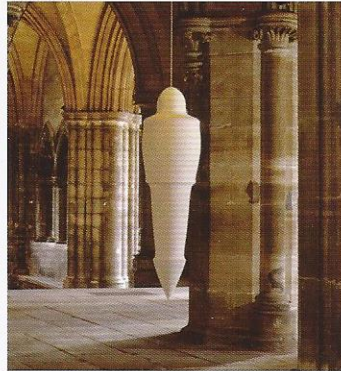
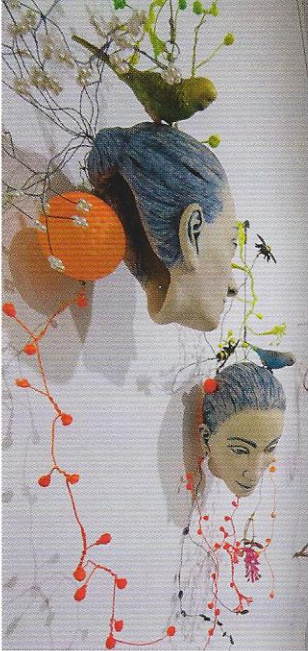


Side by side



There was an interaction between clay and mixed media at a show of work by American artists Jeffrey Mongrain and Judy Moonelis. *Mella Shaw* visited London Gallery West to discover more


A pool of blood spreads across the marble floor of a South Carolina church. On its surface is a perfect image of *The Last Supper*, a reflection of the carved white stone altar behind it. The pool, made of Plexiglas, represents 1.3 gallons of blood – the average amount in the body of an adult man. The place, the materials, the narrative all work in harmony, demanding full engagement from the viewer. This was just one of the photographs of work by Jeffrey Mongrain, on show alongside work by Judy Moonelis at University of Westminster's London Gallery West.

Mongrain's work was given more space and had a gravitas that slightly overshadowed Moonelis's more contemplative pieces. Their approaches, however, complemented each other: both use ceramics as one element of their multimedia sculptural syntax, where materials are chosen for their ability to convey an idea or mood. They also share a preoccupation with site specificity, often creating work in historic locations where research, context and narrative are key to the resulting interventions.

Over half the work on show was presented in the form of large photographs, each revealing an ambitious intervention made by Mongrain in various spiritual locations over the last fifteen years. An early foray into studying for the priesthood underpins his fascination with Christian symbolism and spiritual sites. His beautifully constructed, powerful images have an immediate visual impact and are truly arresting, being not just records of past installations, but art objects in their own right. The only exception to this was in one instance where the image had been reproduced too large; the resulting pixilation was a frustrating distraction.

In *Diviner*, 2001, a large ceramic plumb weight form (above) hangs from the gothic arches of Glasgow Cathedral's 12th-century crypt. It is an intriguing image. As light spills through the space, this form marks the spot where ten human skeletons dating to the Black Death were discovered, and, we are told, where a spiritualist has subsequently attempted to divine more bodies using a plumb line. Displayed alongside the photographs were small sculptural objects, many of which, although resolved, are less affecting. *The Weight of Smoke*, 2015 was my favourite of these. A piece of volcanic rock, wall mounted and containing a glass ball, which in turn contains nicotine-stained smoke, it was intentionally hung just too high to see easily.

Dispersed through the gallery were three photographic reproductions of paintings of *The Last Supper*. In front of each was a shelf and on it a blood red hand-blown glass chalice, each one a replica of the chalice placed in front of the figure of Christ. Each chalice was of course imaginary, created in the mind of the artist – Tintoretto, the Master of the Housebook and Lorenzo Monaco – and expertly recreated in glass by Mongrain's brother James. Again it was a simple idea, stunningly executed. The chalices were made real, transmuted from the two-dimensional surface; a reflection of the Catholic belief in the transubstantiation of the blood of Christ.

Where Mongrain's work was monumental and restrained, Moonelis's was figurative and playful. She addresses the body with the same intensity as Mongrain, but from the inside out. Using fragments of sensory and anatomical structures, she inverts the private inner sphere, nimbly changing scale and materials. The smaller pieces on show were slight but her approach worked best in two large photographs, *Blood Cell (Cell Block 2)* and *(Cell Block 10)*, which show her work in situ at the now derelict Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, where female inmates were kept from 1831 to 1923, often in solitary confinement. Moonelis has filled these former cells with a chaotic mixed-media, including porcelain, network of hanging forms based on the human brain and nervous system – they compete for space with encroaching ivy and weeds. Hers is a messy, energetic beauty, different to Mongrain's formal coolness. The turmoil of Moonelis's intervention speaks directly to the devastation of mind brought on by the practice of solitary confinement. It could be seen to exploit the memory of these women, who had no say over how they were treated in death, as in life. Instead it is a powerful testimonial. The work in this exhibition was as much about site-specific narrative, the qualities of materials and the notion of constructed photography, as it was about themes pertaining to the human body and soul; an ideal introduction to these two established American artists. 

Mella Shaw is an artist, freelance writer and Exhibitions Manager at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Jeffrey Mongrain and Judy Moonelis was at the University of Westminster's London Gallery West: westminster.ac.uk