



ANATOMY ROCKS!

Imagined Display Space Exhibition

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The human body has played an important role in Western Art for most of its history, but in order to eloquently represent the body, many artists studied anatomy; as they believed that it was only by dissecting the dead, they would be able to depict the living (Petherbridge and Jordanova, 1997, p. 7). Our inner corporal world is a hidden realm, enveloped by numerous cultural rituals and taboos, that, until recently, was only revealed during invasive surgery or at times of great brutality. Anatomy has fascinated both scientists and artists alike, yet its attraction is also anomalous and includes the potential for experiences of abjection (Emad, 2019). It is these attributes that have allowed contemporary artists to use it as a means of exploring the more unsettling concepts of our physical body.

Abjection, a concept first developed by the Bulgarian theorist Julia Kristeva in her book *The Powers of Horror* (1982), can be described as that which disturbs us by provoking unconscious, strongly negative feelings of horror, repulsion, loathing, fear and disgust. It is not the intrinsic quality of the thing, object or subject that makes it abject, but rather the disturbance that it causes in the natural status quo, characterised by it being out of context and therefore onerous for us to comprehend, thus threatening our boundaries between the self and other (Buchanan, 2018, p. 1). For example, our bodily fluids often elicit the abject feeling of revulsion due to the fact that they originate from inside us and, although they remain part of our somatic image, they are neither wholly internal nor external, occupying their own ambiguous state. The ambivalent nature of abjection draws us into an interesting paradox; we are both compelled to view the offending object through a kind of fascination, whilst simultaneously trying to tear ourselves away due to feelings of revulsion (Arya, 2014, p. 5). This phenomenon can be demonstrated when one enters a human dissection laboratory to see a cadaver for the first time. In my experience, there is a compulsion to touch the dead body, whilst simultaneously, a desire to keep it at arm's length.

Human cadavers occupy a liminal state as they are “neither the dead person nor not the dead person” (Lechte, 2003, p. 11). They linger on the margins of existence, transgressing the

boundaries between life and death, thus rendering them abject. Kristeva considers the corpse to be “...the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject.” (1982, p. 4). They are a reminder of our own mortality, leading us to contemplate the fact that one day we will die and decay. The organs and bodily fluids contained within our human shell are all essential to our normal physiological function, but once removed they become something else, yet not wholly separated from us, so we are unable to view them dispassionately (Arya, 2014, p. 61). In contemplation of this, one could consider anatomy to be a fine balance between the pulchritudinous and the grotesque, where repulsion is outweighed by the desire to discover the secrets of the body. Thus, anatomical theatres, where the human corpses are dissected and displayed, could be considered as theatres of abjection.

In considering the unconscious, primeval effect that abjection has upon us, I have chosen, for my exhibition, to display five pieces of anatomical art in the Modern Vesalian Anatomical Theatre, at the Museum of the History of Medicine in Padua, Italy. The University of Padua was founded in 1222 and is considered to be the birthplace of the modern practice of anatomy. It is also the home to the world’s oldest anatomical theatre, which was built in 1595 and remained in use until 1872 (University of Padua, 2019).



Figure 1 – The World’s oldest anatomy theatre, University of Padua

The body to be dissected would be placed on the 'stage' in the centre of the theatre, where the anatomist would transform the corpse to a gnawed away skeleton, whilst large audiences of eager students and lay public, gazed down at the performance from the surrounding tiered levels. This was considered a place to bear witness to "the exhalation of life through the analysis of death" (Di Matteo *et al.*, 2015). The macabre display blurred the boundaries between life and death, challenging the way we thought about our bodies.

The Modern Vesalian Anatomical Theatre (named after the famous 16th Century Flemish anatomist Andreas Vesalius, who taught at the university) is a contemporary, and much more clinical, take on the original theatre (see figure 2).



Figure 2 – The Modern Vesalian Anatomical Theatre.

The cramped theatre has become a grand salon, and the abject corpse replaced by an 8-metre-long human mannequin, upon which mapped projections explain the fundamental principles of anatomy and physiology. It is far removed from its origins and reflects how modern society has become detached from death, in our celebration of the living body (Walter, 2004). In holding the exhibition here, I want to challenge this detachment, to provoke abjection and therefore bring introspection into our finite nature.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the planned layout of the exhibition. When visitors initially enter the room, they will be confronted with the automated human mannequin, before discovering the art works secreted in the niches surrounding it.



