

DEXA-DAN: DANNY McDONALD

Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute
75 Commercial Rd, Melbourne

Walk into the Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute, a centre for medical research in Melbourne. You enter an atrium with a four-storey high window, which is divided, on the pattern of a Mondrian painting, into coloured and clear rectangles of glass. An extraordinary entity resides in this wall of light, an immense being who plunges head-first through luminous space. This figure of fragments, *DEXA-Dan*, created by Danny McDonald during the residency *Confocal: A View Within*, is a constellation of images of the human body, a collage of discourses, imaging systems, and histories.

Working in partnership with medical research scientists, McDonald's body was the experimental subject for a battery of tests that the Baker runs in its research programs; outputs, as scanned images, were his raw material. Graphic designer Linda Warner in Hobart worked with the artist to manipulate the medical images. These were then scaled up to the dimensions of the window sections, digitally printed onto translucent film, and laminated onto the glass wall. Originally intended to be a short-term installation, but now semi-permanent, the four-storey high installation is visible both from the inside and the outside of the building. With the radiance of stained glass, this secular Sainte-Chapelle is erected as a testament to the material body, perceived as a collection of chemical and electrical processes. At the same time it points to the ineffable, the still-mysterious process of consciousness for which this material body is the vehicle.

Art of 'the body' is a pervasive theme in contemporary art practice. In *Corps étranger* ('foreign body') (1994) Mona Hatoum used film taken by an endoscopic probe on its passage through her inner chambers and sphincters; in *Under the blood* (2002) Jordan Baseman filmed open-heart surgery. Such exploitation of medical science by artists attests to a genre of 'hot' images of the body, works



of art that represent the sensations of fleshly immediacy, sometimes bordering on abjection. Just as the grotesque historically offers a delirious alternative to good citizenship and conformity, so this medical grotesque can be cathartic for the alienated, constrained taxpayer of late capitalism.

What is the artist to do when propelled into the alien terrain of the laboratory, with its computer screens and characterless beige boxes full of microprocessors? McDonald's response is to bring sophisticated medical-diagnostic images, the result both of meticulous investigative discipline and of awe-inspiring computing capacity, to bear on the challenge of post-human self-image. In distinction to 'hot' works of art, the medical images of *DEXA-Dan* are 'cool'. The mechanism of scanning interposes between subject and representation; the digital screen mediates palpable flesh and diagnostic procedure, so that the immediacy of medical mortality is sublimated into a body reconfigured as analytical fragments.

The overall scan which forms the skeleton of the image is a DEXA (dual energy X-ray absorption) scan, which measures body density and composition. Overlaid on this grey-scale framework is a journey through the history of medical representations. Ribbons of domino-shaped genetic information extend along an arm and leg. There is a block of genomic data in inscrutable ACGT code. In one corner an MRI (magnetic resonance image) of the brain shows successive slices across the cranium; in another activating platelets hint at the



Danny McDonald *DEXA-Dan* 2009, digital print installation on glass, Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute, Melbourne, 16 x 8 metres. Photo: Dianna Snape.

pathology of heart attack; across the chest is inscribed the jagged red graphic of an electrocardiogram.

While *DEXA-Dan* demystifies what those scientists are up to with their inscrutable machines and cryptic jargon, it also expresses covert tension between parts and wholes of the body, between 'smooth flesh' and messy immediacy. *DEXA-Dan*, levitating between the inside and the outside of the building, also floats between the appearance of the body and its mysterious interior. He illuminates both spaces with his ambiguous, colossal presence.

CAROLINE DURRÉ