

# Pain paradox: Joanna Rajkowska casts weaponry out of painkillers

ART / 24 AUG 2015 / BY ALI MORRIS



'Painkillers' is a new show by Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska that will open at l'étrangère gallery next month. Central to the show is a series of life-size weapons cast from powdered analgesics mixed with resin. Pictured: *Uzi submachine gun*, 2014

▶ 🔍 ■■■ 1 OF 7

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During her research into the history of the Cold War, Polish artist [Joanna Rajkowska](#) made the dark discovery that Soviet biological weapons were made in conjunction with, and often in the same laboratories as, life-saving pharmaceuticals. Now, in her latest body of work, 'Painkillers', Rajkowska explores and comments on this paradoxical relationship.

'It seems that means of killing and means of saving peoples' lives are related to each other in terms of the forces generating them,' she says of the new pieces. 'This closeness can probably also be found between the means of inflicting pain and relieving it.'

Central to the 'Painkillers' project, which will be showcased next month at London's [l'étrangère gallery](#), is a series of weapons cast in polyurethane resin mixed with powdered analgesics, such as a life-size Uzi sub-machine gun, as well as a pair of latex gloves and a model of an Israeli nuclear weapon core.

In the back gallery, Rajkowska presents a second object-based series where a multi-chambered crystal formation, found by the artist in Brazil, rests precariously upon a wooden palette. Initially installed in the public space outside Erdington Library in Birmingham, where it was intended to act as a 'chakra point' or 'point of high energy' within the tapestry of the city, *Soon Everything Will Change*, 2014, takes on a new meaning in the private confines of the gallery and the serious context of the show. 'Although the status of this object has always been that of a travelling device – a 700kg "pocket" chakra object – the shift changed its sense in a very surprising way,' says Rajkowska of the crystal's change in surroundings. 'Even to me, a suspicious paranoiac who thinks that galleries castrate an object, it suddenly revealed subtleties that were completely lost in public space. What's more, it started to affect its surroundings so much so that other objects/beings – images or simply viewers – seemed to be less present than the crystal.'

No stranger to the topic of conflict, Rajkowska's previous public works have tackled equally uncomfortable subjects. *The Peterborough Child* – a series of outdoor sculptures inspired by racial tensions in Peterborough, initiated in 2012 – was produced but not installed after religious objections were raised by community representatives; while the artificial *Palm* tree that the artist installed at the junction of Aleje Jerozolimskie in Warsaw, which was created as a commentary on the void left by the absence of the Jewish community in Poland following the Second World War, served as a meeting point for a series of political events, performances and happenings ten years after its installation.



l'étrangère Gallery  
Charlotte Road, London

l'étrangère in Shoreditch, London has announced a new show called 'Painkillers', which brings into conversation new and existing sculptural works by the Polish artist, Joanna Rajkowska. Noted for her ambitious interventions in public space, as well as her objects, films, photography, installations and ephemeral actions, Rajkowska's practice interrogates individual and collective bodies as politicised sites of historical, ideological and psychological conflict. For her inaugural exhibition at l'étrangère, Rajkowska unites two object-based series under the rubric, Painkillers, in order to explore the at times uncomfortable connections between modern warfare, healing systems and the practices of Western science.

At the centre of these troubling relationships is a new series produced especially for the exhibition. Painkillers II (2015) continues Rajkowska's on going interest in the paradoxical interrelation of military weapons and pharmaceuticals, whereby the artist makes casts from modern weapons and 'weaponised' objects out of resin and powdered analgesics. Through extended research into case studies involving medicinal manufacturers in the facilitation of biological weaponry, Rajkowska confronts a set of disturbing and historically-obscured (mis)uses of scientific knowledge and power.

From the clinical suggestiveness of a pair of latex gloves to the seductive modernist design of a nuclear bomb, Rajkowska's choice of objects is not limited by time, place, or the method of pain administration. What unites these spectral forms is their disturbing conflation of death and healing processes. As the artist comments, 'it seems that means of killing and means of saving peoples' lives are related to each other in terms of the forces generating them. This closeness can probably also be found between the means of inflicting pain and relieving it'.

In the back gallery we stumble upon a quieter object: a multi-chambered crystal formation resting precariously on a wooden palette. This mobile chakra was found by Rajkowska in Brazil and was initially installed in the public space outside Erdington Library, Birmingham, as a site to subtly affect human bodies, suspend logic and introduce new social rituals. Now unearthed from its original home and hidden within the enclosed space of the gallery, the spiritual promise embedded within the work's title – *Soon Everything Will Change* (2014) – is rendered redundant within the deathly context of the exhibition.

In its first location, Rajkowska twisted the definition of chakra from being a spiritual centre in the human body to a point of high energy in the organism of the city. Here, by contrasting the crystal's inconceivable history with the fragility of the human body and the instantaneity of its death that is implied by *Painkillers II*, she returns this object to its native meaning, simultaneously unifying and futile in its non-human temporality.

