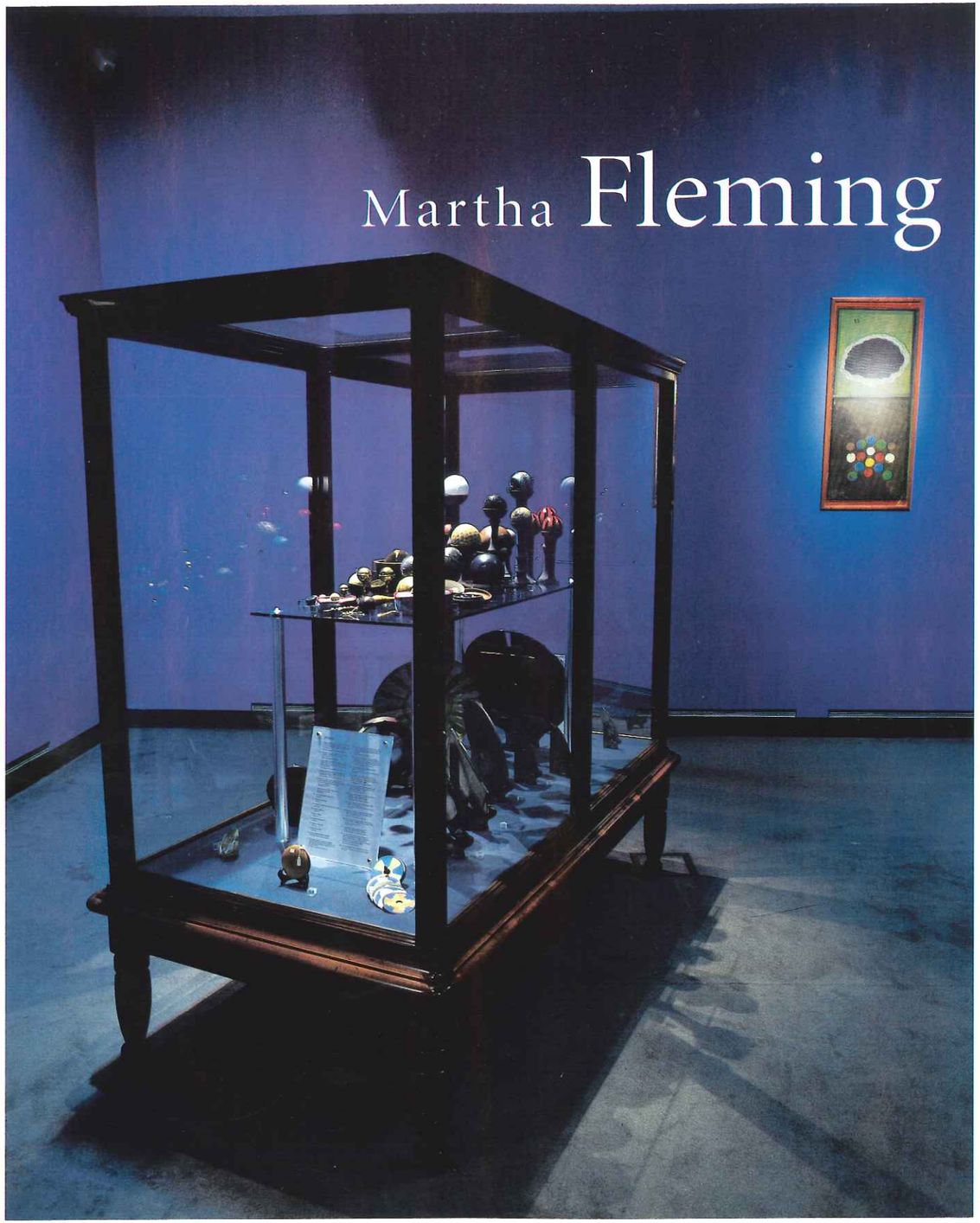
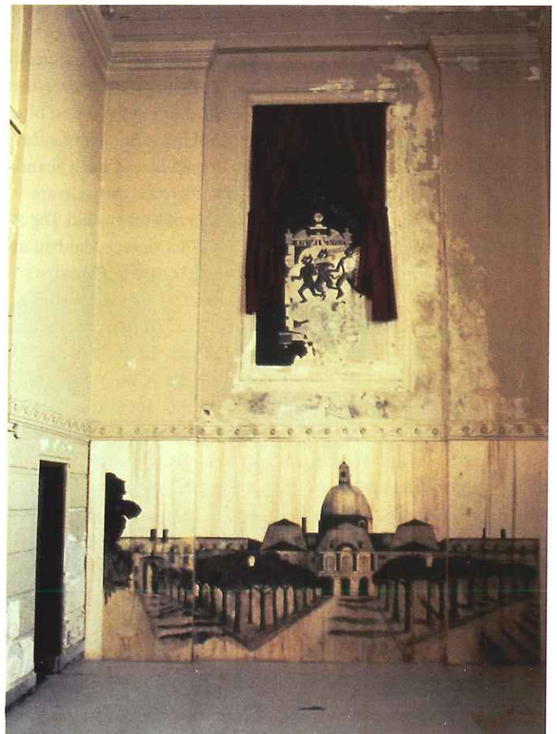


