

'It was believed by the ancient Greeks that when we take leave of the real world we survive only as shades among shades. And yet there are situations when the appearance of a shadow testifies to the solidity of an object, for what casts a shadow must be real.'

ON THE ART OF TEETH
Janetka Platun & Dr David Mills

FOREWORD

Professor Alison Blunt & Professor Joanne Martin

Dentistry in the UK was not a profession requiring qualifications until 1879. This same year, Barts Pathology Museum opened its collection of specimens, created and used to train medical students.

Queen Mary University of London is proud to host *On the Art of Teeth*, an installation by contemporary British artist Janetka Platun, at Barts Pathology Museum. The artwork takes as its starting point the museum's historical collection of teeth, many of which pre-date dentistry as a formal academic discipline. The collection and their accompanying notes tell us much about the experience of patients around this time.

The first dental schools in Great Britain opened in London in 1859; the British Dentists Act, regulating the dental profession for the first time, was passed by Parliament in 1878. This was followed by the 1879 Dentists Register, which limited the title of 'dentist' (an 18th century French term) to qualified and registered practitioners.

Prior to this, dentistry was commonly performed by 'barber-surgeons', with little or no pain relief.

Janetka's collaboration with Dr David Mills and the resulting installation takes an alternative look at the museum's collection of teeth. While many artists before Janetka have sought to depict dental procedures, dental problems or used an evidence-based approach to further medical research and understanding, Janetka invites us to reflect upon the symbolic and psychological nature of teeth and loss as well as the origins of the Barts collection and the people whose teeth these were.

A SCULPTOR MET A RESEARCHER IN DENTISTRY
Janetka Platun & Dr David Mills

Our collaboration began as part of Queen Mary University of London's Centre for Creative Collaboration 'Conversation Project' which paired artists with academics. We were introduced because of our mutual interest in teeth.

Little did we know that our exchange would reveal an eclectic array of shared interests, including making our own oak gall ink, shadows in photography, a love of laser beams, the purest colour in the universe, and our mutual desire to experiment, to put our ideas into practice, and to see what happens.

From our respective fields of art and science, two thoughts emerged. What does damage reveal that we would not otherwise know about, and how might the absence of light make us see and feel absence in a new light?



Joseph_Benoit_Suvee,
The Invention of the Art of Drawing, 1791.
Groeningemuseum, Bruges

ABSENCE OF LIGHT
Janetka Platun

Teeth clench, grit and grind their way through life. We extract the roots and fill in the gaps. What once caused pain outlives us. What once caused pain remains.

Teeth are liminal objects that are both internal and external. They represent both the fullness and the gaps in our own histories. We are archive material.

Nowhere demonstrates this better than Barts Pathology Museum. Removed from people we will never know, there are 24 specimens, totalling 34 teeth in the collection. Nailed, wired and glued inside small glass specimen jars filled with alcohol, most date from the 19th century. They demonstrate the vulnerability of our teeth when inside our bodies, but that once removed, outlast every other part.

X-ray microtomography shines a light to reveal the inner world of each tooth. The scans chart their development; from inside the mother's womb, to the day they were extracted. Each tooth newly born, thrust into dark space. Paradoxically, it is the darkness, the shadow, the absence of light that allows us to see metaphorically inside ourselves. A life lived in a thousand shadows.

What we hide in the light of day, reveals itself in the dark of night. We navigate damage, defence, decay and destruction in the shadowlands of our dreams.

In my art I explore loss and the traces loss leaves – on bodies, on matter, on places. Like our shadow, loss accompanies us through life, shifting according to the light. My work is also about the human capacity to survive, protect and insulate ourselves. If you look closely, these teeth have adapted; self-healed, fused into new forms, grown into vacated spaces, forced minerals into cracks, shed the past to survive. They reveal the visual and emotional depth of our shadow.

X-RAY MICROTOMOGRAPHY

Dr David Mills

X-ray microtomography is an imaging technique using the shadows cast by a tooth to reveal its inner structure. The shadows – known as projections – are created using x-rays and cameras designed to look into deep space. X-rays are light, but light beyond the blue end of the visible spectrum. They can penetrate distance through materials, so they cast imperfect shadows. There is no absolute darkness, only shades of grey. We select the energy – the colour in more usual terms – of the x-rays so that they are partially blocked by the tooth we are imaging. This gives us a range of contrasts in the shadow.

During a scan, a projection is captured, the tooth is rotated a fraction of a degree, and another projection is taken. The process repeats until we have projections covering a full rotation of the tooth, often a thousand or more projections, each offering a slightly different view of the tooth.