Gallery open Tuesday – Saturday, 11am – 6pm or by appointment

More information: [www.letrangere.net](http://www.letrangere.net)

## 'WEAPONS ARE NOT VERY FAR FROM ARTWORKS:' JOANNA RAJKOWSKA AT L'ÉTRANGÈRE

The upcoming exhibition *Painkillers* at **l'étrangère** brings into conversation new and existing sculptural works by the renowned Polish artist, **Joanna Rajkowska**.

Noted for her ambitious interventions in public space, as well as her objects, films, photography, installations and ephemeral actions, Rajkowska's practice interrogates individual and collective bodies as politicised sites of historical, ideological and psychological conflict. For her inaugural exhibition at l'étrangère, Rajkowska unites two object-based series under the rubric, *Painkillers*, in order to explore the at times uncomfortable connections between modern warfare, healing systems and the practices of Western science.

I had the chance to talk to Joanna about both her artistic practice and forthcoming exhibition.



Joanna Rajkowska, Uzi submachine gun, 2014 | © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŻAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère

**How did you become involved in creating art / was there a specific moment that you decided to pursue it as a career?**

I grew up in the last stages of the collapse of Communism, when things were no longer stable, the currency was rapidly devaluing, the economy and culture came to a standstill and the overall atmosphere was one of uncertainty, decline and absurdity. It was a time of in-between. You have to find your own niche in such times, a little universe that is self-sufficient and rich enough to feed your various needs. What's more, art was not an escape for me, it was a means of connecting with the rest of the world, from which I felt I was utterly cut off. I was extremely happy when I would reach this unique state of body awareness, when what you see is being filtered through your senses and your hands are busy re-enacting it.

We still had these fantastic communist Palaces of Culture, where I could spend long afternoons sketching and, in summers, go to the open air painting camps. I had a solid background of practice before I started my adult life as an artist. It was just a way of surviving, a slow and 'organic' entry into the arts. It was also an escape from my mother's mental problems, but that's a longer story.

**It's interesting that you work in a variety of mediums: interventions in public spaces, objects, films, photography, installations and ephemeral actions – what entices you to utilize these different ways of working?**

I am one of those artists who don't have a language of their own. Since I primarily work in public space, my methodology is to respond, with all my mental and physical capacities to a site; and this is exactly the sensual and intuitive response that I use to create a language for a particular place and consequently a project. I trust my body – I use it a lot – it has powers that I cannot activate while coldly scanning, researching and reasoning. When my body says it feels suffocated, I use oxygen and foggers, when it says it needs to find itself inside a volcano, I am trying to build a domesticated volcano – Or at least a model of it.

The strategy works even in highly volatile political situations. It usually produces an alien element or situation in which people are forced to change their language to describe their problems. And it introduces a plane that only art can create, where things are no longer what they are, but become part of a completely different reality. The point is to make this reality stronger and more appealing than what they have.



Joanna Rajkowska, 5.56 x 45mm NATO cartridge, 7.62 x 39mm M43 cartridge and 9 x 19mm NATO cartridge, 2014 | © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŻAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère

**Painkillers (2015)** seem to continue your on-going interest in the 'paradoxical interrelation of military weapons and pharmaceuticals' – when and why did these ideas become an important part of your work?

It's hard to say really, perhaps because of my horrible headaches. It is an old project. One of the black holes of our culture is obviously the war zone. It is a zone that generates enormous energy and this energy is as much focused on the human body as the field of medicine is. The instruments and substances of war present as much sophistication in terms of penetrating and affecting the human body as medical equipment. Shameless amounts of money go into the research and production of weapons. Humans are deeply perverted in that. So, it is hard to ignore such a black hole in culture.

Being usually commissioned to work in public space, I didn't have an opportunity to produce anything substantial for a white cube for a long time. Last year, Anda Rottenberg curated this fantastic exhibition in Warsaw Zachęta Gallery, "Hygiene and Progress". I thought that this could be the right moment and I broadened my research. What is in l'étrangère is a second series of *Painkillers*.



Joanna Rajkowska, M4A1 carbine, 2014 | © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŻAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère

**Having seen some of the works in your up-coming exhibition 'Painkillers' at l'étrangère (particularly the life-size casts created using powdered analgesic and polyurethane resin), I was compelled by their serene aesthetic and had to remind myself these were deadly weapons – was this an intentional result?**

Yes. Weapons are not very far from artworks. All I had to do was to cast them in analgesic and polyurethane resin. If you think about the scope for the Mosin-Nagant rifle and how many people in the history of Soviet wars were aiming at other people through it, how many lives were ended, how much 'intimacy' was involved in killing...they are well designed for the bodies of both, the perpetrators and the victims. We feel it when we look at them, and the sexiness and violence is there, too. Not to mention a mysterious link to modern sculpture. Have a closer look at the model of the Israeli nuclear weapon core. A perfect form...





