

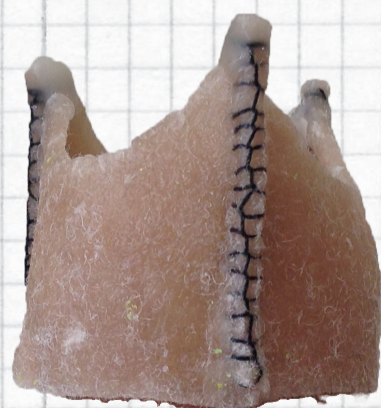
Opening: Thursday 14 March 2019, 6pm to 8pm  
Continues Friday 15 March – Thursday 28 March 2019  
O'Reilly Institute, Trinity College Dublin  
Opening Hours: 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

*Foreign Body* is an exhibition by artist Judy Foley that explores the high-tech medical implant as a handcrafted object. The exhibition will be opened by Anne Mullee, curator of The Courthouse Gallery and Studios, Ennistymon, Co. Clare, and will include a guest talk by Bruce Murphy, Assoc. Prof in Biomechanical Engineering, Trinity College Dublin.

This handout is designed by writer and artist Eoghan McIntyre and features a conversation between Judy Foley and curator Anne Mullee.



Trinity College Dublin  
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath  
The University of Dublin



Judy Foley, *heart valve with blanket stitch*,  
2018, felt, beeswax, thread, 3 x 3 x 3 cm

# Foreign Body

## Judy Foley



# Foreign Body

Judy Foley talks to curator Anne Mullee

**AM:** Your interest in medical devices has led you to participate in a residency at the Trinity Centre for Bioengineering. How did this come about?

**JF:** I sought this residency after I began research into the element of handcraft in the high-tech medical device industry. For example, manufacture of the bioprosthetic heart valve involves a painstaking and laborious process of hand stitching taking two to three days to complete a single valve. The residency has introduced me to the vast area of medical device technology and has allowed me to engage with the MSc in Bioengineering, sitting in on lectures and project work. This has been both informative and enriching.

**AM:** Your work explores the Posthuman in the sense of bodies becoming mechanised via the use of medical devices used to 'mend' the broken. The stitching techniques you use are also associated with mending. Can you describe the relationship between this idea of 'repair' and the Posthuman body?

**JF:** The ideal of the posthuman is a desire to transcend the weaknesses of the human body; the idea that we can repair ourselves to an extent where life is prolonged, and death is postponed. The incorporation of medical implants offers a route to this ideal. Repair through the sewing process is an important element of my work and the stitching methods I use are relevant. The running whip stitch is a temporary mending, a fast, time saving suture not intended for healing. The blanket stitch is used widely by needle workers as a more permanent and secure mending. For me there is this swing between the ideal and the reality; we repair ourselves, we keep on going for another bit, and yet underpinning it all is the inevitable fallibility of the human condition. Despite the technology involved, mortality persists.

Moreover, I find it poignant that the very technology used to fundamentally alter and transcend the human condition relies on the ancient craft of hand sewing for its manufacture. We are working towards a posthuman ideal, yet we haven't successfully shed our reliance on the workings of the body.

**AM:** The materials you have chosen to make these objects are both organic (the wool and beeswax) and non organic (corrodible steel, carbon paper), which we don't associate with medical devices. Can you explain why these materials were chosen?

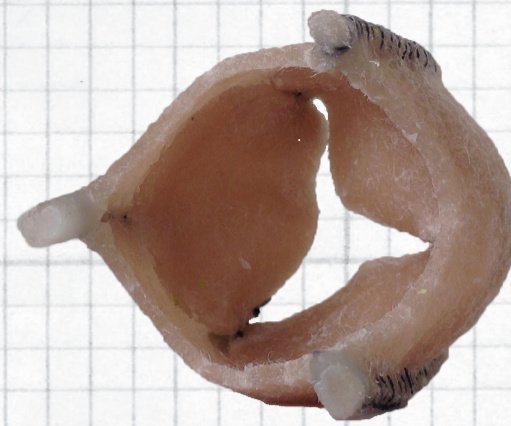
**JF:** As with my sewing process, my choice of materials is important. Many medical implants, in particular cardiovascular implants, are designed to incorporate both organic and inorganic components. The bioprosthetic heart valve, for example, involves a combination of both biological tissue and a high-tech metal alloy such as Nitinol. Considering our desire to be rid of the failings of the body it is interesting that we struggle to find a substitute for the unique combination of properties that biological systems deliver.

