

A few words a week on Art and Life In London

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48. Ilona Sagar at Tenderpixel



(https://750wordsaweek.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/tenderpixel_isagar_0033_web.jpg).

Install shot, Ilona Sagar, 'Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye', 2015, Tenderpixel. Photo by Original&theCopy. Courtesy of the artist and Tenderpixel.

Some shows are easier to write just 750 words about than others. Having often broken your intended word count (sometimes significantly) you feel some shame at not having forced yourself to adhere more strictly to your own parameters, if only in search of a resulting formative effect and the acquisition of the kind of greater professional discipline. The truth is, editing invariably takes longer than the first flow of writing, and time is something you seem to have little of. Your Blog was born in fact of trying to fit more regular writing and 'publishing' into, around and within your high anxiety lifestyle as a precariously financed, unsalaried artist, writer and lecturer in this nerve-wrackingly expensive and increasingly demanding city. Ilona Sagar's show 'Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye', at Tenderpixel is the kind of show that could easily draw a long essay out of you, but you are going to strive here to monitor your writing and more precisely hit your set word limit.



(https://750wordsaaweek.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/tenderpixel_isagar_0032_press.jpg)

Install shot, Ilona Sagar, 'Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye', 2015, Tenderpixel. Photo by Original&theCopy. Courtesy of the artist and Tenderpixel.

You came across the show just the way you like to come to art, without forethought or intention. Visiting 'Tender Books', just off London's Charing Cross Rd, you found yourself increasingly immersed in the show in the adjoining and associated gallery. The ground floor space shows unnervingly delicate, elegantly formed stems, globes and folds of meticulously blown glass, along with a few plinth-like objects and some interrupted language cascading down the tall white walls.



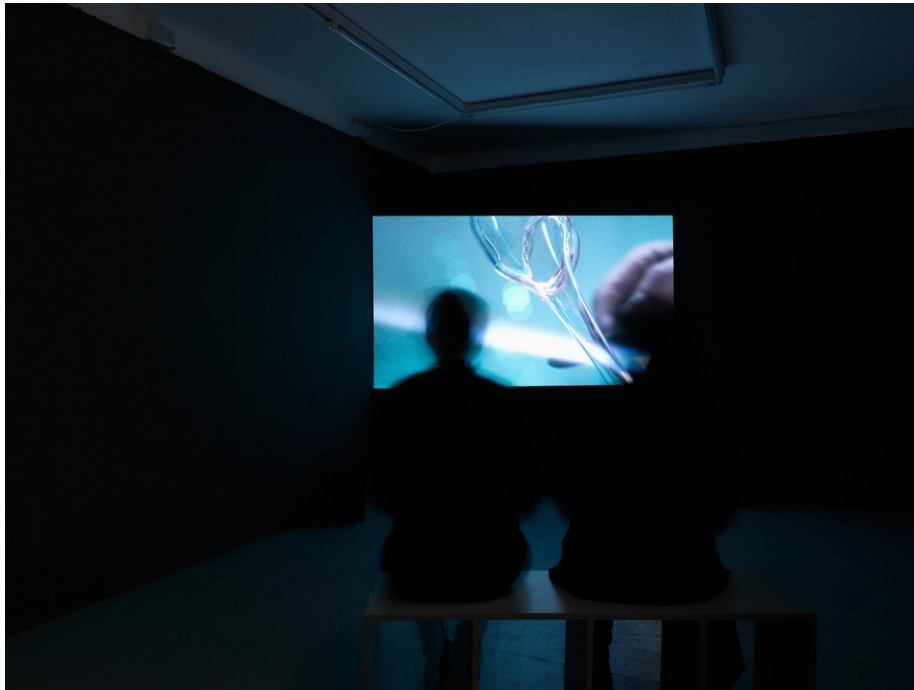
(https://750wordsaweek.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/tenderpixel_isagar_0016_web.jpg).



(https://750wordsaweek.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/tenderpixel_isagar_0024_web.jpg).

Install shot, Ilona Sagar, 'Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye', 2015, Tenderpixel. Photo by Original&theCopy. Courtesy of the artist and Tenderpixel.

