

I Carry You With My Blood¹
By Denise Markonish

“All the soarings of my mind begin in my blood.”²
– Rainer Maria Rilke

In 1628, on the brink of the Age of Enlightenment, English physician William Harvey set out to prove how blood circulated through the body. It is important to understand that Harvey was writing in a time where the heart, blood, and other bodily fluids were aligned with the passions, with emotion. But this was also an era of key scientific discovery, from Galileo’s telescope to van Leuwenhoek’s microscope. Harvey published his findings in the treatise *Exercitatio Anatomica de Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus* (*Anatomical Essay on the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals*). Through the study of various small animals, Harvey discovered that blood moves in a circuit through the body,³ revealing, for the first time that actual physiology can merge with the poetic, with the passions. If you look up the definition of “blood” in the dictionary today, you quickly come face to face with a complicated understanding of this force. Blood is initially defined, dryly, as “the fluid that circulates in the principal vascular system of human beings and other vertebrates, in humans consisting of plasma in which the red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets are suspended.” But just below that technical jargon is definition number two, which reads: “the vital principle; life.”⁴

In her work *Sigh*, Kim Morgan further emphasises this eternal circuit of science and emotion, channelling both Harvey and Rilke. *Sigh* is the latest in a series called *Blood Work*, which she began in 2014 as an investigation into the ways in which art, medicine, and technology intertwine. This comes from a deep-rooted interest in human relationships, as they exist between things, people, and places, which Morgan explores by focusing on materiality, and the role tactility plays in our heavily virtual and digitized culture. For Morgan, this interconnectedness is inherent in blood, of which she writes,

“Blood is the material fabric of our life and therefore we have a profound and dynamic relationship to it. It has medical, social and political meanings and consequences. Blood is woven into our language to define relationships (blood ties, blood feuds, blood brothers) and features in religious and pagan rituals. As a material, blood is complex, vibrant, valuable, and abject.”⁵

And in *Sigh*, Morgan uses the multifarious nature of blood, revealing it as cultural, sustainable, and ultimately, personal.

¹ The title for this essay is adapted from Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Book of Hours* (1905) in which he writes: “arrest my heart, my brain will beat as true; / and if you set this brain of mine afire, / upon my blood I then will carry you.” Published in *Poems from the Book of Hours*, trans., Babette Deutsch, (New York: New Directions, 2009), p.37.

² *Wartime Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke* (1914-1921), trans. M.D. Herter Norton, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1964), p. 205.

³ Stanley G. Schultz, “William Harvey and the Circulation of the Blood: The Birth of a Scientific Revolution and Modern Physiology,” *Physiology*, October 1, 2002 Vol. 17 no. 5
<http://physiologyonline.physiology.org/content/17/5/175>

⁴ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/blood>

⁵ From a proposal sent to the author, May 2016

To begin this work, Morgan collaborated with scientists in Canada to use Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM), which enabled her to view blood samples at 100x -100,000x or more. This degree of magnification allows us to see in a way we cannot with the naked eye, and provides information about our own bodies in an intimate way. It was important that Morgan collect blood from people she knows – her mother, partner, friends, students, and herself – creating a portrait of an extended social unit: each scan is unique, much like fingerprints. Morgan then took these scans and meticulously created a digital all-over composition in which the individuals co-mingle in what she refers to as a “universal blood group.” There is an inherent politics to this blending, especially when considering that the samples that Morgan collected also consist of people with various disorders such as ovarian cancer, anemia, and HIV. Debate around blood donation is a tricky topic. Advertisements from organizations like the American Red Cross and Canada Blood Services urge for donations while merely stating that you must be in good health and at least 17 years of age. That is, until you read the fine print, which reveals, for instance, that in the United States, Canada, and parts of Europe, gay men are banned from donating blood. In 1985 the U.S.’s Federal Drug Administration (FDA), banned any man from donating blood if he had ever had sex with another man, regardless of health status or monogamy.⁶

Morgan’s “universal blood group” is not dependent on eligibility or viability – instead, this hybrid brings to the surface the politics of blood, asking us to really consider this fluid which, while common to us all, is in fact unique, as evidenced in her scans. What a “universal blood group” really looks like when free from regulation? And the end result of this imaging is like a huge mural that is immediately seductive. The original black and white SEM scans are now red and black, and each cell is about the size of a human head, with undeniably beautiful variations of form. Then, a deeper look reminds us just what we are looking at, and we find irregularities, wondering what disorders, diseases, and genetics they point to.

But *Sigh* is more than just a digital portrait. For Morgan, it is equally important to consider how she can represent this information in a tactile way – a way that points back to, and is viscerally connected to, the body. After looking at a variety of materials, Morgan decided to use lightweight silk taffeta, a fabric that functions like a permeable barrier onto which the “universal blood group” is printed. The material has a translucency to it, making it more like a membrane or a skin than a curtain. But what is perhaps most striking is how it moves – the image breathes in the room, sighing and exhaling. From the front, we see the bright red and black cells on this diaphanous surface, accompanied by a soothing rhythm (which is in fact based on Morgan’s own recorded sigh). But as we move behind the curtain, the machinery reveals itself – a pneumatic air handling system that breathes for the piece – and we become immediately aware of the machinations of our own bodies. It is almost as if we have stepped inside a huge lung or heart, and the

⁶ The FDA now recommends a “one year deferral”: men who have sex with men may be allowed to donate blood only if they have been abstinent for at least year. Currently the FDA is reconsidering this policy, after decades of activism around the topic. Jacqueline Howard, “FDA to re-evaluate controversial ban on gay men donating blood” for CNN <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/28/health/fda-gay-blood-ban-policy/>

blood cells move around us, circulating as they would through our veins. It is impossible not to sigh along with it, and be palpably aware of our bodies, relationships, and the circulation of politics around the two. It is important to note that this sense of exchange doesn't end in the gallery, for Morgan has created limited edition "blood portrait" scarves and tote bags, which further point to blood as both a fluid of life and a commodity

In the end, this work makes tangible the mysteries of our own bodies. Feeling the fabric brush our skin is a residue that the piece leaves on us physically, an imprint towards awareness. This touch is the poetry of blood once again, which Sylvia Plath channelled near the end of her life in 1963, when she wrote: "The blood jet is poetry/ There is no stopping it."⁷ Though Plath used the title of her work – *Kindness* – ironically, for Morgan there is true poetry in the blood jet, one that reflects kindness and reminds us that blood is indeed a gift – but more than that, it is a contract of life, politics, and commodity circulating and sighing together.

⁷ Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed., Ted Hughes, (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), p. 269.