

Anna McNay Meets...

Anita Glesta

Anita Glesta (b1958) is a New York City-based multimedia artist, who is known for her public works of art (including a permanent, seven-acre, integrated-landscape commission for the United States Census Bureau headquarters in Maryland), as well as her hard-hitting, but subversively beautiful, installations, videos and sound works, which have been shown internationally and are held in collections around the world.

A key interest running throughout Glesta's work is the human body and its organs – especially the heart and its connection to the brain, and, more recently, the lungs. Her animation works, shot in slow motion using a layered plexiglass box, combine medical imagery, bleeding blooms of ink, and soundtracks that echo the experience of moving through the body. Glesta's interest in the heart amplified after she ended up in the cardiac care unit with a life-threatening ventricular tachycardia in 2017, and her interest in the lungs was sparked by the onset of covid-19.

Glesta, who, at heart, still considers herself a painter, has been the recipient of many grants and awards, including the Pollock Krasner Foundation Grant; the New York Foundation for the Arts Grant; the Puffin Foundation Grant; an Australia Council Grant, a LABA Fellowship; and the New York State Council for the Arts New Media Fellowship. She spoke to Anna McNay about her inspirations, research, methods and ambivalence towards making works of beauty.



Old Lady – still from animation Tongue on Fire © Anita Glesta



Inner Profile © Anita Glesta

Where do you look for inspiration for your work? You frequently seem to be responding to current events, either in your own life, or of the world more widely. How would you summarise your core subject matter or the themes you seek to work with?

That's a really good question, and I'm going to answer it by going back several decades to when my journey with the body began. I've always been fascinated by the heart as a metaphor. I basically wondered why that shape has been used – almost universally – to represent love and emotion. Of course, I understand that a very simple animal response is that our hearts beat faster when we feel things, but still, the heart has been something heavy in me for decades. Even when I was working in the landscape in Australia in the late 90s, I never left the heart too far behind. Then, in 2017, as a result of three different traumatic events, which happened within weeks of each other, I ended up in the emergency room and cardiac care unit for a few days. My body had triggered a life-threatening ventricular tachycardia. I was an otherwise healthy middle-aged woman, with no history of a heart condition, and the doctors were unable to say exactly why this coronary event had occurred. So I began to research a little bit more into the brain-heart connection, thinking especially about how paradoxical it is that we all look so different on the outside, but the skin is really just this thin wrapping that conceals an organic system that all humans share. Throughout western art history, beautiful women have been objectified as models – from the outside. I decided to look instead at our insides.

Despite the large-scale public installations and sculptures I've made, I'm a painter by nature, and so I returned to painting, which was something I hadn't done in two decades, and started to make images of our internal organs. That felt good, but it didn't feel enough, so I decided to work with video and incorporate some of the medical imagery I had recorded during my cardiac event, and that led to a multi-channel video installation about the heart, called Cardiac Harmonium. And that's how I'm continuing to work now – using medical imagery, but altering it, really working it in a different way. The body is so layered – the skeleton, the core structure, the organs – and then it's covered, zipped shut, by the skin. There are a lot of layers in there, and that's a great metaphor for how I'm exploring it.



Chase Manhattan Plaza NYC site-specific interactive audio sculpture installation © Anita Glesta and image Sacha Lecca

You lived through 9/11, right at the epicentre, with an apartment opposite the World Trade Center towers, and your sons’ school directly beneath them. You ran to rescue your sons as you saw the first plane hit. Rather than responding directly to this event, however, you decided to go and talk to the survivors of the 1937 bombing of Gernika [the Basque spelling] (immortalised in Picasso’s painting, Guernica [the Spanish spelling], of the same year), a place where you had spent time as a teenager, and make a work in response to that...

