

The dark ages - Times Online

The Times

In these dark days, when a Damien Hirst pharmacy cabinet filled with old pill boxes can go for £9.7 million, the link between art and medicine needs dissecting. So, in one of those saggy, midsummer, raining-again moments, I wandered into the new Wellcome Collection, opposite Euston station in London, and followed Jane Prophet, an artist of scientific bent, on her personal tour of the exhibition *The Heart*.

What a fabulous hodgepodge the Wellcome Collection is – medical objects old and new, and gruesomely medieval, sprinkled with well-trendy BritArt. Here, art wields a scalpel, science a paintbrush, and it all confounds assumptions about the left side of the brain versus the right. There's a Marc Quinn statue, made from antiretroviral drugs, writhing at the front door, and a dangling Gormley. (You can't go anywhere in Britain without a Gormley bodycast posing on a roof, hanging from the ceiling, or mooning on a beach. I am as bored with the repetition of his body as I am with that of Kate Moss.)

But *The Heart* exhibition is spankingly fresh in its weirdness, ranging from waxwork medical models and paintings to religious miracles of the sacred heart, to a film of a heart transplant, to a whale's heart so huge it would fill a supermarket trolley. I hadn't seen a 3-D heart since school biology, so I had quite forgotten that they look like root vegetables – specifically, an unearthed Jerusalem artichoke of the knobbly type.

Jane Prophet was artist-in-residence at Papworth Hospital, famed for its organ transplants. "Despite all our knowledge of valves and transplants, and of how the brain works, we still hang on to the idea that the heart is the seat of romantic love, the seat of the soul," she says. Even those who made Victorian anatomical wax dummies remained romantic. There's a female model, with a veritable butcher's shop inside the chest cavity. "But if you look at the head, it is thrown back, almost in ecstasy. The hair is attractively arranged, the mouth partly open. The intent was highly seductive."

Those Victorians sexualised the female body on the dissecting table, too. A whole wall was covered with Enrique Simonet y Lombardo's *And She Had A Heart!* – a gorgeous woman laid out for autopsy, one tasteful breast bared, auburn hair flowing pre-Raphaelite style to the ground, a bearded, bespectacled old gent holding up her raw-meat heart, looking slightly surprised.

After watching many operations, Prophet took MRI data of a living heart, reassembled it in 3D on a computer, and made a model using "rapid prototyping" – something to do with lasers solidifying powder wherever images showed. The result is a layered sculpture of the moving heart, coated in silver. I hope that a museum buys it. It has more meaning than Hirst's £50 million diamond skull, which will surely be bought by one of that sad group of billionaires who have money to flush away.

Prophet moved on to the fascinating question of "domino" transplants. Heart and lung transplants are best done in a neat triple package, rather than unplugging it all, so there are healthy spare hearts going begging from lung patients. The two transplant operations take place in the same hospital, often in the theatre next door for speed. Despite rigorous privacy rules, contact is sometimes established between transplantees. How can the sensitive subject be broached? "Nice ticker you've given me. How was it for you?"

"Patients may believe they've taken on the characteristics of the donor – they're emotional in a way they haven't been before, they've developed a sudden taste for certain foods," says Prophet. What else would explain the taste transfer from the orange cream to the nut cluster in Milk Tray? Doctors say long-duration anaesthetic makes a patient more weepy afterwards, but transplantees claim the feelings continue permanently – the feeling of another person's DNA pumping its way round your body...

My visit ended with tremendous iced cupcakes and tea, and I must also recommend the facilities. The French have *l'esprit de l'escalier*, a witty remark that occurs to you too late, on the stairway, but in Britain – where one of our national traits is spending a great deal of time in the loo, reading and whatnot – we have the Bog Thought, which is often bog standard. In the Wellcome ladies', however, the wall of each cubicle has an improving thought. Mine was from Ralph Waldo Emerson, and highly appropriate: "Science does not know its debt to imagination".

kate.muir@thetimes.co.uk

