

Collected and Possessed

Mark Fairington

All the natural life had gone and instead something else had come, something a long time in the making. It lingered there, and then it faded and something replaced it. The face exuded an impression more powerful than anything it had ever done in the days and nights when there was breath and voice.

Nora Webster, Colm Tóibín, Viking

I want describe a path through my work that examines how a portrait and the process of painting a portrait can represent an act of possession. How the image of a person can become a specimen or a relic, a thing to be collected, a thing to remember someone by, to be stored, preserved and contained, an object to be held. In this form the portrait can articulate different kinds of relationships between people, extremes of emotion, of love and hatred, tenderness and cruelty.



2nd of May in 1928, Mark Fairington, 1999, Oil on aluminium, metal case and mirror, 7cm in diameter, Photo: Pete White

Collections have long been the focus of the research for my paintings in particular the subject of the specimen, the peculiarities of the one selected to represent the many. Large-scale insect paintings (*Specimen series* 1999 – 2010) show the creatures enlarged to the size of human beings. They recall the *écorchés*, drawn or sculpted bodies without skin, used to teach artists the intricacies of anatomy. An obsession with the description of surface is visible in these works, representing the insect at a given moment, the thing in itself.



Specimen (6), Mark Fairnington, 2000, Oil on canvas, 203x214cm, Photo: Pete White

It soon becomes clear that the artist is not interested in the perfect and unblemished specimen, but that instead he is in search of the minute ruinations and imperfections which may return the specimen from its indexical role to its corporeal animality. Slight marks, broken legs and ruined wings signify the passing of time and the work of decay where bacteria, parasites and oxidation obliterate the utopian perfection expected of the specimen. The body in question thus acquires an identity and is acknowledged as something not fixed but in flux. It reveals a personal story of some description, one that clashes with the anonymity required of the specimen. The paintings challenge the possibility of an image of the specimen as re-presented in the natural sciences in ways that express our understanding of the changing relationship between humans and animals.

Giovanni Aloï, Art and Animals, I.B Tauris

My paintings of people also negotiate this territory between the specimen and the individual.



Anna-lena, Mark Fairmington, 2012, Oil on panel, 7.4cm diameter, Photo: Pete White

The act of painting uses the brush to re-imagine the subject in relation to the history of painting. In 1998 I made a piece of work in response to a painting, *The Eye of Baroness Luzen* (1842) by William Ross. It is a single miniature eye painted in oil on ivory and mounted as a brooch. Eye miniatures became popular in the 1700's and were called "Lovers' eyes", depicting the eye of a partner or loved one, and were often worn as bracelets, brooches, pendants or rings. Kept to remember someone they functioned as fragments representing the whole; a person captured, collected, possessed by another.



Possession, Mark Fairington, 1998, Oil on aluminium, metal case and mirror, 6.3cm diameter, Photo: Pete White

Eye paintings originated when a woman called Maria Fitzherbert became infatuated with the Prince of Wales, who later became George IV. She had been widowed twice and as a Catholic she realised that the Court would never accept the relationship. After she had fled the situation by travelling to the Continent George sent her a proposal of marriage and a painting of his own eye – “P.S. I send you a parcel, and I send you at the same time an eye. If you have not totally forgotten the whole countenance, I think the likeness will strike you.” She returned to England and they were married in secret.

My painting was a self-portrait, a single eye, made on a circular aluminium panel set inside a make-up compact. When the compact is opened the eye becomes reflected giving the appearance of a full face. It can be closed and put in a pocket, the painting becoming an object detached from the concept of the gallery or being shown, a thing to hold and cherish. Since then I have made a series of eye paintings as miniatures on wooden panels, each titled with the first name of the person pictured.

