

**Human Curiosities in Contemporary Art
and their Relationship to the
History of Exhibiting Monstrous Bodies**

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyses the representation of so-called human curiosities in recent visual art, by drawing a connection to historical practices of exhibiting 'monstrous' and deformed bodies within institutions such as freak shows, anatomical collections and medical museums. The last two decades have witnessed a surge of scholarly interest in the histories of these institutions, particularly through the work of Robert Bogdan, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Rachel Adams, Richard Sandell and Samuel J.M.M Alberti, whose research can be situated in interdisciplinary humanities fields such as disability studies, museology, history of science and literary and visual studies. Concurrently, a remarkable number of contemporary artists have also turned to the history and imagery of these spaces to explore the politics of display in exhibitions of non-normative bodies. This study addresses the critical gap between these two parallel domains of inquiry, drawing upon recent studies concerning historical exhibitions of monstrous bodies to analyse how contemporary artists have simultaneously confronted and extended these traditions through their artworks. In order to show that the very notion of 'monstrous bodies' is inextricably bound up in the curious display practices that frame them, I analyse the representation of human curiosities in the work of Zoe Leonard, Joanna Ebenstein, Diane Arbus, Mat Fraser, Pauline Boudry & Renate Lorenz, Marc Quinn and John Isaacs. Each chapter examines a distinct institutional context – the anatomical collection, the freak show, the art gallery, and the contemporary medical museum – to investigate how these artists challenge the meanings conferred upon extraordinary bodies within each space, bestowing new significance upon these forms within the context of their various art practices. I argue that, by doing so, artists themselves can take on roles like curious collectors, freak show talkers and teratologists, revealing the potential for 'art' to act as yet another display framework that imposes a particular set of meanings onto anomalous bodies.

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Fig. 4-1. Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, *Musée Orfila*, 1990. Image E, from a series of five gelatin silver prints, 81.3 x 59 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Reproduced from Centre Pompidou collections, www.centrepompidou.fr.

Fig. 4-2. Joanna Ebenstein, *Femme à Barbe (bearded lady under bell jar)*, 2009. Digital photograph, edition of 8, taken as part of the *Secret Museum* series, 2010. Reproduced from Joanna Ebenstein, "The Secret Museum", 2010, accessed 9 September 2013, <http://www.astropop.com/secretmuseum/>.

Fig. 4-3. Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, *Musée Orfila*, 1990. Series of five gelatin silver prints, 94 x 67.8 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Fig. 4-4. Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman, Musée Orfila* (detail showing specimen identification card), 1990. Image A (detail showing museum label), from a series of five gelatin silver prints, 104 x 75 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Reproduced from Centre Pompidou collections, www.centrepompidou.fr.

Fig. 4-5. Zoe Leonard, *Seated Anatomical Model*, 1991-1992. Gelatin silver print, edition of 12, 45.5 x 30.5 cm. Reproduced from Christie's, <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/photographs/zoe-leonard-seated-anatomical-model-1991-92-5123432-details.aspx>.

Fig. 4-6. Zoe Leonard, *Beauty Calibrator*, 1993. Gelatin silver print, edition of 6, 24 x 17 inches. Reproduced from Christie's, <http://www.christies.com/otfinder/lot/zoe-leonard-beauty-calibrator-museum-of-beauty-4669738-details.aspx?intObjectID=4669738>.

Fig. 4-7. Zoe Leonard, *Rear View (Geoffrey Beene Fashion Show)*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 38.25 x 26.75 inches. Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami, North Miami, Florida. Reproduced from MOCA North Miami collections, <http://mocanomi.org/2012/07/zoe-leonard-rear-view-geoffrey-beene-fashion-show/>.

Fig. 4-8. Zoe Leonard, *Bride With Broken Fingers (No. 2)*, 1995-1997. Gelatin silver print, 15.75 x 11.02 inches. mumok (Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien), Vienna, Austria. Reproduced from mumok collections, <http://www.mumok.at/collection/>.

Fig. 4-9. Zoe Leonard, *Wax Anatomical Model (Shot Crooked From Above)*, 1990. Gelatin silver print on paper, artist proof 1/2, from an edition of 6. Tate Modern, London, UK. Reproduced from Tate collections, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/leonard-wax-anatomical-model-shot-crooked-from-above-p79209>.

Fig. 4-10. Christine Borland, *This Being You Must Create (A Spy in the Anatomy Museum)* (detail), 1997. Eighty laminated cibachrome prints on perspex, 15.25 x 20.32 cm. Reproduced from "Hygiene: The Art of Public Health", London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, <http://art.lshtm.ac.uk/hygiene/borland.html>.

Fig. 4-11. Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman, Musée Orfila*, 1990. Image B, from a series of five gelatin silver prints, 72.5 x 54 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Reproduced from Centre Pompidou collections, www.centrepompidou.fr.

Fig. 4-12. Close up details showing small imperfections in the photograph. Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman* (detail, Image B), 1991.

Fig. 4-13. Installation view of Joanna Ebenstein's Morbid Anatomy Library and Cabinet, Proteus Gowanus Gallery, Brooklyn, New York. Reproduced from Morbid Anatomy blog, <http://morbidanatomy.blogspot.co.uk/p/morbid-anatomy-library.html>.

Fig. 4-14. Selection of images from Joanna Ebenstein's *Secret Museum* exhibition, photographed in a variety of private and public collections between 2009-2010. Digital photographs. Reproduced from Joanna Ebenstein, "The Secret Museum", 2010, accessed 9 September 2013, <http://www.astropop.com/secretmuseum/>.

Fig. 4-15. Zoe Leonard, *Carnivores*, 1992. Gelatin silver print on paper, 56.1 x 36.1 cm. Tate Modern, London, UK. Reproduced from Tate collections, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/leonard-carnivores-p79210>.

Fig. 4-16. Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit (For David)* (installation view), 1992-1997. Orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon and avocado peels with thread, zippers, buttons, sinew, needles, plastic, wire, stickers, fabric and trim wax, dimensions variable. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Reproduced from Philadelphia Museum of Art collections, <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/92277.html>.

Fig. 4-17. Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit (For David)* (detail), 1992-1997. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Reproduced from Philadelphia Museum of Art collections, <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/92277.html>.

Fig. 4-18. Andreas Sterzing, *David Wojnarowicz (Silence=Death)*, 1990. PPOW Gallery, New York. Reproduced from Emily Colucci, "All I Can Feel Is the Pressure and the Need For Release", *Art21 Magazine* (9 December 2011), accessed 12 December 2013, <http://blog.art21.org/2011/12/09/all-i-can-feel-is-the-pressure-and-the-need-for-release/#.UskIa7QvZEM>.

INTRODUCTION

In 1997, Glasgow-based artist Christine Borland created *After a True Story – Giant and Fairy Tales*, inspired by the skeletons of giant Charles Byrne (1761-1783) and dwarf Caroline Crachami (ca 1815- 1824).¹ [Fig. 0-1] Although they lived at different times, Byrne and Crachami both spent their short lives exhibited as human curiosities in London, where they were known as 'The Irish Giant' and 'The Sicilian Fairy'. Against their final wishes, their remains were obtained for the collection of renowned surgeon and anatomist John Hunter.² Used for anatomical study, their bodies were valued for their contribution to medical knowledge, but were also displayed together as prized trophies among the collection of pathological rarities.³ [Fig. 0-2] For two hundred years, the skeletons of Byrne and Crachami have remained on display in the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons in London, alongside scores of anatomical specimens, surgical instruments, and material related to the lives of notable British surgeons.⁴

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- 1 Christine Borland created *After a True Story – Giant and Fairy Tales* as part of her Turner Prize nomination in 1997.
 - 2 Jan Bondeson, *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* (London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 186 – 214. Jan Bondeson provides a detailed account of the lives of Charles Byrne and Caroline Crachami, including the dubious circumstances of their collection by John Hunter and his successor Everard Home. As Bondeson describes, both Byrne and the family of Crachami feared having their remains collected by anatomists, but their attempts to avoid this fate were blatantly ignored by the collectors. Byrne even arranged to be buried at sea in a lead-lined coffin, but Hunter's agents bribed one of his friends to acquire the body. As recently as 2011, calls for Byrne's remains to be buried at sea as per his wishes have been rejected by Trustees of the Hunterian Museum. See: Theodore Dalrymple, "Why the Irish giant's skeleton remains a bone of contention", *The Telegraph*, 22 December 2011, accessed 25 May 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/8973135/Why-the-Irish-giants-skeleton-remains-a-bone-of-contention.html>; and "Royal College of Surgeons rejects call to bury skeleton of 'Irish giant'", *The Guardian*, 22 December 2011, accessed 25 May 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/dec/22/irish-giant-skeleton-museum-display>. For a broader analytical reflection on the ethics of displaying human remains, see: Samuel J.M.M. Alberti et al., "Should we display the dead?" *Museum and Society* 7 (November 2009): 133-149.
 - 3 Although they were displayed side by side until at least the late 1990s when Borland encountered them, the skeletons of Charles Byrne and Caroline Crachami have since been moved to separate cases in the Hunterian Museum.
 - 4 Within his study of preservation methods and the history of natural history museums, Stephen T. Asma offers a detailed description of the Hunterian Museum and the role of anatomical specimens throughout its history. See: Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of*

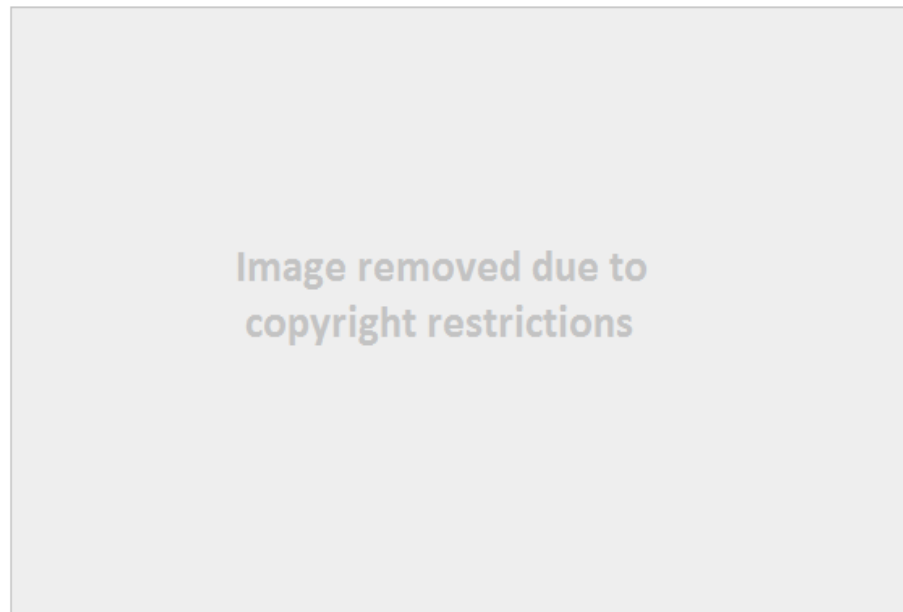


Fig. 0-1. Christine Borland, *After a True Story- Giant and Fairy Tales*, 1997. Nu-clay, leather, dust, glass. Glasgow Museum of Modern Art, Glasgow, UK. Reproduced from Glasgow Museums Collection.

Interested in redressing the display of their bodies, Borland placed replicas of Byrne's and Crachami's skeletons onto large glass plates and dusted over them, leaving a traced outline of their bones. The plates are installed horizontally at heights relative to their respective sizes, thereby resisting display conventions that position objects in relation to 'normal' eye-level. Under the gallery lights, the dust casts a shadow outline of their unusual bodies onto the wall below, making Byrne and Crachami seem at once present and absent within the negative space. Describing the glass shelves as simultaneously evoking forensic slides and the dissection table, Garrett Stewart argues that these missing bodies become their own ghosts within Borland's work, highlighting the theatricality of death which pervades the medical museum.⁵ In this way, Borland's use of dust stands in for a symbolic cremation of the bodies of Byrne and Crachami, completing the natural decay cycle halted by the anatomy museum.

Natural History Museums (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 55-66.

5 Garrett Stewart, *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Artwork* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 211-212.

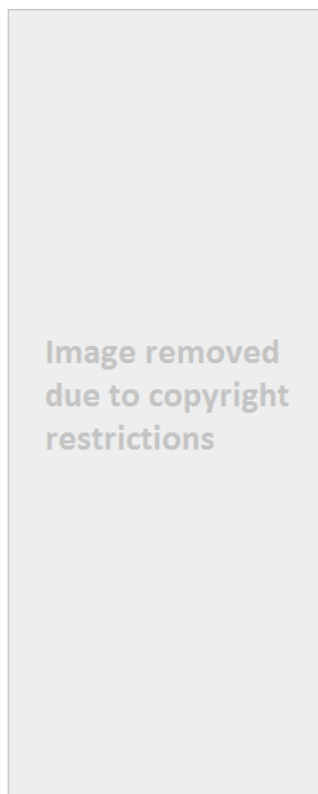


Fig. 0-2. The skeletons of Caroline Crachami and Charles Byrne, from *The Strand Magazine*, 1896.

In a case alongside the dusted shelves, Borland presents a book of Victorian 'Giant and Fairy Tales'. On the open pages she includes information about Byrne and Crachami taken directly from Hunterian Museum labels, resulting in a curious mix of biographical narrative and medical diagnoses. Within the book of fairy tales, these are presented as story-telling devices, highlighting the co-mingling of fact and imagination which informs our cultural understanding of unusual bodies. Drawing out the pathos of the pathological body, Borland challenges the authority of the meanings created around the remains of 'The Irish Giant' and 'The Sicilian Fairy' within the medical museum.

Borland also acknowledges her own part in the history of exhibiting human curiosities, explaining her artistic interest

in the bodies of Crachami and Byrne as a method of re-presenting their memory:

I'm not looking at it self-righteously, because I have to acknowledge that it could be said that, by using the material again, to a certain extent I'm making the problem worse by going over the same ground. That's something which I'm aware of and try to deal with as part of the work. But at the same time, I think these things need to be dragged out of the closet of history. The way that I try to present them or deal with them is not by attempting to achieve justice, it's even simpler than that; I attempt to create a reminder of all these people who end up in museums and medical collections. ... [I]n the face of scientific discovery and great trumpet blowing, there's always the fact that the material used is, of course, people who were once alive and who had an identity; that fact should be somehow referenced as far as possible. ... [I]t's not necessarily a linear inquiry, it's trying to find a new way through art, I suppose, to present the problem or ask the question, or remind us to think.⁶

Using art to navigate the contentious history of exhibiting people with unusual corporealities, Borland does not exclude herself from these practices; however, her approach reveals a self-reflexive interest in exposing these practices of exhibition, rather

⁶ Christine Borland in Anne Barclay Morgan, "Memorial for Anonymous: An Interview with Christine Borland", *Sculpture Magazine* 18 (October 1999), accessed 20 December 2012, <http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag99/oct99/borland/borland.shtml>.

than an exclusive preoccupation with so-called aberrant bodies. Concerned with preserving the identities of the people in these collections, she situates art as an alternative to ingrained manners of looking.⁷ Although she does not necessarily place an artistic framework as morally superior to a medical one, art is presented as an acceptable alternative means of exploring the history of exhibiting human curiosities.

This brief description of Borland's *After a True Story- Giant and Fairy Tales* introduces the main theme of this thesis: the relationship between representations of so-called human curiosities in contemporary art and the history of exhibiting monstrous bodies. Although I do not discuss Borland's work in any more depth in this thesis, her piece is a poignant example of how contemporary artists have drawn upon the display of curious bodies to challenge how meaning is created around non-normativity.⁸ Analysing representations of human curiosities in the work of Diane Arbus, Mat Fraser, Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, Marc Quinn, John Isaacs, Joanna Ebenstein and Zoe Leonard, I discuss how their work both challenges and extends practices of exhibiting monstrous bodies in spaces like freak shows, anatomical collections, art galleries and medical museums. By doing so, I elucidate the larger cultural and historical significance of unusual bodies in art, placing them in dialogue with intersecting discourses of museology, art history, disability studies and visual culture.

The fascination with monstrous births – real humans or animals with extraordinary corporeal aberrations – can be traced throughout recorded history.⁹ Inspiring amazement,

7 Of course, as critics like John Berger have described, the Western cultural aesthetics which inform the art mode of seeing is replete with its own hidden ideologies and power relationships. This concept will be expanded upon in the following chapters of this thesis, particularly in chapters two and three. See: John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972 (London: Penguin, 2008).

8 For a deeper examination of Borland's work, see: Fiona Bradley, ed., *Christine Borland: Preserves* (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2006).

9 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson even traces the fascination with exceptional bodies back to Stone Age cave drawings which record monstrous births, as well as to recordings of congenital abnormalities found on clay tablets from the Ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh. See: Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error- A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity", in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York and London: New York University Press: 1996), 1.

fear, curiosity and repulsion, instances of extraordinary bodies have continuously been collected, preserved, moralised, censured, celebrated, examined and exhibited. Although the forms of exhibition have evolved alongside changing world-views and social conventions, interest in monstrous bodies has never completely disappeared in any era. Over the last two decades, a surge of critical scholarly interest in the histories of these monstrous births has occurred across the humanities and social sciences, resulting in an abundance of literature regarding the history of human curiosities and their socio-cultural significance from the Ancient world to the Victorian freak show.¹⁰ Roughly coeval with this boom in scholarship around the history of monstrous bodies, images of corporeal deformity also began appearing in contemporary art throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, from Zoe Leonard's photographs of bearded ladies, to Damien Hirst's pickled six-legged calf, to Marc Quinn's Neoclassical-esque sculptures of people with malformed limbs.¹¹ Although some images of curious bodies have been perfunctorily addressed within art historical discussions of contemporary Gothic, the grotesque and representations of

10 Although this list is by no means exhaustive, some important recent studies on the history of monstrous bodies include: Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Dudley Butler Wilson, *Signs and Portents: Monstrous Births from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1993); Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Duckworth, 1995); Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery* (1996); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Rosamond Purcell, *Special Cases: Natural Anomalies and Historical Monsters* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997); Barry Wind, *'A foul and pestilent congregation': Images of 'Freaks' in Baroque Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998); Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonder and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998); Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum, *"Defects": Engendering the Modern Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Alan W. Bates, *Emblematic Monsters: Unnatural Conceptions and Deformed Births in Early Modern Europe* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2005); Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); David M. Turner and Kevin Stagg, eds., *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity* (London: Routledge, 2006); Marlene Tromp, ed., *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008); Jennifer Spinks, *Monstrous Births and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009); Nadja Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Elizabeth Stephens, *Anatomy as Spectacle: Public Exhibitions of the Body from 1700 to the Present* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011); and Alexa Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

11 For example: Zoe Leonard, *Preserved head of a bearded woman, Musée Orfila 1991*, 1991 and *Pin Up #1 (Jennifer Miller Does Marilyn Monroe)*, 1995; Damien Hirst, *In His Infinite Wisdom*, 2003; Marc Quinn, *The Kiss*, 2001 and *Allison Lapper Pregnant*, 2005.

disability, little explicit consideration has been given to this type of imagery as a group, nor to the broader socio-cultural implications of this period of renewed visual interest.

Furthermore, despite the volume of literature regarding historical representations of monstrous births, no significant attempts have been made to unite recent images of anomalous bodies with this scholarship and question the place of contemporary art within the history of exhibiting human curiosities.

This study addresses the critical gap between these two related domains of inquiry, by asking how the representation of monstrous bodies in contemporary art draws inspiration from historical displays of these bodies, and how this also creates a new exhibition context which extends these practices into the present day. By placing images of spectacular human abnormality in recent visual art within a larger historical framework, I seek to develop a more nuanced insight into both this imagery and the institutional contexts it activates. Focusing on a selection of artists and artworks which directly engage with histories of exhibiting human curiosities, I examine how contemporary art is positioned in relation to traditional exhibition frameworks, and the way this contributes to the meanings projected onto anomalous bodies. I argue that contemporary artists often use representations of human curiosities as a means of challenging frameworks of normativity; however, by doing so, they also extend the traditions of exhibiting human curiosities into the present day.

Chapter One begins by examining the role of freak shows in contemporary art, asking how the transition from freak to artistic subject (and back again) directs particular readings of these bodies. Positioning Diane Arbus's photographs of freak show performers as a bridge between two distinct modes of constructing the freak body, I address how the resurrection of freak show personae 'Sealo the Sealboy' in Mat Fraser's performances and bearded lady Annie Jones in Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's *N.O. Body* re-visit that

bridge through the lens of disabled and queer identities, problematizing the transformation of freak to art. Scrutinizing this notion of the 'art mode' further, Chapter Two turns from notions of the 'born freak' to the 'self-made freak' in Marc Quinn's *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* series, which depicts people with unusually modified bodies in the style of Neoclassical sculpture. Exploring how Quinn's work engages with art historical notions of the ideal body, this chapter uses the notion of the 'self-made freak' to argue that his series presents a radical new set of bodily ideals for the modern age. The third chapter examines how and why art exploring the unusual body has been embraced by contemporary medical museums, and what this says about the perception of art as an acceptable mode of representing corporeal deformity. Looking at John Isaacs' wax sculpture of a man engulfed by monstrous malignancies on display in the Wellcome Collection in London, this chapter addresses how the context of the medical museum influences its reading and how this work resists expected modes of looking in such a space. Finally, Chapter Four analyses photographs of a preserved head of a bearded woman by Zoe Leonard and Joanna Ebenstein, questioning how the context of each artist's practice frames her unusual body in distinct ways. Exploring the notion of the artist as a collector of curiosities, I argue that their use of photography works to preserve the collecting practices that surround the bearded woman, transforming the medical museum itself into the curiosity.

Together, these chapters aim to illuminate the complex relationship formed between recent art and historical exhibitions of curiosities, positioning contemporary exhibition contexts as another chapter in the history of exhibiting monstrous bodies. By placing them in dialogue, contemporary art exhibition is subject to the kinds of critical analysis applied to historical displays, while revealing rich new layers of meaning for the artworks in question. First, however, this introduction will serve to expand upon my approach to this

material, clarify the controversial terms this thesis employs, and lay out a brief history of exhibiting curiosities and the literature that surrounds it. By doing so, I introduce contemporary art to a history of exhibiting human curiosities in order to lay the groundwork for a close examination of these artworks and the display traditions which inform them.

'After a more curious view': Locating monstrous bodies in contemporary art and theory

After a long expectation, and a tedious Travel, The groaning Mother was disburthened of the Monstrous Birth, whose frightful Apparition so amazed the several Assistants and Spectators, that starting back all pale, they knew not what to think, but long time stood doubtful in their wonder, e're they durst approach, supposing it more dreadful than it was, but *after a more curious View*, they found it was a humain Creature, and bore the stamp (though in an unusual Form) of woman.¹² [Fig. 0-3]

Part of the title of this thesis – *monstrous bodies* – borrows its name from the term 'monstrous births' or 'human monsters', the standard way of describing humans and animals born with unusual congenital deformities between the sixteenth- and nineteenth-centuries.¹³ Displayed in freak shows, studied in anatomical museums, and written about in both popular broadsides and scientific journals, this group of extraordinary bodies included any rare or curious variations of the body which fell far enough outside standards of perceived normality: conjoined twins, giants, dwarves, unusually hairy people, albinos, hermaphrodites, people with superfluous or truncated limbs, extraordinary skin conditions, or extreme facial deformities (just to name a few). This group of body types is difficult to precisely define, and changes according to cultural and historical conceptions of

12 “A True Relation of A Monstrous Female-Child, With two Heads, four Eyes, four Ears, two Noses, two Mouths, and four Arms, four Legs, and things else proportionably, fixed to one Body”, (London: Printed by D. Mallet, 1680), accessed 27 April 2012, Early English Books Online.

13 Arguing that different classifications of these monstrous births reflected changing attitudes to the understanding of the natural world in Europe throughout the sixteenth- to eighteenth-centuries, Alan Bates demonstrates the hardiness of the term 'monstrous births' across multiple centuries and historical contexts. See: Alan W. Bates, “Good, Common, Regular, and Orderly: Early Modern Classifications of Monstrous Births,” *Social History of Medicine* 18 (2005): 141-158.



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Fig. 0-3. Woodcut illustration of conjoined twins from an anonymous broadsheet "A Monstrous Female-Child", published in London in 1680. Reproduced from Early English Books Online.

'normality'; they are a series of mostly unrelated conditions whose remarkable visual manifestations have prompted 'a more curious view', inspiring others to exhibit, photograph, gaze at, collect, record and preserve their curious bodies throughout history.¹⁴

In this way, monstrous bodies are linked by their visual distinction, a trait which also relates them to important aspects of visual art and museum display. For instance, in her discussion of the museum as a way of seeing, Svetlana Alpers describes the bias toward collecting objects of visual interest, thereby creating a representation of human history which favours the practices and people that offer a rich visual illustration of the past.¹⁵ As she describes, through the practices of museum collecting, objects of visual interest are isolated from the world and offered up for attentive looking, transforming them into a form of art. In this thesis, the monstrous body is presented as a concept inextricably bound up in these complex processes of curiosity and display: they are collected and displayed because they are visually interesting, and visually interesting because they are on display. Already transformed into a form of art by nature of their collection, the representation of monstrous bodies in contemporary art forms a complex new chapter within this historical legacy of visual interest.