Figure 3 – Exhibition floor plan (Clair Tompkins, 2021)



Figure 4 – Planned layout of the artwork (Clair Tompkins, 2021)

Each work will be placed in its own space, to allow the visitor to become fully absorbed in it through sight and touch. Enlightenment anatomists considered visual displays as crucial in providing a context for the anatomical system, but touch was considered equally important, as true knowledge could only be achieved through a combination of both (Berkowitz, 2012; 2014). Female bodies were especially sought after as anatomical specimens, as they were difficult to procure (Von Dijck, 2000), so in light of this, I have included several works depicting females.

The Medici Anatomical Venus (figure 5) was created by Clemente Susini (1780-1782), as an alternative method of teaching anatomy, instead of using cadavers. This life-size, wax, dissectible woman was created as the 'perfect object' with glistening glass eyes and real human hair (Ebenstein, 2020, p. 14-15). Languishing on her cushions, her gaze cast downwards, she is unnerving to the contemporary onlooker due to the juxtaposition between her beautiful body and the abjectness of her exposed anatomy. She inhabits a liminal borderland between life and death, appearing to be neither one nor the other, abject in itself.



Figure 5 – *The Medici Anatomical Venus* by Clemente Susini (1780 – 1782)

In contrast to the Anatomical Venus, Professor Gunther von Hagen's *Reclining Women in 8th Month of Pregnancy* (2004) (figure 6) is not a hyperreal, object of perfection, but a real human body preserved by a process known as plastination; which hardens the soft tissue and allows them to be displayed in various lifelike ways (Walter, 2004). There is unease in viewing her glorious anatomical detail, displayed as if she were alive and posing for a photo. The exposure of her baby heightens this unease, as we realise that they both died in unison. In a society, the living and the dead are ritually separated, to see a dead body in 'the flesh', as it were, goes against all normal conventions and makes it captivating to view.



Figure 6 - *Reclining Women in 8th Month of Pregnancy* by Professor Gunther von Hagen (2004)

Consequences by Thomas Robson (2002) (figure 7) is a compositional hybrid that juxtaposes different anatomical parts in ways that both perplex and disturb. It is disorientating to view, whilst simultaneously strangely engaging, as one works to piece it together in order to try and make sense of it. It challenges our perception of the human body, leading us along uncomfortable pathways that we may not wish to follow.



Figure 7 – *Consequences* by Thomas Robson (2002)

This journey continues with *Portia* (figure 8) the hyper realistic sculpture by Jonathan Payne (2013) depicting an anomalous mass of different human body parts. This celebrates the interesting details of the body, whilst combining them in new and rather disturbing ways (Lachat and Evans, 2016, p. 64). *Portia* is the quintessentially abject, being both grotesque and strangely fascinating, it is an abomination of what is natural and ordered.



Figure 8 – *Portia* by Jonathan Payne (2013)

Eleanor Crook's sculpture, *For I Was Wonderfully and Fearfully Made* (2014) (figure 9) is an eloquent representation of all that remains after a human dissection is complete. It was created as a memento mori for Vesalius, the part that no anatomist will ever find, an individual's life and personality (Crook, 2014). Death is a frightening concept, as it is the time when we finally lose all control and our boundaries crumble.



Figure 9 – *For I Was Wonderfully and Fearfully Made* by Elanor Crook (2014)

In bringing this exhibition together, I wanted to challenge the place anatomical art has in the current cultural milieu. We spend our lives avoiding the abject, suppressing all thoughts and behaviours that transgress the boundaries of social acceptability. This has culminated in the antinomy of fear and fascination for what lies beneath our skin. By engaging with the exhibition, I want to force the viewers to confront the abject feelings the works elicit, as I believe that it is only by undertaking this introspection, that we are able to gain a greater understanding of what it means to be human.

(Word count: 1562)

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Figures:

Cover illustration: - *The digestive system*

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Figure 1 – The Anatomical Theatre, University of Padua, Italy.

Available from <https://www.ottocentenariouniversitadipadova.it/en/storia/il-teatro-anatomico/>

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Figure 2 – The Modern Vesalian Anatomical Theatre, the Museum of the History of Medicine, Padua, Italy.

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Figure 5 – Susini, C. (1780 -1782) *The Medici Anatomical Venus* [Wax].

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Figure 6 – Von Hagens, G. (2004) *Reclining Women in 8th Month of Pregnancy* [Plastinated Human]. Available at: <https://bodyworlds.com>

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Figure 7 – Robson, T. (2002) *Consequences* [Pencil drawing on paper].

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Figure 8 - Payne, J. (2013) *Portia* [Polymer clay, acrylics, human hair]

Available at: <http://www.paynesculptures.com/fleshlettes.html>

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Figure 9 – Crook, E. (2014) *For I Was Wonderfully and Fearfully Made* [Wax, twigs, mixed media]. Available at: <https://eleanorcrook.net/gallery/sculpture/>

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