

# Helen Chadwick: Life Pleasures

## 17 May – 26 October 2025

The exhibition shows the artwork of pioneering feminist artist Helen Chadwick throughout her career. It highlights her unconventional use of materials and playful approach to creating art. Chadwick made a significant impact on British and international art history.

### BIOGRAPHY

- Born 1953, in Croydon, UK. Her Greek mother and British father met during World War II.
- Studied at Brighton Polytechnic and Chelsea School of Art.
- Started exhibiting art in 1977, with her first major solo show in 1984.
- From 1985-1995 she was lecturer on several Fine Art courses in London. Some of her students have become very successful artists, for example Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin.
- In 1987 she was one of the first women nominated for the Turner Prize, the biggest prize in the UK for contemporary art.
- Died suddenly of a heart attack in 1996, aged 42.



Helen Chadwick celebrated the natural world and the human body. By stimulating all the senses, she hoped that her work would trigger emotions and feelings such as excitement, wonder, desire, repulsion, tenderness and nausea.

Chadwick wanted to break boundaries around what is usually considered 'traditional' or 'beautiful', so she experimented with materials and images in original and surprising ways.

### THE ARTIST'S LIFE

Chadwick was interested in how her own body and personal experience as a woman could be used to explore bigger issues; feminism, sexuality, disease and beauty.

#### WORK IN FOCUS: *Ego Geometria Sum (I am Geometry)*, 1983



This work is made from ten geometric plywood sculptures. Each represent 'containers' for the artist's body at different ages between birth and 30 years old, including an incubator for a baby, a pram and a play tent.

The nine sculptures on display are printed with images of the objects along with photographs of herself, with her head turned away, to emphasise experiences can be shared by many.

*"I felt alienated from my own sense of self so I thought...let's do something autobiographical."*

**DRAW:** Sketch the shapes you would choose to represent different times or stages in your life.

## MATERIALS AND PROCESS

Helen was a highly skilled maker of sculptures, installations, photography, performances and lightboxes. Some of the unusual materials that feature in her work are flowers, fur, chocolate, hair, bubble bath, snow, milk, meat, engine oil, rotting vegetables and urine.

### WORK IN FOCUS: *Carcass*, 1986

*Carcass* is a two-metre-high clear tower of rotting vegetable matter. As the contents decay, they produce a fizzy, fermenting liquid which Helen saw as a metaphor for life. The 1986 version exploded, spraying the ICA gallery with liquid! Here the liquid is removed.

### WORK IN FOCUS: *Wreaths to Pleasure*, 1992-3



This series of work are different arrangements of flowers and petals in slightly suggestive shapes, floating in a range of liquids. These include tomato juice, milk, fairy liquid, bubble bath and chocolate.

The results are a mix of wet and dry; stillness and fluidity. They were then photographed to become permanent artworks.

**DRAW:** Stand close to one of these artworks and draw the detail of the materials. Capture the contrasting textures of the materials.

## FROM INSIDE THE BODY

From 1988 Chadwick turned her attention inside the body. She was deeply affected by the trauma of the AIDS crisis, as well as the links between environmental pollution and human sickness. Chadwick wanted to explore the relationship between nature and human beings.



### WORK IN FOCUS: *Piss Flowers*, 1991-2

While in Canada, Chadwick and her husband David Notarius travelled into the Rocky Mountains with a large cookie-cutter mould of a flower. They packed snow into the mould before taking turns to urinate into it. They poured liquid plaster into the mould, filling the holes melted in the snow. The resulting plaster shapes were cast in bronze, to make them more permanent.

*"Sometimes I look at them and I think 'gosh they're amazing, they're fabulous...' I guess because they are not devised in the conventional way, they are not things made, they are the product of things that happen, chance things..."*

**THINK:** Helen Chadwick started each artwork with a strong idea, yet some final works are the result of chance. What are the advantages and disadvantages of relying on chance in how materials behave? How could you create an artwork that had unknown outcomes?