A key aspect of my approach to this research has been grounded in the central role of representation in the creation of monstrous bodies and human curiosities. Throughout this thesis, I explore the idea that an anomalous human body only becomes 'monstrous' when it is experienced through a secondary form of representation, such as a visual art work, the contrived spectacle of a freak show, or a marvellous broadsheet. When encountered in this way, our understanding of these bodies is framed – both consciously and unconsciously – by the intentions and ideologies of the creator, the conventions of the

14 The importance of a visual component sets 'monstrous bodies' apart from those with diseases and deformities without an obvious external component, such as the abnormal function of internal organs or mental disorders.

15 Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum a Way of Seeing", in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 25-27.

institution and medium, and the various interpretations of the object. In this view, monstrous bodies are not born naturally, but *created* by artists, authors or exhibitors, who present them as something between fact and fiction, pathology and imagination. Although the term refers to representations of real people with unusual deformities, disabilities or other abnormalities,¹⁶ monstrous bodies exist only in print, images and regulated display settings; monstrous bodies are the products of stylized modes of presentation, not an inherent quality or inevitable destiny of real people with anomalous corporealities.

This approach is based upon the important work of Robert Bogdan, whose seminal study on freak show history examined the artifices of the sideshow and argued that freaks are not born but *made* through its conventions of display.¹⁷ His influential notion of the social construction of freaks has been taken up by scholars working to interrogate the institutional frameworks that construct both contemporary and historical notions of so-called monstrous bodies. Working from the perspective of disability studies, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in particular has expanded on Bogdan's work in recent years, arguing that the bodies known as 'freaks of nature' were always in fact 'freaks of culture', at once a stage performance and a complex collaboration with a spectator.¹⁸ Building on these conceptualisations, I propose that monstrous bodies can likewise be understood by the processes of their representations: people with unusual deformities only become

16 It should be acknowledged that all of these are loaded words with individual definitions, replete with their own ideologies and histories which should not be casually substituted for one another. Although all of these terms are often used in relation to these types of bodies, the term 'deformity', for instance, typically refers a body part exhibiting a major difference in comparison to the average, whereas 'disability' is understood as a complex cultural category and umbrella term for impairments which fall under physical, cognitive, mental, sensory or emotional realms. The term 'abnormality' implies the absence of 'normality', a subjective term which has been historicized by disability theorist Lennard Davis, who traces it to the mid-nineteenth century emergence of statistics and notions of the 'average man'. These and similar notions will be discussed and clarified throughout this thesis. See also: Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 24-35.

17 Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 25-116. For a closer reading of the freak show and its influence in contemporary visual art, see Chapter One of this thesis.

18 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), 6. See also: Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 55-80.

'monstrous' through the representations of their bodies in constructed frameworks such as freak shows, medical museums, art works, broadsheets, etc. Like freaks in the freak show, monstrous bodies are not born, but *made* through the conventions of their display.

Garland-Thomson has chosen to use the term 'freakery' as a way of referring to this spectacular tradition of the extraordinary body, tracing a genealogy of freak discourse from the prodigious monsters of antiquity to the Victorian freak show and into modern conceptualisations of the disabled body.¹⁹ However, I argue that the term 'freak' should be restricted to performers directly involved in performances of the freak show, in order to acknowledge the importance of individual exhibition contexts in the construction of particular meanings around unusual corporeality.²⁰ 'Monstrous', on the other hand, was a term that moved between popular and medical discourses throughout centuries of changing display practices.²¹ Although I acknowledge the impropriety of this term in modern vernacular, it is a useful way to refer to the general phenomenon of representing and displaying unusual bodies throughout history without reference to a specific exhibition context or body type. Extending this contentious term into discussions of contemporary art could be seen to risk perpetuating harmful stereotypes associated with it. However, I have purposely selected 'monstrous' in order to critically interrogate the use of this type of imagery in relation to longer traditions of exhibiting these types of bodies. Any shock or discomfort that this term might cause is intended to showcase the equally troubling history it refers to.²²

19 Garland-Thomson, *Freakery*, 1-19.

20 Furthermore, although the term 'freak' existed as early as the sixteenth century (used as a noun meaning 'a capricious notion' and later as a verb meaning 'to streak or fleck randomly'), it was only applied to 'strange and abnormal individuals' from the mid-nineteenth century, translated from the commonly used Latin *lusus naturae*. See: "freak", *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), accessed 3 June 2013, <http://www.oed.com/>.

21 The term 'monstrous' was still used within medical contexts at least until the final years of the nineteenth-century, when George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle compiled their encyclopedic collection of rare and extraordinary medical cases throughout history, in which the term monstrous is still employed. George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle, *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1897).

22 I would like to also acknowledge the fact that my decision to retain the use of terms like 'freak', 'monstrous', and 'human curiosities' in this thesis was partly inspired by a series of conversations with performance artist Mat Fraser in 2012, whose work I discuss in Chapter One. As he explores through his

A related term which I also employ in this thesis is 'human curiosities', likewise chosen to demarcate a general grouping of extraordinary corporealities without specifying individual conditions of display. Referring to strange, unusual and rare formations of the human body, the term 'curiosity' also signifies the desire to know and learn, and nods to a history of collecting practices like cabinets of curiosity or the preservation of 'human curiosities' in anatomical collections. For instance, eighteenth-century records of the Royal Society in London demonstrate an active interest in the remains of 'human curiosities' for collection and scientific assessment by surgeons, physicians and anatomists. Demonstrating the ambiguity and historical contingency of what constitutes a human curiosity, however, these included monstrous births alongside things like excised tumours, body parts of executed criminals, the remains of an unusually strong man, an 'African negro', and a 'whistling monkey whose skin had the smell of musk'.²³

In his study of early modern English collecting practices, Ken Arnold describes how the investigative traditions of curiosity transformed museums into places 'where people release the knowledge potential of objects'.²⁴ Within modern histories of display, 'curiosity' can be understood as both a collectible object and a methodology in which visual interest activates ideas about the world at large. As human curiosities have moved between different display frameworks through history, the potential types of knowledge that these bodies 'release' changes with the discursive context. In a related vein, David Martin has also used the term 'curiosities' to describe artefacts which expose slippages in scientific rationality. Tracing traditions of the body, collections and mapping through modern visual

own work involving freak show performances, confronting audiences with uncomfortable histories can be a tactic for exposing its continuing influence on contemporary perspectives; as Fraser sees it, softening the harsh truths and hidden biases through political correctness only serves to make injustice more socially palatable. Since the earliest stages of my research I have grappled with how to discuss these issues in a historically appropriate and sensitive manner, and Fraser's insightful input and extensive knowledge into these issues greatly helped me to articulate my own approach to this material.

23 John H. Appleby, "Human Curiosities and the Royal Society, 1699-1751", *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 50 (January 1996): 14.

24 Ken Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious: Looking Back at Early English Museums* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2006), 5.

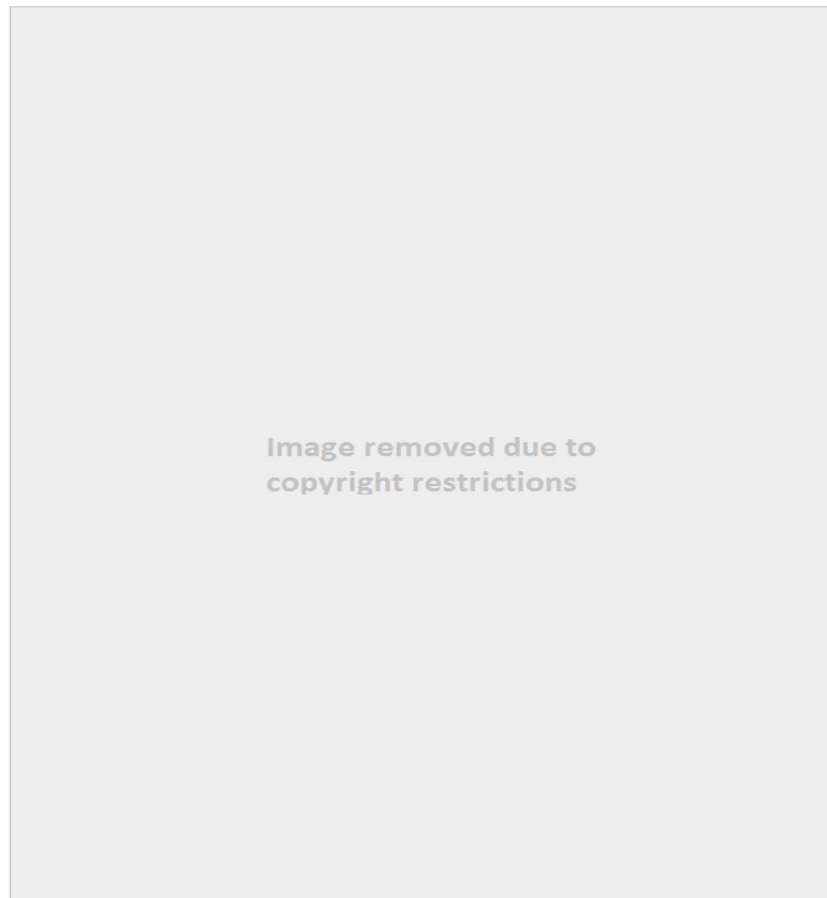


Fig. 0-4. Mark Dion. *Cabinets of Curiosity: Cabinets of the Sea, the Air and the Terrestrial Realm* (detail), 2001. Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Reproduced from University of Minnesota, Weisman Art Museum.

culture, Martin reveals the wonderment, magic and enchantment that haunts modernity in the form of heterogenous 'curiosities' that refuse to adhere to the homogenizing collecting principles of the Enlightenment.²⁵ In this way, the term 'human curiosities' activates a dialogue with traditions of collecting and display practices, emphasizing the central importance that notions of representation and exhibition take within the conception of these bodies.

Within contemporary art, the notion of curiosity and its associated collecting practices have been interrogated by artists like Mark Dion, whose practice often takes the

²⁵ David Martin, *Curious Visions of Modernity: Enchantment, Magic and the Sacred* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), xiv-xviii.

wunderkammer as a point of inspiration for investigating the epistemological structures of modern thought and museum ideology. For instance, in his *Cabinet of Curiosities* for the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota in 2001, Dion presented a re-imagined form of a cabinet of curiosities which sought to erode rigid distinctions between disciplines to create a representation of the University world in miniature.²⁶ [Fig. 0-4] Working collaboratively with students, Dion juxtaposed objects from a range of departments and arranged them according to unconventional logic in order to elicit curious intrigue over their relationships. Mixing *naturalia* and *artificialia*, Dion implements a sort of Foucauldian archaeology, which challenges conventional structures of organization and how they influence our perceptions of the collected objects therein. Although Dion doesn't directly investigate the nature of human curiosities, his exploration of cabinets of curiosities demonstrates the artistic interest in the historical structures of collecting and display, and how these forces contribute to our perception of objects as curious.

Making this association between human curiosities and collecting practices even more explicit, writer and photographer Rosamond Purcell also turned to museum history for her exhibition and subsequent publication *Special Cases: Natural Anomalies and Historical Monsters*.²⁷ [Fig.0-5] Straddling the line between cultural studies and art project, Purcell combed the collections of public museums and private collections to photograph examples of monstrous bodies, in order to explore how the collections forge a relationship between mythical monsters and their real-life counterparts. Her study of 'the inescapable relationship between a dreamed-up monster and its painfully viable counterpart' is richly illustrated with examples across a wide range of sources, from the illustrations of Ulisse Aldrovandi's *Monstorum Historia* (1658) to the living curiosities of Peter the Great's

²⁶ See: Colleen J. Sheehy, ed., *Cabinet of Curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

²⁷ Rosamond Purcell, *Special Cases: Natural Anomalies and Historical Monsters* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997). An exhibition of the same name took place at The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 24 September to 17 December 1994, Santa Monica, CA.

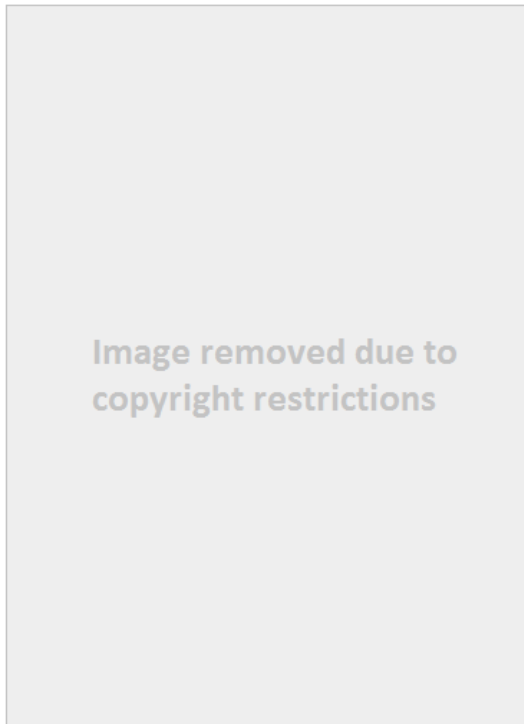


Fig. 0-5. Rosamond Purcell, *Hydrocephalic Child whose skull has opened like a flower* [Universiteitsmuseum, Utrecht], date unknown. Reproduced from Rosamond Purcell, *Special Cases: Natural Anomalies and Historical Monsters* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997), 89.

eighteenth-century *Kunstammer*; the pathological collections of the University of Bologna to the morbid dioramas of Frederik Ruysch.²⁸ Taken together, Purcell's diverse sources seem like a testament to mankind's inexorable desire to create monsters.

Purcell's exploration of the relationship between 'real' monsters and those of mythology reflects the constant oscillation between fact/fiction, real/imagination that characterises the representation of monstrous bodies. This thesis focuses on representations of real 'human monsters' with unusual corporeal aberrations, rather than the fictional

monsters that inhabit literature, cinema and mythology, such as vampires, bogey men or werewolves. The association between the two types, however, is not accidental: the term 'monstrous' was chosen, in part, to highlight the fictional qualities often ascribed to these curious bodies, and to mirror the subjectivity inherent in their representations.

Furthermore, the division between these two categories is ambiguous, rife with slippages and overlaps. 'Monsters', real and imagined, are linked by their hybridity and ontological liminality, manifested in bodies which 'fail to match the normative standard.'²⁹ In his seven theses on monster culture, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes the monster as a cultural body which embodies alterity and resists easy categorization:

This refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' is true of monsters

²⁸ Purcell, *Special Cases*, 18.

²⁹ Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2002), 10.

generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in a systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.³⁰

Our inability to pinpoint monstrous bodies is, therefore, a threat to our systems of classification and the stability of knowledge itself. In Purcell's text, the ability of monsters to move fluidly between boundaries of the real and imaginary within museums, private collections and texts exposes the vulnerability of those taxonomical systems. To borrow a phrase from feminist and disability studies scholar Margrit Shildrick, it is the 'leaky boundaries' between real and imagined monsters which give them their desirability as collected objects, but also gives them power to challenge the ontological structures that try to contain them.³¹

However, as Shildrick has argued, it is the monster's ability to expose the vulnerability of boundaries between self and other that causes deep-seated anxiety around unusual corporealities.³² Contesting the binary of otherness that informs an ethics of display, she employs a post-structuralist discourse to describe how the monster destabilizes notions of the body as fixed or natural entity.³³ Shildrick instead presents the idea of the monstrous body as a condition of becoming; a fluid, indeterminate and unstable site which reveals 'the contested relations between self and other, the simultaneous rejection and recognition, horror and fascination, that grounds ontological unease'.³⁴ The monster, therefore, is never wholly other from the self: it is a discursive construction which reveals the fraught processes of marking the boundaries of all bodies, exposing the vulnerability of fixed notions of self.

It is these boundaries between self and other which are tested in Douglas Gordon's

30 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6.

31 Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997). See also: Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 105-108.

32 Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 3-6.

33 Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 9-11.

34 Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 10.

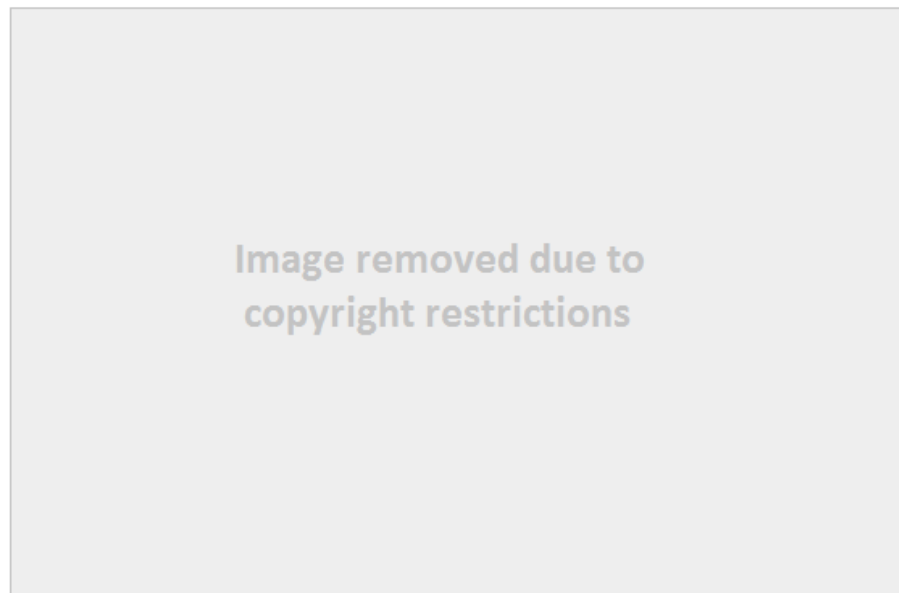


Fig. 0-6. Douglas Gordon, *Monster Reborn*, 1996/2002. Colour coupler print, 70.0 x 113.0 cm. National Galleries Scotland, Edinburgh, UK. Reproduced from National Galleries Scotland collection.

1996 work, *Monster* (later re-created in his 2002 *Monster Reborn*). [Fig.0-6] In this photograph, Gordon presents himself in a double self-portrait: once as his regular self, and once with his face transformed into a grotesque distortion using clear sellotape. The simple intervention to his own face creates an ambiguous relationship between the two bodies, revealing a myriad of questions around our perception of his 'normal' face in relation to the 'monstrous' version. Which is his true self? Does the image show a transformation into a monstrous other or reveal the monster that lurks in us all, just under the surface? How does his facial transformation consequently imply a shift in moral, mental, aesthetic meaning as compared to a normal visage? And just what is so monstrous about these distorted features? Is it only a relative monstrousness in comparison to our knowledge of his regular look? Earlier versions of this work presented the taped version on the right, which, read left to right, implies the transformation of artist to monster; the 2002 version switched the order, perhaps suggesting that the monster is reborn as the normal-looking man.

In *The Body and Contemporary Art*, Sally O'Reilly identifies explorations of the monstrous body as a key theme in recent contemporary art, linking it closely to questions of social boundaries and re-categorizations of the body in relation to nature and technology.³⁵ Emphasizing its ability to pose conceptual challenges to the human condition, O'Reilly describes the monstrous as 'something that does not fit within our existing framework of rationality or that deviates from a norm'.³⁶ To illustrate this broad conceptualisation of the monstrous within contemporary art, O'Reilly discusses the work of Australian artist Patricia Piccinini (among others), whose hyper-realistic sculptures occupy a hypothetical transgenic space between human and animal. Perhaps depicting a not-so-distant future where genetic experiments have produced new lifeforms, Piccinini's sculptures imagine how these undetermined beings might be treated by future humans and integrated into their ontological understanding of the world.

A particularly intriguing example is Piccinini's 2010 sculpture *The Comforter*. [Fig. 0-7] In this work, a young girl whose body is covered in dark hair lovingly cradles a monstrous creature that seems little more than a lump of flesh with a mouth and feet. Like many of Piccinini's works, the relationship between human and creature is depicted as tender, the girl gazing lovingly down at the being, as if it were a beloved pet or favourite doll. She seems either unfazed or unaware that this fleshy, hairless thing in her arms might be seen as monstrous, disturbing or 'wrong' by a viewer unsure of what it is and how it came to be.

Of course, the girl's captivated gaze and the ambiguity of the creature mirrors the debates around the boundaries of humanness which have taken place around hairy bodies just like hers for centuries. Historically, excessive hairiness – also known as hypertrichosis – was viewed as a signal of atavism, or a trait of a hybrid being which traverses the human

35 Sally O'Reilly, *The Body in Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 149.

36 O'Reilly, *Body*, 149.

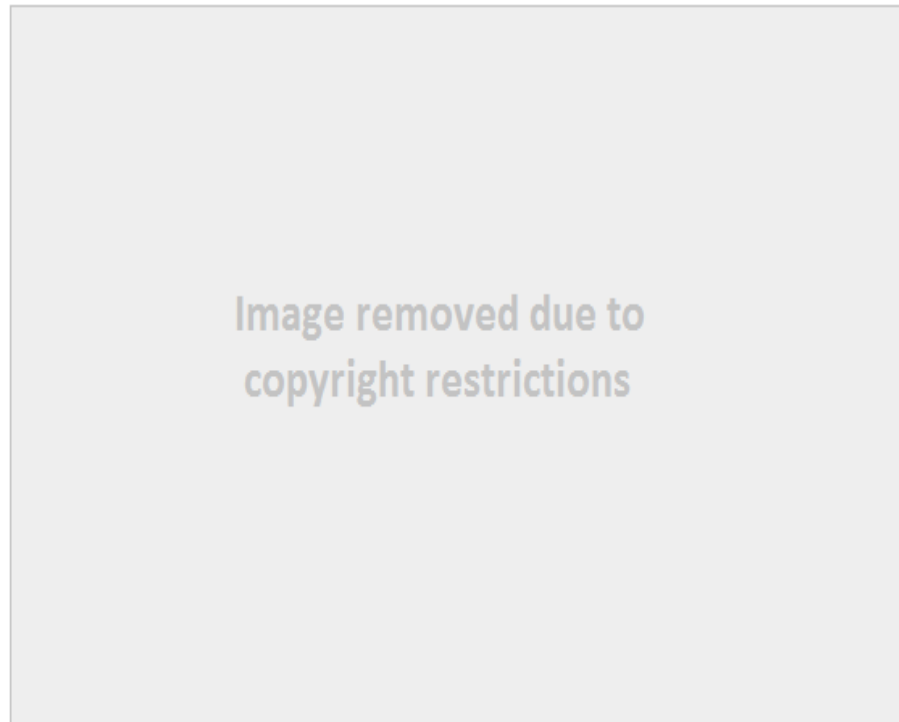


Fig. 0-7. Patricia Piccinini, *The Comforter*, 2010. Silicone, fibreglass, steel, fox fur, human hair, clothing, 60 x 80 x 80 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

and animal realms.³⁷ From legends of werewolves to exhibits of 'missing links' in late nineteenth-century freak shows, the status of hairy bodies on the continuum between man and beast was always anxiously contested. Sitting casually on the floor and dressed in modern, age-appropriate clothing, the humanness of Piccinini's hirsute girl is not in question here; in fact, the tenderness she exhibits toward the creature makes her seem especially 'humane'. Instead, the ethical and spiritual dilemmas of the monstrous body are transferred to the ambiguous life-form in her arms, revealing the ongoing relevance of these seemingly anachronistic philosophical debates in the wake of genetic engineering. Blurring the boundaries of humanness (or, at least, pointing out that the boundaries are never clear), Piccinini's use of hyper-realism makes the hypothetical scene seem particularly plausible, allowing it to slip between the boundaries of the real and imaginary.

³⁷ Purcell, *Special Cases*, 128-130; Durbach, *Spectacle*, 89-114.

The artwork, in this way, becomes a safe, albeit troubling, place to test our relationship to these boundaries.

It is this ambiguity of form which has made monstrous bodies such a fecund symbol within aesthetic traditions like Gothic horror. Judith Halberstam, for instance, identifies the body of the monster as a symbol of 'interpretative mayhem' within Gothic horror, describing the style as a versatile tool to create monsters which are endlessly transmutable to the needs of a given historical and cultural moment.³⁸ Reflecting upon both eighteenth-century Gothic literary traditions and contemporary horror films, Halberstam argues that in the Gothic mode the monster's body can be manipulated to 'represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative'.³⁹ Christoph Grunenbuerg linked a similar Gothic sensibility to late 1990s art practice, in *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art*, an exhibition (and subsequent publication of the same name) at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in 1997. Tracing the resurgent interest in Gothic themes to pre-millennial anxieties, Grunenberg characterises the Gothic sensibility as a preoccupation with the dark and uncanny side of the human psyche; an attempt to transgress rigid boundaries of the known world and society's vague definitions of normality through images of horror, lust, repulsion and disgust.⁴⁰ Within this exhibition, the monstrous takes on an unusual corporeality in works like Zoe Leonard's *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman* (which I also analyse in Chapter Four of this thesis); Grunenberg identifies this work as representing the unease of in-between or ambiguous states described within Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject.⁴¹

However, throughout Grunenberg's selection of artworks, the monstrous is more

38 Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 1-2.

39 Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 21.

40 Christoph Grunenbuerg, ed., *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art* (Boston, London, and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 217-218.

41 Grunenbuerg, *Gothic*, 163. See also: Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1980, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

often present a nefarious force that lurks just beyond the visible, resulting in the fragmentation and decay of the body: within the unsettling domestic scenes of Gregory Crewdson, the disembodied wax appendages of Robert Gober, or the masks and body part assemblages of Cindy Sherman. Although the artworks in *Gothic* are linked by a shared preoccupation with death, deviance, fragmentation and the psychology of unease often centred around the body, Grunenberg never definitively determines what exactly constitutes a Gothic sensibility within contemporary art, instead leaving the term (and its relationship to the artworks) ambiguous. As Gilda Williams has observed, the Gothic in the context of contemporary art is perhaps better understood as atmospheric rather than a defined idea, a borrowed term for stylized horror which spills into notions of the uncanny, grotesque and abject.⁴² Within this equivocality, the Gothic body could potentially signal anything from the anatomical fragments of Géricault⁴³ to the monsters of contemporary horror films.