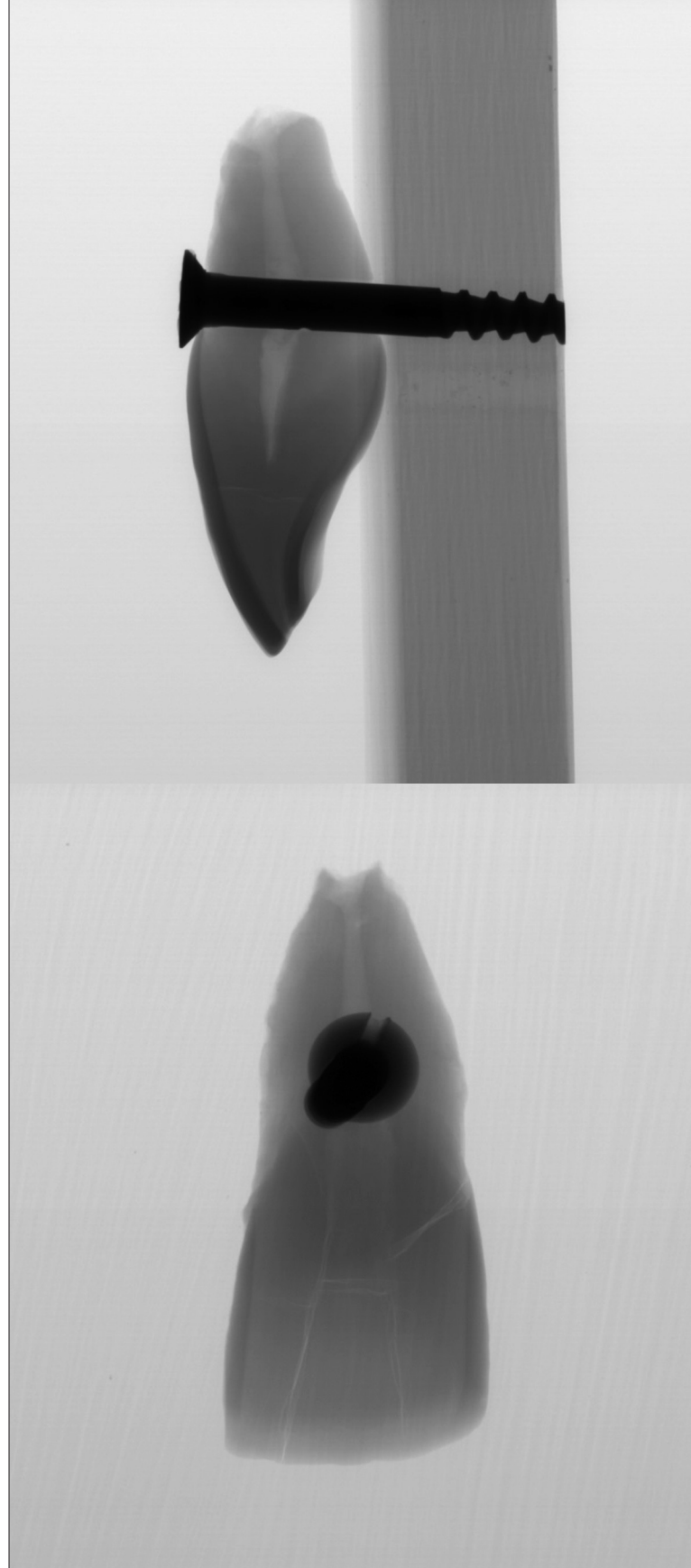
The projections are mathematically transformed through a process called reconstruction. This produces a 3D image that can be virtually sliced through, to reveal the inner structure of the tooth.

