form a corporeal ground of intelligence and desire, are alluded to in my work.

Lynn's first solo exhibition at Southard Reid, *Mind Fields*, opened in 2021. Her work was included in the forthcoming exhibition *Our Silver City, 2094* at Nottingham Contemporary (2021-2). The installation *Spin*, 1995-7, and *Caryatid*, 1986, were included in the Gwangju Biennale, *Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning* (2021). Recent group exhibitions include *Crossings*, Te Pataka Toi Adam Art Gallery, Wellington and *Day/Night*, Southard Reid, Old Folks Association, Auckland (2021). *I, HERE, NOW*, a retrospective, was held at Te Pataka Toi Adam Art Gallery, Wellington in 2008.

Lynn's works have been widely exhibited and acquired by institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand including Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand; Toi o Tamaki, Auckland Art Gallery; Te Puna o Waiwhetu, Christchurch Art Gallery, as well as Smithsonian Institute, Washington; Honolulu State Foundation and Honolulu Art Academy, Hawaii, amongst others.

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Vivian Lynn in conversation with Christina Barton, publication on the occasion of *Vivian Lynn, Spin: Versor, Versari*, 27 September - 23 November 1997, City Gallery Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. All subsequent quotes by Lynn from this source, unless otherwise stated

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Christina Barton writing in *Vivian Lynn I, HERE, NOW* (2010, Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington).

³ Vivian Lynn, in conversation with Frances Lavinia Bigwood, *Mantles, Maladies, Mutations and Prussian Blue*, Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1999, not paginated.