Grunenberg's ambiguous use of the term 'Gothic' forms part of a larger curatorial interest in theorising the return to the figure in visual art since the early 1990s, of which the representation of curious bodies is only a part. Like Grunenberg, other curators have co-opted existing terms in order to help articulate the ineffable sensations of experiencing unusual, disturbing or merely strange bodies. For instance, *The Uncanny*, curated by Mike Kelley at Sonsbeek in the Netherlands in 1993 and revived at the Tate Liverpool in 2004, drew upon Freud's notion of the 'uncanny' to describe the creepy or unsettling sensations of contemporary figurative sculpture.⁴⁴ Meditating on our seemingly continuous fascination with polychrome figurative sculpture, Kelley's choice of works favoured body parts and pieces to evoke the simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of looking at the human body.

⁴² Gilda Williams, ed., *The Gothic* (London: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2007), 12-15.

⁴³ See: Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 19-23.

⁴⁴ Mike Kelley, *The Uncanny*, 1993, ed. Christoph Grunenberg (Koln: Walther Konig, 2004). See also: Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, 1919, trans. David McLintock (New York and London: Penguin, 2003).

Even more recently, *Disparities & Deformations: Our Grotesque*, curated by Robert Storr for the Site Santa Fe Biennial in 2004-2005, embraced formal opposites and the sensations of wonder/horror to explore traditions of the grotesque within contemporary art.⁴⁵

Vacillating between visceral disgust and carnivalesque whimsy, this exhibition aimed to add a visual and emotional richness to the sensation of uneasiness associated with viewing monstrous forms, by placing it in dialogue with the stylistic disjunctions of a grotesque visual tradition.⁴⁶

Although each of these exhibitions dealt with different overarching themes – the Gothic, the grotesque and the uncanny – all three grappled with how to apply these complex historical constructs to contemporary art that explored the sensations triggered by representations of the body in various states of trauma. Furthermore, the artists included in these exhibitions frequently overlapped, including artists like Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Jake & Dinos Chapman, Tony Oursler, Paul McCarthy, Cindy Sherman and Douglas Gordon, whose work is often concerned with deviant, disturbing or monstrous bodies. Like Grunenberg's use of the term 'Gothic', the ambiguous application of these terms to contemporary art reflects the difficulty in articulating the precise meaning of such disparate corporeal forms. But it also shifts the emphasis from the body itself to the sensations associated with *looking* at such bodies. In other words, the monstrous is positioned as experiential rather than inherently other.

However, even though the monstrous body formed important aspects of these curatorial approaches, the representation of human curiosities in contemporary art has yet to be explored in depth. Moreover, despite a large body of recent scholarship produced on the history and politics of exhibiting unusual bodies, little has been done to link traditions

⁴⁵ Robert Storr, *Disparities & Deformations: Our Grotesque*, ed. Sarah S. King (Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 2004).

⁴⁶ For a more thorough overview of traditions of the grotesque in modern and contemporary art, see: Frances Connolly, ed., *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David Cross, "Some Kind of Beautiful: The Grotesque Body in Contemporary Art" (PhD Thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2006).

of exhibiting 'monstrous' bodies with contemporary art representations. The first steps toward this have only recently taken place, in Ann Millett-Gallant's study *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (2010), which is one of the first dedicated monographs to treat the subject of disabled bodies in contemporary art.⁴⁷ This engaging study makes the first attempt to unite the fields of disability studies and art history, challenging much of the popular discussion around the representation of disabled bodies in visual culture, which is too often reduced to oversimplified characterisations of 'positive' or 'negative' imagery.⁴⁸ Placing work by artists like Mary Duffy, Joel-Peter Witkin, Marc Quinn, Alison Lapper and Diane Arbus in dialogue with disability theory and visual culture – including histories of the freak show and medical photography – Millett-Gallant explores how these 'diverse visual histories all contribute to visualizing disability in material culture and society and particularly to staging the disabled and disfigured body as a spectacle'.⁴⁹

Millett-Gallant makes great strides in opening up more critically engaged discussions around this type of imagery in contemporary art, and draws insightful comparisons to historical imagery and institutional contexts of these bodies. However, her discussion is driven by the dominant agendas of disability studies, which limits her engagement with the broad category of so-called curious bodies. Since the early 1990s, disability studies has emerged as an interdisciplinary branch of study dedicated to the critical examination of the social, political, historical and cultural forces shaping notions of disability.⁵⁰ As Millett-Gallant describes,

47 Ann Millett-Gallant, *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Another significant recent text addressing the subject of disability in modern and contemporary art is Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010). In this study, Siebers argues for disability to be considered as an important form of aesthetic within modern art, which enlarges our ideas about the human form and variation, retaining the potential to revolutionize existing notions of beauty and art itself.

48 Millett-Gallant, *Disabled Body*, 17. As Millett-Gallant argues, reducing readings of disability imagery to such overly simplistic labels as 'negative' or 'positive' only serves to 'disable the subject' and limit the potential for multi-faceted gazes, reactions and significance.

49 Millett-Gallant, *Disabled Body*, 6. See also pages 19-20 for a broad overview of her approach.

50 Some of the major interdisciplinary volumes regarding disability studies within the humanities include, but are not limited to: Lennard Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, eds., *The Body and Physical Difference*:

Exploring the experiences, subjectivity, representational frameworks for, and social and political barriers faced by disabled people, disability studies is a cultural studies of the body. Disability studies exhibits how the body may serve as a site, target, and vehicle for ideology and creative expression.⁵¹

Although the field of disability studies is broad and varied, she identifies several primary agendas emerging from the majority of the associated scholarship. These include 1) problematizing medical models of disability which privilege ableist attitudes and the standardization of all bodies, 2) working to overturn prevalent stereotypes and notions of 'normal', and 3) the establishment of a social model of disability which asserts that disability is a socially-constructed identity that changes through time.⁵² Although she acknowledges the difficulties of defining a group as heterogeneous as people with disabilities, Millett-Gallant asserts the potential of 'disability' to act as a category of identity with parallels to the identity politics of race, class, gender and sexual orientation.⁵³ Similar views have recently been extended to museum and gallery contexts, in the edited collection *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, which explores representations of disability within contemporary museological and curatorial practice. Taking the view that cultural representations are '*constitutive* as well as *reflective* ways of seeing', Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd in particular argue for an acceptance of the social model of disability as part of an 'activist museum practice' which works to actively direct social change.⁵⁴

Discourses of Disability (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum, eds., "*Defects*": *Engendering the Modern Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Sharon L. Snyder et.al., *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2002); David M. Turner and Kevin Stagg, eds., *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity* (London: Routledge, 2006); Richard Sandell et.al., *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010).

51 Millett-Gallant, *Disabled Body*, 6-7.

52 Millett-Gallant, *Disabled Body*, 7. For more perspectives on the 'social model' of disability, see: Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare, eds., *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002).

53 For a deeper discussion of the relationship between representations of disability and identity politics, see: Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 6, 11; and Catherine J. Kudlick, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other'", *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 763-793.

54 Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd, "Activist Practice", in *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, ed. Richard Sandell et.al. (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 3; 12-15.

Although this is a subject undoubtedly worthy of this (and much more) critical attention, I have chosen to open up my discussion of curious bodies in art beyond a disability studies framework in order to consider extraordinary bodies which exceed contemporary notions of disability. As Nadja Durbach argues in her study of freak shows in modern British culture, by positioning historical exhibitions of aberrant bodies within discourses of disability, one risks collapsing the cultural meanings produced in particular historical moments, by retrospectively applying a twentieth-century concept in a way not true to the original historical or cultural context.⁵⁵ For example, Durbach points out that historians of queer studies have demonstrated that relatively modern concepts like 'homosexuality' are not identity or social categories that 'can usefully be mapped back onto sexual practices and subjectivities before the late nineteenth century'; likewise, disability denotes a historically contingent set of power relationships around particular types of bodies that are often different than those grouped under the rubric of 'freakery'.⁵⁶

Although Millett-Gallant references a range of curious contexts, such as the freak show and medical photography, her focus on the discourse of disability studies axiomatically excludes aberrant body types like hairy people, human pin cushions, albinos, or self-made freaks (just to name a few), who played important roles within a history of exhibiting curious bodies. Bearded women, for example, have a particularly conspicuous presence in the history of exhibiting human curiosities, but the condition of superfluous hair holds only tenuous links to modern conceptualisations of disability. Furthermore, the generalized category of disability also includes variations of the body which have not historically been included in exhibitions of unusual bodies, such as people with deafness, blindness or paralysis. Although the framework of disability studies offers powerful insights into this material which I will draw upon in this thesis, I focus upon tracing

⁵⁵ Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 14-16.

⁵⁶ Durbach, *Spectacle*, 17-19.

contemporary art within a visual tradition that has been known, in various contexts, as the display of freaks, curiosities, teratological specimens,⁵⁷ wonders, human oddities, anomalies, prodigies, or *lusus naturae*.⁵⁸

While disabled bodies undoubtedly form important aspects of this history, I argue that it does not tell the whole story about conceptions and display of 'monstrous' or 'curious' bodies. I certainly do not wish to lay out my arguments in contradiction to the agendas of disability studies by re-inscribing such terms; instead, my approach is positioned to complement disability frameworks by showing how traditions of exhibiting curious bodies have been re-imagined and re-configured throughout history. I argue that 'monstrosity' or 'curiosity' are the products of particular exhibition contexts, not inherent qualities of actual human beings, although they may have real-world consequences for the lives of people with disabilities. Only by scrutinizing these frameworks can we begin to fully understand the significance of their impact on concepts of 'abnormality'.

In his book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*, Lennard Davis makes a compelling case for the historicisation of the term 'normal', relating it to the emergence of statistical measurement during the nineteenth century, and the related notion of a standard, measurable body.⁵⁹ Davis addresses the work of Belgian mathematician Adolphe Quételet, who first began applying scientific methods of probability and statistics to sociology, a technique which had mainly been used in astronomy until that time. Using this approach, Quételet outlined the revolutionary concept of *l'homme moyen*, a quantifiable 'normal' man who was physically and morally average.⁶⁰ Taken up with gusto within the Victorian interest in classification and measurement, Leonard argues that the average became an ideology, positioning the 'norm' as a new ideal.⁶¹ Despite its seemingly

57 Teratology refers to the study of birth defects or other abnormalities of physiological development.

58 Which translates to 'jokes of nature'.

59 Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 24-25. The word 'normal' itself is also surprisingly modern, deriving from the word 'norm' which was used to describe a carpenter's square up to the mid-nineteenth century.

60 Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 26-30.

61 Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 30. It is interesting to note that early statisticians, such as Sir Francis Galton

objective association with statistical measurement, normality is nonetheless a politically ambiguous notion measured against a white, able-bodied, civically-responsible male. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the freak show reached its apex of popularity during the late nineteenth century, amid the radical re-conceptualisation of the body as 'normality' emerged as the dominant corporeal framework.

Modern histories of exhibiting human curiosities inevitably become bound up in questions of where the threshold between notions of normality and abnormality lies. Examining where different historical, cultural or political contexts have drawn the line between these two constructs reveals deep-seated belief systems around perceptions of the human body and how they operate in our larger beliefs about the world. In the mid-twentieth century, philosopher and physician Georges Canguilhem laid important groundwork in modern thinking on deviance, arguing that objects of pathology have been historically framed as either identical to the imagined norm within the acceptable parameters of quantitative variation, or framed as the opposite to health in the form of the 'abnormal'.⁶² In this view, the concepts of normal/healthy are always defined in relation to deviance, as much a value judgement as a diagnosis. Michel Foucault in particular built upon Canguilhem's framework in his studies of abnormal individuals (expanding upon Canguilhem's determination of biological abnormality to include criminal, sexual and psychological deviance), focussing on how definitions of normality/abnormality functioned as demonstrations of power, and were enforced by nineteenth-century disciplinary institutions such as the prison complex and the hospital.⁶³

or Karl Pearson, were often eugenicists as well. Combined with Charles Darwin's theories of natural selection, and the rediscovery and application of Mendel's laws of genetics to human traits, they believed the human race could be improved by diminishing deviations from their statistical notion of normalcy. To achieve this goal, eugenicists advocated the mandatory sterilization of those deemed inferior to the ideal notion of the human race. Once an accepted and celebrated branch of science, eugenics gave people a reason to fear and stigmatize people with unusual bodies, who began to seem capable of 'tainting' the human race. See also: Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 62.

62 Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 1943, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (New York: Zone Books, 1989).

63 See, in particular: Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991); Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de*

These concepts also tie into recent philosophical debates regarding the nature and characterization of disease, and the difficulty of precisely defining it. Although the arguments are far more nuanced than can be covered here, the main debate boils down to objectivist versus constructivist perspectives toward concepts of health, disease and normality.⁶⁴ Modern philosophical thought holds that in determining what qualifies as disease – or, conversely, health – humans rely upon a set of beliefs and common-sense expectations about the optimal function of the human body, based on scientific theories of human biology and a set of normative judgements about the body. A central concern within this conceptualisation lies in the degree to which normative judgements determine the criteria for disease and abnormality. Constructivist perspectives on disease challenge assumptions about the objectivity of biology, arguing that biological constructions are also informed by normative judgements; that illness is a product of culturally-defined attitudes bound up in the value systems of the history of Western medicine.⁶⁵ This has often been the view which underpins revisionist discourses in disability, feminist and post-colonial studies, which challenge the normative and patriarchal values inscribed on the body through the dominant histories of science and medicine. Those adhering to the objectivist camp, on the other hand, contend that there are indisputable biological facts about the human body and definite markers of disease which exist beyond cultural factors; obvious signs of dysfunction and deformity which deviate from a healthy, normally-functioning body. The difficulty of this position is that of definition: terms like normal, function, deformity and disease are difficult to adequately articulate in words, particularly without enacting the types of relative judgement scrutinized by constructivist arguments.

France 1974-1975, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003).

64 For a useful overview of the main philosophical perspectives which contribute to this argument, see: Dominic Murphy, “Concepts of Disease and Health”, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2008), accessed 5 September 2011, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/health-disease/>.

65 These debates around the terms 'objectivist' and 'constructivist' are outlined by Philip Kitcher, *The Lives to Come: The Genetic Revolution and Human Possibilities* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 207-208.

This problem of definition is, perhaps, where visual arts become particularly important in cultural and historical reflections of these ideas, offering a means of both articulating and contesting complex concepts of disease and deformity through the power of images. In many ways, this debate has been omnipresent throughout the history of exhibiting curiosities, implicitly underpinning the existence of illustrations, wax models, live displays and preserved specimens to demonstrate and define concepts of abnormality, illness and curiosity (an idea which informs my discussion of the role of artworks within medical museums in Chapter Three). This thesis is centrally concerned with how these beliefs are both secured and contested through various forms of display: how these exhibitions prompt particular kinds of looking, and what contemporary art contributes to these traditions. In other words, I am interested in how the representational contexts of unusual bodies foster 'a more curious View'.

A brief history of exhibiting human curiosities

In their study of 'wonder' in the early modern period, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park reject a teleological history of human monsters, instead arguing that historical reactions to monstrous births demonstrate overlapping emotions of horror, pleasure and repugnance which have informed both popular and scholarly representations of these bodies.⁶⁶ Tracing histories of monsters as they are understood as prodigies, entertainment and errors of nature, Daston and Park's study of monstrous births reveals a complex picture of overlapping interpretations and associated emotions in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although their study is limited to monsters of this period, this view can be extended throughout the history of exhibiting monstrous bodies, in which sensations of amazement, fear, curiosity and repulsion produce a myriad of socio-cultural readings of

66 Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1998), 173-201.

the extraordinary body in any time period. The final section of this introduction outlines a brief history of exhibiting human curiosities, in order to plot out some of the broad perspectives and motivations behind different forms of display. I do so to present the major exhibition histories that have implicitly informed contemporary conceptualisations of human curiosities, which have also provided points of inspiration for contemporary artists engaged with representations of these corporeal forms. Although this section will lay out a roughly chronological history of exhibiting human curiosities, Daston and Park's model of overlapping meanings should be kept in mind.

Reflecting the general geographical and historical focus of this thesis overall, my examples focus on exhibition histories and art based in Western Europe and North America, with particular emphasis on the United States and Britain. While it is not my intention to re-inscribe these as uncontested centres within a history that hinges on the binary of normal/otherness, the dominant colonial ideologies which have informed this history have most often radiated from these locales, reinforced by the forms of exhibition that originate within them. As such, the majority of the research into the history of exhibiting human curiosities that I draw upon – including histories of freak shows, medical museums, anatomical museums and art galleries – have tended to focus on Western or Euro-centric perspectives and institutions.

Of course, this has not been the universal rule, particularly in the case of scholars looking at issues of race or cultural 'Otherness' within exhibitions of humans in visual culture. For example, Conal McCarthy's research into the representation of Māori culture in New Zealand museums and World's Fair expositions presents a compelling argument that these exhibitions were not simply sites of colonial domination, but reveal a complex mutual relationship in which Māori people were often able to exercise agency in shaping their own representation within Western frameworks.⁶⁷ Such perspectives work to reveal

⁶⁷ Conal McCarthy, *Exhibiting Māori: A History of Colonial Cultures of Display* (Wellington: Te Papa

the complexities within what Stuart Hall has described as 'the Spectacle of the Other': the sets of representational practices which inscribe meanings of difference around certain types of bodies, particularly in regard to ethnicity.⁶⁸ Looking at the way racial stereotypes operate as reductive signifiers of physical difference, Hall deconstructs their role within dominant regimes of representation that rely upon discourses of binary oppositions (black/white, male/female, normal/abnormal, etc.), the assignment of positions within a classificatory systems, and psychoanalytical notions of the unified self to create a racialized 'Other'.⁶⁹

Although my research focuses on exhibitions of physical deformity rather than on representations of race as a form of Otherness, it is important to acknowledge how closely these concepts intertwine within histories of exhibiting curious bodies. For instance, Nadja Durbach's research into freak shows in modern British culture directly examines the notions of race, class and ethnicity within these frameworks, analysing how notions of primitivism, exoticism and imperialism informed freak show displays in the late-nineteenth century.⁷⁰ Certainly one of the most famous examples of this is the story of Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman, a South African slave woman who was exhibited as the 'Hottentot Venus' during the early nineteenth-century, in a sideshow act that strongly exoticised the abundant curves of her body.⁷¹ Such histories are also bound up with that of 'human zoos' of the same period, in which people of non-European descent were placed on display like animals, in ethnographic spectacles that emphasized their physical and cultural differences

Press, 2007).

68 Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'", in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications and the Open University, 2007), 225. See also: Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998).

69 Hall, "Spectacle", 234 - 238.

70 Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, 2010.

71 See: Natasha Gordon-Chipembere (ed.), *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Rachel Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman: Born 1789 – Buried 2002* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007); and Hall, "Spectacle", 264-269.

from white Europeans.⁷² The term 'human curiosities' is always relative to a particular set of cultural ideals which are deeply informed by overlapping notions of what constitutes physical and racial 'otherness', and their display has often worked to buttress those constructions of difference in the medium of popular entertainment.

Finding examples of representations of human curiosities throughout history is not difficult; although the manner in which curious bodies were displayed, recorded and understood has evolved alongside shifting world views and socio-cultural values, the fundamental interest in looking at corporeal anomaly never seems to cease. In the following section, I briefly outline a history of extraordinary bodies, to demonstrate how various forms of representation have adapted to suit the interests, values, imaginations and belief systems of a given historical moment. Drawing primarily on the research around monstrous births that has been produced in the last two decades, I introduce a long tradition in which monstrous bodies are created by the contexts of their display. However, rather than an exhaustive survey of this history or literature, this section merely offers a brief overview of how evolving perceptions of corporeal bodies have been expressed and established through various forms of display. In doing so, I present a more or less linear historical narrative of human curiosities; a narrative which contemporary artists have both contested and extended through their own representations of rare and spectacular bodies, as I shall discuss in the main chapters of this thesis.

From prodigies to the monstrous races

Because this thesis is centrally concerned with the representation of human curiosities in art, it is appropriate to begin in the Ancient world, where the groundwork for so much of Western artistic practice was laid (a notion which I will return to in Chapter Two, in my discussion of Neoclassical ideals within the work of Marc Quinn). Many

⁷² See: Pascal Blanchard and Teresa Bridgeman, *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008); and Pascal Blanchard et.al., *Human Zoos: The Invention of the Savage* (Arles: Actes Sud and Musée du Quai Branly, 2011).

historians writing on the subject of corporeal deformity begin their studies with the Ancient philosopher Aristotle,⁷³ and his writings on the subject of 'generation' (reproduction), particularly in *De Generatione Animalium* (Generation of Animals, Book 3, Sections 3-4).⁷⁴ In the broadest terms, Aristotle held the view of an ideal or generic state of physical human perfection, to which all creatures deviated to a greater or lesser degree. In Aristotle's view, every human body is at best deformed, and at worst monstrous; the farther one strays from the generic ideal, the more one falls in the latter category. Rather than ascribing supernatural causes to instances of corporeal deformity, Aristotle theorized that monstrosity was a result of a 'confusion of semen or arbitrary deviation from Nature'.⁷⁵ As Stephen Asma has observed, although the Aristotelian conception of monstrosity was grounded in physiological understanding of the body, there is still an implicit philosophical/moral perspective underpinning his work: the idea that the more deviant a body was, the less humanity it embodied.⁷⁶

However, Aristotle's notion of monstrosity as the result of natural errors was a minority view within the Ancient world; rather, monstrous births were far more widely understood as divine portents sent by the gods.⁷⁷ Much like other prodigious phenomena, these bodies were 'read' by augurs in Ancient Rome and oracles in Ancient Greece, to prophesy the success of military campaigns, high-profile marriages, and business prosperity.⁷⁸ Although attitudes toward monstrous births were generally negative in the Ancient world, these perspectives varied between city-states and changed throughout time.

73 See: Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Duckworth, 1995), 1; Barry Wind, *'A foul and pestilent congregation': Images of 'Freaks' in Baroque Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 7; Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 45-49; Jennifer Spinks, *Monstrous Births and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 5.

74 For a more detailed overview of Aristotle's writings on monstrous births, see: Dudley Wilson, *Signs & Portents: Monstrous Births from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 16-20.

75 Wind, *Freaks*, 7.

76 Asma, paraphrasing Aristotle, *On Monsters*, 49.

77 Asma, *Monsters*, 49.

78 Other fortune-telling devices included predicting the significance of phenomena such as meteorites or unusual weather, or reading from the viscera of sacrificed animals. See: Asma, *Monsters*, 39.

For instance, Ancient Greeks were generally less hostile toward curious bodies than the Romans, with the Athenian state even providing welfare for people with disabilities.⁷⁹ In Sparta, however, where strategies of eugenics were rigidly upheld, law required parents to abandon deformed and sickly infants at birth.⁸⁰

Despite the fear toward monstrous bodies in Ancient Rome, they must have also inspired curiosity, as demonstrated by the collection of human oddities by members of the elite classes. For example, the Roman emperor Domitian (51-96 AD) attended public entertainment accompanied by ‘a body clad in flaming scarlet whose head was abnormally small’; Augustus' granddaughter Julia kept a dwarf named Canopas as a pet; and slaves with deformities and mental deficiencies were purchased for entertainment at dinner parties and other festive occasions.⁸¹ Plutarch (46-120 AD) is even known to have complained that healthy, beautiful boys and girls sold in the slave market for less than people with deformities, chastising his peers for their obsession with monstrous bodies for entertainment.⁸²

The interest in people with corporeal deformities also extended to artistic representations of monstrous bodies, particularly in the Late Hellenistic era to the first centuries of the Roman Imperial era. Before this time, Greek artists show little interest in portraying the deformed body; rather, the chief artistic inspiration of this time was the physically perfect human, exemplified by statues of the youthful, beardless deity Apollo. And although this theme persisted strongly throughout Antiquity, by the Hellenistic era the taste for realism began to ‘manifest itself at the expense of idealism’; only then did artists attempt to represent physical deformities.⁸³ Coarsely-rendered bronze and terracotta figures which depicted corporeal deformities like dwarfism and gibbosity became extremely

⁷⁹ Garland, *Deformity*, 3.

⁸⁰ Garland, *Deformity*, 14-15.

⁸¹ Wind, *Freaks*, 6.

⁸² Wind, *Freak*, 7-8.

⁸³ Garland, *Deformity*, 105-106.

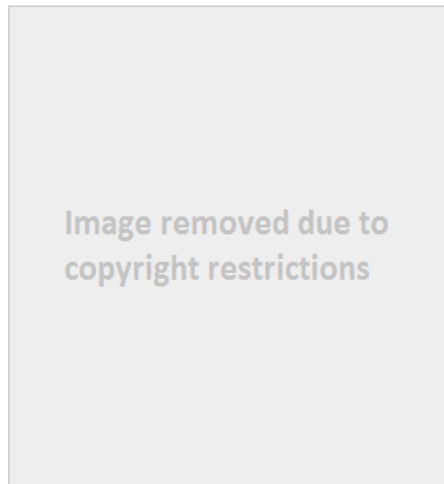


Fig. 0-8. Bronze figure of a dancing female dwarf, ca 150-100 BC. Bronze, 9 cm. British Museum, London, UK. Reproduced from British Museum collections.

