VISIONARY ANATOMIES


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One of the best-kept secrets in Washington, D.C., is the National Academy of Sciences gallery space, where exhibitions that explore relationships among the arts and sciences, engineering and medicine are regularly mounted. Given my enthusiasm for this venue, I was excited to learn a small catalogue accompanied their recent exhibition Visionary Anatomies. Excellent, and yet concise, this 40-page overview is a treasure. It includes full-color reproductions of each artist (or collaborative team), brief statements about the printed works, and introductory essays that place current fashions within the history of art and anatomy. As a whole, the book brings to mind several recent exhibitions (Dream Anatomy at the National Library of Medicine, 2002; the Hayward Gallery, London’s Spectacular Bodies, 2000–2001; and Revealing Bodies at the San Francisco Exploratorium, 2000). These exhibitions similarly highlighted how artists have translated collective advancements in medicine, anatomy and technology into their own projects.

Indeed, J.D. Talasek acknowledges that Visionary Anatomies is a part of the dialogue begun in these earlier venues. Talasek also reminds us the dialogue between artists and scientists has an extended history. Some of the details of this history are outlined in Michael Sappol’s contribution, “Visionary Anatomies and the Great Divide: Art, Science and the Changing Conventions of Anatomical Representation 1500–2003.” Sappol, a curator-historian with the National Library of Medicine, introduces a series of long-standing issues in the history of anatomical representation that include the conventions that govern collaborations among artists and anatomists. He speaks both the boundaries and dialogue between them. Beginning with the assertion that we think of ourselves as anatomical beings, Sappol then moves to how the subject of anatomical representation, like the placement of “boundaries” between art and science, is not purely academic. It also has reference to our own experience. What I liked most about this short essay was the chronology it provided. Also of great interest were the engravings included to illustrate the text. For example, although I am acquainted with the history of anatomy from Galen through Vesalius, the Scottish anatomist John Bell, and contemporary imaging technologies, I had never clearly delineated how the uses of anatomical representations shifted as artistic/scientific conventions, meanings and audiences altered their perspective on the world. Whereas Vesalius’s bodies are often placed in a scene, and other illustrations cited (or parodied) iconic traditions and subjects, by the 18th century conventions had changed. The essay further explains that by the end of this century Bell had truculently denounced “the vitious practice of drawing from the imagination,” instead of “truly from the anatomical table” (p. 5).

The plates of the artworks convinced me that this is an excellent exhibition, while also reminding me of how much is lost when we look at reproductions rather than the works themselves. Some of the pieces worked better in the small format than others. I loved the sinewy quality and the way it was accentuated by light/dark contrast in Mike and Doug Starn’s Blot Out the Sun #1, which used a combination of techniques found in both the history of photographic processes as well as tools of today’s digital age. Katherine du Tiel’s Inside/Outside series also translated effectively despite the small format. Images reproduced include Spine/Back and Muscle/Hand, which are printed so that it is difficult to separate the within from the without. Each confines the lines between anatomy and physical reality, and combines an elegant aesthetic with a subdued whimsy.

The limitations of seeing art through a publication were more obvious in Stefanie Bürkle’s Panorama Paris Lambda print. It was immediately evident that her work follows in the epic style that has become associated with contemporary German photographers (e.g. Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and Candida Hofer). This piece contrasts the Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris with a terminal at Charles de Gaulle airport. Bürkle places an anatomical model of a man standing on his head in the museum room, which is stacked full of encased creatures, objects of natural history. Visually the juxtaposition is intended to prompt a comparison between cultural and social values in the 19th and 21st centuries. Impressive as I assume the piece is in the physical space, the contrast was primarily in my mind when pondering it in the catalogue. The reduction of a 31.5 × 78 in. piece to a two-page spread that measures 13 in. across mitigates its power. Similarly, Richard Yarde’s piece looked impressive, but is too large to read in the small size provided.

I was particularly grateful that contributors included statements about each work. As someone who enjoys knowing the process and how the artist “sees” the project, I found this information helpful to round out the book as well as my understanding of what I was actually looking at when viewing the reproductions. For example, (art)”s contribution Pet Study 2 (Lung Cancer): Man Ray/Picabia Imitating Bazaar is a virtual sculpture modeled on a photograph of the painter Francis Picabia taken by Man Ray. I would not have conceptualized the image at all without the accompanying statement’s explanation that when the image is viewed through a backlit barrier screen, the assembled images are perceived by the viewer to exist in three dimensions. The statement also explains that similarity exists between the way that (art)” builds up the multiple layers of the virtual sculpture and the way that contemporary medical scanning technologies deconstruct the body in a series of planes.

In closing, the Visionary Anatomies catalogue is a splendid overview of contemporary work that references the body. It is available in its entirety at <www7.nationalacademies.org/arts/Visionary_Anatomies.html>. I highly recommend it, with the footnote that those who can visit the show will no doubt find the actual works offer more when seen at full size in the physical world.

Visionary Anatomies by Harvey Fineberg, J.D. Talasek and Michael Sappol. (Reviewed by Amy Ione, Leonardo 39, no. 2 (2006): 171-172.)