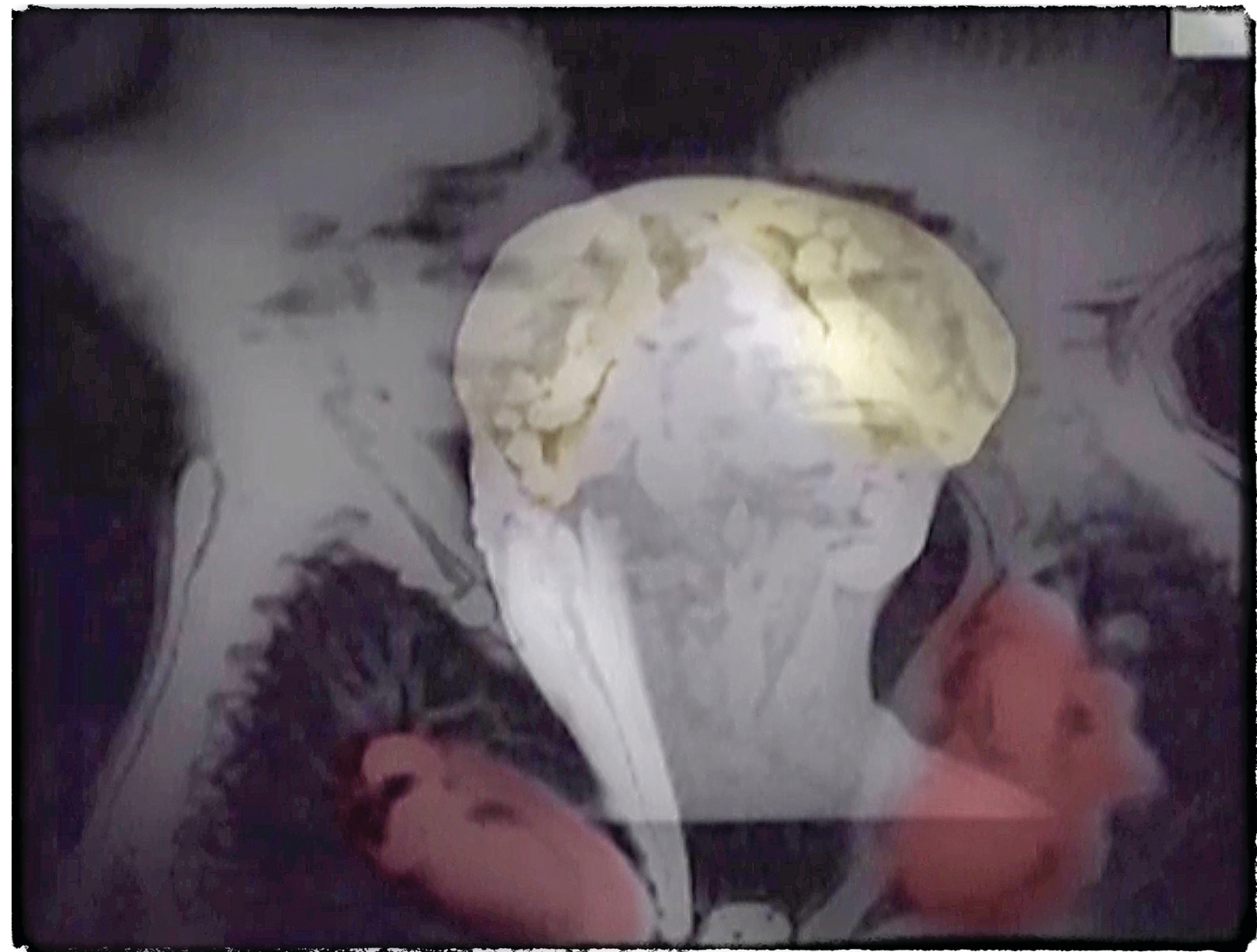
Yes, all of that is true. There is another ingredient, however, which I think is interesting. Because we lost our apartment in the attack, and because I had a friend who, at the time, was a president of the American Institute of Architects, I was invited to attend some of the meetings to develop guidelines for what might happen at the site of the World Trade Center. I have to say, I was a little upset to see these notable architects, all with an American flag on their lapel, looking at this as an incident of which we were the only victims. At the same time, we started to invade Afghanistan, so it felt so weird and very isolationist and anti-historical. I also wondered why they were so quick to want to build something on the site. Because I’d lived in northern Spain as a kid, knew where Gernika was, and knew its proximity to Bilbao, where the Guggenheim Museum is, I kept thinking about Picasso’s painting, and asking myself whether it had any resonance for now. We are in a different time. Would a visual icon that symbolises peace really be resonant in the aftermath of this kind of tragedy?