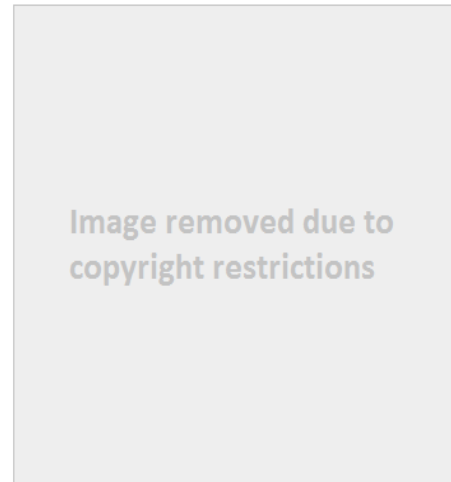


Fig. 0-9. Grotesque terracotta statue of man with elephantiasis (enlarged penis), 2nd - 1st century BC, Greece. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Reproduced from Metropolitan Museum of Art collections.

popular during this era, usually occupying the bottom end of the art market and often mass produced in Alexandria.⁸⁴ [Fig. 0-8 and 0-9]

Attitudes toward monstrous bodies in the Ancient world remained highly influential throughout the Middle Ages. This is particularly true of the work of the Roman author Pliny, whose catalogue of monstrous races was widely diffused throughout Medieval Europe, and deeply influenced popular and theological ideas about corporeal and racial difference.⁸⁵ Supported by accounts from Hellenistic travel writers like Ctesias and Megasthenes, Pliny described exotic races of men who lived beyond the Mediterranean, with curious bodies and strange customs. For instance, Pliny's marvellous descriptions included the *Blemmyes*, headless men whose faces were instead on their chests; *Sciopods*, one-legged people with a foot so large it could be used for shelter if they laid on their backs; and *Pygmies*, dwarfish men with black skin who braided their hair into garments

⁸⁴ Garland, *Deformity*, 106-108.

⁸⁵ The influence of the so-called 'Plinian' races in Medieval art and thought is discussed in detail in John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

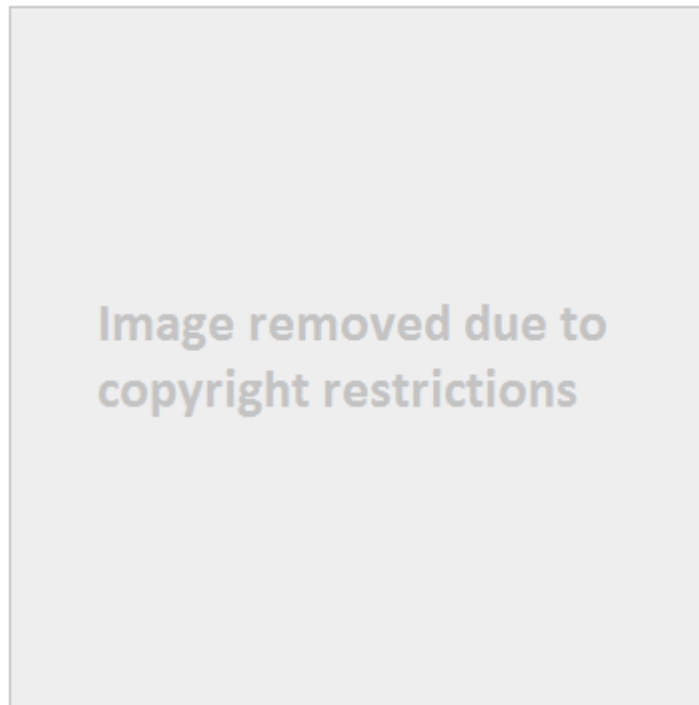


Fig. 0-10. Workshop of Michael Wolgemut, illustration of a Blemmye from the *Nuremberg Chronicle* by Hartmann Schedel, 1493. Reproduced from Morse Library, Beloit College.

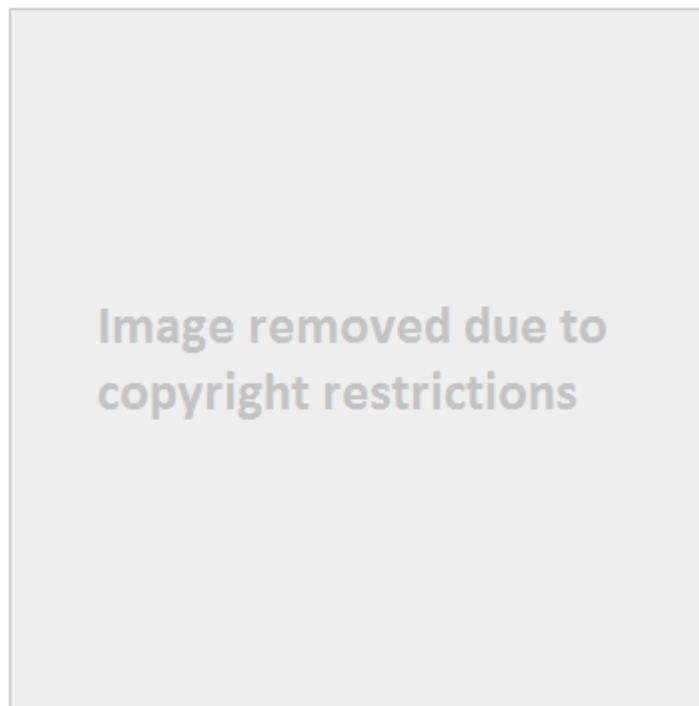


Fig. 0-11. Workshop of Michael Wolgemut, illustration of a Sciopod from the *Nuremberg Chronicle* by Hartmann Schedel, 1493. Reproduced from Morse Library, Beloit College.

(among others).⁸⁶ [Figs. 0-10 and 0-11] Although these descriptions often seem completely fantastic, historians speculate that many were based in real encounters with people in exotic lands. For instance, the 'headless' *Blemmyes* were a real group of migratory Ethiopians who attacked Christian settlements in North Africa several times between the third and fifth century; it has been suggested that their use of ornamental shields or chest armour might have obscured their head and made them appear headless from a distance.⁸⁷

Ideas of these monstrous 'Plinian' races fed into important spiritual debates within the Judeo-Christian traditions of the Middle Ages, around the spiritual condition of such curious and 'degenerate' beings. For instance, did these monstrous men have souls? Were they rational? Were they descended from the lineage of Adam as other humans, or did they have another, separate lineage? However, despite the gravitas of these spiritual questions, John Block Friedman has argued that the travel-writing upon which these monstrous races were based was mainly an entertainment-based medium; although perhaps once based on realistic encounters with exotic people, the appeal of these tales to medieval men was based in 'fantasy, escapism, delight in the fascination of the unknown, and the fear of the unknown'.⁸⁸ As such, tales of monstrous men were exaggerated as they were passed on from person to person, then distilled into the form of illustrated manuscripts which gave spectacular visual form to these curious bodies.

For example, one of the most important publications of the time was the Nuremburg Chronicle published in 1493, a lavishly illustrated history of humanity as related in the Bible.⁸⁹ One of the most striking elements of this text are the 645 woodcut illustrations from the workshop of Michael Wolgemut, some of which capture the monstrous races that were imagined to live beyond the civilized world. [Fig. 0-10 and 0-

⁸⁶ Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, 9-21.

⁸⁷ Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, 24-25.

⁸⁸ Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, 5-6.

⁸⁹ Hartmann Schedel, *Chronicle of the World: the Complete and Annotated Nuremberg Chronicle of 1493*, 1493, ed. Stephan Füssel (Cologne and London: Taschen, 2001).

11] Even with increasing travel into the East and more frequent contact with people of foreign nations, images like these exerted a powerful and persistent grip on the imaginations of Medieval Europeans, appealing to deeply engrained notions of corporeal, cultural, and spiritual Otherness.

Moral monsters and maternal imagination

In the years around 1500, there was a shift away from interest in the Plinian races of distant and exotic lands, toward interest in monstrous births happening locally. Jennifer Spinks has argued that this shift occurred primarily because monstrous races remained unverifiable, whereas monstrous births allowed viewers to experience the marvellous as something tangible.⁹⁰ Regardless of the cause, in England alone the years between 1550 and 1700 witnessed the publication of at least seventy monster ballads, dozens of cheaply printed pamphlets and popular book-length collections describing the births of monstrous infants and tales of people with extraordinary physical afflictions.

All texts followed roughly the same format: a sensational description of an extraordinary body, an analysis of the meaning of the deformity and a call to repent for the sins that caused it.⁹¹ These popular broadsheets sometimes included a roughly hewn woodblock image, in which a highly exaggerated depiction of the condition served to emphasize the moral message of the text. [Figs. 0-3 and 0-12] For instance, in a 1682 pamphlet describing the birth of a two-headed child in Exeter, a crude sketch of a small human with a second head perched on his upper arm accompanies a warning against female vanity [Fig. 0-12]:

...[I]n truth, the Monstrosity it self may have been occasioned by the irregular fancies of Conceiving and Breeding Women. It has been a great happiness to this Nation, that accidents of this Nature rarely fall out among us. But if Heaven at any time permit them, perhaps to punish the Pride and vanity incident to the Female Sex, and by the misfortunes of one to admonish the Multitudes, it is better to be warned by Truth, then multiplied falshood.⁹²

⁹⁰ Spinks, *Monstrous Births*, 18.

⁹¹ Kevin Stagg, "Representing Physical Difference: The Materiality of the Monstrous", in *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity*, ed. David M. Turner and Kevin Stagg (New York: Routledge, 2006), 20-21.

⁹² A. Brocas, "True Relation of the Birth of a Monster Born at Exeter..." (London: Printed for W. Davis,

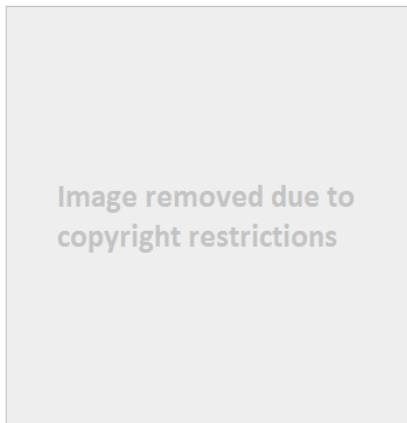


Fig. 0-12. A. Brocas, woodcut illustration from "True Relation of the Birth of a Monster Born at Exeter...", printed by W. Davis in London, 1682. Reproduced from Early English Books Online.

In another example, an anonymous author praises God for his wonderful judgement in the case of a Monstrous, Deformed Infant, begotten by incestuous copulation, between the brothers sonne and the sisters daughter, being both unmarried persons', which he describes as 'a notable and most terrible example against incest and whoredome.'⁹³ Texts like these linked physical deformity with sin, mediating an understanding of curious bodies through sententious moral and political messages that helped

justify the *raison d'être* for the sensationalist publications. Drawing together the moral imperatives of the Reformation with the burgeoning print culture, this period demonstrated a seemingly unquenchable thirst for news of monstrous bodies.

The interest in depicting monstrous bodies was not limited to the crude illustrations of these popular broadsheets, but also inspired some of the greatest artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁹⁴ Consider, for example, the portrait of bearded woman Magdalena Ventura with her husband and son, painted by Jusepe di Ribera in 1631. [Fig. 0-13] Commissioned in 1629 by the Duke of Alcalá, one of Ribera's major patrons, this work depicts a woman with a thick black beard and receding hairline, posed next to her husband while nursing an infant from her exposed breast. Placed next to her is a spindle,

1682), 2, accessed 24 October 2010, Early English Books Online via Bodleian Library.

93 "A Most Straunge, and true discourse, of the wonderfull judgement of God... [sic]" (London: Imprinted for Richard Jones, 1600), 1, accessed 24 October 2010, Early English Books Online.

94 For example, Albrecht Dürer's interest in monstrous bodies include a well-known engraving of the monstrous Landser sow in 1496 drawing of conjoined twins born at Erlingen in 1512; and Diego Velázquez includes depictions of little people in *Portrait of Baltasar Carlos with Dwarf* (1631), *Portrait of Sebastien de Morra* (ca 1645) and *Las Meninas* (1656). See also: Agnolo Bronzino's double-sided *Portrait of the Dwarf Morgante* (before 1533), Lavinia Fontana's *Painting of Tognina Gonzales* (ca 1590), Agostina Carracci's *Portrait of Amon, Pietro Matto and Arrigo Peloso* (ca 1598), and Juan Carreno's *Portrait of La Monstrua* (1680), just to name a few.

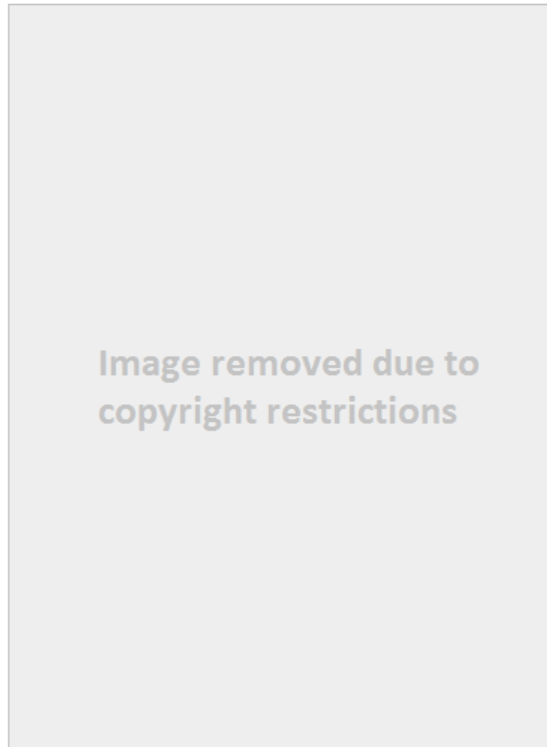


Fig. 0-13. Jusepe di Ribera, *Magdalena Ventura with Her Husband and Son*, 1631. Oil on canvas, 196 x 127 cm. Museo Fundación Duque de Lerma, Toledo, Spain.

representing female domesticity, and a snail, a hermaphroditic symbol.⁹⁵ Ribera depicts Magdalena Ventura beside a plinth engraved in Latin, which testifies to the truth of her curious body, and to the self-proclaimed talent of the artist in accurately rendering her image:

Look, a great miracle of nature. Magdalena Ventura from the town of Accumulus in Samnium, in the vulgar tongue Abruzzo in the Kingdom of Naples, aged 52 and what is unusual is when she was in her 37th year she began to go through puberty and thus a full growth of beard appeared such that it seems rather that of a bearded gentleman than a woman who had previously lost three sons whom she had borne to her husband, Felici de Amici, whom you see next to her. Joseph de Ribera, a Spaniard, marked by the cross of Christ, a second Apelles of his own time, by order of Duke Ferdinand II of Alcala, Viceroy at Naples, depicted in a marvellously lifelike way. 17th February 1631.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez and Nicola Spinosa, *Jusepe Ribera 1591-1652* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 93-94.

⁹⁶ Trans. W. Michael G Tunbridge, “La Mujer Barbuda by Ribera, 1631: a gender bender”, *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* 104 (January 2011): 733, accessed 19 September 2012, <http://qjmed.oxfordjournals.org/content/104/8/733.full.pdf+html>.

Ribera's immodest testimony to his own artistic skill in capturing Magdalena Ventura's likeness supports the plausibility of the scene, aiding the assumption that this is an accurate rendering depicted by a trustworthy observer. Although a certain amount of creative license must be expected in such images, this combination of text and image works together to convince the viewer of the authenticity of the monstrous body. As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park put it, this 'emphasizes the role of the artist not only as disseminator of prodigious events but also as witness and guarantor of their truth.'⁹⁷

In addition to artistic explorations of extraordinary bodies, a number of (quasi-)scientific studies of monstrous births were produced in this period. Included among these is the heavily illustrated *On Monsters and Marvels* (France, 1573) written by barber-surgeon Ambroise Paré, which was one of the first texts to attempt to explain birth defects⁹⁸; Fortunio Liceti's *On the Nature, Causes and Differences of Monsters* (Italy, 1616; republished in 1634 with illustrations) which classified developmental abnormalities based on morphology rather than cause⁹⁹; or Ulisse Aldrovandi's encyclopedic *History of Monsters* (Bologna, 1642), a compendium of reported monsters and hybrid bodies in natural history.¹⁰⁰ An especially enduring belief system evolved in early embryological studies, which attributed birth defects to the imagination and behaviours of the mother during pregnancy. For example, in 1733 a Freisian midwife named Catherina Schrader noted in her records that the mother of a boy born with malformed genitals and a 'face like an ape' had seen apes dancing while she was pregnant.¹⁰¹ Seeming to act as yet another way

97 Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 186. Likewise, Daston and Park give an example of a sixteenth-century broadsheet from Munich illustrated by Hans Burgkmair the Elder, that describes the birth of conjoined twins in Tettnang. In this, the artist is explicitly relied upon to authenticate the existence of the monstrous birth, in a manner similar to Ribera. Illustrated with a detailed woodcut which the artist likely based on original sketches of the twins, the broadsheet states: 'The said lord and count called his artist, Master Matheysen Miiller, citizen of Landau, to draw or portray the child and ordered it printed, as is seen above.'

98 Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, 1573, trans. Janis L Pallister (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Originally titled in French as *Des Monstres et Prodiges*.

99 Fortunio Liceti, *De Monstrorum Caussis, Natura and Differentis Libri Duo*, second edition (Padua: 1634).

100 Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum Historia*, 1642, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002).

101 Catherina Schrader, as cited in Betterton, "Promising Monsters", 80-81.

of regulating the behaviours of women, monstrous births were also linked to a woman's sexual excess or perversion, the mixing of different sperm, copulation between different races, intercourse during menstruation, coitus with the devil, bestiality, or simply illicit looking.¹⁰² By the eighteenth century, such theories of maternal imagination had more or less replaced earlier practices of attributing deformity to divine causation.

Live displays and curious collections

The interest in deviant bodies was motivated by an ambiguous notion of 'curiosity' that manifested spectacularly in the Renaissance cabinets of curiosity; eclectic collections in which extraordinary bodies co-mingled with fine art, archaeological treasures, rare books, religious relics, exotic animals, natural history objects and other biological specimens. [Fig. 0-14] For example, Krzysztof Pomian describes the private cabinet of seventeenth-century French physician Pierre Bouel (1620-71), whose rareties included the bones of a giant, a two-headed monster, fragments of a mummy, a deformed cat, a unicorn's horn and several bezoars, displayed alongside exotic sea creatures, scientific instruments, Antique artefacts, and miniature oil paintings.¹⁰³ As Arthur MacGregor has described, cabinets of curiosity like these sought to represent 'the universe distilled', an encyclopedic aspiration which juxtaposed all manners of objects in order to evoke the interwoven relationships within the universe.¹⁰⁴ In these eclectic collections, the interest in extraordinary bodies was just one aspect of the overall taste for all things curious or strange.

However, the interest in human difference was an important enough part of Western

102 Herman W. Roodenburg, "The Maternal Imagination: The Fears of Pregnant Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland", *Journal of Social History* 21 (Summer 1988): 707-709, accessed 30 July 2009, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/3788009.pdf>; Rosemary Betterton, "Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity and Maternal Imagination", *Hypatia* 21 (Winter 2006): 80-100.

103 Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, 1986, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 44-46. Pomian argues that the emergence of Humanism in Italy at the end of the fifteenth century and the emergent interest in collecting Antiques helped to spread the values associated with cabinets of curiosity throughout Europe.

104 Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 11.

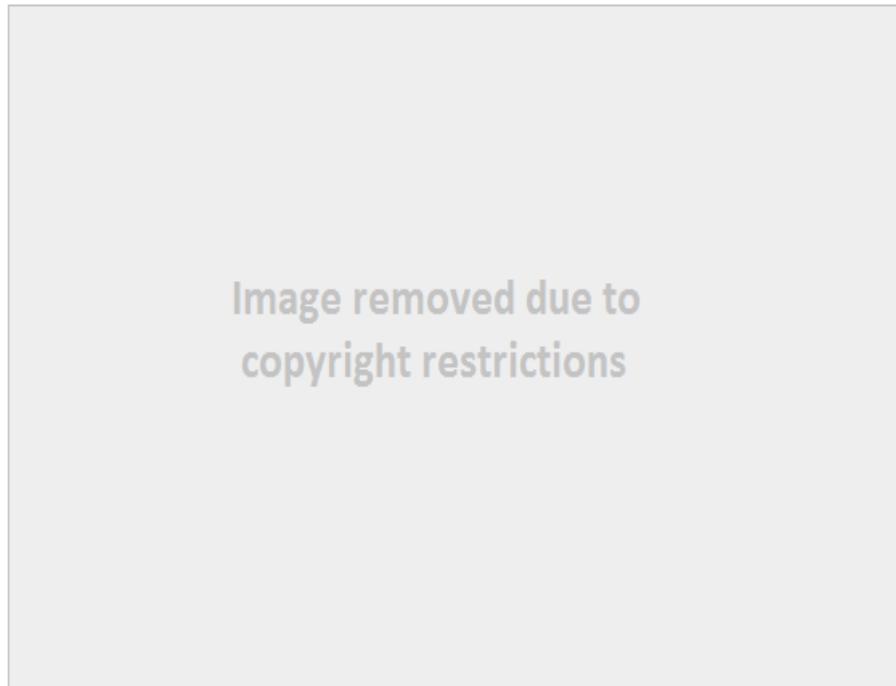


Fig. 0-14. Ole Worm's cabinet of curiosities, from "Museum Wormian", Leiden: ex officina Elseviriorum, 1655. Reproduced from Smithsonian Institution Libraries.

culture to be emulated by Peter the Great, in his attempt to establish Russia as an intellectual and cultural force on par with Western European cities. In 1727, he established the *Kunstkamera* in St. Petersburg, a magnificent museum built to display his 'bizarre collection of anatomical preparations, natural history objects, artificial curiosities, ethnographic rarities and "freaks of nature"'.¹⁰⁵ Dedicated to preserving natural curiosities and rarities, one of the most striking features of this substantial collection was his display of live human and animal oddities – a collection primarily formed in the first two decades of the eighteenth century by legally decreeing that all children and animals born with deformities be sent to the museum, dead or alive.¹⁰⁶

These live displays of human curiosities were also a regular sight in seventeenth and eighteenth century London. Itinerant showmen would commonly set up exhibitions of human and animal curiosities in taverns, inns or wherever pedestrian traffic was heavy,

¹⁰⁵ Anthony Anemone, "The Monsters of Peter the Great: The Culture of St Petersburg *Kunstkamera* in the 18th c.", *The Slavic and East European Journal* 44 (Winter 2000): 585.

¹⁰⁶ Anemone, "Monsters of Peter the Great", 12-15.

attracting mainly lower class citizens and provincial tourists seeking cheap amusement.¹⁰⁷ Many of these independent acts also flocked to the annual fairs to exhibit each year. Most important of these was the Bartholomew Fair in London, the biggest and longest-running fair in the country, which took place every summer between 1133 and 1855. In the words of Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who visited the fair in 1802, typical sights included:

All moveables of wonder, from all parts,
Are here – Albinos, painted Indians, Dwarfs,
The Horse of knowledge, and the learned Pig,
The Stone-eater, the man that swallows fire,
Giants, Ventriloquists, the Invisible Girl,
The Bust that speaks and moves it goggling eyes,
The Wax-work, Clock-work, all the marvellous craft
Of modern Merlins, Wild Beasts, Puppet-shows,
All out-o'-the-way, far-fetched, perverted things,
All freaks of nature...¹⁰⁸

The eclectic array of acts described by Wordsworth demonstrates the wide range of strange and alluring sights that could command a paying audience at these popular fairs. According to Richard Altick, although these jumbled fair offerings existed in the realm of popular amusement and were primarily patronized by the working class, the lure of human curiosities also attracted aristocrats and learned men. He claims that 'a common curiosity erased social distinctions'; although most were simply there to titillate their 'innate relish for the sensational, the mysterious and the grotesque', these acts also drew those with a genuine scientific interest in extraordinary bodies.¹⁰⁹

In addition to such live displays, the dead bodies of human and animal curiosities were often collected and studied in the context of anatomical and surgical museums. The turn of the seventeenth century witnessed an increasing interest in the collection of preserved body parts for cabinets, spurred by an increasing prevalence of dissection and

¹⁰⁷ Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge: 1978), 35. See also: Paul Semonin, "Monsters in the Marketplace: The Exhibition of Human Oddities in Early Modern England", in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), 69-81.

¹⁰⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1802), as quoted in Altick, *Shows of London*, 35-36.

¹⁰⁹ Altick, *Shows of London*, 36.

advances in preservation techniques, which enabled anatomists to store soft tissues in spirits long-term.¹¹⁰ In the eighteenth century, the values of the Enlightenment began to privilege a rational system of classification and a Linnaean taxonomy; from this, anatomy museums emerged from private cabinets as a distinct enterprise with a specialised set of exhibition practices. The gathering of curiosities became characterised by the spirit of Baconian philosophical inquiry, which prized material objects for their ability to reveal factual knowledge about the world; as such, museums became increasingly recognized as places of inquiry governed by methodological discipline.¹¹¹

Eighteenth-century anatomists still prized the unusual and deformed, but also collected large numbers of typical specimens, intended to create a comprehensive representation of the states of the human body, both healthy and diseased.¹¹² As Alberti describes, these were accompanied by images, text, and wax to render the diseased body legible (a concept I discuss further in Chapter Three in regards to a sculpture by John Isaacs in the Wellcome Collection). The chief motivation for these collections was didactic, and they were increasingly seen as key tools for the study of anatomy within a modern medical education. But the collection of preserved curiosities also operated as implements of professional self-fashioning: a way of establishing the credibility of the anatomist or surgeon by demonstrating his dissection skills, asserting his expertise of the human body, and showing off his ability to acquire and identify rarities.¹¹³

Freaks and the nineteenth-century exhibitionary complex

Although medical practitioners certainly continued to amass personal collections during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, private collections increasingly began to move into the public (or semi-public), merged into institutional collections of

110 Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities: Medical Museums in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13-14.

