

Roger Hiorns,
BSE / vCJD
Hayward Gallery, London.
10 Feb – 26 April 2015

In the first ever exhibition in an art gallery to investigate bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) and its impact.

Hiorns provides an artistic exploration of the disease and its human equivalent, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), looking at how these crises arose, and the key milestones in their developments, as well as their lasting impact. He has worked with scientists to investigate BSE and vCJD, and to curate an exhibition that incorporates the materials of biomedicine, agriculture, animal husbandry, food production and consumption.

The exhibition itself is multi-layered, displaying artworks, cultural artefacts - excerpts from a cattle passport, scientific equipment and objects related to BSE research and vCJD research, film and documentary media clips, and official committee reports - alongside newly produced objects, including a 3D-printed model of the fatally infectious prion protein. The exhibition is structured around a timeline charting the history, development and impact of the diseases, in addition to other points, socially, aesthetically, that the artist found of interest.

Hiorns pulls together a diverse range of material, forming a radical form of collage or sculpture. That tells the remarkable story of the BSE / vCJD crisis and its lasting effects, noting that the experience marked a change in public attitudes towards institutional governing bodies. He draws parallels between historical and more contemporary prion-related diseases (such as scrapie and chronic wasting disease in the US) and the media or public responses to them, highlighting what these situations reveal about society and its structures, and materially defining the political and social island border of the UK.

"I was a student at the time when the press revealed the crisis of BSE and its link to vCJD," says Hiorns. "Being part of an at-risk generation created an unusual and tense social environment where a generation found themselves connected by a collective sense of medical potential and profound mental dread. The UK, always a social experiment, was defined in the 90/00s by a quiet dangerous material.

"Studying the crisis in finer detail over the last year, some 20 years on, has revealed to me the troubling - and pervasively lasting - effect these two brain diseases have had on our past, and on the future of international medical science, politics, culture and the wider society. Its unknowable protean form finds its way into everything, physically as well as metaphorically. It feels like the time is right for a reassessment."