Martha Fleming Sphere case from *Atomism & Animism* exhibition 1999
Photo Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library

Atomism & Animism

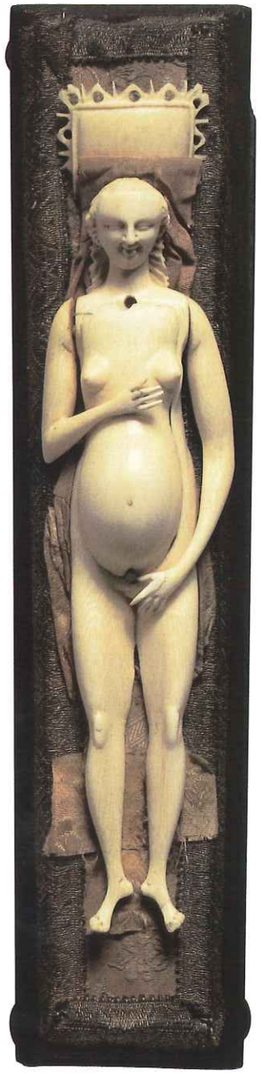
At the beginning of her career, **Martha Fleming** helped create an installation about an imaginary science museum. Now in England, she works as artist in residence for a very real one. **Peter Goddard** files a report

BELOW: **Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe** *Le Musée des Sciences* 1984
Installation detail Courtesy Martha Fleming



ABOVE: **Herschel's original Thaumatrope disc**
Photo Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library

Ivory obstetrics teaching model, 18th century
Photo Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library



Barely through the front doors of the Science Museum on Exhibition Road in London's old-money South Kensington, you come to face a towering, ancient artifact. Ancient? It is, in fact, the landing gear from an Airbus A330. But the space around it transforms its meaning. With its thick, bundled strands of circuitry and tubing twined up the towering leg like monster veins, you initially imagine the giant haunch of a Tyrannosaurus rex.

Certainly this is the kind of thrill-making big-bang first impression that museums have practised for decades: get them at the front gate with the dino leg. And no museum gives off the whiff of history more than this one. Paid for with part of the £186,436 profit from the Great Exhibition of 1851, the South Kensington Museum, as it was called, evolved under the watchful eye of Prince Albert to become the very model of Victorian museology. Here the princely will to stimulate British scientific exploration and to educate the public in the wonders of British technology also gave the go-ahead for the museum's curators to accumulate as much stuff as they could get their hands on.

As the accumulation of objects quickly grew out of hand—including even British patents and patented objects such as Arkwright's first spinning machine—the science museum was separated from what became the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1909 and was moved in stages across Exhibition Road to an even more ponderously undistinguished space than the V&A. Officially opened by King George V in 1928, it has become home to a collection so enormous—some three hundred thousand objects squirrelled away across England, some fifteen thousand alone on display in the South Kensington galleries—that the word "collection" no longer applies. For this is an environment of objects, the Vatican of things, where even the very faith in modern Western science itself must be measured in prodigious terms: the museum has a six-hundred-thousand-volume library.

Needless to say, I feel certain of only one thing as I follow the Canadian artist Martha Fleming as she takes a fistful of keys from her pocket to quickly unlatch the door to her cramped, musty office. Our walk though *Atomism & Animism*, her installation at the Science Museum through to October 31, has led me to sense her intimacy with the museum and its objects. There's a pride here, as if she's made this space her own. But this might be expected. Although she collaborated with artist and former partner Lyne Lapointe with a smaller-scale installation at the Science Museum in 1996, *A&A* is her first solo installation of any kind, anywhere, since she and Lapointe went their separate ways.