Joanna Rajkowska, Model of Israeli nuclear weapon core as photographed by Mordechai Vanunu in 1985, 2015 | © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŽAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère

**In the back of the gallery there is a multi-chambered crystal formation (mobile chakra), a found piece of art, entitled *Soon Everything Will Change* (2014) – how did you come across it and how does it relate to the rest of the works?**

I worked on a project in Brazil in 2013. My curator took me to Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of Dawn) near Brasilia, a community founded by the medium and ex-truck driver Tia Neiva in 1969. It is a curious place where people practice a complex religious syncretism. They serve a whole variety of powers, from flying saucers and Christian saints, to Afro-Brazilian, pre-Columbian and ancient Egyptian spirits. They have a UFO landing site and a pyramid, in which there is a huge crystal hanging from the ceiling. Water was dripping out of it and I was given a glass of it to drink. This crystal was so... perfect. Soon after that, I was commissioned for a project in the outskirts of Birmingham. Well, there is nothing sicker than post-industrial English suburbs. So, I thought, the 'healing' power of a huge crystal – this must be an answer to this bleached place. It looked insignificant there, but people's curiosity generated a lot of really fantastic situations. People would spend an hour by the amethyst, dangling their bare feet into it to soak up lots of good vibes, Queti, a local shopkeeper, told me it worked.

Obviously, this was a completely different potentiality. Still, beyond any ethical positions, both crystals and instruments of war are about sublimity (ideal crystalline organisation of atoms!), the accumulation of energy and the perfect affect on the human body. I also found very tempting the juxtaposition of different temporalities, something that is beyond any human timescale – a chemical precipitation that takes millions of years to become a proper crystal formation and the very human immediacy of weapons, with its imminent destruction.

**Have you got any future projects / plans lined up?**

I would love to continue with the *Painkillers*. I dream about casting Little Boy with the same technique and re-creating a death chamber with its irreducible surgical table holding the three drugs that are the components of a lethal injection. But both dreams are expensive.

– Harry Dougall

Joanna Rajkowska *Painkillers* opens at [l'étrangère](#) on 17 September and will be on view until 24 October; 44a Charlotte Road, London, EC2A 3PD; Tuesday – Saturday 11am – 6pm; Admission: FREE

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## 17.09 Londyn: Wystawa Joanny Rajkowskiej

dp 11:43, 01.09.2015

**Joanna Rajkowska - autorka słynnej warszawskiej Palmy w Alejach Jerozolimskich i "Dotleniacza" na pl. Grzybowski - zawita do Londynu.**



Odlew broni prezentowany na wystawie, materiały prasowe

Wystawa "Painkillers" ("środki przeciwbólowe"/ "zabójcze środki") przedstawia modele wykorzystywanej we współczesnych konfliktach broni, wykonane jako odlewy ze sproszkowanych leków i żywicy poliuretanowej.


Koncepcja pracy odwołuje się do badań nad bronią biologiczną, której Brytyjczycy użyli przeciwko rdzennej populacji Indian z Ameryki Północnej, rozprawdzając wśród nich koce skażone wirusem ospy. Równie niezwykły był rozwój broni biologicznej w Związku Radzieckim, zwłaszcza w okresie zimnej wojny.

Głównym założeniem pracy jest fakt, że często te same przedsiębiorstwa i spółki angażują się jednocześnie w wytwarzanie broni biologicznej i badania kliniczne lub produkcję leków. W obu obszarach wykorzystuje się podobną technologię i prawdopodobnie te same lub podobne substancje, zarazki. W obydwu procesach uczestniczą te same osoby.

M-KOS, September 2015

## Joanna Rajkowska "Painkillers" at l'étrangère, London

Posted on [September 10, 2015](#) by [M-KOS](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

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Joanna Rajkowska, Uzi submachine gun, 2014, life-size cast, powdered analgesic, polyurethane resin. ©Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŻAK | BRANICKA, Berlin & l'étrangère, London

### JOANNA RAJKOWSKA

#### PAINKILLERS

17 September – 24 October 2015

l'étrangère, London

**Private view: Wednesday 16 September 2015, 6.30 – 8.30pm**

l'étrangère is delighted to announce *Painkillers*, which brings into conversation new and existing sculptural works by the Polish artist, Joanna Rajkowska. Noted for her ambitious interventions in public space, as well as her objects, films, photography, installations and ephemeral actions, Rajkowska's practice interrogates individual and collective bodies as politicised sites of historical, ideological and psychological conflict. For her inaugural exhibition at l'étrangère, Rajkowska unites two object-based series under the rubric, *Painkillers*, in order to explore the at times uncomfortable connections between modern warfare, healing systems and the practices of Western science.

At the centre of these troubling relationships is a new series produced especially for the exhibition. *Painkillers II* (2015) continues Rajkowska's on-going interest in the paradoxical interrelation of military weapons and pharmaceuticals, whereby the artist makes casts from modern weapons and 'weaponised' objects out of resin and powdered analgesics. Through extended research into case studies involving medicinal manufacturers in the facilitation of biological weaponry, Rajkowska confronts a set of disturbing and historically-obscured (mis)uses of scientific knowledge and power.

From the clinical suggestiveness of a pair of latex gloves to the seductive modernist design of a nuclear bomb, Rajkowska's choice of objects is not limited by time, place, or the method of pain administration. What unites these spectral forms is their disturbing conflation of death and healing processes. As the artist comments, 'it seems that means of killing and means of saving peoples' lives are related to each other in terms of the forces generating them. This closeness can probably also be found between the means of inflicting pain and relieving it'.

