

PAINKILLERS BY JOANNA RAJKOWSKA AT L'ÉTRANGÈRE

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Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska's upcoming exhibition at London's l'étrangère gallery is an unnerving exploration of Western science; casting weaponry out of painkillers, Rajkowska has created products physicalising the complex relationship between the military and pharmaceutical production industries that often develop biological armament and painkilling drugs in cohesion with each other.

Rajkowska has formed products of modern warfare -guns, grenades, bullets- from powdered analgesics. The pristine whitened perfection of these final products mounted on white walls is far from what we hitherto understand as an environment for weapons of war; chaos, blood, dirt upon dilapidated landscapes. Instead, the space they sit in -unused- is clinical, modern, almost dystopian in its displacement.

The same businesses own armament and pharmaceutical production industries due to their similar technologies, similar substances and the similar knowledge required. Therefore, the same individuals are responsible for considering the medical, chemical and psychological consequences of a weapon and the medical, chemical and psychological knowledge to ease a cause of pain. In Rajkowska's pieces, this complex purpose is physicalised; the product of destruction and a product of aid.

Each weapon is mounted alongside a list of countries that have used it and the wars it has been present in.

These spectral forms, in the purity of their white space, untouched, unmarked and deactivated are unnerving in what we know is their true purpose. Our body, present, should fear these products of harm and destruction, though hesitate in the materialism of analgesics that seek to cure the body justly. In *Painkillers*, Rajkowska demands this conversation of conflict ideologies. We spoke to her about the process of the artwork, the exhibition and the place for the body within it.

Joanna Rajkowska, Uzi submachine gun, 2014 © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŻAK I BRANICKA & l'étrangère



You speak of endless historical research into biological warfare and pharmaceutical industries but what prompted you to create something physical from these findings?

Out of a sense of helplessness; I think there are answers to your question on two different levels. One is about my artistic methodology and the other refers to the situation in which we are now, as a culture, in the most fundamental way.

I start with the way I work. I usually have an image in mind before I fully know what it is exactly about. In this case I saw white, pristine weapons and I knew they should be made out of analgesics. I've always been fascinated by medications of all sorts, especially painkillers and sleeping pills. So I started a really long research project which took me into the area of biomedical ethics. The facts about the junctions between pharmaceuticals and instruments (or substances) of war are innumerable, and there are many companies that develop and manufacture both. Sera, antibiotics, radiation, even chemotherapy, precision aiming, surgery optics, etc.

The junction became the core of paradox that the *Painkillers* are based on. But as I say, I saw the image of it first and I worked sort of backwards, learning and developing new examples based on subsequent findings.

In the wider context I see it as a result of reflecting upon the unfortunate dialectics of the Post-Enlightenment legacy and its curious obsession with progress and hygiene. I am terrified by it. You can trace this development in language. We generated sterilization, disinfection, cleansing, purification, eugenics etc. And all these phenomena have serious 'side-effects' and more – they are highly dangerous, not only for humans.

The exhibition includes video work, can you tell me what these works feature within the *Painkillers* space?

I wanted to keep the exhibition super-clean, so they won't be directly on display at *l'étrangère*. But they will be in the back of the gallery, as they are really a performative part of the research. In *Progress* a small girl is repeating the names of weapons developed through centuries spent mastering the art of killing. She starts with spears, goes via the Little Boy nuclear bomb and ends with drones. The man's voice is teacher-like, neutral and firm. She makes mistakes trying to 'incorporate' her world into it, so chlorine gas becomes crawling gas, for example.

In fact, this is my husband's and our daughter's little play, as we decided to examine the effect of the clash (we grown-ups know very well what she is talking about, she doesn't yet) on the linguistic level. Why not teach her the language of killing instead of the language of love and peace? At the end of the day, this is exactly the course of many of the finest scientific developments of humanity. Why shouldn't we be proud of it? And why shouldn't we pass this pride on to our children?

What is the body that exists within the space you have created and what do you wish the work demands from the human body spectating?

All these guns or instruments of war/killing, including latex gloves, are designed for the human body. Both the perpetrator's body and the victim's body. I would like the viewer to remain on both sides, as some kind of double body bound by the weapon. So, it is an ambiguous relationship between the work and our bodies, a demanding and a painful one.

In *Painkillers*, the body is treated as a material to be destroyed or repaired, as if the human body was a substance that has to undergo a certain operation to become a properly formatted entity. In so many cases, it has to be killed, intoxicated, exploded or at least properly programmed so that you start to wonder about what its primary status actually is, this bare human being....

Would you consider this work a reflection of our age now, or is it restricted to a historical conflict?

It is as a historical as it is a contemporary condition. There is also this hint of acknowledgement that art is very often linked to dirty power including money laundering and the arms trade. So, instead of hiding weapons in the back of the gallery, why not put them on display?

How does the process of creating the forms relate to the work's purpose and meaning?

The process of making is out of my hands, actually, as it is done by specialists working for the cinema industry. They meticulously mix the polyurethane resin and powdered analgesic and pour the mix into the moulds.

Seeing the next weapon in this mesmerizing white makes me think about the mysterious relationship between the strictly sculptural or even aesthetic qualities which actually produce the meaning, and what we know about these objects.

What I learnt from the process of production is that the weapons are strikingly similar to art objects produced around the same time. Have a close look at the model of Israeli nuclear weapon core as photographed by Mordechai Vanunu in 1985, which I recreated. It is a phenomenal shape, an absolute modern beauty.

***Painkillers* opens at *l'étrangère* Gallery, London EC2A 3PD on the 17th September and runs until the 24th October**

More information can be found [here](#).