Downstairs a darkened space provides a concentrated context in which to view the artist's accompanying film. Here you see echoes of the works upstairs in references to glass and its manufacture as well as certain forms that follow those in the ground-floor gallery. High definition moving images crowd-in on human bodies and bring us up close to pieces of technological apparatus apparently designed to aid the human eye. It's a macro-visioned, consequently claustrophobic perspective exacerbated by disembodied voices that sound similarly close as they recite a collage of poetic texts and philosophical observations, occasionally citing observations on the body drawn from another age. As the show's title suggests, the eye appears repeatedly as a central motif and some of the speech and other imagery also relates to optics. Sometimes you see what might be tears, in extreme close-up. As they run over skin and other material surfaces their viscose droplets gather into forms which are, again reminiscent of the blown glass shapes you saw in the gallery upstairs.



(https://750wordsaweek.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/tenderpixel_isagar_0053_web.jpg).

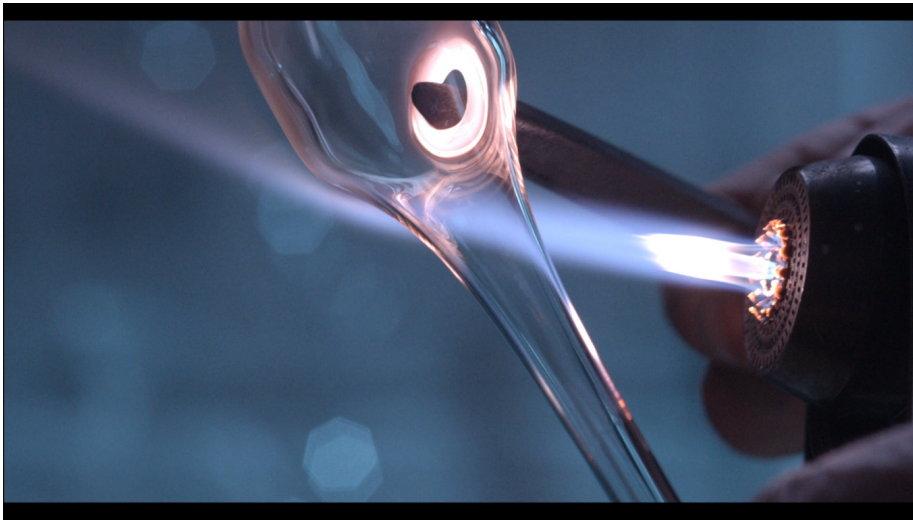
Install shot, Ilona Sagar, 'Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye', 2015, Tenderpixel. Photo by Original&theCopy. Courtesy of the artist and Tenderpixel.



(https://750wordsaweek.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/tenderpixel_isagar_0051_web.jpg).

Install shot, Ilona Sagar, 'Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye', 2015, Tenderpixel. Photo by Original&theCopy. Courtesy of the artist and Tenderpixel.

According to a concise, carefully designed hand-out / keepsake provided by the gallery, the artist discovered that the invention of a the first clear glass, *cristallo*, in the middle ages induced a new psychological illness in people who came to fear that they too were becoming brittle and fragile. It's around this useful piece of contextual information that the work really starts to open up its most profound and fascinating values for you.



(<https://750wordsaweek.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/tenderpixel-hole-poke.png>).

Install shot, Ilona Sagar, 'Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye', 2015, Tenderpixel. Photo by Original&theCopy. Courtesy of the artist and Tenderpixel.

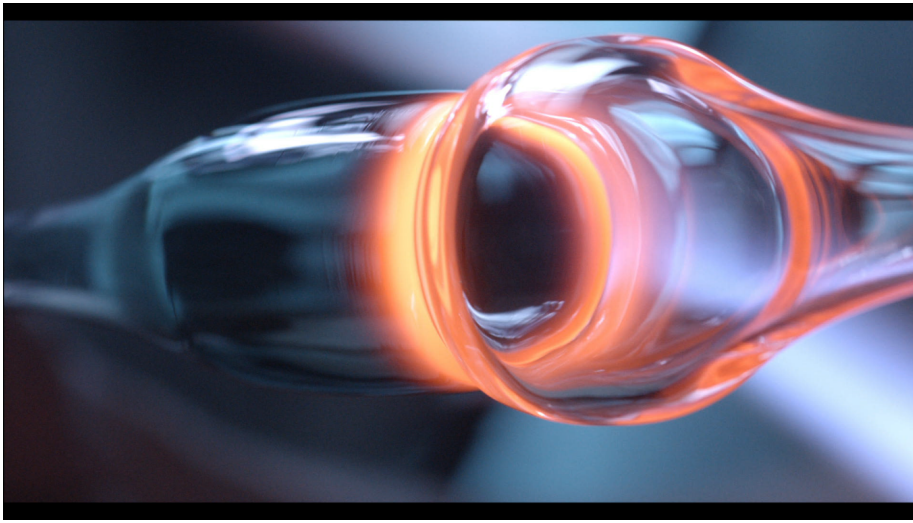
Like many of your peers you studied the ideas of Gilles Deleuze in maverick reading groups through the 90s, then, more formally as part of your masters degree and doctoral research, but its really only recently that you feel you can really apply those ideas with personal conviction and no-longer in fear that they may merely be a fashionable attribute of your academic environment and thus something you have not thoroughly questioned or found your own reason to affirm. Watching Sagar's film however, you once again start to taste those synaesthetic and nonsensical-ly affective allusions made in the radical cultural conversation forged between Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and extreme creative figures like Antonin Artaud.