111 Arnold, *Cabinets*, 21-23.

112 Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities*, 14.

113 Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities*, 17; Arnold, *Cabinets*, 138.

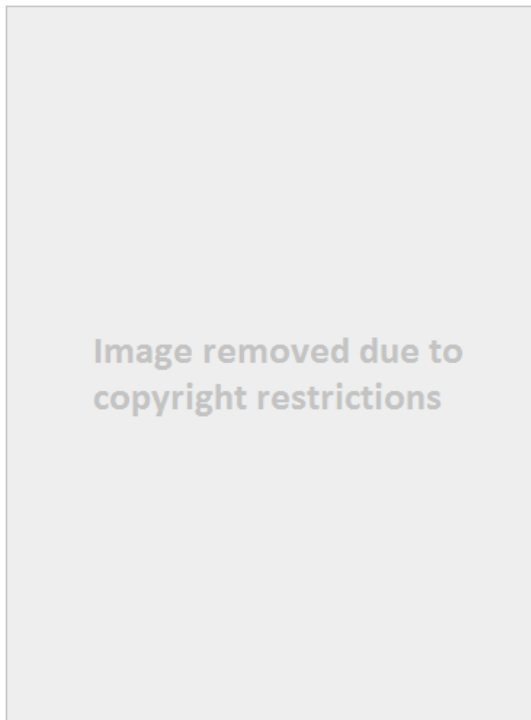


Fig. 0-15. Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist with his Museum*, 1822. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Reproduced from Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

royal colleges, learned societies, hospital museums, and universities. A good example is the anatomical collection of influential surgeon and anatomist John Hunter, whose substantial collection of pathological rarities was inherited by the Royal College of Surgeons in London in 1799, where it was eventually opened to the public in the form of the Hunterian Museum (introduced at the beginning of this chapter in relation to the work of Christine Borland).¹¹⁴ [Fig. 0-2]

However, the display of preserved human curiosities was by no means the exclusive domain of medical educators; the display of rarities, body parts and wax models often crossed into more commercial enterprises, in popular exhibitions of anatomical curiosities and fairground freakery.¹¹⁵ In America, for instance, the first public museum in the country was the Peale Museum in Philadelphia, created by painter and taxidermist Charles Willson Peale in 1786.¹¹⁶ [Fig. 0-15] Although his taxonomical approach departed from the eclectic magpiety of cabinets of curiosity, the museum did not lose interest in extraordinary bodies: in addition to collections of taxidermy, fossils, minerals and scientific gadgets, Peale also exhibited albinos and other

¹¹⁴ John Hunter (as well as his brother William Hunter, whose own collection would form the basis of the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Glasgow) accumulated one of the most important anatomical collections in eighteenth-century Britain, consisting of thousands of wet and dry preparations of human and animal anatomy. His collection is discussed as the heart of nineteenth-century medical museum culture by Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, who identifies a distinct body of literature that has grown around the lives and collections of each brother. See: Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities*, especially 17-18.

¹¹⁵ Durbach, *Spectacle*, 22-23.

¹¹⁶ Robert E. Schofield, "The Science Education of an Enlightened Entrepreneur: Charles Willson Peale and His Philadelphia Museum, 1784-1827", *American Studies* 30 (Fall 1989): 27- 28, accessed 17 August 2011, <https://journals.ku.edu/index.php/amerstud/article/view/2470/2429>.

human curiosities.¹¹⁷ Within a burgeoning museological culture that venerated systems of classification, anomalous bodies were studied in hopes they would provide insight into the natural ordering of humans and animals.

Tony Bennett describes the emergence of such institutions as part of the larger 'exhibitionary complex' of the nineteenth century, interconnected with the development of museums of art, history and natural science, dioramas, national exhibitions and arcades; spaces of representation shaped by the discursive foundations of newly emerging disciplines such as art history, archaeology, geology, biology and anthropology.¹¹⁸ Bennett describes the 'exhibitionary complex' as the sets of institutions which brought objects and bodies from private spaces into the public arena during the nineteenth century, where they 'formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power throughout society'.¹¹⁹ This is contrasted with Foucault's 'carceral archipelago' in which public displays of punishment were increasingly withdrawn from the public eye in the form of incarceration.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the museological interest in studying corporeal anomaly had merged with the long-running trend of exhibiting human curiosities at fairs and in taverns: most itinerant shows of human curiosities began to attach themselves to a commercial museum, enjoying the steady income it provided.¹²⁰ In America in particular, 'dime museums' became popular attractions for the nineteenth-century public, where live human exhibits starred as the main feature, alongside paintings, scientific devices, taxidermy, artefacts, lectures and performances.¹²¹ Originally established to be morally edifying institutions for the benefit of amateur scientists and betterment of the public, the

117 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 29.

118 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 59, 75.

119 Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 60-61.

120 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 30.

121 See: Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

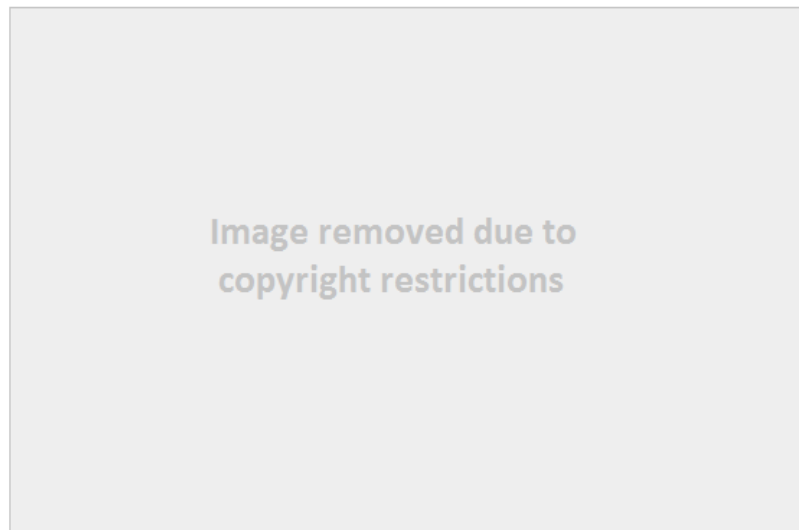


Fig. 0-16. Barnum's American Museum, New York City, 1869. Black and white print, 12 x 17 cm. Reproduced from New York Public Library Picture Collection.

curious displays of dime museums were justified alongside the development of educationally-modelled Victorian museums, established to 'better the masses'.¹²² Seizing on the amusement potential of these institutions, enterprising showmen like Phineas Taylor (P.T.) Barnum stepped in to transition dime museums into the world of popular entertainment using aggressive advertising techniques and over-the-top sensationalism.¹²³ The most famous example of this was Barnum's fashionable American Museum, established in 1841 in the heart of New York City. [Fig. 0-16] Until it burnt down in 1868, the American Museum was a première attraction in New York. Here, patrons could 'be educated and amused by scientific demonstrations, skits, magic shows, lectures, and ballets', in addition to viewing human curiosities like 'The Highland Fat Boys', 'The Swiss Bearded Lady', and an albino family.¹²⁴

¹²² For a history of the development of educationally modelled museums in the nineteenth century, see: Barbara Black, *On Exhibit: Victorians and Their Museums* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000). See also: Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 17-58.

¹²³ For biographical information on P.T. Barnum and his influence on the freak show and circuses in the nineteenth century, see: Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Struggles and triumphs; or, The recollections of P.T. Barnum* (London: 1882); A.H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: the Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., *P.T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman* (New York: Knopf, 1995); and Benjamin Reiss, *The showman and the slave: race, death, and memory in Barnum's America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹²⁴ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 32- 35.

Originally intended as educational institutions, dime museums were initially thought of as respectable institutions, and scientists and physicians would often visit the exhibits of human curiosities in order to study their medical conditions.¹²⁵ According to Bogdan, this helped to legitimise the general public's interest in deviant bodies, and freak shows would capitalize on this mindset by sometimes referring to the showman as 'professor', or by publishing endorsements from doctors, scientists and members of nobility.¹²⁶ Within the educational auspices of the dime museum, the freak show straddled the fine line between erudition and entertainment by claiming to offer something for the scholarly-minded observer.

However, by the 1870's, Barnum's commercial model of the dime museum had proliferated throughout America,¹²⁷ making human oddities a rare and valuable commodity. Because there was more demand than available freaks, showmen increasingly had to resort to fraud and fakery to compete.¹²⁸ Known as 'gaffs' within the entertainment world, fraudulent freaks included acts like faked Siamese twins or 'floating head' illusions. Although amusing, it was far more difficult to justify the educational value of gaffs. As the level of fraud climbed, dime museums were brought into disrepute, and 'respectable citizens' began to abandon them.¹²⁹ Dime museums, in a sense, collapsed under the weight of their own success.

Although dime museums did remain in existence until the early twentieth century,

125 For example, see J. G. Wood, "Dime Museums", *Atlantic Monthly* (June 1885), accessed 23 June 2011, <http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/lib/docs/2123.htm>.

126 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 27; Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 28.

127 The famed freak shows organized by showmen like P.T. Barnum in the mid-nineteenth century were located in the United States and, as a result, much of the freak show history written to date has focused on American manifestations of the freak show (see, for example, Bogdan, *Freak Show* 10-11; Garland-Thomson, *Freakery*, 4-12; and Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 10-16). However, Nadja Durbach has argued that by the mid-nineteenth century these freak shows were also commonly found in places like Victorian Britain, a product of the growing middle class and the growing demand for inexpensive popular entertainment. For the purposes of this thesis, my use of the term 'freak show' will not refer to any specific geographical location of it, but rather reference the common display conventions and recognizable marketing techniques shared by all of them. See: Durbach, *Spectacle*, 4-8.

128 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 37-38.

129 Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 15.



Fig. 0-17. Freak show banner painted by Fred E. Johnson, early twentieth century. Reproduced from Sideshow World.



Fig. 0-18. Freak show banner painted by the firm of Millard & Bulsterbaum, Coney Island, early twentieth century. Reproduced from Sideshow World.

albeit in a state of decline (as I discuss in relation to the work of Diane Arbus in Chapter One), the best acts left dime museums for freak shows in travelling circuses, which experienced their golden age in America from about 1840-1940.¹³⁰ Usually attached to larger institutions like circuses or carnivals, freak shows became an acceptable and popular form of amusement which developed recognizable conventions of display.¹³¹ For example, a strong-voiced lecturer (known as a 'talker' or 'blower'), would usually be stationed outside the freak show tent to lure in audiences with his exaggerated tales of the wonders they would encounter inside.¹³² Large, brightly-coloured bannerlines were fixed behind the talker, displaying distorted representations of the performers that maximized the sense of

¹³⁰ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 40-41.

¹³¹ In recent years, there have been a number of important critical texts analysing the history of freak shows, its conventions, and their socio-cultural significance. The grandfather of this work was Bogdan's 1988 *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, which laid out the historical conventions, performance types and associated figures in remarkable detail. Nearly all scholarship on the history of the freak show that has been produced since then has built upon this groundwork, and as such, my account of the freak show draws most heavily on his work. However, other important texts on freak show history include (among others): Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery* (1996); Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A...*; Thomas Richard Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination: Constructing the Damaged Body from Willa Cather to Truman Capote* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Marlene Tromp, ed., *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008); Michael M. Chemers, *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Durbach, *Spectacle* (2009).

¹³² Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 94, 101-102.

curiosity and wonder. For instance, a man with ectrodactyly¹³³ hands might be promoted by the freak show as 'The Lobster Man', with the banner depicting a half-man half-lobster creature. [Figs. 0-17 and 0-18] Fabricated background stories, added (or subtracted) inches to height, misrepresentations of gender, and exaggerations of animalistic qualities were all part of the standard hyperbole built into freak show descriptions.¹³⁴ (Such freak show conventions will be re-visited in Chapter One as part of my discussion of the work of Mat Fraser, and how his performances re-contextualise the exhibition practices of the freak show in order to challenge historical perceptions of the disabled body.) Susan Stewart has argued that, within the confines of the freak show, the actual authenticity of the freak was secondary to the *illusion* of authenticity:

...[T]he façade of the pitch or patter makes it of little significance whether the freak is authentic or not. It is the possibility of his or her existence that titillates; it is the imaginary relation, not the lived one, that we seek in the spectacle.¹³⁵

In other words, the pleasure of the curiosity is not located within factual authenticity: the appearance of authenticity is only important insofar as it provides a platform to suspend disbelief, and delight in the possibility that the monsters of our imagination have come to life.

Freak shows were not limited to the exhibition of those with physiological impairments. Within the entertainment business, freak show performers were generally separated into three main categories: 'born' freaks, 'made' freaks, and novelty acts.¹³⁶ 'Born' freaks are what people today most closely associate with freak shows. This category included performers who came by their condition naturally, either by being born with a physical anomaly or developing it later in life. Common types of born freaks included (but were not limited to): little people, giants, bearded women and uncommonly hirsute men,

133 The condition of ectrodactyly refers to the absence of one or more central digits, so the hand appears to be split down the middle like a lobster claw.

134 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 95-101.

135 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 111.

136 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 7-8.

human skeletons, extremely obese people, armless and legless wonders, people with extra body parts, albinos, conjoined twins, hermaphrodites, and people with various skin disorders. 'Made' freaks, on the other hand, were those whose unusual quality was created, such as tattooed people or those with exceptionally long hair. (The category of the 'self-made' freak will be interrogated in more depth in Chapter Two, in which I discuss the sculpture of Marc Quinn and how the voluntary pursuit of freakishness factors into notions of the ideal body in his work.) In the late nineteenth century, the category of 'made freaks' also included 'ethnic freaks': people with no physical anomaly who were exhibited for their racial differences. These performers were usually presented as the culturally strange inhabitants of exotic and mysterious parts of the world, with their ethnic differences exaggerated or fabricated through stereotypical costumes, behaviours and props. Finally, 'novelty acts' boasted an unusual performance or skill, such as sword-swallowing, snake-charming, fire-breathing or knife-throwing.

The popularity of freak shows sharply declined in the mid-twentieth century due to changing attitudes toward the display of disability and deformity, coupled with advances in surgical techniques and experimental drug therapies that 'medicalized' the curious body.¹³⁷ Because of this, novelty acts and 'self-made' freaks began to play a much more central role in the re-emergence of alternative freak shows at the end of the century (as I will discuss further in Chapter One).¹³⁸

Art and the history of exhibiting human curiosities

The freak show provides rich source material for those interested in the politics of representation because its frameworks of display are so anachronistic to the modern eye. By observing how freak shows categorized curious bodies and deliberately cultivated a sense of wonder around them, it seems obvious how a person with an unusual body could

¹³⁷ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 62-63.

¹³⁸ Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 220-228.

be transformed into a monstrous body in this context. However, rather than dismiss this as pure spectacle, recent artists and historians of the freak show have worked to glean the larger political, cultural and historical significance of these exhibitions, revealing the freak show as complex institution with far-reaching implications for perceptions of the body. As I shall discuss throughout Chapter One, some artists have purposely re-created the shock tactics of freak shows, re-contextualising its exhibition conventions it employs to challenge how meaning is created around non-normative bodies.

This encounter between the freak show and contemporary art is a somewhat surprising historical convergence, considering the developments of each institution. Although they both emerged as independent public institutions within the 'exhibitionary complex' of the nineteenth century, and their roots can be traced to the cabinet of curiosity,¹³⁹ the brash sensationalism of the freak show was historically positioned as the antithesis of the art gallery, with its higher aesthetic concerns and commitment to order.¹⁴⁰ This has, in part, been strategic on the part of art museums, which deliberately defined themselves in opposition to lowbrow amusements like the freak show during the nineteenth century. Bennett even describes the establishment of the modern museum as a process of differentiation, distinguishing itself from the chaos of its predecessors and the wonder of commercial exhibitions.¹⁴¹

For instance, in 1870 the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was deliberately established by the upper crust of New England society (the so-called 'Boston Brahmins') in order to separate fine art from the the distractions of 'bearded women and mutants' in the dime museums frequented by the working class.¹⁴² On the other side of the world, the

139 MacGregor, *Curiosity*, 237.

140 For this thesis both the American term 'art museum' and the British term 'gallery' will be used interchangeably to describe a public collection of fine art. Like my use of the term 'freak show', it does not refer to any specific geographical location, but references the common display techniques and institution conventions they share generally.

141 Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 1-3.

142 Jeremy Tanner, "Museums and the Social Construction of High Culture," in *The Sociology of Art*, edited by Jeremy Tanner (London: Routledge, 2003), 150-151.

National Museum of Victoria in Melbourne was founded in 1854 with a similar aim: to combat the influence of the annual visiting circus, which brought into the city 'a living nature that was showy and flashy, a nature that still pulsed to the culture of curiosity'.¹⁴³ To counter this spectacle, the museum strove to be an academically serious and rationally organized institution that appealed to higher reason, aesthetic taste and intelligence, consciously attempting to promulgate the dominant visual culture of the elite class.

Although it is perhaps not quite as glaring the freak show, the art gallery is not a neutral space either, with its own conventions framing the meaning of the human body. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, the art museum is also embedded within a set of values around the body, indebted to the influence of Neoclassical notions of the ideal which emerged in the eighteenth century. Of course, avant-garde artists throughout the twentieth century have challenged the values of the body within academic art, from evocations of the grotesque body within Dada and Surrealism through to the confrontational, abject nude within feminist performance art of the 1970s.¹⁴⁴ And since the middle of the century, contemporary artists have turned to the museum itself as a site of critical and creative intervention, in order to interrogate its arcane frameworks.¹⁴⁵

This thesis takes as its point of departure these forms of institutional critique as it converges with the history of exhibiting human curiosities. I address the work of contemporary artists who challenge the creation of monstrous bodies, looking at larger issues of how various institutional contexts frame their meaning. But I also ask how these artists propagate a tradition of exhibiting monstrous bodies by placing human curiosities

143 Bennett, *Pasts*, 14.

144 See: O'Reilly, *Body in Contemporary Art*, 11-14; Marta Makela, "Grotesque Bodies: Weimar-Era Medicine and the Photomontages of Hannah Höch," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, edited by Frances Connelly (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 193-219; Kristen A. Hoving, "Convulsive Bodies: The Grotesque Anatomies of Surrealist Photography," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, edited by Frances Connelly (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 220-240.

145 A detailed overview of artists who have drawn on the conventions and history of museums (art and otherwise) is provided in James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, revised edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009).

within the context of contemporary art. I begin with a discussion of Diane Arbus, whose work was instrumental in bringing freaks from the stage to the gallery, reinventing the traditions of freak show photography to focus on the vision of the artist. More recently, artists like Mat Fraser and Pauline Boudry & Renate Lorenz have used freak show material to shift focus back onto the politics of the curious body itself, through the frameworks of disability and queer identities. Investigating the notion of the artist-as-exhibitor, I address how contexts of display in the art museum and freak show can overlap to direct meanings around non-normative bodies.

I scrutinize the traditions of the art gallery more closely in Chapter Two, examining how notions of the 'self-made freak' and Neoclassical ideals converge in Marc Quinn's *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas*, a series of sculptures portraying real people who have deliberately altered their bodies in extraordinary ways. Looking at Neoclassical conventions of the body that have historically operated in art, I argue that their rejection of these values reveal a new ideal body for the modern age, which embraces artificiality and spectacle. I also discuss how Quinn's work uses art to legitimise the debates around the public display of their bodies, while simultaneously challenging its conventions. In Chapter Three, I turn to a single artwork in the Wellcome Collection in London – a wax sculpture by John Isaacs of a man engulfed by a monstrous tumour – in order to address how the framework of art and the medical museum create particular associations around the curious body. Discussing art's role in rendering the curious body legible in the space of the anatomical museum, I explore how the dynamic of this relationship has shifted through time, creating an overlapping set of meanings around the curious body presented in this work. Finally, in Chapter Four I discuss two photographs of a preserved head of a bearded woman taken by Zoe Leonard and Joanna Ebenstein, analysing how their respective practices frames the meaning of the bearded woman in

different ways. I describe photography as a form of preservation akin to taxidermy, which enabled them both to re-collect her unusual image in the context of their individual artistic practices, thereby infusing it with new meaning. In particular, I argue that their photographs capture the collection itself as an anachronistic curiosity, in order to expose its manner of framing the bearded woman's decapitated head. Together, these case studies provide an analysis of the conventions and contexts at play within representations of human curiosities in contemporary art. I discuss how they challenge the history of exhibiting monstrous bodies I have presented here, while also extending it into the present day.

CHAPTER ONE:

From the Freak Show Stage to the Art Gallery Wall (and Back Again)

Freaks and the context of display

An important concept that underpins this thesis is the notion that our understanding of monstrous bodies is inextricably entwined with the display contexts in which we encounter them. What happens, then, when the freak body moves from the freak show stage to the art gallery wall? This chapter looks at the use of freak shows in contemporary art to analyse the relationship between these two modes of framing non-normative bodies, by examining representations of freaks and freak shows in the work of Diane Arbus, Mat Fraser, and Pauline Boudry & Renate Lorenz. I examine how contexts of display in the art museum and freak show overlap to inform our understanding of and engagement with non-normative bodies. At its core, this chapter asks how the transition from freak to artistic subject (and back again) directs particular readings of these bodies, and how art can be analysed as another mode of exhibiting human curiosities.

A key concept in this discussion is the notion of 'freak' as a social construction. Simply put, freaks are not born. Although freaks were sometimes people born with unusual physical conditions, this alone did not make someone a freak.¹ In Robert Bogdan's

¹ Furthermore, the term 'freak' is not solely applied to those in the freak show who were born with physical anomalies; the term freak is also applied to performers who developed unusual conditions later in life, to performers who modified their bodies in unexpected ways, performers who demonstrated unusual skills, and those who played so-called 'ethnic' freaks.

influential study on the social construction of freaks, he gives the example of Jack Earle, an unusually tall college student who was invited by circus manager Clyde Ingalls to 'become a giant'.² As Bogdan describes, 'being extremely tall is a matter of physiology – being a giant involves something more. (...) “Freak” is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people.'³ A freak is the product of a freak show, created within its stylized conventions and display strategies. As a urinal is just a urinal until it is placed in an art gallery and becomes a work of art, a person with an unusual body is still just a person until they walk onto the freak show stage and become a freak.

But rather than consider the freak show stage in isolation, it is perhaps more constructive to consider the freak within a network of interactions between freak shows, freaks, and their audience. A person might have become a freak once they walked onto the freak show stage, but this transformation occurred, in part, because a spectator entered into a designated space with the expectation of a particular experience. Although independent, itinerant displays of 'monstrous births' were a common sight in places like fairgrounds from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, the phenomenon of the multiple-act freak show emerged as a recognizable exhibition practice around the 1840s. During this period, American showmen like P.T. Barnum began to organize these independent exhibits into formalized shows, usually attached to a circus, dime museum or travelling carnival. This formal organization and its attachment to the emerging popular amusement industry is significant because the repetition of stylized shows formed recognizable display conventions, where every detail was designed to enhance the bizarreness of the bodies on display.⁴

Firmly embedded in what Rachel Adams has termed 'the American cultural

2 Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 2-3, 25.

3 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 3.

4 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 10-11.

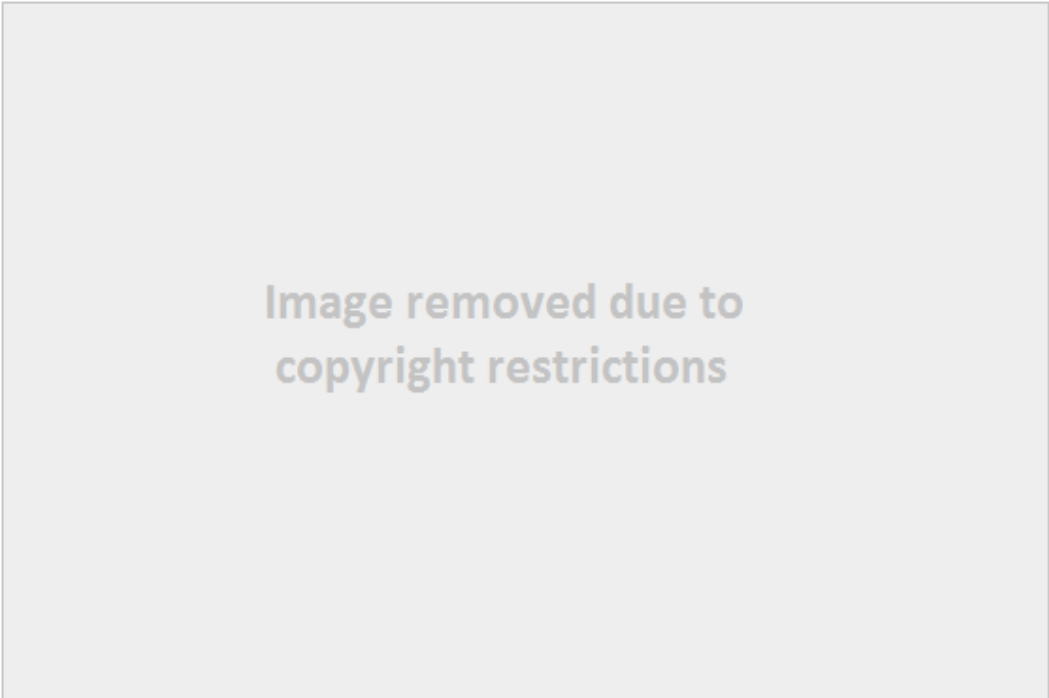


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copyright restrictions

Fig. 1-1. Photo postcard from the Congress of Living Freaks, Joyline Undercliff Circus, June 16-19, 1909. Photographer unknown. Reproduced from Sideshow History archives.