In the back gallery we stumble upon a quieter object: a multi-chambered crystal formation resting precariously on a wooden palette. This mobile chakra was found by Rajkowska in Brazil and was initially installed in the public space outside Erdington Library, Birmingham, as a site to subtly affect human bodies, suspend logic and introduce new social rituals. Now unearthed from its original home and hidden within the enclosed space of the gallery, the spiritual promise embedded within the work's title – *Soon Everything Will Change* (2014) – is rendered redundant within the deathly context of the exhibition.

In its first location, Rajkowska twisted the definition of chakra from being a spiritual centre in the human body to a point of high energy in the organism of the city. Here, by contrasting the crystal's inconceivable history with the fragility of the human body and the instantaneity of its death that is implied by *Painkillers II*, she returns this object to its native meaning, simultaneously unifying and futile in its non-human temporality.

Joanna Rajkowska (b. 1968) is a Polish artist based in London, working with objects, films, photography, installations, ephemeral actions, and widely discussed interventions in public space. Rajkowska's artwork has been presented in the UK, Germany, Poland, France, Switzerland, Brazil, Sweden, US, Palestine and Turkey, among others. Her public projects include commissions by CCA Zamek Ujazdowski (2007, Oxygenator, Poland), Trafo Gallery (2008, The Airways, Hungary), Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2009, Ravine, Poland), The Showroom (2010, Chariot, UK), British Council (2010, Benjamin in Konya, Turkey), 7th Berlin Biennale (2012, Born in Berlin, Germany), Royal Society of Arts, Citizen Power Peterborough programme's Arts and Social Change, Arts Council England (2012, unrealised project, The Peterborough Child, UK), Frieze Projects 2012 (2012, Forcing a Miracle, UK) and Institute for Contemporary Ideas and Art (2014, Carpet, Sweden).

## *Exhibition: Painkillers - Joanna Rajkowska at l'étrangère, London, 17th September - 24th October 2015*



Uzi, Painkillers II, 2015, life-size cast, powdered analgesic, polyurethane resin © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŽAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère

**By Guy Sangster Adams**

Black and white. Even before one discovers the paradox at the heart of Joanna Rajkowska's powerful and confronting sculptural series, Painkillers, one is arrested and unsettled by the guns fashioned in pure white. Consciously or unconsciously, the fact that black is the hue one would normally associate with guns taps into the traditional Western cultural duality that black and white symbolise distinct opposites: the dichotomies of night and day, evil and good, war and peace, killing and healing.

Rajkowska's research into this last pairing informed her series when she discovered a long history of pharmaceutical companies at the forefront of the development of analgesics, antibacterials, and antibiotics, also being at the forefront of the development of chemical and biological weapons. Similarly, engineering companies innovating and producing medical equipment also innovating and producing military hardware.



M4A1 carbine, Painkillers II, 2015, life-size cast, powdered analgesic, polyurethane resin, © Joanna Rajkowska.  
Courtesy ŻAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère

Rather than killing and healing being distinct black and white opposites, as the Polish born, London based artist explains, “similar technology is often used in both fields, the same knowledge, quite possibly the same or similar substances, germs, and the same people are often involved. To produce an effective weapon, to define the damage it can cause to a human body, an extensive knowledge about the mechanical/chemical/psychological consequences of its use is needed”. She continues, “It seems that means of killing and means of saving peoples’ lives are related to each other in terms of the forces generating them. This closeness can probably also be found between the means of inflicting pain and relieving it”.

For her visual representation of her theme, she has created life size sculptures of pain inflictors from powdered pain relievers - powdered analgesic tablets; hence the white colouration - and polyurethane resin. Having created her first works in the Painkillers series last year, for her inaugural exhibition at London’s l'étrangère gallery she has specially created new works, Painkillers II.



14.5 x 114mm MDZ high explosive shell, Painkillers II, 2015, life-size cast, powdered analgesic, polyurethane resin, © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŻAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère

In a separate space within the gallery the exhibition will also feature Rajkowska's large multi-chambered crystal formation which she brought back from Brazil and which was first exhibited last year outside Erdington Library, Birmingham, as part of her public project, *Soon Everything Will Change*. Inspired by Brazil's "fusion of different kinds of beliefs, spiritual orders and rituals", her intention was not "a site-specific installation but rather a travelling, global device - a mobile chakra". A chakra that rather than being a 'centre of spiritual power in the human body', became "a point of high energy in the organism of the city".



*Soon Everything Will Change*, 2015, crystal formation, © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŻAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère



In Painkillers the large crystal will rest precariously on a wooden palette, symbolising the fragility of the human body, not least set against the works of Painkillers II, and within this interrelation her intention is that the object is returned to “its native meaning, simultaneously unifying and futile in its non-human temporality”.