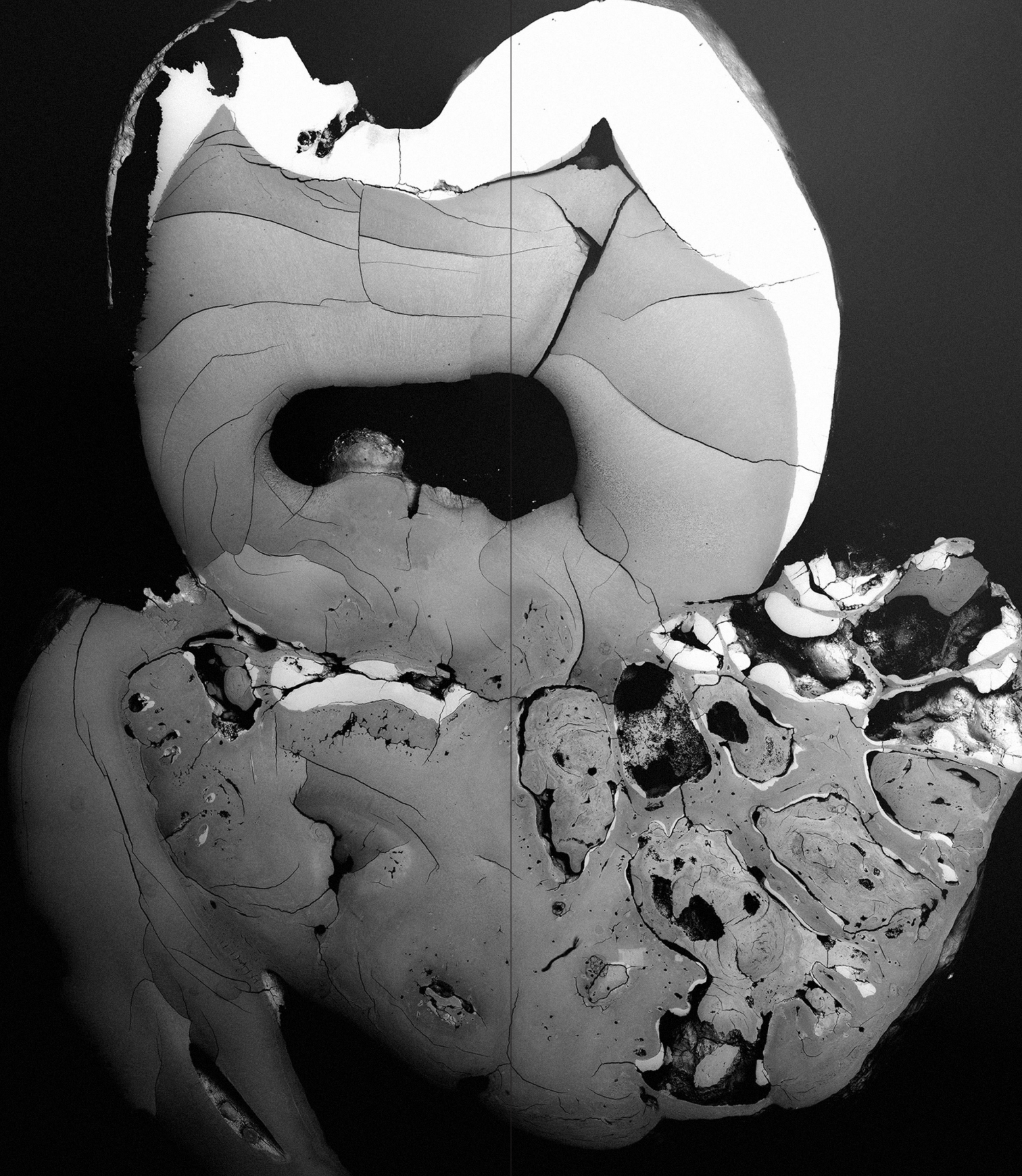
J21. ABSORPTION OF ROOTS.
X-ray projections.