From her earlier works, specifically the *Project Building/Caserne #14*, a 1983 installation with Lapointe, Fleming has explored space that is charged with history and ideology—sites, like the Science Museum, with a masculine stamp on them (the *Caserne* was a disused fire station in Montreal).

Fleming's past installations with Lapointe had an aggressive, feminist/radical/grandly gestural quality. Rebel works, they were held outside galleries and museums. One exception, *Studiolo*, a 1997 retrospective at the Art Gallery of Windsor and later at the Musée d'art contemporian de Montréal, was an exception. It celebrated their collaboration but signified the break-up of their fifteen-year relationship, both personal and professional.

Nothing was settled or settling about these early duo-installations. Their chosen locations were places in transition, either crumbling with age or about to be renovated for new use. The events within were rigorously critical of comfy feminism and cozy gallery/museum-keeping as they were of patriarchal society. These art acts were meant to bite the hand that Fleming and Lapointe wouldn't let feed them.

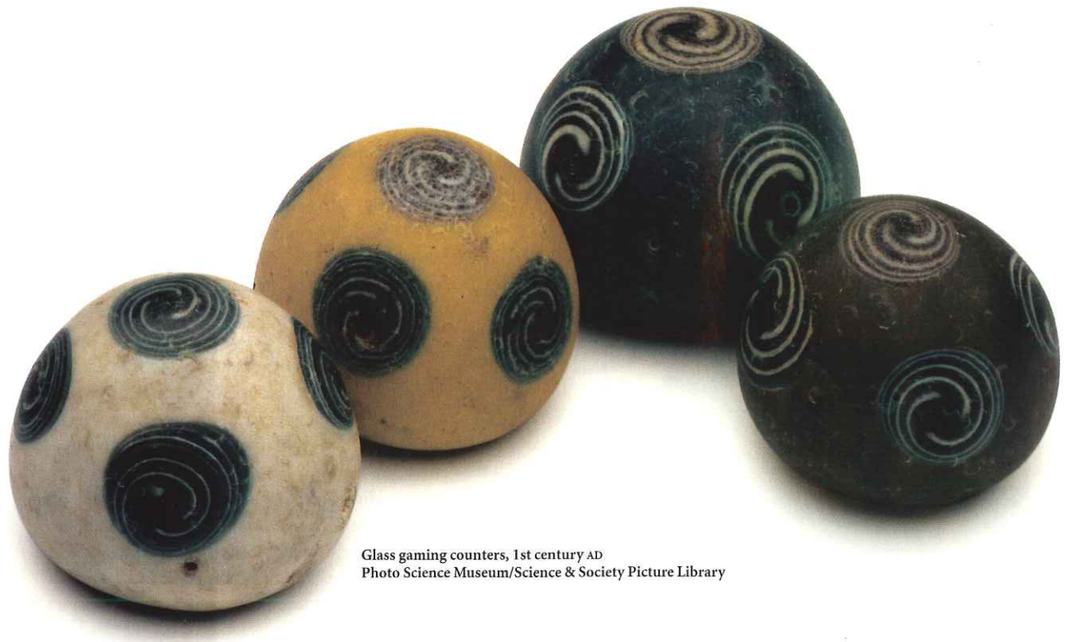
At times whimsical, at times acerbic, the installations were nevertheless grounded in reality: *Le Musée des Sciences*, their science-debunking 1984 piece set in an unused old post office in a hard-scrabble *quartier* of Montreal, was alive with feminist politics; *La Donna Delinquenta* in 1987, placed in an abandoned vaudeville house in Montreal, took its name from Cesare Lombroso's treatise on the criminality of women; and *The Wilds and The Deep*, the 1990 installation in a vintage Manhattan ferry terminal, dangled a battered old canoe at Brooklyn's high-tech shores across the East River.

In contrast, *Atomism & Animism* is intimate and reflective, even if it is fashioned on a broad scale with displays distributed across the entire museum. Pieces also have been imported from the British Museum and the Hove Museum and Art Gallery. Each site juxtaposes one or more objects from the Science Museum's twenty-four subject areas with other objects, creating a new relationship, wanting a new understanding.