(<https://750wordsaweek.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/tenderpixel-hair-crystles.png>).

Install shot, Ilona Sagar, 'Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye', 2015, Tenderpixel. Photo by Original&theCopy. Courtesy of the artist and Tenderpixel.

As when he championed a 'neoBaroque', Deleuze often used a history of ideas to stir up, disrupt, illuminate and undermine established patterns or modes of thought. The medieval world (as Michel Foucault also noted) had not yet succumbed to the Enlightenment's representational organisations of knowledge, and so, there and then we may find a rich field within which to re-interpret experience, finding new/old vocabularies and understandings of our health, our body and the infinitely complex and mercurial relationship between the body and its environment. In the medieval world -we might even venture to say- the eye had not yet been crowned king as it would in the Renaissance and this implies another fascinating field of enquiry which might, again, be supported by the writings of Foucault.



(<https://750wordsaaweek.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/tenderpixel-eye-melt-glass.png>)

Install shot, Ilona Sagar, 'Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye', 2015, Tenderpixel. Photo by Original&theCopy. Courtesy of the artist and Tenderpixel.

The post-structuralist terms of these thinkers allow you to re-appreciate and re-articulate your own experience, beyond the habitual structures and language with which you were arbitrarily indoctrinated as a child. Thus you increasingly appreciate the plight of Alice in Carroll's 'wonderland' as she negotiates experience and the environment as a series of baffling puzzles and challenges to the established or common 'sense' that forms her upper-middle-class Victorian character. A form of 'radical empiricism' places the senses where logic would be and demands we live according to feelings, behaviours and intensities rather than as Euclidean, Kantian, Cartesian subjects controlling chaos by means of a conveniently contrived representational schema.

In Sagar's film you occasionally see illustrated pages from a medieval text showing bodily afflictions (people are vomiting, bleeding comprehensively or writing in tongues of fire) which contemporary medieval speech puts down to 'devils', but what are these 'devils' you think, and might we still need them today? Meanwhile other images mix in cutting edge technology that seems to be supplanting what we take for granted as vision with alternative forms of information that might allow the blind to negotiate space using a mix of digital information and synaesthetic sensual prompts, thereby striving to 'see' using other than the eye.

Sagar's film inhabits and promotes a realm where language erupts through, wraps around and breaks over a body that weeps and folds, mutable and vulnerable, unable to know, master or measure itself. Poetics emerge from language ever-straining, ever failing to express. One utterance fleetingly underlines the episteme when it says: "...feeling alive is different from knowing you're alive ... "

The artist uses current technology, high definition sound and images along with craft processes and the curatorial art of installation to provide a disruptive set of sensual stimuli that succeed in scrambling habitual orientation. The eye, for so long the centre of our art world, becomes another surface, a fold in a continuum, a symbiotic product of the material stimuli to which it responds, and thus no longer distinct from the glass it might see through or which might threaten its flinching surface.

Just when you start to get judgmental about this or that detail of the film your Deleuzian empathy kicks back in and you recall that glass is of course made of sand which itself contains the product of the pressurized erosion of billions of bodies. Thus the manifold dialogues between the body and glass in this film no longer even seem confrontational and contentious but continuous, consistent 'unstriated.'

Repeated images of glass being heated, turned, blown and pressed into shapes links the various references in the show together with a kind of alchemy that is not yet entirely eradicated by our post-Enlightenment hyper-modernity, but rather speaks of a persistent or potential neo-medievalism wherein and whereby we gain an opportunity to critique modernity as if from without, from before, or perhaps as if it never happened.

[Link to Tenderpixel's page for the show \(http://www.tenderpixel.com/Haptic-Skins-of-a-glass-eye\)](http://www.tenderpixel.com/Haptic-Skins-of-a-glass-eye)

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