

## In the beginning . . .



### Working Drafts: Envisioning the Human Genome

An exhibition at Two10 Gallery, London, UK, showing until Jan 11, 2002.

Seven contemporary artists, from England, the Netherlands, Scotland, Taiwan, and the USA have used photography, sculpture, ceramics, and installation to "explore the idea of the human genome".

The most aesthetically pleasing work is by Scottish artist Christine Borland. Developed from her interest in medical researchers' use of family trees in studying inherited disorders, part of the appeal of her steel mobiles is their familiar form. Many will have seen similar family trees displayed in museums, inset with painted miniatures or sepia photographs. Instead of such literal depictions, Borland uses slices of agate to represent family members. Different coloured stones chart manifestations of Thomsen's disease in four generations of the Griffith family and three generations of the Jones family. Blue agate denotes an individual with the disease; purple

represents a symptom-free individual, and so on. Borland took the pedigrees depicted in the mobiles, and extracts of case notes that accompany them, from *A Treasury of Human Inheritance*,



Detail from Christine Borland's *Griffith's Case* (2000)

published by the Galton Institute of Eugenics in the 1930s. Each of Borland's agate slices has a unique configuration of crystals and rings, symbolic of the individuality and

human value of each Griffith or Jones, over and above the colour that represents their clinical status.

The thoughtful, joint work of Dutch artists Leon Bloemendaal and Patricia Dekkers reflects their concern that "it is very likely that human beings will want to use genetic engineering to alter, redesign, and recreate their appearance". In a wry parody of expensive cosmetic packaging, the artists present three fictitious products—Evolution, Improvement, and Progression—manufactured by an imaginary pharmaceutical company, DNA Genomics.

Other artists had variable success in meeting the explicit challenge in the subtitle of the exhibition—to envision the human genome. It is probably too soon for artists, as it is for the general public, to have digested the importance of the whole subject. *Working Drafts*, however, presents the beginnings of artistic interpretation of our knowledge and understanding of the human genome.

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## We are so lightly here



### Ten New Songs

A new album by Leonard Cohen, produced by Sharon Robinson. Sony, 2001. £15.99.

It's an interesting fact about human psychology that we can derive as much, and sometimes more, pleasure from tragedy as from comedy. Is it that our reaction to the depiction of tragedy is quite different from our reaction to tragedy itself, or that we are smugly surprised to find ourselves able to empathise with others in their misfortune? The answer is unclear, but the point itself is illustrated by several songs on this new CD by Leonard Cohen, his first for several years, made jointly with a long-term collaborator, Sharon Robinson, who was co-author of the lyrics, contributed vocals, and produced the record.

*Here It Is* sounds at first like an inventory of disasters. Cohen seems to be posing as a reality salesman with the unusual marketing technique of first kicking you in the teeth before shoving his own indigestible version of The Truth down your throat. But all this is counter-balanced with hungry reminiscences of love and a synthesised erotic

background of fat South American rhythms with peachy piano chords. By *The Rivers Dark* opens with insidious bongo drums and the subdued wailing of strings being casually tortured in the nearby undergrowth. The archaic setting, the rivers of Babylon, is then transformed by ghostly female vocals into a landscape of nightmare. In these songs Cohen has clearly not lost his gift for paradox or for metaphor.

The finest song is *Boogie Street*. It begins with the soaring passion of Sharon Robinson's voice. In the next verse Cohen's smoke-sodden, catatonic croak intones to a leaden, anaesthetising rhythm. A rapturous third stanza gives us a brief glimpse of heaven on earth:

"And O my love, I still recall  
The pleasures that we knew;  
The rivers and the waterfall  
Wherein I bathed with you.  
Bewildered by your beauty there,  
I'd kneel to dry your feet.  
By such instructions you prepare  
A man for Boogie Street."

And then, as if from nowhere, comes this:

"So come, my friends, be not afraid  
We are so lightly here.  
It is in love that we are made  
In love we disappear."

I am reminded here of what the novelist, Ian McEwan, wrote about the desperate mobile phone messages from people trapped in the World Trade Centre: "There is only love, and then oblivion. Love was all they had to set against the hatred of their murderers". September 11th also illustrates the tragic meaning of the words, "We are so lightly here". Art aims for beauty and logic for truth, according to the German philosopher, Gottlob Frege. This song, miraculously, combines both beauty and truth.

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