You walk. You discover. Here's a sphere used as a model for oxygen with a globe. Here's a bottle of tiny religious votive tokens paired with a replica seventeenth-century thermometer. "What I was interested in was: how is it that we know how to

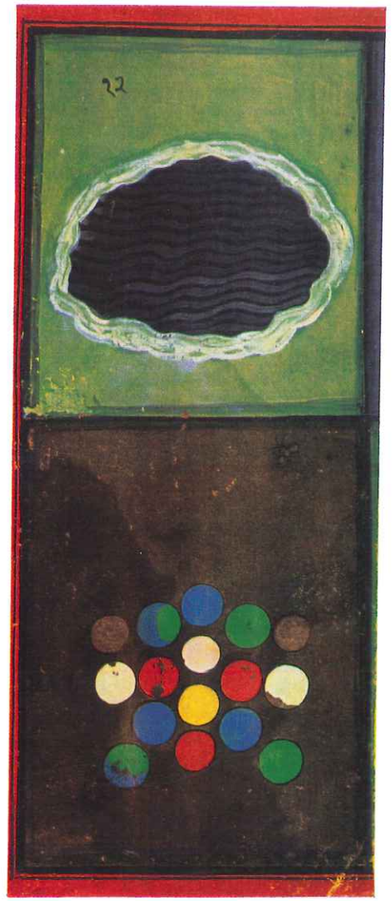
Lyne Lapointe's *Pastel Box/Pharmacy* (detail) 1991
Photo Paul Litherland

"Just **look** at the objects. They'll show you **everything** you're looking for. Your first **impressions** aren't wrong." *Martha Fleming*



Glass gaming counters, 1st century AD
Photo Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library

Muybridge's zoopraxiscope plate
Courtesy Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library



Anonymous gouache *Separation of the Atoms from the Waters of Non-Entity*, Rajasthan, 18th century Photo Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library

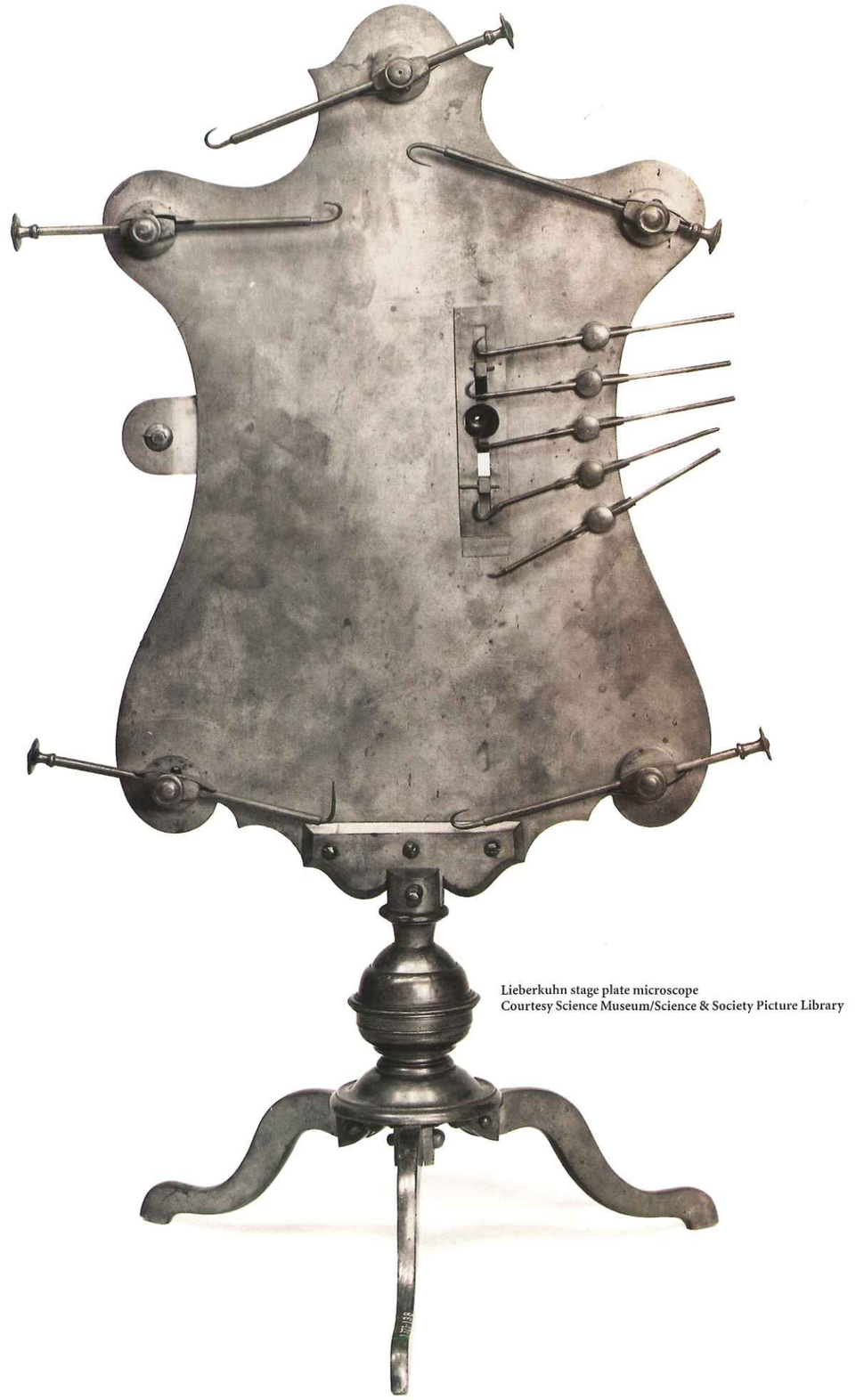
measure temperature but we don't know how to measure faith?" Fleming says looking at her arrangement. "Why is it that we even choose to measure certain things and not others? Why do we value those things which are immeasurable—like faith?"