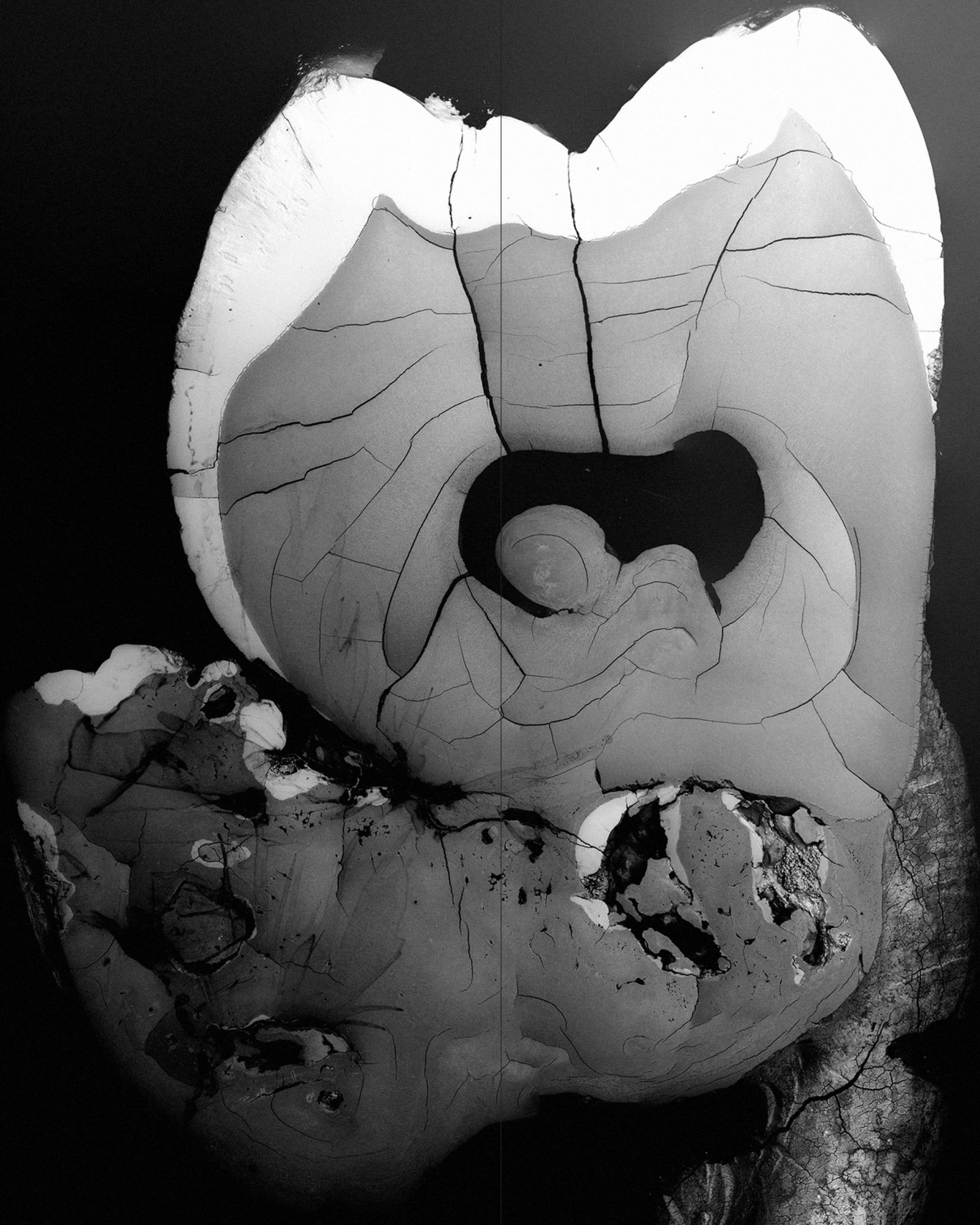
J29. ODONTOME CORONAIRE.
Back scattered electron
micrograph.

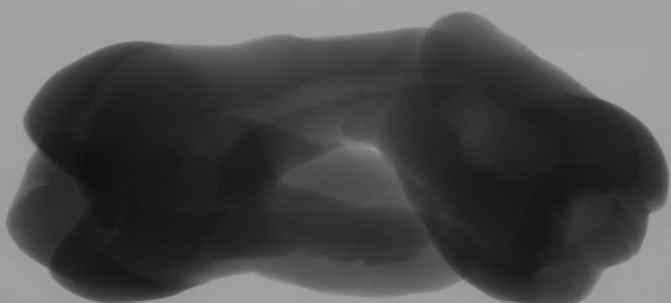
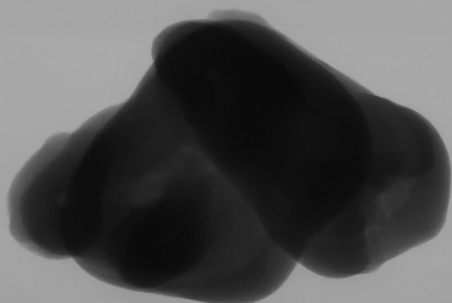
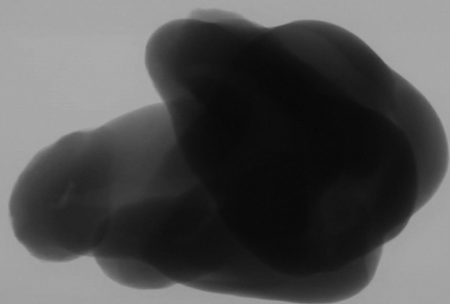
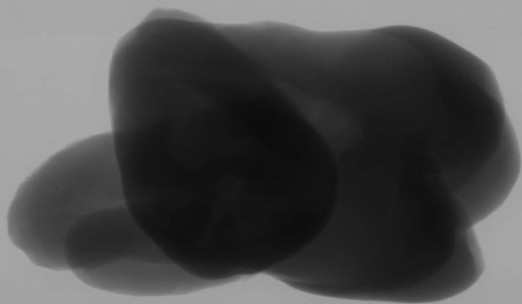
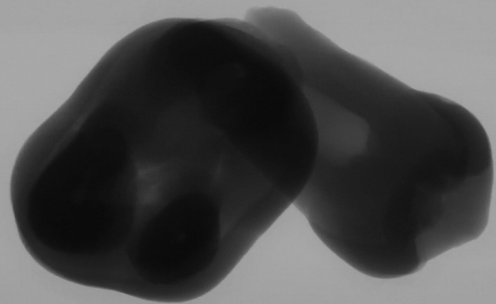
J2. FUSION.
X-ray projections.

