

## Joanna Rajkowska: Painkillers at l'étrangère

Text by Cat Gough

**'It seems that means of killing and means of saving people's lives are related to each other in terms of the forces generating them.'** Prompted by a wide range of stimuli that includes military weapons and pharmaceuticals, radical Polish-born artist and public space 'intervenor' Joanna Rajkowska creates casts out of modern guns, latex gloves and nuclear weapon cores.

London's l'étrangère is currently showing *Painkillers*, an exhibition of Rajkowska's new and existing sculptural works. Prior to putting together the exhibition, Rajkowska found herself knee deep in research. She began wading through scores of Cold War case studies of Soviet medical manufacturers who facilitated biological weaponry developments. Initiating a foundation for her works in *Painkillers*, Rajkowska began a practice of interrogating individual and collective bodies as politicised sites of historical, ideological and psychological conflict.

In the resulting resin and powdered analgesic cast sculptures within *Painkillers*, Rajkowska confronts and disturbs a historically obscured, cynical misuse of scientific knowledge and power. There is a mix of stand-alone and plinth-mounted sculptures. A 'smallpox infected' sculpture is ensconced on the gallery's varnished floorboards. *Blanket Infected with Smallpox* – a pallid, folded towel – sits in an uncomfortably familiar position. Innocently placed on the floor, the intimate and informal space inhabited by the sculpture recalls the inviting warmth of enveloping oneself in a giant fluffy towel.

Yet the title jerks away this naive daydream, evoking something more radically sinister. It represents instead the colonial germ warfare enacted by the donation of smallpox infested blankets to Native Americans by colonials in the 1700s. The sculpture captures an entrenched history of a moral and professional mismatch between the intent to inflict pain or to relieve it.

This is reflected similarly in Rajkowska's weapon cast sculptures, which sit clinically and politely upon plinths within the exhibition space. Rajkowska's sleek, modernist resin casts of military weaponry represents a disturbingly clear conflation of death and of protection.

*Joanna Rajkowska: Painkillers is showing at l'étrangère until 24 October*