I generally use materials that are inherently unstable, and, like the human body, degrade or age over time, tending in the direction of 'disorder' and releasing energy as they oxidise - the mild steel corrodes, the paper fades, the wool degrades. Only the beeswax will not decompose.

This question is particularly pertinent in that it indicates the unease that persists with the idea of a medical implant residing within the body. I have chosen specific materials, and despite the fact that some are organic in nature, such as beeswax and felted wool, and even paper, perhaps none of them sit easily within the body or fit in with what we consider actually belongs inside the body.



Judy Foley, vessel with running whip stitch, 2018, felt, beeswax, thread, 3 x 3 x 4.5 cm



Judy Foley, heart valve with blanket stitch, 2018, felt, beeswax, thread, 3 x 3 x 3 cm

**AM:** Ideas around ontology of objects and the nature of being is at the forefront of a lot of artistic enquiry at the moment. I immediately think of ontological enquiry in relation to object making in the context of your work, and also the more extreme aspects of biohacking where hackers construct and 'install' hand made objects into their bodies. For you, is there an ontological aspect to the objects you make, given that their production could be framed within the Posthuman concept of biohacking?

**JF:** I can see why the association with biohackers would arise - the objects are hand made; they are laid out and lined up as if ready for DIY insertion into the body - and I have been asking myself why this idea does not sit easily with how I think about my work. I see biohacking as relating more to a transhumanist way of thinking about the posthuman, a thinking that clings to the anthropocentric, i.e. one that privileges human values and experiences in its quest to create a super being. I consider this to be in opposition to the posthuman perspective that an Object-Oriented Ontology promotes, where objects are invested with an agency and existence independent of human perception. My work seeks to understand this hidden agency of objects and to explore how, through particular methods of making, an object may be invested with this status; how to privilege the inherent or the latent.

In the context of my residency I have been looking at precisely what it is that I am making; how to classify or contextualise it. For example, if an engineer makes a thing, it is a *prototype* or a *test piece* - the language of industry. If I make it, it might be an *object* or a *study* - something to look at, or an interpretation of something that has been looked at. We could each make a *model* or a *sketch*, but for a different end-purpose or outcome. Then the same entity could have two different 'lives' or contexts, in that it is not impossible that I might create an object that could be deemed a *test piece* leading to a viable outcome for industry, and equally an industry *prototype* could warrant an existence as an object to look at. It is the potential for this kind of fluid dynamic between objects that interests me, and it is the reason that I make my work to the specified industry scale.

Finally, as an extension to the ontological aspect of my enquiry I have established an object-based Instagram account - judyfoleyart - as a route to empower these entities with a reality and agency.

**Judy Foley** is a Dublin based interdisciplinary artist. She is currently completing an MA in Art and Research Collaboration (ARC) at IADT, Dun Laoghaire, and has a residency placement at the Trinity Centre for Bioengineering and AMBER, Trinity College Dublin. Prior to her art practice she worked for 18 years as a chemist in the pharmaceutical manufacturing industry. Exhibitions include *Ex Voto: The Body + The Institution*, (Galway Arts Centre, 2018), *Statecraft* (in partnership with IMMA's National Programme, 2016) and *Holding Together* (Douglas Hyde Gallery, 2010). She is a current recipient of a funding award from the Trinity Visual and Performing Arts Fund. [www.judyfoley.ie](http://www.judyfoley.ie)

**Anne Mullee** is curator, researcher and art writer based in Co. Clare and Dublin. She has an independent practice and is curator of The Courthouse Gallery & Studios, Ennistymon, co. Clare.

*This project has been informed and enabled through interdisciplinary collaboration within the team of Bruce Murphy, Assoc. Prof. in Biomechanical Engineering, and funded investigator at AMBER, the Science Foundation Ireland Research Centre for Advanced Materials and BioEngineering, at Trinity College Dublin. My thanks in particular to Prof. Bruce Murphy and the MSc Bioengineering class of 2018/2019. My practice has been inspired and enriched by this collaboration.*

*Steel display units in collaboration with Derek Larkin, IADT.*

*This exhibition is part funded by the Trinity Visual and Performing Arts Fund.*