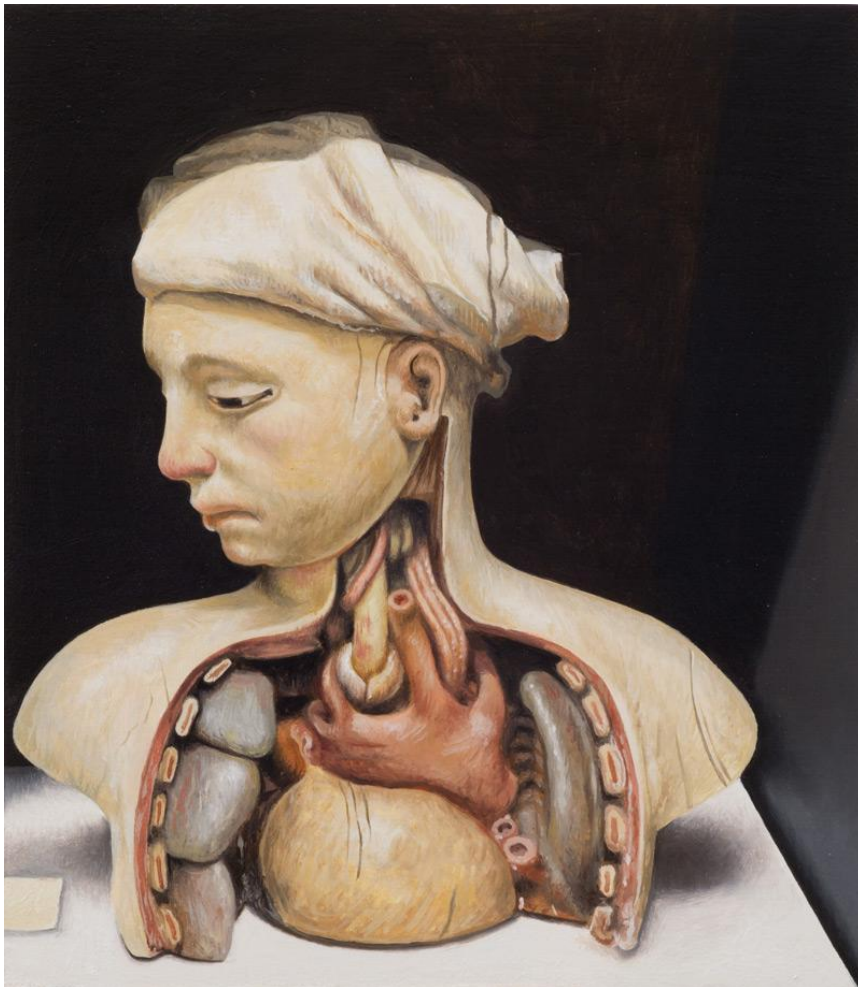
While the animal or plant specimens housed in some of the most important national collections have been central to my work for many years the human presence has always been evident, particularly in the visible eccentricities of the individual collectors and their collections. Henry Wellcome, businessman and co-founder of the Wellcome pharmaceutical company, acquired objects on an extraordinary scale. He built one of the world’s largest collections, designed to be the universal story of mankind, founded in the history of medicine.

The Wellcome collection became a story of how the human body has been perceived, understood and studied in different cultures. It is a place where the histories of art and science criss-cross and intertwine. At the time of his death in 1936 it contained over one million objects, filling warehouses across London and was too vast and disorderly to be organised or researched.

Wellcome's collections embodied the belief that ultimately the material world would succumb to the rigours of Western scientific scrutiny; that everything could be contained, known, and understood, if one only had the resources necessary to contain it. But objects are full of ambiguities and entangled histories, they tend to undermine the categories we provide for them and lead us down unpredictable pathways as we learn from them.

Frances Larson An Infinity of Things, Oxford University Press

My series of paintings *Collected Human documents*, describes and reimagines some of the human images contained in the Wellcome, situating them within the historical context of portrait and still life painting, in particular the still lives of Sánchez Cotán where vegetables or fruits are placed on a ledge or in a window and the space in the painting gives the objects a monumental presence.



The Aside, Mark Fairnington, 2014, Oil on wooden panel, 15x13cm, Photo: Pete White

The human figure is present here as specimen and image and in the form of objects made to fit the body, operate upon it, injure, disguise, protect, embellish and contain it. In the *Collected Human*, faces and heads are re-presented as miniature portraits.



