



## Yellow Heart Gallery

### *Breath Lab*

**Artist name:** Tamara Baillie | Artist in Residence History and Heritage Collection

**Gallery Location:** Level 1, Zone F — just past the Queen Victoria Lecture Theatre

**Exhibition dates:** November 2019 to the end of January 2020

Assisted by the Hospital's Museum Curator Emily Collins, Tamara Baillie was invited to explore the collection by the WCH Foundation's Arts in Health program.

Tamara's final artwork is a response to the many objects in the collection associated with breathing.

Tamara and Emily have reflected on creating the Breath Lab installation.

### **Artist statement by Tamara Baillie**

I was invited to spend time exploring the History and Heritage Collection at the Women's and Children's Hospital and produce artwork reflecting on it. In my first days here, I opened all the doors and cupboards and drawers and systematically took a visual inventory. While there is a written list that records the contents of the Collection, my preference is always for direct sensory engagement where possible: the look, feel, touch, smell of the object are all ways of knowing about the object. Amongst the myriad photos and portraits and honour boards, I found well-worn anatomical models, a complete skeleton, defunct building signs, a tea set, baby bottles from various eras, educational posters, superseded medical equipment and all sorts of strangely assembled objects.



*Tamara Baillie with her installation Breath Lab.*

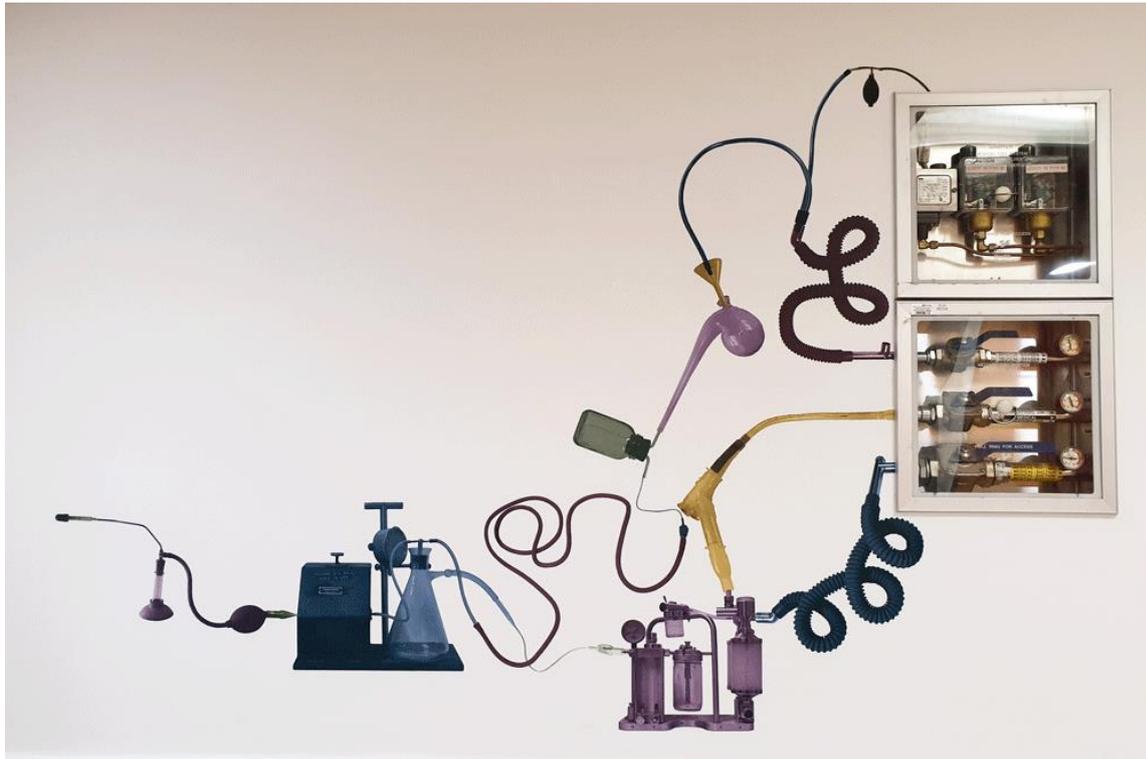
I found myself drawn to the laboratory glassware, each piece hand-blown and precisely calibrated to carry out some mysterious purpose in a highly controlled laboratory environment. Scientific glassblowing has been integral to the development of chemistry, pharmacology, electronics and physics in instruments such as Galileo's thermometer and Edison's light bulb. The glass pieces in the History and Heritage Collection have long since retired from their useful lives, but remain solidly evocative in this age of disposable plastic and computerised analysis.

I was also drawn to some lengths of tubing and strange canisters and gauges that I initially mistook for more laboratory equipment, but were in fact outdated anaesthetics equipment. While distinctively different in appearance from the glassware, there was a compelling liveliness in the assortment of tubing and oddly shaped cases that intrigued me.

Working with images of these objects I created intuitive collages in black and white, to help visually unite the disparate materials. Slowly the unifying factor became apparent after the visual and material differences were pared back: glass blown by breath, and equipment through which so many breaths have flowed.