**Painkillers - Joanna Rajkowski**

**runs from 17th September - 24th October 2015**

**at l'étrangère, 44a Charlotte Road, London EC2A 3PD**

**Gallery open Tuesday - Saturday, 11am - 6pm or by appointment**

**For more information:**

**Joanna Rajkowski [www.rajkowska.com](http://www.rajkowska.com)**

**l'étrangère [letrangere.net](http://letrangere.net)**

## PAINKILLERS BY JOANNA RAJKOWSKA AT L'ÉTRANGÈRE

SHARE

September 8, 2015

by [Ellen Turner](#)

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Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska's upcoming exhibition at London's l'étrangère gallery is an unnerving exploration of Western science; casting weaponry out of painkillers, Rajkowska has created products physicalising the complex relationship between the military and pharmaceutical production industries that often develop biological armament and painkilling drugs in cohesion with each other.

Rajkowska has formed products of modern warfare -guns, grenades, bullets- from powdered analgesics. The pristine whitened perfection of these final products mounted on white walls is far from what we hitherto understand as an environment for weapons of war; chaos, blood, dirt upon dilapidated landscapes. Instead, the space they sit in -unused- is clinical, modern, almost dystopian in its displacement.

The same businesses own armament and pharmaceutical production industries due to their similar technologies, similar substances and the similar knowledge required. Therefore, the same individuals are responsible for considering the medical, chemical and psychological consequences of a weapon and the medical, chemical and psychological knowledge to ease a cause of pain. In Rajkowska's pieces, this complex purpose is physicalised; the product of destruction and a product of aid.

Each weapon is mounted alongside a list of countries that have used it and the wars it has been present in.

These spectral forms, in the purity of their white space, untouched, unmarked and deactivated are unnerving in what we know is their true purpose. Our body, present, should fear these products of harm and destruction, though hesitate in the materialism of analgesics that seek to cure the body justly. In *Painkillers*, Rajkowska demands this conversation of conflict ideologies. We spoke to her about the process of the artwork, the exhibition and the place for the body within it.

Joanna Rajkowska, Uzi submachine gun, 2014 © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŻAK I BRANICKA & l'étrangère



**You speak of endless historical research into biological warfare and pharmaceutical industries but what prompted you to create something physical from these findings?**

Out of a sense of helplessness; I think there are answers to your question on two different levels. One is about my artistic methodology and the other refers to the situation in which we are now, as a culture, in the most fundamental way.

I start with the way I work. I usually have an image in mind before I fully know what it is exactly about. In this case I saw white, pristine weapons and I knew they should be made out of analgesics. I've always been fascinated by medications of all sorts, especially painkillers and sleeping pills. So I started a really long research project which took me into the area of biomedical ethics. The facts about the junctions between pharmaceuticals and instruments (or substances) of war are innumerable, and there are many companies that develop and manufacture both. Sera, antibiotics, radiation, even chemotherapy, precision aiming, surgery optics, etc.

The junction became the core of paradox that the *Painkillers* are based on. But as I say, I saw the image of it first and I worked sort of backwards, learning and developing new examples based on subsequent findings.

In the wider context I see it as a result of reflecting upon the unfortunate dialectics of the Post-Enlightenment legacy and its curious obsession with progress and hygiene. I am terrified by it. You can trace this development in language. We generated sterilization, disinfection, cleansing, purification, eugenics etc. And all these phenomena have serious 'side-effects' and more – they are highly dangerous, not only for humans.

**The exhibition includes video work, can you tell me what these works feature within the *Painkillers* space?**

I wanted to keep the exhibition super-clean, so they won't be directly on display at *l'étrangère*. But they will be in the back of the gallery, as they are really a performative part of the research. In *Progress* a small girl is repeating the names of weapons developed through centuries spent mastering the art of killing. She starts with spears, goes via the Little Boy nuclear bomb and ends with drones. The man's voice is teacher-like, neutral and firm. She makes mistakes trying to 'incorporate' her world into it, so chlorine gas becomes crawling gas, for example.

In fact, this is my husband's and our daughter's little play, as we decided to examine the effect of the clash (we grown-ups know very well what she is talking about, she doesn't yet) on the linguistic level. Why not teach her the language of killing instead of the language of love and peace? At the end of the day, this is exactly the course of many of the finest scientific developments of humanity. Why shouldn't we be proud of it? And why shouldn't we pass this pride on to our children?

**What is the body that exists within the space you have created and what do you wish the work demands from the human body spectating?**

All these guns or instruments of war/killing, including latex gloves, are designed for the human body. Both the perpetrator's body and the victim's body. I would like the viewer to remain on both sides, as some kind of double body bound by the weapon. So, it is an ambiguous relationship between the work and our bodies, a demanding and a painful one.

In *Painkillers*, the body is treated as a material to be destroyed or repaired, as if the human body was a substance that has to undergo a certain operation to become a properly formatted entity. In so many cases, it has to be killed, intoxicated, exploded or at least properly programmed so that you start to wonder about what its primary status actually is, this bare human being....

**Would you consider this work a reflection of our age now, or is it restricted to a historical conflict?**

It is as a historical as it is a contemporary condition. There is also this hint of acknowledgement that art is very often linked to dirty power including money laundering and the arms trade. So, instead of hiding weapons in the back of the gallery, why not put them on display?

**How does the process of creating the forms relate to the work's purpose and meaning?**

The process of making is out of my hands, actually, as it is done by specialists working for the cinema industry. They meticulously mix the polyurethane resin and powdered analgesic and pour the mix into the moulds.