Her diction is crisp and her sentences edited before they're uttered. She laughs easily, but rarely. If there is something of the tenured art prof about her, however, it certainly doesn't show through *Atomism & Animism*. If anything A&A is a counter-revolutionary act on her part, a supreme show of intellectual contrariness and puritanism in the face of the intellectual profligacy of turbo-charged modern techni-think where, as American physicist, J. Doyne Farmer, says, "disorder is fairly well understood, but order isn't."

Always orderly, Fleming is critical of the ways things are ordered. Her museum-critical stance which surfaced with *Le Musée des Sciences* has found its way into the Science Museum, as well. "Interestingly enough, a number of museum objects representing the apotheosis of Enlightenment science are just court toys, as in the case of what's known as the George III collection," says Fleming. "They're demonstration models for a King. This magnetic toy, with different metal hearts, purports to be experimental magnetism, but it was really a guessing game. Close the top on their box and take a chance on which invisible slot held the gold one or the lead one. But what really interested me was the image of the heart—so unscientific, so culturally charged! I paired it with a book illustration by the late nineteenth-century clairvoyant Annie Besant, whose drawing used the same heart shape to represent what we now know as the quark at the centre of the atom, some sixty years before its discovery."

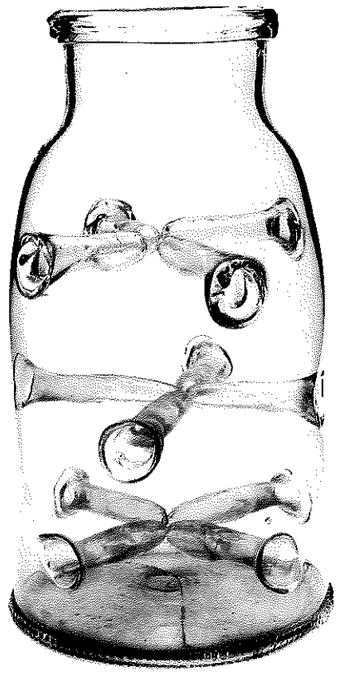
Yet *Atomism & Animism* is about order, not just one order, but alternative, plural orderings which is something of a preoccupation with Fleming, whose flinty Scottish ancestry can be detected in the careful rigour of the installation. "You could psychoanalyze this and say I want to control the uncontrollable," she says. "What I'm interested in works at the microscopic level compared to the effect of what someone like Christo can have. I think the most important thing is to have a long-term ripple effect that will help people feel empowered by their own first reactions to these objects—to recognize that they already bring knowledge to what it is they're looking at and that there's not just the one master narrative. Big works by Christo are such statements that they are almost irrefutable. They become their own master narrative. I sometimes err in the opposite direction."