Breathing, the defining action between life and death, supplies essential oxygen to and removes waste gases from every cell in our bodies. The quality of breathing also affects our brain function and behaviour. Inhalation and exhalation, nasal or mouth breathing all influence and respond to our emotional currents and memory recall.

This body of work is a series of nonsensical experiments that play with relics of this ordinarily invisible and ephemeral process.



*Breath Lab in the Yellow Heart Gallery.*

## **Statement by Emily Collins, Curator of the WCHN History and Heritage Collection**

Tamara Baillie is the first artist, supported by the Women's & Children's Hospital Foundation, to respond creatively to the rich repository of artefacts and archives at the Hospital that is known as the History and Heritage Collection.

Tamara's dual identity as a medical professional and a visual artist made her the ideal fit for inaugural Artist in Residence for this Collection, which holds artefacts significant to the history of child, youth and women's health care in South Australia and nationally.

As Curator of the Collection, I found hosting Tamara rewarding on a personal-professional level. The roots of my own tertiary educational background are in science: Anatomy, Histology and Physiology. Yet I had not consciously engaged with this aspect of my own history in perhaps two decades or more. In our conversations around the scientific and medical objects, I found myself recalling long dormant knowledge.

Unexpectedly, this sparked in me a desire to consider anew the empirical world. I was inspired to delve into Primo Levi's masterpiece *The Periodic Table*, a collection of essay-memoirs on science, in which he illuminates the beauty and creativity of this systematic enterprise; something that had earlier eluded me in my mindless application of scientific method.

Down among the odds and ends of the History and Heritage Collection, Tamara and I shared moments of aesthetic-scientific banter. A robust piece of glassware was not merely a Liebig condenser – passed between our hands, it had *gravitas*. Laboratory objects, arranged by Tamara on tables, took on personalities, each in possession of a *habitus*. Latin words, once learned through the rote memorisation of anatomical terminology, started to bubble up from my memory stores. The effect of interacting with artefacts of science, in the company of an artist, revealed to me a little of the art of science itself, and the capacity of art to help us make sense of its complexity.

Primo Levi, in his essay titled ‘Hydrogen’, relates his initiation as a young man into the world of chemical experimentation in a rudimentary laboratory. He recalls being confused as to how to test out his ideas, on account that he did not know how to work with his hands. Insensitive and untrained, his hands “... were unfamiliar with the solemn, balanced weight of the hammer, the concentrated power of a blade ... the wise texture of wood ...”. Confronted with the glass in the laboratory, he was enchanted by its mystery and forms, yet intimidated by its fragility.

In her roles of medical practitioner and artist, Tamara operates as diagnostician and maker. She is a master of problem solving, and of her hands. Yet in the exhibition *Breath Lab*, the artist has virtually removed her hands from the art-making equation. She has taken sundry laboratory and medical apparatus from the Collection, felt their weights and textures with her sensitive, trained hands – manipulated them into atypical postures – and then ultimately chosen to work simply with the memories of them, as images.

In doing so, she has created novel scientific scenarios. A length of concertinaed tubing is separated from its conventional apparatus; an old, portable gas analgesia machine used by midwives to give pain relief to mothers during home births. Twisted and turned upon itself, this piping is practically alive, and exponentially more dynamic. In connecting disparate pieces of equipment, the tube appears to test out hypotheses. To you, the visual-investigators, the tube inquires: is the artistic process not unlike the scientific process? Is the conversion of glass beaker to laminated image not some material transformation, of the kind Primo Levi fashioned when adding one element from the periodic table to another? Art and science are inseparable. In *Breath Lab*, on the wall, we observe their intertwining as literal.

In the hollows of her vessels and tubes, Tamara invokes breath. In the Yellow Heart Gallery, set in a walkway connecting the maternal and children’s areas of the Women’s and Children’s Hospital, these breath routes and receptacles signify power, and life. They remind that, on a nearby ward, a woman is absorbed in the laboured breathing of labour. With each painful contraction comes the sharp intake of breath. She inhales an analgesic substance through a tube. She harnesses her breath to channel her maternal power.

She births a baby. In this strange new world, the baby takes its first breath ...

## About Tamara

Tamara Baillie works primarily in sculpture and installation to explore personal and collective historical narratives, seeking alternative perspectives that counteract our collective 'forgetfulness'. Playing with concepts of presence and absence, her practice is built around ongoing investigations into the convergence of memory and identity.

Tamara is currently the City of Adelaide studio resident at ACE Open and a Co-Director of FELTspace ARI. She was recently recipient of a Helpmann Academy British School at Rome residency and has previously exhibited at the National Art School (NSW), Artspace (NSW), Firstdraft (NSW), Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, South Australian Museum, Adelaide Festival Centre and Adelaide Town Hall.

Tamara holds a Master of Visual Arts from UniSA and a Doctor of Medicine from Flinders University.

For enquiries please contact the WCH Foundation by **email** or phone **08 8464 7900**.

To learn more about Tamara's work visit her **website** and Instagram page **@tamaraghostmaker**