The Forgettory, Mark Fairington, 2014, Oil on wooden panel, 16x12cm, Photo: Pete White

Objects that are housed in locked rooms, in closed cabinets, fluidly shift between medicine; art and anthropology, creating juxtapositions that are disturbing, unexpected and profoundly moving. I found that exploring the collection could be an unnerving experience on entering a room full of prosthetic limbs or examining wax heads lying on cushions with wooden handles protruding from their necks and shelves stacked with plaster death masks.



Shelf, Mark Fairnington, 2014, Oil on wooden panel, 18x40cm

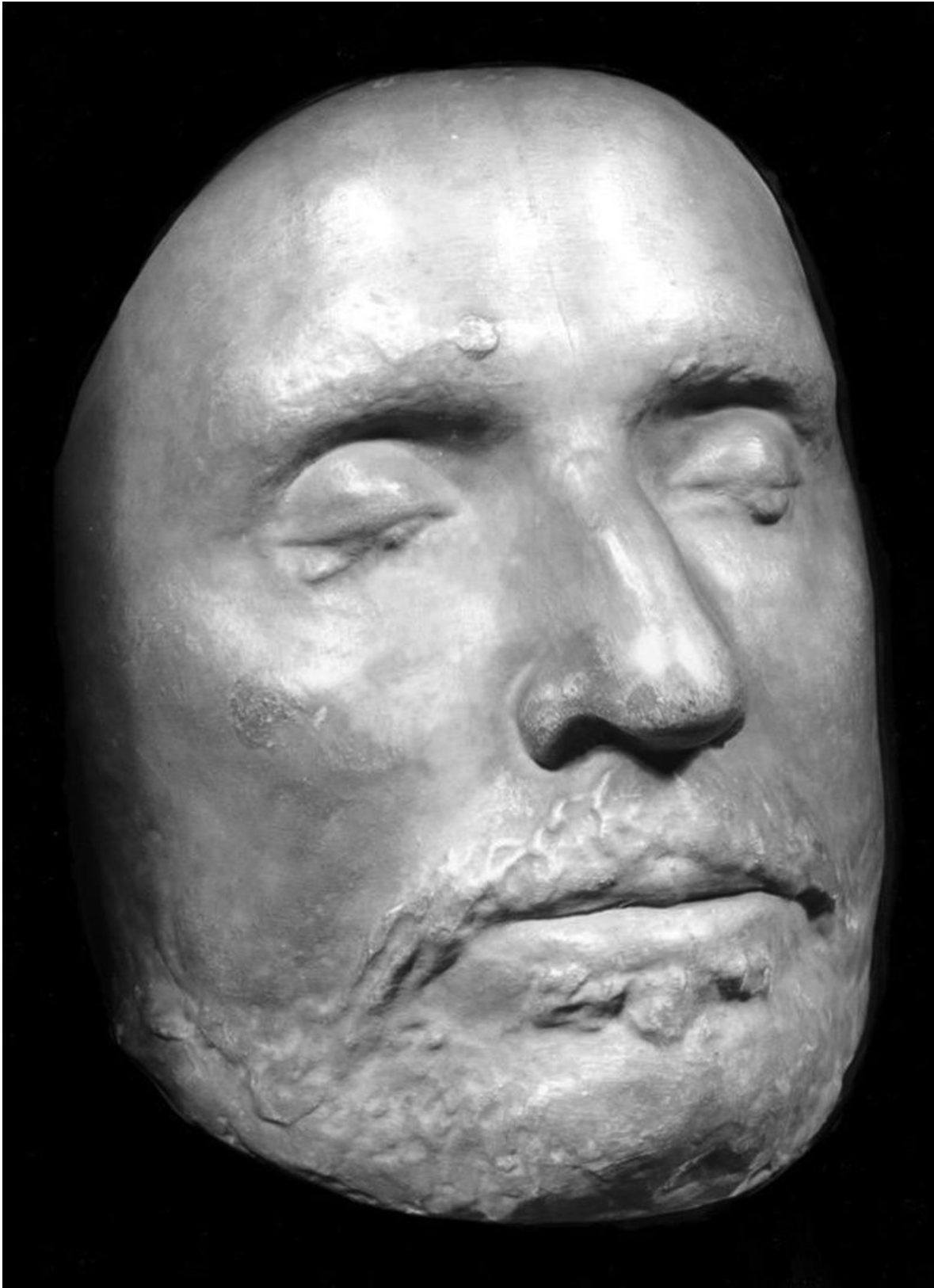
The death mask became popular in the 19th century because it was seen to be the most accurate portrait possible. The process of casting gave the image a direct relationship to the person, reproducing the face in all its detail, even after death.