I wrote to the Gernika Gogoratuz Peace Research Centre saying I was an artist, who makes public works, and a survivor of 9/11. I received a response the following day from María Oianguren, the director, which said: ‘We have been waiting for you’. It was extraordinary. A few months later, they flew me over and put me in a room, in the village of Gernika, with a group of older people eating their tapas. They had organised an international panel with simultaneous translation. I was sitting next to a German woman who, at the very beginning of the panel, stood up, faced the group of old people, and said: ‘I’m here to apologise to you. My father was one of the pilots who bombed your village.’ I couldn’t believe it. What was so extraordinary to me was the response from what looked like these benign older people, who could have been anyone’s grandparents. They were really angry and yelled at her and asked whether it was voluntary or obligatory. Then it was my turn to talk, and they yelled at me too, and said: ‘You’re American!’ I said: ‘Tell me what I should tell my 10-year-old twin boys when they look up in the sky and they hear an airplane and are terrified?’ And, at that moment, the old people started to come up to the panel, a few at a time, and said: ‘Teach them not to hate’. It was a life-changing moment, and I knew then that there was no picture I could make, there was nothing that could ever eclipse the emotion that their voices captured. So that set me on a five-year journey of recording interviews with them, and this became the core of my artwork – eight sound boxes, each with two-minute narratives from these survivors. I also made a video of them, a documentary. First, it was installed as a sound sculpture at Chase Manhattan Plaza, right near Ground Zero, and then also at White

Box, which is a non-profit space in downtown. For them, I also made a projection of a red river with white people floating in it, which represented the paper that was flying out of the World Trade Center at the time of the bombing. Then, happily, the work travelled to the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Kraków, Poland, and the Arthur M Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology in Beijing, China. I had the voices translated, and they were played in Spanish, English, Polish and Mandarin.

Clearly research forms a large part of your practice. Do you see each work as a finished piece in its own right, or are they stages in an ongoing research project?

The latter. More specifically, in relation to the current situation with the Coronavirus, I am working on a series of animations, which are all part of ongoing research. I should perhaps mention that my father was a doctor, and he always said that it wasn’t going to be nuclear war that would get us, but a strange virus that we don’t know about. When I began to hear whispers about this virus, from friends in Italy, I started to think about what happens when something enters the body. I made a series about the lungs, starting with Corona Butterfly, which I made even before New York City entered lockdown. In this work, the virus is a pretty insect that enters the body and flies through its organs. The butterfly is neither beautiful nor ugly, but it is clearly a presence foreign to the body, and it ends its journey in the lungs. In the title, I replace the word ‘monarch’ with the word ‘corona’ because both words coincidentally reference royalty. Now, several months later, I’m beginning to tackle a range of emotions and trying to figure out how they can be expressed through a combination of imagination and medical imagery. I’m undertaking research with various neuropsychiatrists, neuroendocrinologists and neurocardiologists to begin to really understand what that connection between the brain and our bodies is.



Heart Sandwich - still from animation Second Brain © Anita Glesta

That leads me on to ask about the PhD programme you have applied for in Australia – most of which you hope to undertake digitally from New York this year. Can you tell me a bit more about the research you hope to carry out? What will be the ultimate outcome?

The programme is working with new media and the sciences, and, specifically, my area would be anxiety. They're interested in having me do a work for a festival called the Big Anxiety, which is being organised by the director Jill Bennett in 2022. It would involve working with doctors and developing something visual that can be then put in the public sphere and used as another form of evaluating, understanding and measuring people's anxiety, as well as other kinds of mental-health disorders. It's a whole new world of understanding the neuroscience of our bodies, which has not been fully explored, so it's really exciting and relevant. I'm not sure how art can mediate it, but that's where the similarity lies between scientists and artists – we both explore the unknown and offer a new way of looking at it.



Corona Butterfly – still from animation © Anita Glesta

Despite dealing with terrifying subjects – illness, the global pandemic, the bombing of Gernika, climate change – your works are beautiful, both visually, but also acoustically, thanks to your choice of music. Do you see, or seek, beauty in pain and fear, or is your art a form of sublimation and/or catharsis?

Many of those things. I also feel there is a little bit of seduction, that there's maybe something subversive in it too, because in this century, or the latter part of the last century, we have had so much access to communication through television, that we have become anaesthetised to a lot of difficult imagery. We turn off and tune out.

I'm glad you asked that question because it is so fundamental to the making of visual art and, especially, to my work. For many years, I had a love-hate relationship with making beauty. I have always been a visual artist, since I was a little girl, and so, for me, seeing and translating the three-dimensional world into the two-dimensional is a very easy language. As I came of age as an artist, I became concerned about the ease with which I could make a beautiful painting and that it might become facile. This was when I stopped painting and started to make sculpture out of various materials that are not necessarily beautiful.