Seeing the next weapon in this mesmerizing white makes me think about the mysterious relationship between the strictly sculptural or even aesthetic qualities which actually produce the meaning, and what we know about these objects.

What I learnt from the process of production is that the weapons are strikingly similar to art objects produced around the same time. Have a close look at the model of Israeli nuclear weapon core as photographed by Mordechai Vanunu in 1985, which I recreated. It is a phenomenal shape, an absolute modern beauty.

***Painkillers* opens at *l'étrangère* Gallery, London EC2A 3PD on the 17th September and runs until the 24th October**

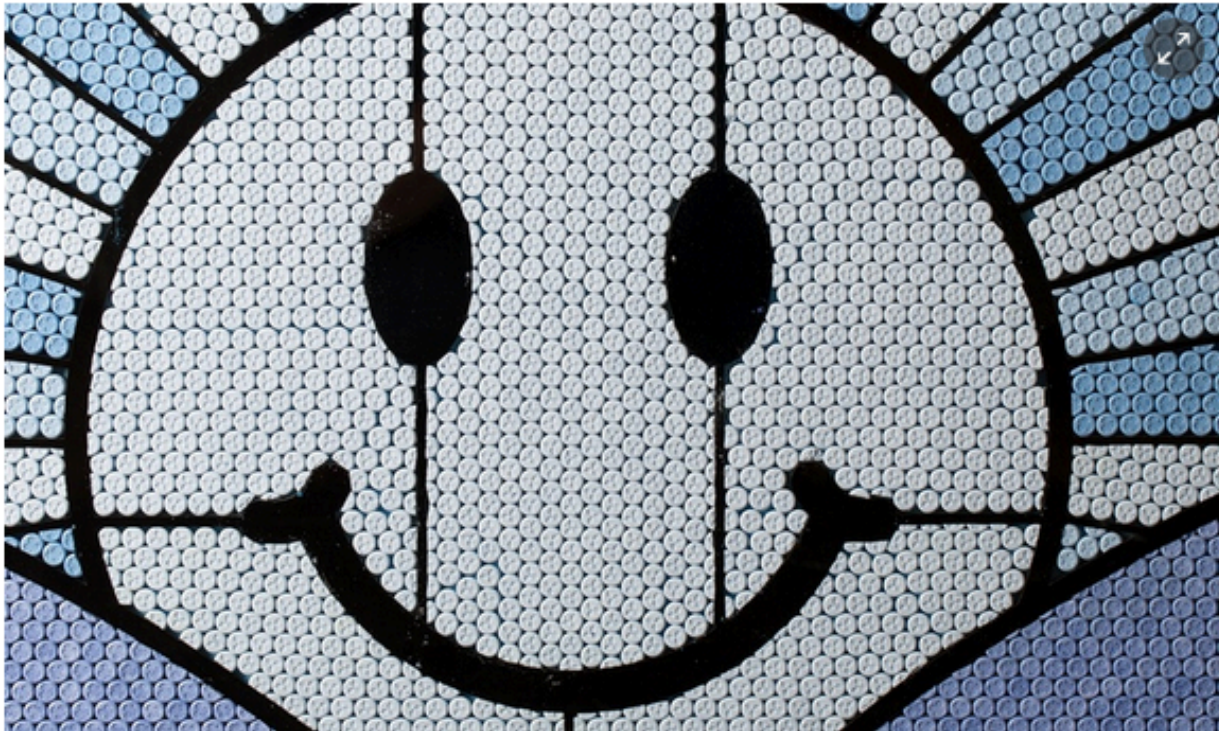
**More information can be found [here](#).**

## Art

Jonathan Jones on art

# Life's a drug: why pharmaceutical art is so addictive

Machine-guns made of painkillers, ecstasy pill murals ... artists from Damien Hirst to Chemical X make pharma art to expose our numb, drug-addled age



Detail of The Reckoning panel from The Prophets of Ecstasy (2014), by the artist Chemical X, which was assembled from more than 10,000 pills. Photograph: Chemical X

Jonathan Jones

Thursday 10 September 2015 13.10 BST



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We live in a chemical world, where everything from pain to pleasure to survival itself can be shaped by legal and illegal drugs. Many people live on a daily cocktail of prescribed pharmaceuticals, and many more take unprescribed ones at the weekend. No wonder so many artists make pharma art. Life in the west is no longer raw even at the rawest times, but muffled by medicine. Even death is mediated by chemicals: many of us will pass away in a drugged blur.



Uzi submachine gun, 2014, by Joanna Rajkowska, from her series Painkillers. Photograph: Joanna Rajkowska/Courtesy ZAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère



[Joanna Rajkowska](#) is tackling this with her eerie white sculptures of guns made out of resin mixed with powdered painkillers. Her [new exhibition](#), according to the press release, “confronts a set of disturbing and historically obscured (mis)uses of scientific knowledge and power”. But it’s the idea of an artwork actually being made out of modern pharmaceuticals that is haunting.