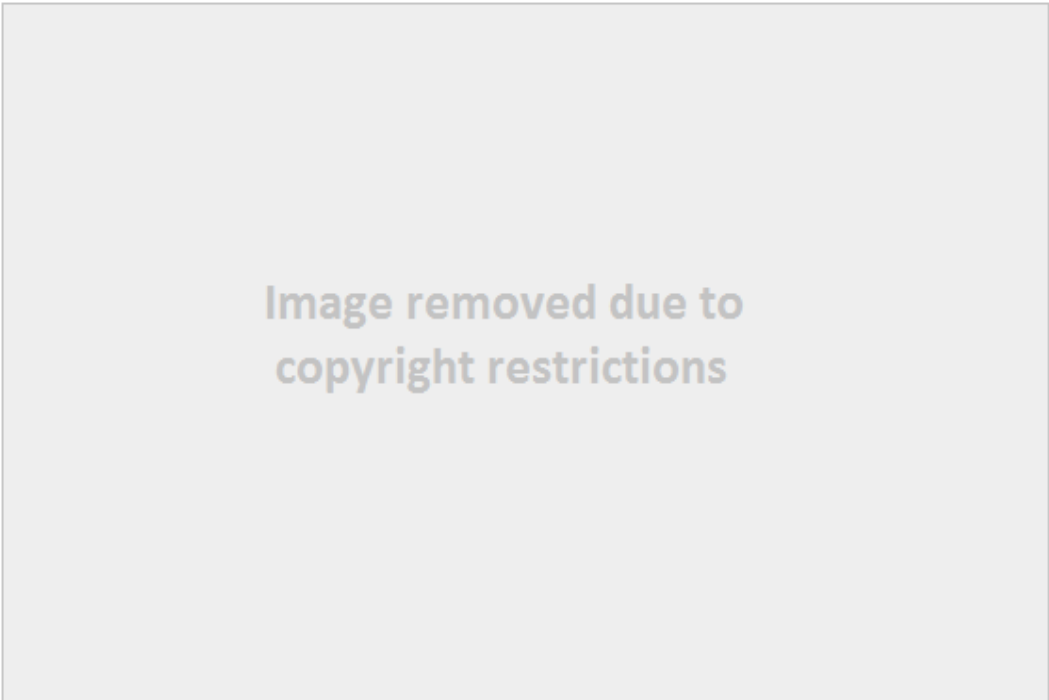


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copyright restrictions

Fig. 1-2. Edward J. Kelty, photograph of the cast of Congress of Freaks, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus, 1927. Private collection of Derin Bray, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Reproduced from "The Photographs of E. J. Kelty".

imagination' between 1840-1940, common knowledge of freak shows meant that the understanding of an anomalous body as 'freak' began to form before a spectator ever physically entered the freak show.⁵ Freaks began to form as a spectator read the outlandish posters and newspaper advertisements for the freak show, as they heard the sideshow 'talker' outside the tent proclaiming the wonders within, and as they saw the stylized banner-line with exaggerated visual depictions of the performers. [Fig. 1-1] As the spectator paid their entrance fee and stepped into the freak show tent, freaks were formed as the spectator observed the raised stage and exotic costumes, as they watched the theatrics of the freaks on stage, and as they purchased autobiographical pamphlets and *carte de visite* photographs from the performers. [Fig. 1-2] Describing these experiences as a set of entwined oral, visual and textual narrative forms, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has defined the freak show as 'an interlocking set of stylized, highly embellished narratives [which] fashioned unusual bodies into freaks within the formalized spaces of shows, museums, fairs, and circuses'.⁶ A freak show requires an audience; it is both a form of entertainment and a set of relationships between audience and performer, audience and freak show, and freak show and performer.

Today, the freak show is often dismissed as an exploitative, outmoded institution of the past, a far cry from the ethics and display practices of the contemporary art gallery or museum. Although recent scholars have argued for a more nuanced understanding of the freak show and its cultural and historical significance, its condemnation has been pervasive since the mid-twentieth century; an attitude which has greatly influenced modern modes of representing unusual bodies.⁷ For instance, a 2003 study on representations of disability in

5 Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (London: University of Chicago University Press, 2001), 2-15.

6 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), 5-7.

7 For example, Robert Bogdan (1988), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997), Rachel Adams (2001), Elizabeth Stephens (2005), and Nadja Durbach (2009) all call for a reconsideration of the freak show for its significance to both the histories of the disabled body and popular culture, questioning modern day

contemporary British museums revealed that the legacy of freak shows has directly impacted contemporary curatorial practices, causing curators to avoid displaying material related to unusual and disabled bodies for fear of perpetuating 'negative' forms of looking associated with the freak show.⁸ Nonetheless, representations of unusual and freak bodies have made their way into the art gallery in the form of performance, sculpture and installation over the last twenty years, often motivated by a desire to engage with critical discourses around corporeality.

Despite the hostility shown toward freak shows by museums, they share a basic schema in the way each space projects particular meanings onto the unusual bodies on public display. By thinking about the art gallery as a location where systems of interlocking narratives and expectations come together around art, we can observe similarly intertwined relationships between artwork, artist and viewer emerging within another regulated social space where corporeal deformity is on display. Although I certainly don't intend to argue that the relationship between freak/freak show and art/art gallery operate in perfect parallel to one another, in both cases our understanding of these institutions direct our experience of the objects we find within.

Writing on the conventions of the modern 'white cube' art gallery, Brian O'Doherty

assumptions about the one-way, exploitative nature of these shows. It should be noted, however, that these viewpoints are not without their critics: for example, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder criticize the academic interest in freak shows as perpetuating a harmful, curious form of looking under the guise of sociological knowledge-gathering. See: David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "Exploitations of Embodiment: Born Freak and the Academic Bally Plank", *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25:3 (Summer 2005), unpag., accessed 9 April 2011, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/575/752>. David A. Gerber has also questioned the validity of volition based on limited social options for disabled people who chose freak show careers. See: David A. Gerber, "The 'Careers' of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization", in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 38-54.

- 8 Richard Sandell et. al., "In The Shadow of the Freakshow: The Impact of Freakshow Tradition on the Display and Understanding of Disability History in Museums", *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25 (Fall 2005), accessed 15 April 2011, <http://www.dsq-sds.org/article/view/614/791%3f>. The research cited in this article was taken from a larger study undertaken in 2003 by the Research Centre for Museum and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester, which addressed the representation of histories of disability in UK museum and art gallery collections and exhibitions. See: J. Dodd et.al., *Buried in the Footnotes: The Representation of Disabled People in Museum and Gallery Collections* (Leicester: University of Leicester Research Centre for Museum and Galleries, 2004), accessed 19 December 2011, <http://hdl.handle.net/2381/33>.

observed:

[T]hings become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them. Indeed, the object frequently becomes the medium through which these ideas are manifested and proffered for discussion- a popular form of late modernist academicism ('ideas are more interesting than art').⁹

O'Doherty offers some examples of the physical elements which support the discursive aura of the art gallery – the white walls, ceiling lights, polished floors, etc. – but his emphasis rests on the ways that ideas are powerfully directed within the space so that even a firehose becomes an 'esthetic conundrum'.¹⁰ Emma Barker has likewise observed that the condition of being on display is fundamental to the cultural notion of 'art' in the Western world, and therefore bound up in the existence of the museum, its manner of imposing meaning, and the specialized modes of looking that it evokes.¹¹ Although the limits and conventions of the art gallery have been challenged by artists and theorists alike,¹² the most fundamental aspect of this argument remains more or less true: the way we understand the things we encounter within the art gallery is directed by the way we understand the function of the gallery itself. The invisible networks of communication formed between artist, artwork and viewer bring a multiplicity of meanings and gazes, but the nature of the exchange is guided by the process of display, and by the knowledge that it is operating within the rubric of art.

The systems of display which lead a freak show to produce 'freaks', and the art gallery to produce 'art' overlap in provocative ways when freaks are represented within contemporary art. In her study of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century freak shows in the American cultural imagination, Adams describes the freak show as a public stage for

9 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1976), expanded edition (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 14.

10 O'Doherty, *White Cube*, 15.

11 Emma Barker, *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 13.

12 A comprehensive survey of contemporary artists who have challenged the limits, conventions, authority, power dynamics and history of museums and art galleries can be found in James Putnam's *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* (2001), revised edition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009).

playing out many of the century's most pressing socio-political debates; a place where controversies around race, empire, sexuality, taste, and decency took the form of spectacular visual entertainment.¹³ As these represent some of the most significant themes in contemporary visual practice since the early 1990s, it is perhaps unsurprising that artists have turned to the freak show as a means of exploring constructions of the sexual, moral, cultural, historical and gendered body. For example, in a series of performances entitled *Undiscovered AmerIndiens* in 1992, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña challenged historical displays of the ethnic 'Other' in freak shows by dressing in exaggerated exotic costumes and living on display in a cage outside museums in Madrid, London, Irvine, Washington and Minneapolis.¹⁴ Evoking similar themes of racial identity and display, Renée Cox donned oversized artificial breasts and buttocks to channel Saartjie Baartman's famous freak show persona 'The Hottentot Venus' in her 1994 self-portrait *HOTT-ENTOT*.¹⁵ In *One Flew Over the Void (Balla perdida)* (2005), Javier Téllez drew on the spectacle of the circus sideshow in order to question the psycho-geographical borders between Self and Other, when he arranged a carnivalesque parade of residents of a Mexican mental institution, which culminated in the Human Cannonball being shot over the fence on the Mexican/US border between Tijuana and San Diego.¹⁶ And emphasizing the more macabre and grotesque aspects of the freak show, Joel-Peter Witkin has spent his artistic career creating transgressive photographic tableaux which draw upon historical freak show, medical and post-mortem photography to revel in the darkest human desires for disturbing imagery.¹⁷

13 Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 2-3.

14 See: Anna Johnson, "Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña," *BOMB Magazine* 42 (Winter 1993), accessed 13 January 2013, <http://bombsite.com/issues/42/articles/1599>.

15 This work is also credited as being part of a larger collaboration between Renée Cox and Lyle Ashton Harris, entitled *Venus Hottentot 2000*. See: Priscilla Netto, "Reclaiming the Body of the 'Hottentot': The Vision and Visuality of the Body Speaking with Vengeance in Venus Hottentot 2000", *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12 (May 2005): 149-163.

16 See: Steven Stern, "Javier Téllez," *Frieze Magazine* 116 (June-August 2008), accessed 3 October 2012, http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/javier_tellez/.

17 See: Ann Millett, "Performing Amputation: The Photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin", *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28 (2008): 8-42.

The term 'freak show' has also been co-opted in curatorial themes as a means of signalling otherness and oddity. In a show at Califia Gallery in Horazdovice, Czech Republic in 2009, for instance, curator Tony Ozuna adopted the name *Freak Show* to describe the way artists are seen as outsiders by regular townspeople; a 2007 exhibition at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art entitled *FREAKSHOW: An Unnatural History* artistically explored spectacular and bizarre elements of natural history museums; and a 2010-2011 exhibition curated by Sophie Lovell for Berlin's Helmrinderknecht Gallery displayed objects by contemporary designers who 'mutate' conventional methods of design.¹⁸ Although this is just a small sample of how freak show-esque themes and imagery have been incorporated into contemporary visual practice, the wide range of interpretations and re-presentations of the freak show demonstrate both its malleability and its potency as a recognizable symbol of difference.

One of the earliest artists to introduce this material into modern/contemporary art was Diane Arbus, the iconic 'photographer of freaks'.¹⁹ Arbus' square-format black-and-white photographs include a gambit of unusual characters, urban subcultures and social outsiders that appear strange and alienated under the gaze of her lens. Among Arbus' subjects were actual freak show performers from Hubert's Museum, a run-down New York dime museum which became an important early source of inspiration for her practice. Focusing on these images, I discuss Arbus's relationship to the dime museum freak show and its performers, charting it alongside her successful attempt to have her photography legitimized within the world of fine art. By doing so, I aim to demonstrate how the

18 *Freak Show* exhibition at Galerie Califia (Horazdovice, Czech Republic), curated by Tony Ozuna, 21 August- 21 November 2009, http://www.galeriecalifia.net/freak-show?set_lang=en; *FREAKSHOW: An Unnatural History* exhibition at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art (Gateshead, England), 16 May – 26 August 2007, <http://www.balticmill.com/whatsOn/past/ExhibitionDetail.php?exhibID=68>; *Freak show: Strategies for (Dis)Engagement in Design* exhibition at Helmrinderknecht Gallery (Berlin, Germany), curated by Sophie Lovell, 13 November 2010 – 29 January 2011, <http://www.helmrinderknecht.com/index.php/freak-show.html>.

19 Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 250. According to Bosworth, the moniker 'photographer of freaks' was given to Arbus by critics, and disliked by the artist.

integration of her work into the Museum of Modern Art signalled a shift in the interpretation of freak photography, shifting the focus from the bodies of the freaks to speculation about her conceptual intentions and the ethical relationship between subject and photographer.

Rachel Adams has suggested that Arbus' freak photographs can be seen as a bridge between two historical modes of presentation, ushering in a new era where anomalous bodies could be considered within the framework of the gallery rather than the freak show.²⁰ Building on this characterisation of Arbus' work, I look at two contemporary artists who re-visit the bridge that she built between the freak show and the modern art museum. First, I discuss the work of multidisciplinary performance artist and disability rights activist Mat Fraser, who has been re-creating the performances of freak show character 'Sealo the Seal Boy' since 2001, exploring a cultural heritage of the disabled body that informs perceptions of his own disabled body. Discussing how Fraser's personal relationship to this material has evolved over the last decade, this section addresses the way that freak shows have been re-imagined and re-staged in a contemporary context. I will argue that the understanding of Fraser's practice as art allows him to introduce an engaged discourse back into the freak show, forming a complex relationship with his audience which challenges traditional discourses around both the freak and the disabled body.

I then turn my attention to a video/installation by Berlin-based artists Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, entitled *N.O.Body*. Inspired by photographs of famous nineteenth-century bearded lady Annie Jones taken from freak show *carte de visites* and sexology textbooks, their work investigates the contexts of display around her unusual

²⁰ Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 120-137. It is also important to note that the art gallery is by no means the only mode of presentation that existed beyond the freak show; this thesis simply follows one such trajectory within the genealogy of exhibiting monstrous bodies which culminated in the representation of human curiosities in contemporary art.

body, exploring how Jones moves between freak, pathological and artistic contexts of display. Bringing the freak into dialogue with constructions of sex and gender, I discuss how their work uses laughter, time and historical photography to disrupt historical systems of representation around the bearded woman. I ask what it means to present the bearded woman as a freak, a medical case study and now, in the context of their work, as an artwork. Through the discussion of these three artists, I demonstrate how contemporary artistic representations of freak shows interrogate the contexts of display around the freak body while simultaneously contributing to a new mode of representation within the art museum.

Diane Arbus: Inviting Hubert's Museum into the Museum of Modern Art

Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot. It was one of the first things I photographed and it had a terrific kind of excitement for me. I just used to adore them. I still do adore some of them. I don't quite mean they're my best friends but they made me feel a mixture of shame and awe. There's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. I mean, if you've ever spoken to someone with two heads, you know they know something you don't. Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats.

- Diane Arbus, 1972²¹

Diane Arbus was born into an upper-middle class family in New York in 1926. She originally worked as a fashion photographer, finding early success conceptualising tableau-like 'idea pictures' within the photography business she and her husband Allan Arbus started in the early 1940s.²² After separating from her husband in the late 1950s, Diane

21 Diane Arbus, as quoted in the documentary *Masters of Photography: Diane Arbus*, directed by John Musilli (New York, NY: Camera Three Productions, 1972), Vimeo video, 29:25 (posted by Foto Parangolé, 8 October 2012: <http://vimeo.com/51029159>). A version of this quote is also included in *Diane Arbus: an Aperture Monograph* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1972), 3; however, this version of quote, which is most commonly cited, omits the line 'I mean, if you've ever spoken to someone with two heads, you know they know something you don't.'

22 Philip Charrier traces these 'idea pictures' within her early fashion photography career as prefacing the thematic approach which would characterise her later artistic career. See: Philip Charrier, "On Diane

Arbus began to pursue magazine photojournalism and establish herself as an artist, successfully publishing her explorations of urban sub-cultures in magazines like *Esquire*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Glamour*, and *The Sunday Times Magazine* between 1959 and 1962.²³ After winning a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship in 1963, seven of Arbus' photographs were purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which were then included in their 1964 *Recent Acquisitions* show. However, it was the inclusion of thirty of her photographs in *New Documents* in 1967 which cemented Arbus' place in the art world. Considered a landmark exhibition for the modern perceptions of art photography, *New Documents* was a group exhibition in which curator John Szarkowski intended to showcase how contemporary photography had evolved from the sociological documentary style of the 1930s-40s to a more personal and self-conscious use of the medium.²⁴ Exhibiting her work alongside Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, this important show helped establish Arbus as a 'legitimate' fine art photographer, placing her work within an artistic dialogue that pushed it beyond the concerns of commercial photography.

In advance of the *New Documents* exhibition, Arbus sent Szarkowski a three-page list of people she wanted him to invite to the opening on her behalf.²⁵ Included among the elite of the New York cultural scene – including Gloria Vanderbilt, Frank Stella and Anthony Perkins – were the names Charlie Lucas, the former manager of Hubert's Museum, and his wife Woogie, a snake charmer. Because *New Documents* included pictures of performers that Arbus had met at Hubert's Museum, Charlie and Woogie's inclusion on the invitation list was probably a simple gesture of gratitude to the man who had given her access to the world of the freak show. But it also signals an important shift

Arbus: Establishing a Revisionist Framework of Analysis”, *History of Photography* 36:4 (2012): 426, accessed 10 February 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2012.703401>.

23 Charrier, “Diane Arbus”, 426-427.

24 *New Documents* press release issued by the Museum of Modern Art (28 February 1967), MoMA Press Archives, accessed 30 January 2013, http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/3860/releases/MOMA_1967_Jan-June_0034_21.pdf?2010.

25 This typed invitation list is referenced in Gregory Gibson's *Hubert's Freaks: The Rare-Book Dealer, The Times Square Talker and the Lost Photos of Diane Arbus* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 2008), 58.

taking place within the traditions of representing the freak body, in which the art gallery began to take control over the presentation of the curious body. By inviting them into the domain of the art world, Charlie Lucas' role as freak show exhibitor is transformed into that of spectator; within the context of MoMA, his role in creating the freak show is secondary to Arbus' creation of the images. Examining the relationship between Diane Arbus and Hubert's Museum, I discuss how her photographs ushered the freak body into a new exhibition space which transformed their representation, meaning and content, framed with the context of Szarkowski's curatorial approach to photography at MoMA.

By the time Charlie and Woogie were invited to *New Documents* in 1967, Hubert's Museum had already closed down all of its live acts.²⁶ Established in 1926 on West Forty-Second Street in New York, by the 1950s Hubert's dime museum was a seedy, run-down establishment surrounded by shabby theatres, burlesque shows, cut-rate retail shops and chop-suey joints. In addition to the live freak show, patrons of Hubert's could also be entertained by Heckler's Flea Circus, magicians, dancers, a shooting gallery, game room and souvenir shop.²⁷ When Arbus encountered Hubert's in the late 1950s, it was run by the aforementioned Charlie Lucas, a seasoned freak performer who once made his living performing as an 'exotic savage' in 'African Village' exhibits at World Fairs in the U.S.A. and Canada.²⁸ [Fig. 1-3] His wife, Woogie, also performed at Hubert's as 'Princess Sahloo', working in the 'blowoff' room doing seductive dances with a live python.²⁹ Hubert's survived remarkably late into the twentieth century, still in operation thirty years after the end of the golden age of freak shows, and long after most other dime museums had shut their doors. Although there were still some seasonal sideshows in operation, by the 1950s

²⁶ Hubert's Museum shut down all its live acts at the end of 1965, although it stayed open as a run-down arcade until 1969. See: Gibson, *Hubert's*, 56.

²⁷ Gibson, *Hubert's*, 12-16.

²⁸ Gibson, *Hubert's*, 10-11.

²⁹ Gibson, *Hubert's*, 30-31. The 'blowoff' was an additional act which patrons encountered as they exited the freak show, in which customers could watch something sexy or grotesque for an extra fee. See also: Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 103-104.

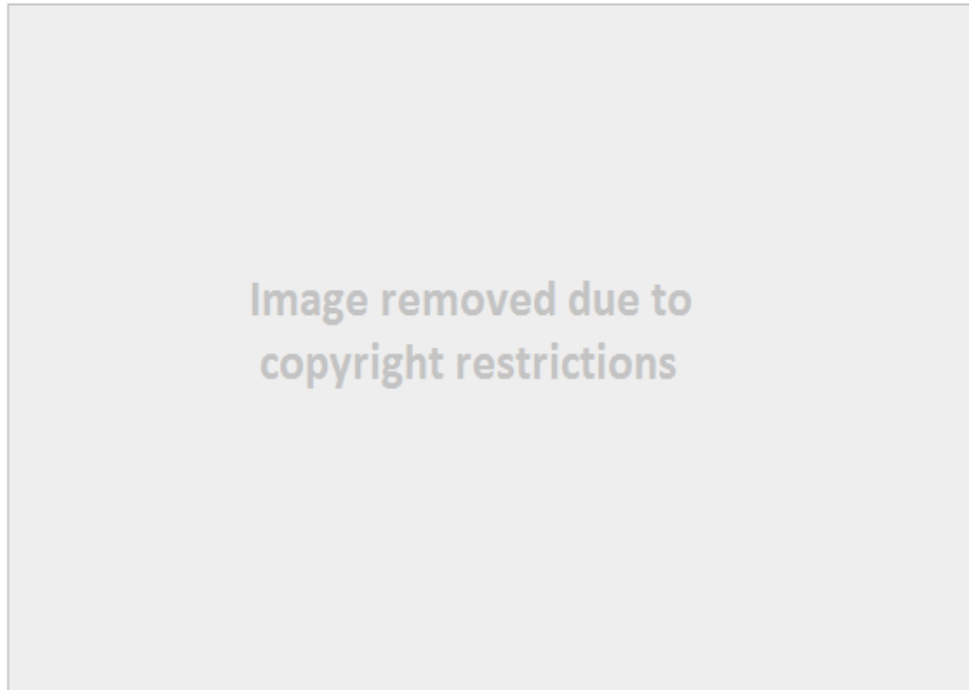


Fig. 1-3. Charlie and Woogie Lucas in exotic dress as “Woofoo and Woogie” for the Conklin Circus African Village at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, Canada, ca 1940-1950. Photographer unknown. Private collection of Bob Langmuir. Reproduced from “Hubert’s Freaks”.

the freak show industry had declined to the point that Hubert's was the only show open year round, and the only establishment of its kind in New York City. This lack of competition meant that Hubert's played host to the best known freak performers of the day: Eddie Carmel as the 'World's Tallest Cowboy', Stanley Berent as 'Sealo the Seal Boy', Andy Ratchoueff as 'Andy Potato Chips', Hezekiah Trambles as 'Congo the Jungle Creep', and the heavily tattooed Jack Dracula.³⁰ It was here at Hubert's that Arbus encountered some of the most recognizable faces in her photographs, such as giant Eddie Carmel featured in *A Jewish Giant at Home with his Parents in the Bronx, N.Y.C* (1970), Cha Cha in *Mexican Dwarf in His Hotel Room* (1970) [Fig. 1-4], Jack Dracula in *Jack Dracula, The Marked*

³⁰ Gibson, *Hubert's*, 24-29.

Man, NYC (1961), and *Andy Potato Chips in Russian Midget Friends in a Living Room on 100th Street, N.Y.C.* (1963).

It is unclear what first drew Diane Arbus to Hubert's, though she may have been introduced to the establishment by one of her first photography tutors, Lisette Model, who had previously taken some photographs there in the 1940s.³¹ However, the long-term relationship that Arbus developed with Hubert's Museum shows that she must have managed to establish a special trust with the establishment, which enabled her ongoing collaboration with them. Gregory Gibson has pointed out that photography was generally not allowed at Hubert's, nor were patrons permitted to fraternize with the performers.³² This tight regulation was a typical strategy employed by freak show managers intent on preserving the air of mystery and rarity through which they made their profit. The freaks of Hubert's made their living from the paid exhibition of their bodies and sale of their photographs: it would not be in their best interest to allow an outsider to control the circulation of their image.³³ This reveals something important about how Arbus and her photography project must have been perceived by Lucas and the other Hubert's performers: simply put, they must not have regarded her as a financial or cultural threat. Perhaps Lucas felt that the fine art audience she wanted to target were not the type to frequent the seedy vestiges of the freak show, or perhaps he realised that after more than three decades Hubert's was in its dying days. It is unknown whether or not Arbus paid for the privilege, but the fact that she was invited behind the scenes of the freak show at all is significant. As Arbus once said: 'Photography was a license to go wherever I wanted and to do what I

31 Lisette Model's photograph *Albert-Alberta, Hubert's Forty-second Street Flea Circus, New York* (1945) has been discussed in relation to Diane Arbus's practice by Rachel Adams, who characterises Model's work with Hubert's as an interest with constructions of sexual deviance, rather than the more direct interest in Otherness that Arbus demonstrates. See Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 124-126.