Yet her very occupation of the museum space, as cavernous as it is, reorders its relation even with those contents not involved with her installation. Fleming thinks of herself, temporarily, as another of the museum's curators with another sort of collection. "I don't think that many artists would have the stamina to go through all of the administration process necessary to get the point of actually putting objects in cases for display," she says with a trace of a smile. "I'm not complaining. It's part of my practice. It's 'when in Rome do as the Romans.' But it's



Lieberkuhn stage plate microscope
Courtesy Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library

Glass leech jar, ca. 1875
Courtesy Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library



not for everybody. You can imagine the negotiations."

Then again, maybe the Science Museum, where she's worked "eight-to-eight p.m." for the last six months of the three years she's spent pulling *Atomism & Animism* together, had it coming. It is, after all, the classic monument to Cartesian reasoning, the backbone of Enlightenment scientific reason which describes the world as one vast mechanism just packed with inert bodies, sort of like a downer Monty Python skit but for real. Atomism, a product of Pierre Gassendi's convoluted reasoning (circa 1658) is Descartes-but-with-an-explanation, that is, there are some things that can't be fathomed, try as you might.

René Descartes was the Sergeant Friday of science: "Just the facts, ma'am." See those pretty clouds? he asked in "Discours de la Méthode" in 1637: "if I explain the nature of clouds in this treatise well enough...there will no longer be any occasion to admire anything that we see in them." Well, take that Nicky Poussin and those smokey little clouds in *Spring or the Earthy Paradise.*

To counter the severe Cartesian rationality behind the Science Museum's philosophy, Fleming found a philosophical starting point in notes written around 1930 by Ludwig Wittgenstein as a reaction to his reading James Frazer's *The Golden Bough.*

Forget the given historical links between things, between data itself, Wittgenstein argued. Rearrange the order of things to make hypothetical links. "An hypothetical link," he argued, "is not meant to do anything except draw attention to the similarity, the connection between the *facts.*"

This led to Fleming's mating atomism with animism, the belief "that objects all have a spirit or a force of some kind," as she notes. "There are hundreds of thousands of objects in this collection," she tells me as we walk past many of them. "Some have been slumbering and I've been able to awaken them in a way other curators have not been able to for one reason or another. The vision that I bring has to do with looking at these as models, and not looking at these as a scientist. I think there are deep structure things that can be revealed by another form of visual training."

We're facing two small boxes, one with a series of connected spheres, the other like a ballroom from the grandest of dollhouses. A child would want to play with these, I think. "The one on the left is the model of penicillin," Fleming says. "It's the sort of icon that's important as an object. It lives as an object. On the right is a set model that was made for a recent production at the Royal Court. The idea of modelling and the relationship of scale is present in both these forms of representation. What they're talking about is what does take place over time and how can you show it as a concrete object.

"The aura around certain objects can be very particular like the penicillin model. It's a very moving object. The impact of penicillin in the treatment of so many illnesses is so extraordinary that there is no one who would not be touched by this model. People have a rapport with penicillin that is iconic because penicillin is an icon. This object clusters things around it and this is one of the things I wish to draw out.

"I do have doubts about what it is I'm doing. But I'm still doing it. Sometimes I think that it's either too obvious or too subtle—or both at once, you know. But I was drawn to coming here because I have had a fifteen-year practice of making and doing large projects, most of which have been site-works and have involved a lot of comparison between objects found on-site which has been made into a studio, and the interweaving of those objects with other objects.

"One of the conditions I gave myself for this particular project was that the objects I wanted to work with all had to be things I could handle myself in my own hands. The Science Museum has a large objects store that's in an old RAF base in the country. You find objects like five different kinds of Mercedes-Benz ambulances. I didn't want to use those big objects but instead those objects which would have a scale in rapport with my own ability to manipulate these objects."

We stop at a case called "Bodies," where a mathematical model next to a leeching bottle with all its interior tubes makes for "the most erotic thing I've done," she says, "because it's basically about penetration in a way. The point I'm making is that mathematics might be a more visceral thing than we think. I don't know how viewers will experience it, though.

"What this is really about is the recognition of lateral thinking. The structure of logic is not as clear or clean as we would think. That's why I quoted Wittgenstein. Here was the eminent logician who knows that there is actually no structure to logic, that it is something that has to be teased out of every event." ■