📍 The Prophets of Ecstasy (2014) mural by Chemical X – comprising The Rapture, left, and The Reckoning. Photograph: Chemical X

While Rajkowska uses painkillers to make machine guns, the artist who calls himself [Chemical X uses thousands of Ecstasy pills to make murals](#). Meanwhile, [Bryan Lewis Saunders](#) has done a fascinating experiment in self-portraiture. He has taken an impressive, and probably very dangerous, number of drugs, and on each drug he makes a work of art: [the resulting drawings and paintings reveal a mind split open, put back together, stretched out in the sun, barbecued and frozen](#).

These artists are working in the tradition of 1990s artists who today are often seen as sensationalists, careerists and outdated schlockmeisters. The truth is that art’s continuing interest in medicine and drugs is a tribute act to the best and most original impulses of the Young British Art generation. [Marc Quinn](#)’s most beautiful work is a series of sculptures of people who depend on regular doses of pharmaceuticals to keep them alive: Quinn mixed the medicines they rely on into the resin out of which each figure was cast. Their bodies lie sprawled helplessly on the ground, like the fallen children of Niobe in ancient Greek art. Only modern medicine can raise these people up.



📍 Damien Hirst in his installation Pharmacy at Tate Modern in 2001. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA



No artist has made quite as much chemical art, however, as Damien Hirst. In fact the popularity of pharmaceuticals with artists today shows why Hirst’s early work is still such a formidable mirror of our time. His installation [Pharmacy](#) is a dazzling, disturbing array of prescription drugs, a Baroque interior for the chemical age. He has also [laid out vast collections of pills revealing their almost hallucinatory range of colours](#) in some of his most compelling and troubling images of our drug-dependent world.

Pharma art is the art of our time because this is an addicted and medicated age. We have become comfortably numb.

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099. Joanna Rajkowska



*Joanna Rajkowska, Uzi submachine gun, 2014. Life-size cast, powdered analgesic, polyurethane resin. © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ZAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère.*

Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska speaks to Traction Magazine about her upcoming solo exhibition 'Painkillers' at l'étrangère, London.

**Your solo exhibition 'Painkillers' features a new series produced for the exhibition entitled 'Painkillers II' alongside your previous work 'Soon Everything Will Change'. Can you tell us a little about the relationship between these two bodies?**

They might seem to belong to different registers: a geode full of crystals, a 700 kg geological structure meticulously devised by chemical precipitation processes, and casts of modern instruments of war in polyurethane resin and powdered analgesic. I juxtaposed them to see us - humans - in-between these two phenomena that affect us equally and which are not so very far from each other, especially on a molecular level.

Firstly, both objects are a result of chemical processes - amethyst is a silicon dioxide and polyurethane resin is a polymer composed of a chain of organic units joined by carbamate (urethane) links. Analgesic is obviously a chemical, too. Yet, only the amethyst has a crystalline structure. A crystal structure is a unique arrangement of atoms, ions or molecules. It is a highly ordered structure, an ideal symmetric pattern. I became fascinated by this idea of perfection. On the other hand nuclear bombs or telescopic sights are also about perfection. So, the exhibition presents two perfect entities: the crystalline structures and various attempts at perfect killing. And I see both as a result of a sort of blind power, a power of necessity and order. An unstoppable course of things.



*Joanna Rajkowska, Soon Everything Will Change, 2014. Crystal formation. © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ZAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère.*

I think that the radical difference lies in the delivery of energy by both, the rock and the guns. We have a chakra understood as a place of a highly accumulated energy that lasts in time (the rock) versus this momentary explosion or crash on a molecular level that happens during biological or chemical attacks (the war machines). This is also energy, just a different form.

**For 'Painkillers II', you have cast modern weapons in resin and powdered analgesics. How did you develop this technique?**

It is the result of the research that actually led to this project. The idea came to me when I was reading about the germ warfare that the British conducted against indigenous North American Indians by distributing smallpox-infected blankets among them. Knowledge about epidemics and the spread of smallpox was maliciously exploited in a precursor of biological warfare.

The next step was reading about the development of Soviet biological weapons, especially during the Cold War era. For example the infamous Biopreparat program ("Biological substance preparation") was run by, amongst others, the Ministry of Health. One of the scientists involved, Yuri Anatolevich Ovchinnikov, promoted the use of molecular biology and genetics for creating new types of biological weapons. Kanatzhan Alibekov (physician and microbiologist), a major figure in Biopreparat and now a biodefence consultant in the USA, "not only oversaw the biological weapons facilities but also the significant number of pharmaceutical facilities that produced antibiotics, vaccines, sera, and interferon for the public." (Wikipedia). As the junction between pharmaceuticals and the means of destruction was to be the core of the project, I decided to use genuine painkillers in the mix with the polyurethane resin to cast the weapons.