32 Gibson, *Hubert's*, 21.

33 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 89-93. As Bogdan has discussed, freak show culture cultivated a blatant hostility to those outside the circus world, viewing outsiders as 'rubes' who would cheat and ridicule them at any opportunity (and thus deserved to be taken advantage of).

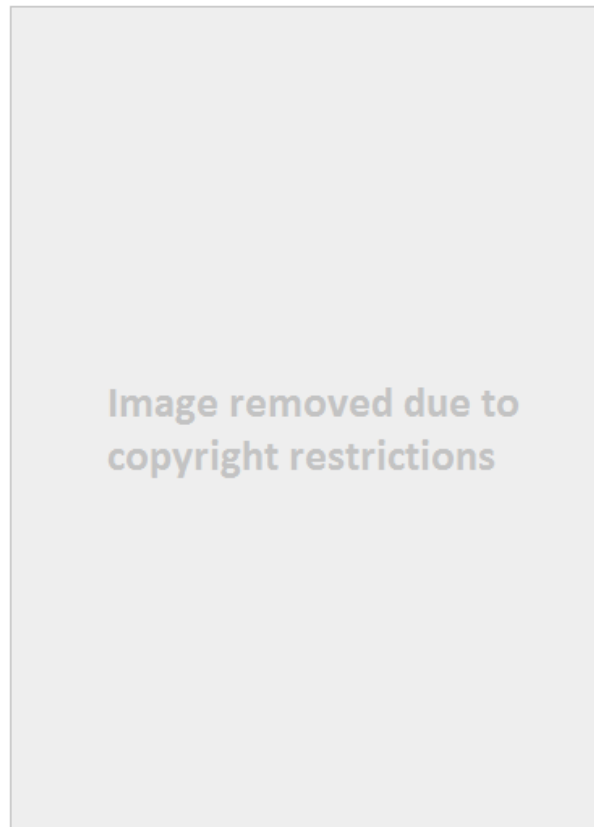


Fig. 1-4. Diane Arbus, *Mexican Dwarf in His Hotel Room*, 1970. Photograph on paper, 382 x 369 mm. Tate/National Galleries of Scotland, UK. Reproduced from *Masters of Photography*.

wanted to do'.³⁴ And, at least in the case of Hubert's Museum, her camera and role as an artist did indeed grant her unusual access to a highly regulated exhibition space.

Part of Arbus' motivation for photographing Hubert's performers was to capture the end of an American cultural tradition.³⁵ However, her approach to photography defies simple documentation of Hubert's Museum. In some ways, her photographs of freak performers re-package the conventions of freak show photography, connecting her practice to a photographic tradition that stretched nearly a hundred years before she ever set foot in

³⁴ Diane Arbus, as quoted in Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1977 (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 41.

Sontag criticizes Arbus' attitude to the access photography allowed her, arguing, 'The camera is a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photography from any responsibility toward the people photographed.'

³⁵ Arbus wrote an essay in 1966 entitled "Hubert's Obituary" which reveals her sentimentality over the end of this display tradition. The essay was re-published in Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus: Magazine Work*, ed. Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel (New York: Aperture, 1984), 80-81.

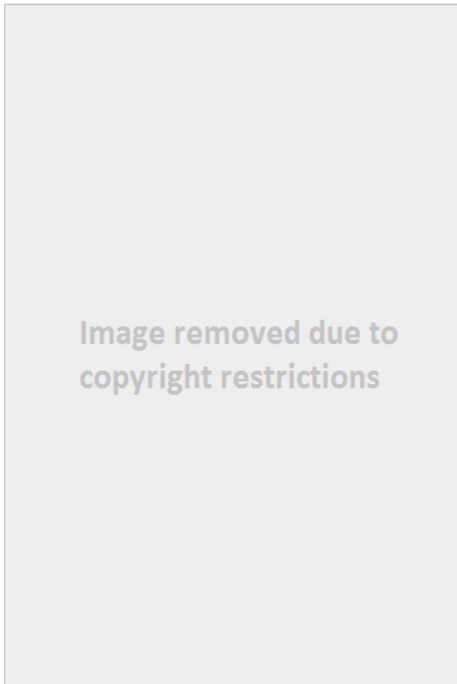


Fig. 1-5. Carte de visite of giantess Anna Swan with unidentified midget man, 1865. Photographer unknown. Ronald G. Becker Collection, Syracuse University Library. Reproduced from Syracuse University Library.

the dime museum. Freak show portrait photographs had been sold as part of the standard freak show repertoire as early as the 1850s, with the collection of freak *carte de visites* reaching craze levels by Victorian Americans in the early 1860s.³⁶ Adams has observed that the popularity of freak shows in the later half of the nineteenth-century corresponds with the popularisation of photography, suggesting that the circulation of freak show photographs worked as a mass promotional device.³⁷ Popular freak show acts posed for leading freak portraitists like Matthew Brady and Charles Eisenmann, who worked to emphasize the curiosity of their bodies through

the juxtaposition of extremes (such as posing a giant with a little person to emphasize their unusual size) [Fig. 1-5], the use of exoticizing props and backdrops [Fig. 1-3], the use of camera angles to exaggerate or diminish size, and the blatant doctoring of negatives (and so on). Elements of freak show photography can certainly be observed in Arbus' photographs of Hubert's performers, perhaps influenced by the context of the freak show that she encountered them within. For example, in her photograph *Jewish Giant At Home in the Bronx, N.Y.C.* (1970) Eddie Carmel is pictured towering over his diminutive parents, his unusual height emphasized by the physical mismatch with the ceiling height of the small apartment. [Fig. 1-6] Germaine Greer, who was photographed by Arbus in 1971, argues that Arbus is even more reductive than typical freak show photography, since at

³⁶ For a more detailed overview of freak show photography history and practices see Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 11-16 and Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 112-120.

³⁷ Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 113.

least traditional sideshow *carte de visites* listed the name and often a story about the performer, whereas Arbus reduces her subjects to 'generic phenomena' such as 'Jewish Giant', 'Russian midgets', and 'Tattooed Man'.³⁸

Furthermore, at least one subject from Hubert's – tattooed man Jack Dracula – claimed that Arbus embellished details about him in order to give her photograph an air of drama. Arbus photographed Jack Dracula in 1961, resulting in *Jack Dracula, The Marked Man, N.Y.C.* (1961), which was subsequently published in *Harper's Bazaar* alongside an essay she wrote about him. [Fig. 1-7] Jack claimed that Arbus falsely described him as a Satanic worshipper who lived in isolation with a pet bird named 'Murderer', details that she had completely fabricated about the life of the (relatively normal) circus performer.³⁹

Playing off early stereotypes of the tattooed body as the ultimate marker of criminality and primitivity, these exoticizing details could be seen as a way of enhancing the strange excitement of Arbus's photograph, borrowing upon freak show techniques of fabricating the background stories of performers in order to accentuate their Otherness. Susan Sontag described Arbus' interest in freaks as 'a desire to violate her own innocence, to undermine her sense of being privileged, to vent her frustration at being safe'.⁴⁰ By cultivating a sense of deviance and danger in her description of Jack Dracula, Arbus makes her photographic encounter with him seem thrilling and transgressive. By getting down on the ground with Dracula to photograph him laying shirtless in the long grass, Arbus mimics the freak show's presentation of the wild, tattooed 'savage', which gave audiences a controlled thrill in the form of a live encounter with a 'dangerous' or 'exotic' Other.⁴¹ Although really just

38 Germaine Greer, "Wrestling with Diane Arbus", *Guardian* (8 October 2005), accessed 23 May 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2005/oct/08/photography>.

39 As recounted in an interview between Jack Dracula and Bob Langmuir, a collector and rare-book dealer who was responsible for tracking down the original Arbus photographs of Hubert's Museum, in Gibson, *Hubert's*, 116.

40 Sontag, *On Photography*, 43.

41 For an in depth treatment of the ethnographic presentation of the 'wild man', 'primitive', and 'savage' in freak shows, and their impact on cultural attitudes toward class, ethnic and racial otherness, see: Nadja Durbach, "Chapter Five: 'When the Cannibal King Began to Talk': Performing Race, Class and Ethnicity," in *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 147-170.




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Fig. 1-6. Diane Arbus, *A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y.C.*, 1970. Gelatin-silver print, 15 x 15 inches. The Ralph M. Parsons Photography Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Reproduced from the Museum of Contemporary Art.

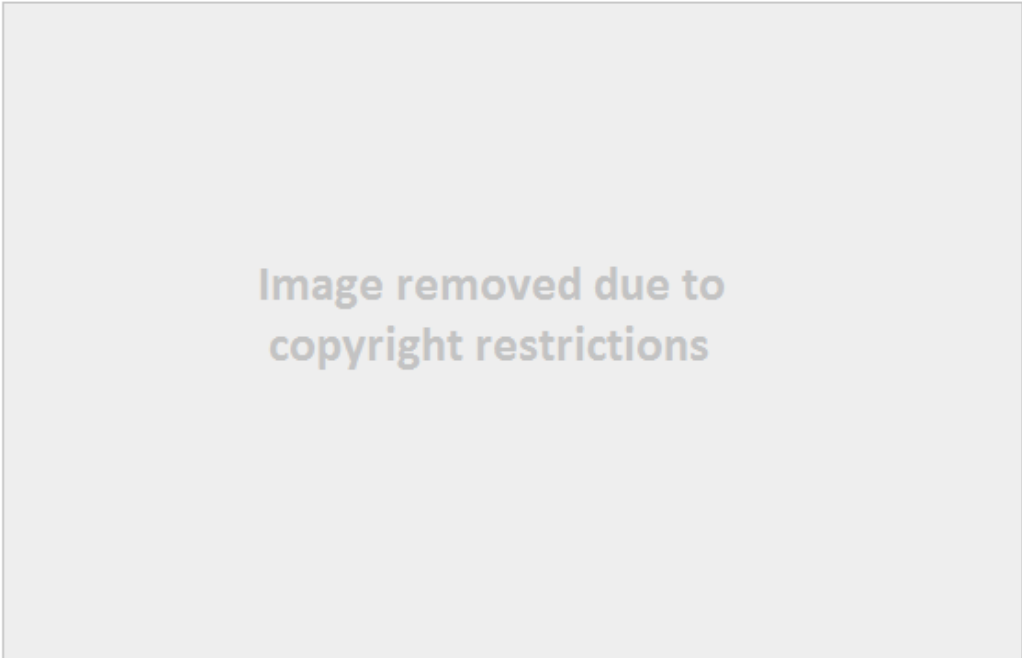


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Fig. 1-7. Diane Arbus, *Jack Dracula, the Marked Man, N.Y.C.*, 1961. Gelatin silver print, 119 x 172 mm. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas. Reproduced from the Spencer Collection.

created for the sake of the display, this results in the formation of a complex subject-photographer relationship where she simultaneously creates and confronts the monstrous body.

Although, in some ways, Arbus' photographs of freak show performers reiterate conventions of freak show photography, she also deviates from them. Perhaps most significantly, several of her most prominent photographs of Hubert's performers were not photographed in the dime museum, but in un-staged domestic settings. For instance, *Russian Midget Friends in a Living Room on 100th Street, N.Y.C.* (1963) shows Hubert's performer Andy Potato Chips (Andy Ratchoueff) posed alongside two other little people in a modest living room. [Fig. 1-8] The room is filled with worn furniture and the cosy clutter of a typical household, such as personal photographs tucked into the mirror, house plants, and a newspaper; a far cry from the contrived studio sets that characterise typical freak photography. After a career spent on a public stage, Ratchoueff has invited Arbus into his private domain. Here, at home, Ratchoueff wears street clothes instead of a costume, does not don a freak show persona like his character 'Andy Potato Chips', and sits among friends whose shared body type defines the norm for the space. Invited into their domestic space, it is Arbus' body that is unusual and alien.

In her critical biography of bearded woman Jane Barnell (1871-1951), Erin Naomi Burrows stresses the importance of these domestic spaces for freaks who performed at Hubert's Museum. Barnell, who went by the stage name 'Lady Olga', was an esteemed freak show performer who spent the majority of her career in high-profile travelling sideshows. After a life lived in train cars and hotel rooms, securing regular work at Hubert's Museum in New York City in the late 1930s enabled Barnell to procure an apartment and settle into a comfortable domestic routine, becoming very private and protective of her hard-won sense of home.⁴² Like many freak show performers, Barnell

42 Erin Naomi Burrows, "By the Hair of Her Chin: A Critical Biography of Bearded Lady Jane Barnell"

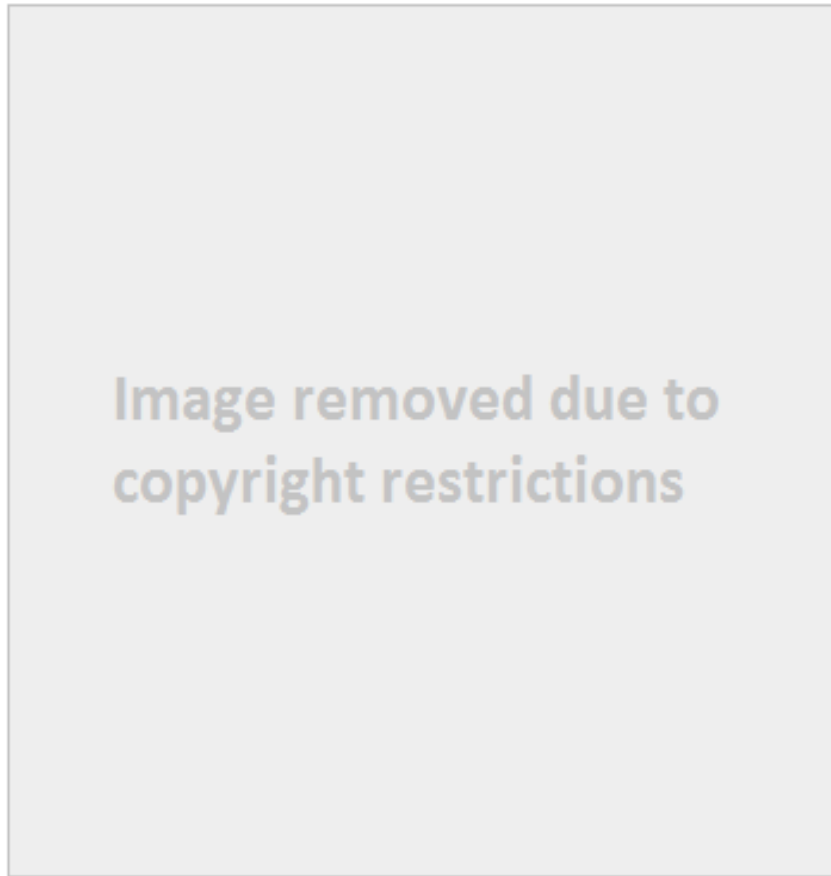


Fig. 1-8. Diane Arbus, *Russian Midget Friends in a Living Room on 100th Street, NYC*, 1963 (printed 1972). Gelatin-silver print, 50.8 x 40.64 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California. Reproduced from LACMA collections.

chose to live in an apartment building occupied by other circus folk, finding comfort in the sense of community and normalcy it provided.⁴³ In 1961, Arbus tried unsuccessfully to track down Jane Barnell (who was, unfortunately, already dead) in order to take her photograph, showing that her primary interest in was not the freak show itself, but in the lives of freaks beyond the stage.⁴⁴

The domestic setting of Arbus' photographs takes on special significance in the context of the final years of Hubert's Museum, a time where people who made their career as freaks were transitioning back into life in the 'real world'. When *Russian Midget Friends*

(Master's thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2009), 83-85.

43 Burrows, "Jane Barnell", 82.

44 Burrows, "Jane Barnell", 87.

in a Living Room on 100th Street, N.Y.C. was taken in 1963, Hubert's Museum was only two years from closing, drying up work as a freak performer. Posed in a middle-class domestic setting, the little people in this photograph are dislocated from the sideshow, the institution which made them into freaks. Without the freak show to frame their identities, the domestic setting emphasizes the vulnerability of the 'freak' framework during this historical period. Arbus' invitation into the homes of freak performers also speaks to the long-term relationship she built up with many Hubert's employees: although she initially visited the dime museum in 1956, many of her most recognizable photographs of the performers there were not taken until years later, inside their homes and other private spaces. Her photograph of Eddie Carmel, for example, was taken in the living room of his family home in 1970, fourteen years after her first visit to Hubert's Museum. [Fig. 1-6]

However, rather than use the domestic setting to normalise the Hubert's freaks, I would argue that Arbus's larger body of work instead places them alongside all the other types of 'freaks' she found in the world. In other words, instead of re-positioning Hubert's performers as *not freaks*, Arbus photographs instead reveals *everyone* as a potential freak. At a historical moment when the freak show was experiencing its dying days, the private settings of Arbus's photographs show the freak show performers re-integrated into a society already peppered with strange people. Although Arbus showed a taste for subcultures whose bodies or habits marked them as Other – freaks, drag queens, nudists, etc. – she did not limit her photographic interest to those whose appearance or habits automatically conferred outsider status upon them.

Take, for example, one of Arbus's most compelling and iconic photographs, *Child With Toy Hand Grenade* (1962). [Fig. 1-9] This gelatin-silver print depicts a knobby-kneed young boy in Central Park, holding a toy hand-grenade in his tensed hand and donning an amusing expression of frustration. Arbus captured the young boy in the split-second where



Fig. 1-9. Diane Arbus, *Child with Toy Hand Grenade*, 1962. Gelatin silver print, 39.4 x 38.3 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Reproduced from Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

his face is contorted in a bizarre expression with his mouth muscles clenched and his eyes wide, making his skinny legs, dishevelled outfit, and choice of toy seem strange and alien. In *Revelations: Diane Arbus* – a collection of Arbus's images, letters and notes compiled posthumously by her daughter Doon Arbus in 2003 – the editors include a copy of the contact sheet from this photo shoot, showing the young boy in a dozen alternative poses.⁴⁵ [Fig. 1-10] Examining these images in comparison to the final chosen photograph, it is remarkable how ordinary the boy appears in every other picture. It is clear that the artist directs the boy through the photograph, subtly adjusting his location, pose and expression until she achieves the look of bizarre unfamiliarity that the final image expresses. As this

⁴⁵ Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel, eds., *Diane Arbus: Revelations* (New York: Random House, 2003), 164.



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Fig. 1-10. Diane Arbus, contact sheet for *Child With Toy Hand Grenade*, 1961. Reproduced from *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, edited by Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel (New York: Random House, 2003), 164.

demonstrates, Arbus' role in the creation of her photographs is paramount. She does not stumble upon these characters accidentally but *creates* them, selecting and crafting the final image that the viewer encounters.

The idea of photographer as creator was passionately advocated by John Szarkowski, who also played an important role in establishing Arbus' career as an artist. Within the scope of his role as Director of the Photography Department at the Museum of Modern Art between 1962 and 1991, Szarkowski influentially championed a perception of photography as determined by the process of selection, emphasizing the subjective role of the photographer in the creation of an image.⁴⁶ Outlining the pictorial language of photography as a unique medium based on selection rather than synthesis, Szarkowski shifted discussions of photography from a technical to a conceptual virtuosity, grounded in the unique vision of the photographer. For instance, in the catalogue essay for an exhibition of American landscape photography in 1963, Szarkowski accentuates the importance of the photographer over the subject matter:

Photography was unmasked, and shown not to be a faithful witness but an interpreter. The subject would now tend to become not the reason for the picture, but its pretext; the picture's first function was to reveal the *photographer*.⁴⁷

In what Douglas Crimp has described as a fundamentally modernist position, Szarkowski presented a view of art photography that privileged the vision of the artist and the practice of photography itself over the subject of the image.⁴⁸ With this shift in focus from subject matter to photographer during the 1960s and 1970s, photographs stopped being portraits *of* something and started to be portraits *by* someone; an important conceptual shift that is largely credited to Szarkowski's influence during this period.

The significance of this for the career of Diane Arbus is two-fold. First, this

⁴⁶ See, in particular, John Szarkowski's introduction to *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966). See also: Sontag, *On Photography*, 188-189.

⁴⁷ John Szarkowski, *The Photographer and the American Landscape*, ed. John Szarkowski (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963).

⁴⁸ Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, 1993 (London and Cambridge, Mass.: 1997), 72-75.

framework of photography separates Arbus' photographs from earlier freak show photography by shifting the primary concern from the freaks themselves and onto the vision of the artist: her photographs of Hubert's are most importantly made *by* Diane Arbus rather than pictures *of* freak show performers. Second, Szarkowski played a key role in Arbus' integration into the art world, perhaps recognizing her work's potential to substantiate his vision of contemporary photography. In 1962, after failing to publish a number of thematic photo-essays she was working on, Arbus decided to pursue funding from the Guggenheim Foundation, looking for stable financial support to pursue her 'personal' photography interests free of commercial constraints.⁴⁹ For the application, Arbus collected letters of support from Lisette Model, Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, and Robert Frank (among others), whose collective endorsement was crucial in establishing Arbus as a legitimate artist, rather than 'just' a photojournalist. As part of the application process, Arbus submitted her portfolio to Szarkowski at MoMA, hoping to solicit his support for her Guggenheim grant application. Although not initially impressed with her work, which in the early days had a grainy snapshot quality, Szarkowski was drawn to the vision and personality of the artist, and encouraged her to find a way to 'resolve' her images.⁵⁰ Szarkowski arranged the purchase of seven of her photographic prints for the MoMA collection in 1964, her first museum sale. The integration of her work into the formal space of the art museum further legitimized her position in the art world, and the support from Szarkowski validated her creative vision as an artist. In the press release for the *New Documents* exhibition in 1967, the importance of her vision as an artist is emphasized:

The portraits of Diane Arbus show that all of us – the most ordinary and the most exotic of us – are on closer scrutiny remarkable. The honesty of her vision is of an order belonging only to those of truly generous spirit.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Charrier, "Diane Arbus", 427.

⁵⁰ Szarkowski recounts his initial dislike of Arbus' portfolio in an interview with Hilton Als, "Looking at Pictures", *Grand Street* 59 (Winter 1997): 108.

⁵¹ Press release for *New Documents* issued by the Museum of Modern Art (28 February 1967), accessed 30 January 2013, MoMA Press Archives, http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/3860/releases/MOMA_1967_Jan-June_0034_21.pdf?2010.

And, indeed, it is Arbus' vision that took primary importance both in the *New Documents* exhibition and in the way we still understand her photographs. Cementing her place in the art world, *New Documents* also helped to usher in a way of seeing Arbus' photographs as her creative vision, instead of mere visual documentation.

Of course, the laudatory description of Arbus' work included in the *New Documents* press release was not an opinion shared by all. Most notably Susan Sontag wrote a scathing essay about Arbus' work, partly in response to the overwhelming audience attendance at her 1972 MoMA retrospective.⁵² Denouncing the artist's choice of subject matter on moral grounds, Sontag compared Arbus's photographs to pornography and images of extreme violence, arguing that repeated exposure to this type of 'horrible' imagery would lead to the moral degradation of society.⁵³ In Sontag's view, Arbus' photographs 'lined up assorted monsters and borderline cases' to assert the otherness of the normal/other dichotomy set up by the freak show as a form of entertainment.⁵⁴

Reception to Arbus' work still tends to be polarized, with Sontag's harsh criticism continuing to impact the reception and discussion of her work.⁵⁵ Recently, several writers have even attempted to unpack the complex theoretical relationship between Sontag and Arbus, and its continued influence on the reception of Arbus' work. Calling them the 'Siamese twins of photographic art', Lisa A. Baird has argued that Arbus showed a complex interest in the subtleties of the subject-photographer relationship, which is also an over-

52 Susan Sontag's original essay, "Freak Show" was included in a collection of essays on photography for the *New York Review of Books* in 1973, and later reprinted as part of *On Photography* (1977) in a chapter called "America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly." All references to the essay included in this thesis refer to the version published in *On Photography* in 1977.

53 Sontag, *On Photography*, 33-39.

54 Sontag, *On Photography*, 32.

55 Ann Millett-Gallant has argued that the critical reception of Arbus' work tends to fall into two categories: those who follow Sontag's lead to criticize the work as exploitative and/or grotesque, and those seduced by the pleasure of looking at people whose bodies mark them as unusual. As she points out, reactions to Arbus' work (especially the mobilisation of terms like 'deviant', 'grotesque', and 'freakish') tend to reveal more about the person using the label than it reveals about the subjects themselves. See: Ann Millett-Gallant, *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010), 114-115.

arching concern throughout Sontag's body of writing.⁵⁶ David Davies also contests the ethical and psychoanalytical component of Sontag's criticism, arguing that her reading of Arbus' work is over-concerned with Sontag's own perceptions of the subject matter, and doesn't pay adequate attention to Arbus' manner of artistic representation.⁵⁷ Echoing Szarkowski's presentation of Arbus's photographs, these perspectives all firmly ground Arbus in a (post)modernist view of photography which concerns itself with the conceptual intentions of the creator. Whether lauded or castigated for her choice of subject matter, Arbus is nonetheless regarded as morally and artistically responsible for the outcomes of her photography; her work is firmly entrenched in the discourses of the art world, and not discussed as documentation or traditional freak photography.