And yet the masks themselves seem to conspire against their portrait-like qualities. In the first place, a dead body always looks dead. There's an inertness that accretes to a body, a slowing of the blood and then a swelling as that same blood pools. Conversely, the dead body is always in motion as it rots, sags, and decays.

Luke Fidler Impressions From the Face of a Corpse, The Atlantic

The National Portrait Gallery collection contains a number of life and death masks including the artists John Constable, Joseph Mallord William Turner, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and

George Frederic Watts. The NPG has 229 portraits of Oliver Cromwell including a death mask and a print of Oliver Cromwell with the severed head of King Charles I.



Oliver Cromwell by Unknown artist plaster cast of death-mask, possibly late 17th century, © National Portrait Gallery, London

Josiah Wilkinson liked to take Oliver Cromwell's head to breakfast parties. The broken metal spike which had been thrust through Cromwell's skull at Tyburn, 160 years earlier, provided a convenient handle for guests to use while examining the leathery relic over devilled kidneys.

Frances Larson Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found, Granta



Box Room, Mark Fairington, 2014, Oil on wooden panel, 13x42cm, Photo: Pete White

With the *Collected Human* I found that I was making paintings of severed heads at about the same time as ISIS videos of beheadings began to appear online. The head is the place where our self exists. It is the way we are recognised, how we understand the world and how we communicate to others. The severed head as an image in the history of painting re-presents the head and the portrait as a specimen. Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553) painted many versions of *Judith with the head of Holofernes* and *Salome with the head of John the Baptist*. In *David and Goliath* (1599) Caravaggio pictures himself as the severed head of Goliath being held aloft by his studio assistant and lover Cecco. Gericault, in making preparatory studies for the *Raft of the Medusa*, began visiting the morgue of the Hospital Beaujon in Paris. Among the paintings he made of body parts are a number of severed heads; the head as still life.



Puppetman, Mark Fairington, 2015,
Oil on wooden panel, 13x40cm
Photo: Pete White

Douglas Gordon's installation *30 Seconds Text* is about a scientist who attempts to communicate with the severed head of a criminal immediately after he has been executed by guillotine. The executed man's eyes seem to respond to his name being called for 30 seconds until they go blank. The viewer of the artwork has 30 seconds to read the text before the room goes black.

At that moment I shouted "Languille" in a loud voice, and I saw that his eyes opened slowly and without twitching, the movements were distinct and clear, the look was not dull and empty, the eyes which were fully alive were indisputably looking at me. After a few seconds, the eyelids closed again, slowly and steadily.

Douglas Gordon, 30 Seconds Text, 1996

Biography

Mark Fairnington is a Reader in Painting at UAL who lives and works in London. In 1998 the exhibition *Heavier Than Air* at the Imperial War Museum in London followed a two-year residency to research the Museum's archive and collections.

In 2000 he was awarded the Sargant Fellowship at the British School at Rome and in 2002 the Wellcome Trust funded a field trip to the rainforests of Belize, with the entomologist George McGavin, from the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. A major exhibition of Mark's work, *Fabulous Beasts*, was mounted at the Natural History Museum in 2004 and subsequent projects have involved the Horniman Museum and the Wellcome Collection.

Unnatural History, 2012, was a retrospective at the Mannheim Kunstverein in Germany. Fairnington's most recent solo exhibition *Collected and Possessed* was at the Horniman Museum in London, finishing on January 24th 2016.

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