In my interview with one of the survivors in Gernika, who happened to be a painter himself, I learned that the survivors did not see Picasso's painting until the 1960s, when the mayor of Prague brought over a Czechoslovakian postage stamp with the image on it to present to the mayor of the village. When I asked him about what he thought, he said: 'Well, I thought it was a little weird, an eye here, a head there, but then I realised how important it was for the world as an icon of peace, so I learned to love it. But Picasso had never been to the Basque country, and he should never have used bulls. We don't have bulls here.' This really made me think a lot about the power of the icon and the double-edged sword of power and danger, truth and fiction. I thought about how art has been used as propaganda and considered that perhaps the depiction of an event through traditional modes of representation is not enough.



Tsunami Lung – still from animation © Anita Glesta

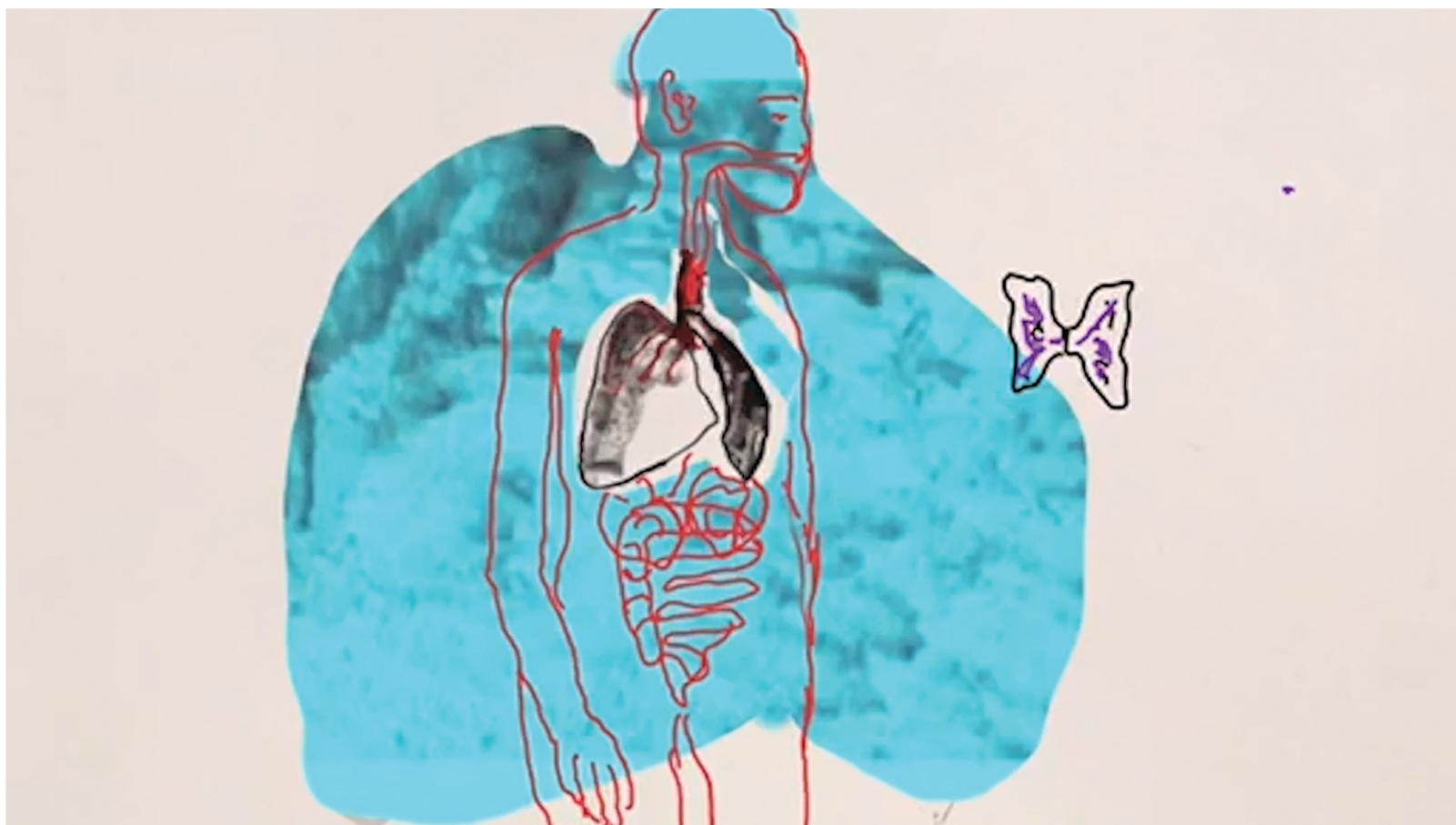
This is especially interesting in the current climate of Black Lives Matter and the imperative of recognising, understanding and integrating the history of African American people in this country. Who has the ‘right’ to utilise, incorporate, and perhaps usurp visual imagery that depicts identity? It has become an issue in many exhibitions here, beginning with the Whitney Biennial in 2017, which included [the white artist] Dana Schutz’s painting, *Open Casket* (2016), of Emmett Till [a black 14-year-old who was lynched by two white men in Mississippi in 1955]. What does it mean that we are all visual beings, and that looking at skin colour and ‘what we look like’ has always been a trigger for how we relate? Therefore, for me, working on our shared internal systems is, in a way, as much a political statement as it is an effort to understand human behaviour.