J33. FRACTURE OF ALVEOLUS.
Microtomography reconstruction.









WORKING WITH THE COLLECTION AND COMMUNITIES

Suzanne Heath

At the heart of this collaboration is the historic tooth collection at Barts Pathology Museum. Known as the 'J Series', they chronicle 'Diseases of Teeth'. The majority of the teeth are accompanied by an index card, that today acts as a kind of instant biography reflecting the ethics, language and societal attitudes of their time. For example, women are described as complaining of pain, whilst men suffer.

The collection was gathered before modern standards of consent were established. As a way of connecting the past with the present, Platun and Mills worked with contemporary communities in east London and south Tyneside. Both areas have some of the highest levels of tooth decay in England.

Over the course of 10 workshops, 233 participants engaged in the sessions. Using a handling collection of hand-sized replicas of the teeth specially made for the project, Platun and Mills worked with young children in the process of losing their milk teeth. Given that tooth loss has been linked with increased risk of dementia and other health issues, they also worked with elders who have a lifetime of memories regarding their own teeth and the teeth of others.

Almost 200 years after the first teeth in the collection were catalogued, their survival continues to help advance medical knowledge, poses questions pertinent to the current landscape and social inequality in dentistry, and have the power to elicit intimate memories.



'40 years ago my ex-husband beat me up and knocked out my teeth... I went to the jewellers and got the gold crown put on a ring.'

'I had a baby tooth removed when I was 62.'

'I don't remember anything about teeth, do you know what I mean... actually I only remember my mum as having false teeth so she must of had them out when she was very young.'

'Me and my friend were doing cartwheels and I knocked her tooth out. We're still friends.'

'My mam had false teeth, my dad had false teeth, they only wore them when they went out.'

'Going to the dentist was as bad as going to confession.'

'I pulled my grandson's tooth out myself.'

'I lost all my front teeth two weeks after my wedding aged 19. The dentist used a dirty needle and they all became infected.'

'I remember going to the dentist 80 years ago. They strapped me in with a leather belt.'

'I've got one tooth left that's my own. They won't take it out because it's good.'

JANETKA PLATUN is an artist and guest lecturer. Her practice incorporates sculpture, film and installation. She studied sculpture at Camberwell College of Art and has been an Artist Fellow at Queen Mary University of London.

DR DAVID MILLS is a senior lecturer in imaging and calcified tissues at Queen Mary, University of London. His research interests include X-ray imaging for comparative anatomy and heritage science.

BARTS PATHOLOGY MUSEUM is a grade II listed medical museum, on the site of St Bartholomew's Hospital, London. It forms part of the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry at Queen Mary, University of London. The museum is one of the largest collections of human pathological specimens in the UK. www.qmul.ac.uk/pathologymuseum/about/

ON THE ART OF TEETH
Barts Pathology Museum
3rd-6th December, 2025

Toughened glass circles, borosilicate glass specimen jars, beeswax coated resin casts, beeswax altar candles.

Sequence of microtomography and digitally scanned files, no sound, continuous projection.
Video: 27 minutes, 07 seconds

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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BARTS HEALTH NHS TRUST

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BARTS PATHOLOGY MUSEUM EVENT SPEAKERS

Richard Barnett and Vanessa Muirhead

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Age UK East London, Blue Gate Fields Junior School,
Boldon Secondary School, The Centre for Public Engagement,
The Centre for the Written Word, Dunn Street Primary School,
Happy at Home South Tyneside, Newcastle University,
Ocean Regeneration Trust, QM Centre for Creative Collaboration

THANKS

Sian Acreman, Jenefa Bibi, Alan Boyde, Alex Cresswell-Boyes,
Jill Draper, Clara Fenlon, Emily Ford, Lindsey Gibson, Stefan Gio
Amosso, Vinita Gurjar, Mandeep Kaur, Thariskan Maheswaran,
Mridula Malik, Tasneem Maryoud, Leah Morhtassi-Kennedy,
Tabita Parisa Nazari, People's Palace Projects, Issy Shepherd,
Jackie Tillyard, Billy Toft, Ciarra Walsh-Desir and Jessica Walton

SPECIAL THANKS

Aoife Monks for starting and nurturing the conversation
and to the people these teeth once belonged to

In memory of Regina Platun

1939 – 2025