*Joanna Rajkowska, MDZ high explosive shell, 2014. Life-size cast, powdered analgesic, polyurethane resin; 14.5 x 114 mm. © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ZAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère.*

**'Soon Everything Will Change' was previously displayed in a public space outside Erdington Library, Birmingham. How do you feel about the move of this work into the gallery space?**

It was always intended to be a travelling chakra, so it is not a site-specific piece. But I agree that the move to a gallery is a serious shift in the way it works. Prior to l'étrangère, I exhibited it in a solo show at Goldsmiths for my PhD. There, I noticed a very curious phenomenon – the crystal somehow 'erased' the rest of the objects in the exhibition. They were so much less significant, they simply seemed superfluous. Perhaps the geode establishes a super-strong point of reference or maybe it works by weight. But I also noticed that there were subtleties that were not apparent when the geode was buried in the ground in Erdington that suddenly became very obvious at Goldsmiths. It turned out that the geode demands undivided attention, it is a very focusing object. This one-to-one relationship was absent in Erdington, where it functioned as a public crystal cave in the ground.



*Joanna Rajkowska, Model of Israeli nuclear weapon core as photographed by Mondechai Vanunu in 1985, 2015. Life-size cast, powdered analgesic, polyurethane resin. © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ZAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère.*

**In making this work, you must spend a lot of time contemplating the fragility of human life. Overall, does this leave you feeling hopeful or pessimistic?**

I am actually quite terrified. I am not worried about humans at all. I am worried about the fragility of everything else. I think humans are extremely dangerous for life on this planet.

**Where can we see your work next?**

In Japan! I will exhibit a film about my father and our extremely complicated relationship. It is an old film though. At the moment I am working on the geological past of Central Europe, from the time of the Zechstein Sea. I am fascinated by the layers of salt from the Middle to Late Permian period. By the way, the Zechstein Sea stretched from the east coast of England to Northern Poland, which is exactly this 'in-between' where I live....

*'Painkillers' runs between 17 September and 24 October at l'étrangère, 44a Charlotte Road, London EC2A 3PD. For more information, visit <http://letrangere.net>.*

*To find out more about Joanna Rajkowska's practice, visit <http://www.najkowska.com>.*



## L' ETRANGERE

### THE STORY

Join us at the exciting Private View for the upcoming exhibition at l'etrangere gallery with a solo exhibition from Joanna Rajkowska.

The exhibition will bring into conversation new and existing sculptural works by the Polish artist. Joanna Rajkowska has been noted for her ambitious interventions in public space, as well as her objects, films, photography, installations and ephemeral actions. Her practice interrogates individual and collective bodies.

For her inaugural exhibition at the gallery she unites two object-based series under the rubric Painkillers, in order to examine the uncomfortable connections between modern warfare, healing systems and the practices of western science. A new series of work has been especially produced for the exhibition.

Don't miss out on your chance to be amongst the first to see the exhibition at this exclusive Private View and RSVP to the event today.

## Joanna Rajkowska. Painkillers

17 Sep — 24 Oct 2015 at l'étrangère Gallery in London, United Kingdom



Painkillers I, 2014, life-size cast, powdered analgesic, polyurethane resin © Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy ŽAK | BRANICKA & l'étrangère

l'étrangère is delighted to announce Painkillers, which brings into conversation new and existing sculptural works by the Polish artist, Joanna Rajkowska. Noted for her ambitious interventions in public space, as well as her objects, films, photography, installations and ephemeral actions, Rajkowska's practice interrogates individual and collective bodies as politicised sites of historical, ideological and psychological conflict. For her inaugural exhibition at l'étrangère, Rajkowska unites two object-based series under the rubric, Painkillers, in order to explore the at times uncomfortable connections between modern warfare, healing systems and the practices of Western science.

At the centre of these troubling relationships is a new series produced especially for the exhibition. Painkillers II (2015) continues Rajkowska's on-going interest in the paradoxical interrelation of military weapons and pharmaceuticals, whereby the artist makes casts from modern weapons and 'weaponised' objects out of resin and powdered analgesics. Through extended research into case studies involving medicinal manufacturers in the facilitation of biological weaponry, Rajkowska confronts a set of disturbing and historically-obscured (mis)uses of scientific knowledge and power.

From the clinical suggestiveness of a pair of latex gloves to the seductive modernist design of a nuclear bomb, Rajkowska's choice of objects is not limited by time, place, or the method of pain administration. What unites these spectral forms is their disturbing conflation of death and healing processes. As the artist comments, 'it seems that means of killing and means of saving peoples' lives are related to each other in terms of the forces generating them. This closeness can probably also be found between the means of inflicting pain and relieving it'.

In the back gallery we stumble upon a quieter object: a multi-chambered crystal formation resting precariously on a wooden palette. This mobile chakra was found by Rajkowska in Brazil and was initially installed in the public space outside Erdington Library, Birmingham, as a site to subtly affect human bodies, suspend logic and introduce new social rituals. Now unearthed from its original home and hidden within the enclosed space of the gallery, the spiritual promise embedded within the work's title - *Soon Everything Will Change* (2014) – is rendered redundant within the deathly context of the exhibition.

In its first location, Rajkowska twisted the definition of chakra from being a spiritual centre in the human body to a point of high energy in the organism of the city. Here, by contrasting the crystal's inconceivable history with the fragility of the human body and the instantaneity of its death that is implied by *Painkillers II*, she returns this object to its native meaning, simultaneously unifying and futile in its non-human temporality.