All of this to say that when I make something visually engaging, it is perhaps the most deliberate and considered ‘thing’ that I do. And perhaps a common thread in all my work has been respecting the power of making visual art and walking the fine line between the saccharine/sentimental and the provocative/subversive.

Coming back to your more recent animations, can we talk a bit about the process? How do you go about working over the medical imagery, adding the visual layers, and also the music?

I use old-fashioned stop motion with my little camera. It’s all self-taught and embarrassingly primitive. There is a great 10-minute video of Walt Disney talking about how he invented depth and perspective in his animation, using a glass box. This is probably something from Animation 101, but I thought it was amazing. I don’t know exactly how many layers of glass he had, but he would slide the camera above it all, and you would be able to move through a landscape, as witnessed in *Bambi*, for example. When you look into the forest and see trees moving and *Bambi* tucked behind those trees, it was all done with this glass box and different layers of glass that the camera moved across. I’ve been playing with a few layers of plexiglass. I thought that would work in an interesting way, making layers of the bodily organs, because one is tucked behind the next. I’m playing with that, layering the medical imagery, and then also working with a very high-intensity ink, which I have been painting with since I was a little girl, so it’s very comfortable for me. Of all the mediums I use, it’s something that has just always been my go to. With stop motion, you have to move quickly, and you have to feel a level of confidence in how to handle the ink, because it will bleed, but I feel comfortable enough that I know where and how it’s going to move, and I let the camera follow those movements, so the flow is as organic as we are.

The sound I choose is an integral aspect to having the experience of moving through the body. It’s so visceral, and it touches such a chord. For example, when I was listening to Mozart’s *Mass in C Minor* recently, which is really beautiful, with some incredible passages, I realised that it was all about breath. So I’ve been thinking about Mozart and breathing and the lungs and how I might connect all of these to create something visual. I don’t know how I can do it yet, but I plan to.



Full Body with Lung – still from animation *Lung Tsunami* © Anita Glesta



Corona Butterfly – still from animation © Anita Glesta

How do you envisage your works ideally being shown? When we met before, in 2015, we were at the National Theatre in London, where you had your work, *Watershed*, projected on to the side of the building as part of the Totally Thames Festival. It has also been projected on to pavements and a basilica back in the US. Is this your ideal method of screening – large-scale projections in public arenas – or are you equally happy for people to view your work online on their laptops and iPhones?

Totally, 100 per cent! It’s just such an interesting time right now. I would also love to show work in an interior venue in a very immersive way. So yes, yes, yes to all of the above! Why not?

I guess the other thing I can say without being preachy is that it’s a terrible time we are living in right now, but I’m wondering about the shift that we are in. I’m not thinking it’s going to be entirely great or entirely terrible, but I do think, as an artist, it is a very interesting time to really reconsider our roles. And I’m pleased about that. I really feel it’s been a long time coming, and there’s been an acceptance of visual art becoming more and more decorative, and that’s been less and less interesting for me. And the gallery system that has been constructed has really become superficial. So I am hoping that this is the time when artists are going to have to rethink how they make art, what the place of art is in society, and, apropos your question about whether my work can be seen on a phone or a computer, I think it’s not only me who is going to be grappling with this. I don’t think we can return to what was. And I’m hoping that artists will really use this as a time to document what we’re going through and come out on the other side with a new way of looking and thinking. Because it is artists, along with scientists, who can take what exists and shine a new light on it.

For more information, visit www.anitaglesta.com