

## LONDON

### Joanna Rajkowska

L'étrangère // September 17–October 24



RENOWNED AS A PUBLIC artist, Rajkowska's proposed interventions—the conversion of an unused industrial chimney in Poznan, Poland, into a facsimile of a West Bank minaret, say, or the installation of an imitation prehistoric grave pit in the center of a sleepy United Kingdom town, complete with replica skeleton—have provoked such embittered opposition that she literally wrote a book on it (*Where the Beast Is Buried*, 2014). So it was a little disarming to find her showing small, tastefully white sculptural objects on even more tasteful plinths in a commercial gallery in London.

Yet the potential for disarming (more or less literally) is what the artist was angling for here. "Painkillers I," 2014, and "Painkillers II,"

2015, the series that dominate the compact exhibition and from which it also drew its title, fixates on the tension between the deadly glamour of weaponry and its rendering as harmless: The selection of works from both encompasses an armory of weapons mechanical, nuclear, and biological (even an innocuous blanket is revealed in the label to be "Infected with Smallpox"), each object cast, life-size, in polyurethane resin mixed with powdered analgesics.

The artist is said to have conducted extensive research on the involvement of pharmaceutical companies in biological warfare in the buildup to the exhibition, but the grain of historical detail that might bring this knowledge alive is hardly communicated by the blank, unnuanced, uniform finish of the casts, nor by the deadening emphasis of its iteration. And in most cases, painkillers don't heal so much as numb.

Another, perhaps more profitable, interpretation of Rajkowska's material metaphor, then, might be as a framing of the desire to end pain (or prevent imagined pain) as precisely that which produces violence. This is one way to parse *Progress*, 2014, a video screened at the back of the gallery that shows a young girl reciting the names of increasingly complex forms of weaponry (from "bow and arrow" to "drone"), an unsettling conjunction of the technology of war and the prototypical subject whose safety is its nominal justification. In the same room, a series of exquisite hand-colored prints (*Wound Profiles*, 2015) overlays diagrams of the damage done to skin by various models of bullet with arbitrary decorative geometric sketches, as if Rajkowska were testing out art's capacity for purposelessness as a capacity to neutralize real harm.

That an artist until now readily associated with the idea of art as activating and empowering its public should now adopt a vision of the aesthetic as a *disempowering* force is stimulating and poignant, and no small thing to achieve on so condensed a scale. In their enveloping smoothness and spectral whiteness, the "Painkillers" suggest both a luminous dream-vision of art as turning swords into plowshares and the utter sequestration of that vision from the reality of life outside the gallery. —**Matthew McLean**

**Joanna Rajkowska**  
*Model of Israeli nuclear weapon core as photographed by Mordechai Vanunu in 1985, 2015. Life-size cast, powdered analgesic, polyurethane resin, 9 x 11 x 5 in.*