By 1965, all of the live acts at Hubert's Museum had closed down. Although one of the very last hangers-on of the nineteenth-century freak show tradition had closed its doors, interested viewers could still see the Hubert's performers on public display at the Museum of Modern Art, thanks to Diane Arbus. However, upon entering the space of the art gallery, the freaks in her photographs are no longer seen as they once were at Hubert's. Framed as more than mere documentation of a bygone institution, the bodies of the freaks in these images are discussed in relation to Arbus's vision, intention and morality. When Charlie Lucas invited Arbus into the freak show to photograph its performers, she was given access to an elite cultural space governed by a highly stylized set of conventions; when Arbus invited Charlie to the opening of *New Documents* at the Museum of Modern Art, she did the same for him. Here, the art gallery changes the nature of discussion around the freak body, but its presentation is still constructed by a system of conventions perpetuated by cultural insiders. As Arbus was accepted into the institution of the art museum, she brought

56 Lisa A. Baird, "Susan Sontag and Diane Arbus: The Siamese Twins of Photographic Art", *Women's Studies* 37 (2008): 971-986.

57 David Davies, "Susan Sontag, Diane Arbus, and the Ethical Dimensions of Photography", in *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011), 211-229.

the freak body along with her, moving the Hubert's performers from the freak stage and onto the gallery wall.

Performance and contemporary freak shows: Mat Fraser as Seal the Sealboy

Diane Arbus may have played a significant role in bringing freaks from the freak show stage to the gallery walls, but that didn't mean they stayed there. Although she was, in part, inspired to photograph the performers of Hubert's Museum in order to document the decline of an American cultural institution, the freak show never really disappeared.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth-century, the freak show survived in seedy circus sideshows and popular imagination, immortalised in photographs, the collection of sideshow memorabilia and representations of freaks in film and literature.⁵⁸ Elizabeth Stephens has suggested that the frequent prediction of its impending extinction – and the associated sense of nostalgia – is part of an in-built narrative of decline within the freak show, which capitalizes on the appeal of scarcity and sentimentality.⁵⁹ She argues that re-invention is a key part of the success of this narrative of decline; by constantly re-inventing themselves and their acts, and positioning themselves as the 'last' and 'once-in-a-lifetime' events, freak shows are able to maintain the sense of rarity that is essential to their continued appeal.

Far from disappearing, Stephens and Adams have both argued that freak shows have re-emerged in recent years, with groups like the *Tokyo Shock Boys*, *Circus Amok* and the re-invented Coney Island freak show attracting new audiences across America and

58 Examples of film and literary representations of freaks/freak shows include: Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) (which was re-released in the 1960s, reaching cult film status in the 1970s-80s); David Lynch's highly acclaimed film *The Elephant Man* (1980); Katherine Dunn's novel *Geek Love* (1989); and the queer fiction of Carson McCullers.

59 Elizabeth Stephens, "Twenty-First Century Freak Show: Recent Transformations in the Exhibition of Non-Normative Bodies", *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25 (2005), accessed 2 April 2011, <http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/580/757>.

Europe.⁶⁰ These niche fairground events have also crossed over from fringe entertainment into mainstream television, with the recent introduction of shows like *Freakshow* (2013-present), a reality TV series that follows the lives of freaks working in the Venice Beach Freakshow in California.⁶¹

However, despite this re-emergence, the freak show no longer exists in the same form it once did. Although today's freak shows often try to shock audiences by drawing on the outrageous display techniques of traditional freak shows, they have nonetheless had to re-invent the traditional form in order to be acceptable by today's standards. People with mental impairments, for example, are never exhibited as they once were in traditional freak shows, and even those with extreme physical anomalies are rather rare. Instead, the contemporary freak show has moved more toward 'made' freaks such as people with unusual body modifications or those who perform astonishing skills.⁶²

Most importantly, however, contemporary freaks shows are usually self-aware and politically engaged, ironically re-constructing the conventions of this contentious institution. One notable example is *Circus Amok*, whose self-stated mission is to bring 'free public art addressing contemporary issues of social justice to the people of New York City'.⁶³ Directed by feminist/queer activist and bearded lady Jennifer Miller, *Circus Amok* stages free public shows which combine traditional circus arts with modern dance, song and comedy with activist messages:

Clowns break into a hula-hoop routine to decry tax loopholes... We watch a soaring acrobatic treatise against entitlement cuts called the Disappearing Safety Net Act...The knife-throwers are reciting statistics of the AIDS crisis...⁶⁴

Among the acts is Miller herself, wearing exaggeratedly frilly dresses and a full beard,

⁶⁰ Stephens, "Freak Show", unpag.; Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 210-228.

⁶¹ *Freakshow* (TV series), produced by Greg Johnston and Todd Ray (AMC Network, 14 February 2013-present).

⁶² Stephens, "Freak Show", unpag.

⁶³ "Circus Amok: About Us," *Circus Amok* website, accessed 12 April 2011, <http://www.circusamok.org/about>.

⁶⁴ "Circus Amok: About Us."

juggling and eating fire while delivering a sideshow-style spiel about feminism or queer politics.

Positioning themselves as political performance artists rather than popular entertainers, Susan Monagan has argued that Jennifer Miller and *Circus Amok* present two distinct political agendas: the active political agenda addressed through the show's verbal content, and the more passive agenda which challenges traditional gender roles and the representation of difference.⁶⁵ Freak, in this way, is a chosen performative identity which has been purposefully activated for a political purpose, and instituted thorough a stylized repetition of acts that draws upon the historical conventions of the freak show in a self-aware manner. Drawing on Judith Butler's theories of performing gender, this notion of 'performing freakishness' has been put forth by Adams as a way to explain why the freak show has become such a powerful symbol for authors and artists 'who perceive themselves as marginalized on the basis of physical appearance.'⁶⁶ As she describes:

To characterize *freak* as a performance restores agency to the actors in the sideshow, who participate, albeit not always voluntarily, in a dramatic fantasy that the division between freak and normal is obvious, visible, and quantifiable.⁶⁷

In other words, by understanding the 'freak' as a role that is performed, rather than an inherent characteristic of bodies that deviate from slippery definitions of 'normality', people with unusual bodies can become empowered to participate in the way that meaning is created around their display. In this re-interpretation of the freak show, Miller *performs* freakishness rather than embodying it.

Bringing these notions of performativity into dialogue with disability activism,

British multi-disciplinary performance artist Mat Fraser has won critical acclaim for his

65 Susan Monagan, "The Artmaker as Active Agent: Six Portraits", (Masters thesis, Cornell University, 2005), 97, accessed 15 April 2011,

http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/monagan/monagan_web.pdf.

66 Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 16. Bogdan also employed the term 'performance' in his conception of the social construction freaks, using it a way of addressing it as a theatrical mode; Adams, on the other hand, borrows upon Butler's notion of performativity to understand how freaks might also become an identity through the stylized repetition of acts. See also: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

67 Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 6.

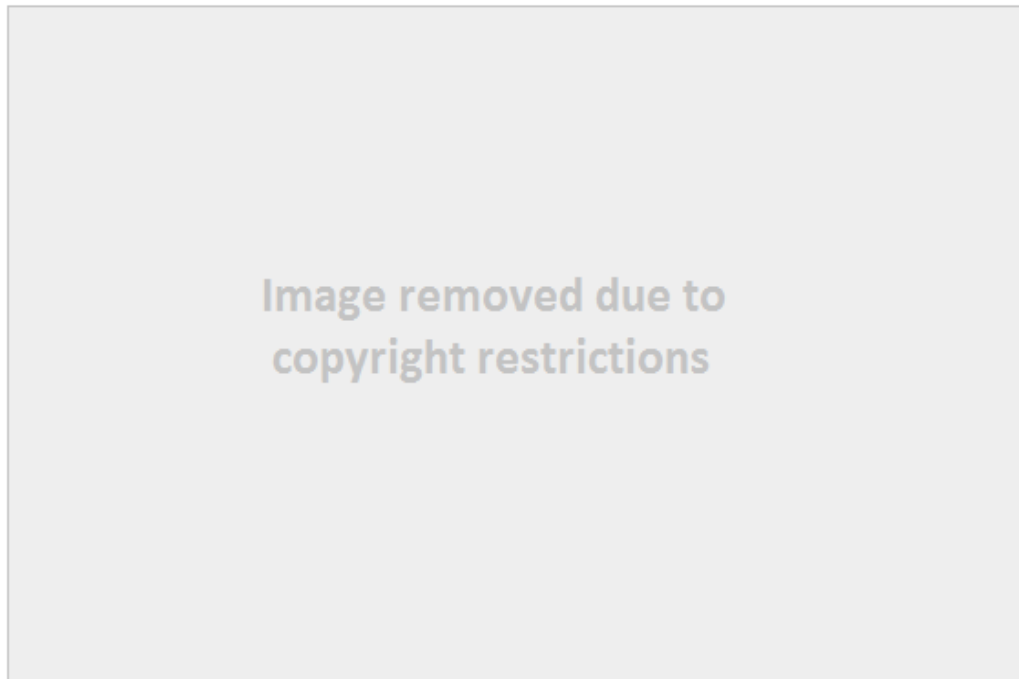


Fig. 1-11. Mat Fraser posed with freak show banners as publicity for his *Freak and the Showgirl* act, circa 2010. Photographer unknown. Reproduced from Robin Brown, "Review: The Freak and the Showgirl and Dadalesque", *Seven Streets*, accessed 28 May 2010.

one-man show *Sealboy: Freak*, which he began performing in 2001. [Fig. 1-11] In this act, Fraser resurrects the role of 'Sealo the Sealboy', the freak show persona of Stanley Berent, who, like Fraser, was born with foreshortened arms. [Figs. 1-12 and 1-13] Fraser's *Sealo* performances blur the clear distinction between art and the freak show, taking on a form that mimics the presentation techniques of the freak show, but engages in a loaded socio-political discourse. Like the photographs of Diane Arbus, Fraser's work is understood in terms of artist intention, the relationship between subject and audience, and perceptions of its institutional framework. Although Fraser's performances operate on the fringes of a fine art context, they are nonetheless understood in terms of its higher meaning, even as his act moves between theatre and circus tent.

In this section, I discuss how Fraser's work both challenges and mobilises the

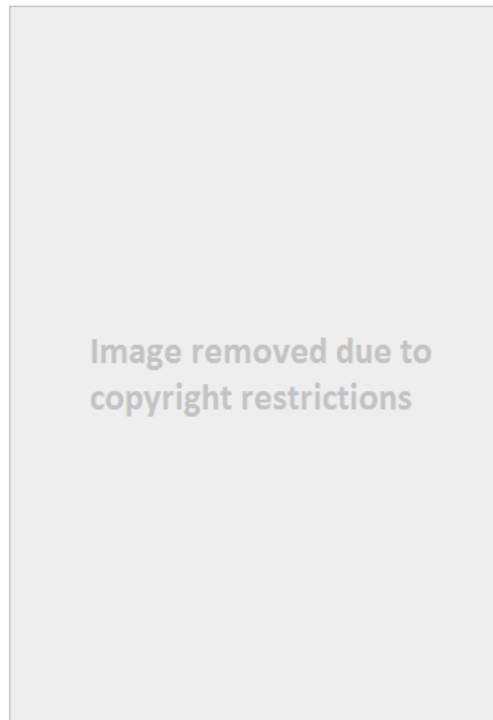


Fig. 1-12. Photo postcard of Stanley Berent as Seal the Sealboy sawing a crate at Ringling Bros. Circus, 1951. Photographer unknown. Private collection of James Mundie. Reproduced from Sideshow Ephemera Gallery.

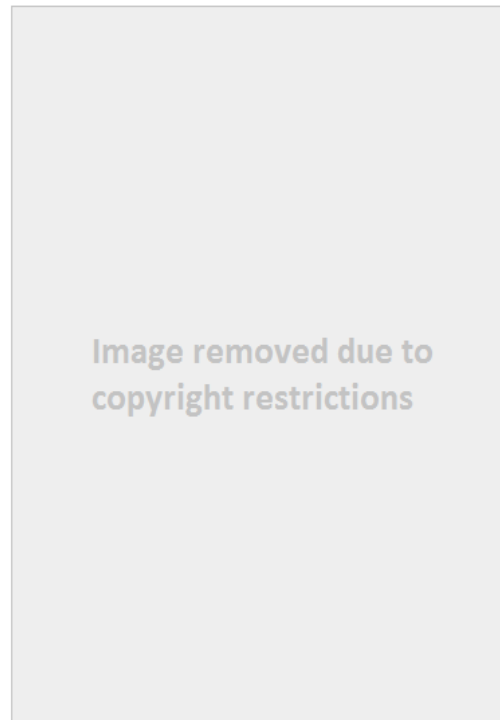


Fig. 1-13. Mat Fraser as Seal the Sealboy sawing a piece of wood in *Sealboy: Freak*, ca 2001, photographed by Aaron Jacob, Fire Tusk Circus. Reproduced from Fire Tusk Pain Proof Circus.

conventions of the freak show in order to critique histories of representing the disabled body, to confront the relationship between performer and audience, and to explore the visibility of non-normative bodies in contemporary entertainment. As elements of his *Sealo* act move between performance contexts – the theatre, the documentary film, the sideshow, and neo-burlesque – I discuss how his work maintains an engagement with these higher political concerns. If Arbus' photographs of freaks established a bridge between the freak show and the art gallery, I argue that Fraser uses that bridge to re-visit the freak show stage and reclaim it a potential alternative to the 'dominant regime of representation' around unusual bodies.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Stuart Hall uses this term in his analysis of racialised representation within western popular culture, and how such portrayals can reinforce or undermine conventional understandings of difference. See Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'", in *Representations: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 232.

While doing research into the history of the freak show in the late 1990s, Fraser became deeply fascinated by freak show photographs of Stanley Berent, whose body exhibited a similar physical malformation to his own.⁶⁹ Berent was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1901, with a congenital condition known as phocomelia, which literally translates to 'seal-like limbs'.⁷⁰ Between the 1930s and 1970s, Berent performed in many prominent freak shows as 'Sealo the Sealboy', including Hubert's Museum, Sutton Circus Sideshow, Coney Island freak show, and the Ringling Brothers travelling circus. On stage, the affable Sealo would perform a range of everyday tasks using his flipper-like arms, such as shaving his face, sawing a piece of wood, or lighting a cigar: ordinary tasks made extraordinary by his unusual body and the sensationalistic context of the freak show. By all accounts Berent enjoyed the freak show life, even successfully suing the State of Florida in 1972 when a group of politically-correct activists tried to have his freak show act banned under an obscure law that prevented the exhibition of 'handicapped' people. After thirty-five years in show-business, Sealo eventually retired to the Independent Showmen's Association Retirement Village in Florida, and died in his home-town of Pittsburgh in 1980.

In his *Sealboy:Freak* performances, Fraser not only reanimates the role of Sealo the Sealboy, but also attempts to bring Stanley Berent to life. Impersonating Berent's American accent, Fraser opens his act by gregariously flapping his arms like a seal and introducing himself:

Good day to you, folks! My name is Stanley Berent, but mostly I am known by my professional name of 'Sealo the Sealboy,' so called because of an extremely rare medical condition I have, known to doctors and scientists as phocomelia. This literally means seal-

⁶⁹ Unless otherwise stated, all biographical and contextual information about Mat Fraser are taken from two interviews I conducted with the artist in London, UK, on 27 November 2012 (at the Young Vic Theatre) and 9 January 2013 (at the artist's residence). During the latter interview, Fraser also allowed me to view video and ephemera related to his performances from his personal archives, which also informs my interpretation of his work.

⁷⁰ Biographical information about Stanley Berent via James Mundie, "Sealo- The Seal Boy", *Sideshow Ephemera Gallery*, accessed 10 February 2011, <http://www.missioncreep.com/mundie/gallery/gallery16.htm>, and J Tithonus Pednaud, "Stanley Berent- Sealo The Seal Boy", *The Human Marvels*, accessed 10 February 2011, <http://thehumanmarvels.com/76/stanley-berent-sealo-the-seal-boy/limbless>.

like limbs, and, as you can see, my little 'handsies' – as I like to call them – do in fact resemble the flippers of a seal more than the regular human-shaped arms and hands that you folks have.⁷¹

By presenting himself *as* Stanley Berent from the very beginning, Fraser frames 'Sealo' as a chosen alter ego or a theatrical role to be played, and not an inherent identity. In other words, he presents Berent as a man with a medical condition who *plays* a freak named 'Sealo the Sealboy', rather than presenting him *as* a freak. Although Fraser meticulously researched Berent and his act – even consulting retired circus showmen to familiarize himself with the patter – the oral history of the freak show is largely unrecorded, so Fraser's act must be regarded as a modern interpretation. His inclusion of these humanizing details in his preamble subtly signal his approach to the history of the freak show, engaged with contemporary notions of performativity and the politics of disability.

Wearing a shiny green vest to emphasize his 'handsies' (as he puts it), Fraser recreates the elements of the original 'Sealo' act by shaving his face, sawing a piece of wood, and barking like a seal while slapping the backs of his hands together. At the end of the performance, Fraser even reminds the audience to buy his *carte de visite* as proof to show their friends. However, although Fraser draws upon the conventions and aesthetics of the freak show, he puts an unmistakably contemporary spin on the freak show form. One of the most important ways his performance deviates from traditional presentations of the freak body is his use of self-presentation. Rather than remaining in the traditionally passive role of the freak, Fraser also takes on the role of the 'talker', giving him agency over the way his own representation is framed. Not only does he narrate his own performances with comedic banter, but by faithfully recreating the freak show act he also takes on the role of historian and writer. The freak, traditionally an image which has values thrust upon it, is instead charged with generating his own narrative and controlling the information and meanings given to the audience. Petra Kuppers argues that, by doing so, Fraser destabilizes

71 Mat Fraser, *Sealboy:Freak* (2001).

the traditional hierarchies of power and exposes histories of looking at the disabled.⁷² By communicating directly and authoritatively with the audience, Fraser undermines the mysteriousness and passive curiosity that generated wonder and gave the freak show power in the first place. In other words, Fraser might mimic the spectacle of the freak show in terms of the aesthetic and format, but he also challenges the culture of 'enfreakment' that the freak show traditionally engendered.⁷³

A born performer, Fraser came to this type of theatrical exploration of disability after spending sixteen years as a rock musician, working as a drummer for rock and reggae bands throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. The son of two actors, Fraser felt at home in the theatre, but had been deterred from pursuing the path of an actor due to the sheer absence of disability in British theatre and screen. However, in 1994 Fraser saw a high-quality theatrical production put on by Graeae, a London theatre company made up entirely of performers with disabilities. He then decided to leave his band and become involved in disability arts and activism; a moment he describes as his 'coming out' as a disabled person. Fraser successfully auditioned for the Graeae Theatre Company, signing on with an agent soon after and landing several small roles in theatre and television in the late 1990s.⁷⁴ However, he soon grew frustrated with the attitudes toward disability he experienced from directors, producers and casting agents, and with the lack of parts for disabled performers (even roles where the character was disabled were, nonsensically, still given to able-bodied actors). During this time, Fraser became an increasingly vocal supporter of disability arts, and also channelled his anger into an irreverent rap album entitled *Survival of the Shittest*.

72 Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 37, 47-48.

73 David Hevey, "The Enfreakment of Photography", in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 332-347. The term 'enfreakment' was originally put forth by David Hevey as a way of articulating and critiquing the harmful Othering that photography imposes upon the disabled body.

74 Fraser reflects on these experiences further in: Jackie Gay and Mat Fraser, "Why Does Representation Matter?," in *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museum and Galleries*, ed. Jocelyn Dodd et.al. (Leicester: RCMG, University of Leicester, 2008), 22-23.

In 1999, Fraser was commissioned by Arts Council England to write and perform a piece for *Wrong Bodies*, an exhibition and performance event at the ICA in London. Unhappy with the representation of people with disabilities in mainstream entertainment, Fraser saw this as an opportunity to explore historical presentations of non-normative bodies and their impact on contemporary perceptions of disability. The resulting piece was *Teratotestament* (1999), a lecture-performance in which he recounted a fictional biography of his extended family using nineteenth-century freak show *carte de visites*. Fraser assigned new names and family roles to each, while recounting fabricated anecdotes about their dysfunctional behaviour; for instance, he introduced the pitch-card of a 'living skeleton' as his Great Uncle Wolfgang, and a photograph of a hirsute girl became his daughter/speed dealer Ingrid. Within this piece, Stanley Berent also made his first appearance in Fraser's work, playing the role of 'Uncle Eugene'.

Although Fraser now views *Teratotestament* as a clumsy first attempt to handle this material with humour, this transformation of freak show imagery into a wacky family tree introduces the important notion of a 'disability heritage'. By presenting them as his ancestors, Fraser ironically reiterates the outmoded idea of 'freak' as a fate one is born into. This tactic also works to establish a connection between the lived experiences of disabled entertainers from different historical eras. Koppers argues that this notion is at the heart of his *Sealboy:Freak* act, viewing it as an opportunity to explore his 'roots' as a disabled performer. As she describes:

Employing these terms (role models, roots) designates the disability experience not as an individual and singular fate, but as a cultural minority experience, similar to cultural production shaped by the black diaspora.⁷⁵

Re-imagining the medical narrative of the body as a genetic inheritance, Fraser instead places himself as the offspring of a disability heritage, positioning his body as the product of a cultural inheritance.

⁷⁵ Koppers, *Bodies on Edge*, 31.

By establishing himself and Stanley Berent as part of a shared corporeal genealogy, Fraser's *Sealboy:Freak* performances can be seen as an engagement with one of the visual traditions he has inherited from this cultural 'disability heritage'. Fraser created the act in 2001 to much critical acclaim, initially touring it around theatres and alternative venues the UK and then abroad. In addition to playing the role of Berent/Sealo, the freak show part of the act is juxtaposed with the story of Tam Schraefer, a modern-day disabled actor deeply angry about how he is seen as a professional performer (not-so-loosely based on Mat Fraser's own experiences). Playing both roles, Fraser presents a historical parallel between the two men, as a way exploring his ambivalence toward the history of the freak show and what it means for continued perceptions of his body. On one hand, his act grapples with the modern legacy of the freak show as an artless, exploitative enterprise which perpetuates negative and de-humanizing views of disability for the sake of a profit. On the other, Fraser acknowledges the freak show as a valid theatrical tradition, which provided a stage and financial independence for a close-knit community of disabled performers 'living the 1930s equivalent of a rock and roll lifestyle'.⁷⁶ In this view, Fraser re-positions Berent as an actor, and the freak as a character to be played; by taking on the 'Sealo' act he reprises Berent's most notable theatrical role.

Shortly after his first tour of *Sealboy:Freak*, Fraser was invited to create a documentary called *Born Freak* for Channel 4, in which he was able to address these issues even more directly. Fraser used the more mainstream platform to extend this exploration of disability performance, and question why – despite the long history of disabled people performing within the show business of the freak show – our cultural construct does not consider these performers as actors. In the opening sequence of *Born Freak*, he asks the viewer directly: 'As a disabled man, will I ever be seen as just an actor? Or will I only ever

⁷⁶ Mat Fraser in conversation with the author, 27 November 2012.

be seen as a freak who acts?'⁷⁷ The documentary then transitions into a hypothetical martial arts film in which Fraser plays the role of the action hero: he bursts into a room where two antagonists have the leading lady tied up but, rather than being grateful for his heroic intervention, she and the thugs burst out laughing at the sight of the unconventional hero. Although the other characters laugh at him in this scene, the context of the documentary brings the viewer in on the joke, redirecting the laughter away from his body and toward the absurdity of the scene itself. The audience is prompted to laugh at the cultural constructs which underpin the scene in order to undermine them.

Rejecting political correctness and middle-class politeness, Fraser uses humour throughout his various performances to establish a relationship with his audience that challenges the traditional exchange of gazes between the freak and the freak show audience. Koppers has argued that this relationship forces viewers to 'confront their collective connection with the freakshow audiences of the past', using Sealo as a catalyst to establish a link between his body and Stanley Berent's, as well as the bodies of past and present spectators.⁷⁸ Intending to 'shock people out of their complacency', Fraser purposely solicits the kinds of gazes/stares deemed impolite, inappropriate or politically incorrect, in order to defuse their power. By doing so, Fraser prompts his viewers to actively address their relationship to the normal/Other narrative the freak show historically sets up.⁷⁹

These tactics have been criticized by disability theorists David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, who contend that Fraser's contemporary attempts to de-construct the 'prurient gaze' of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries mainly serves to 'revivify the original objectification', demonstrating our own 'spectatorial proclivities' within the analytical

77 As quoted by Mat Fraser, in the opening sequence of *Born Freak*, dir. Paul Sapin (Planet Wild for Channel 4 UK, 2001).

78 Koppers, *Bodies on Edge*, 33.

79 For more around the theories of the stare within disability studies, see: Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has argued that the stare, as opposed to the gaze, is a form of curious looking that is situated in a desire to understand the world.

framework of academic commentary.⁸⁰ In their view, through the historical re-enactment of Sealo and the sociological analysis he employs in *Born Freak*, Fraser submits the disabled body into a new context as objectifying as the original freak show. As Mitchell and Snyder describe:

Sociological distance merely gives way to a new formation of the gaze. In fact, it provides a model that allows the freak show gaze to continue while seemingly disguised behind a façade of interpretive scepticism...The contemporary freak show spectator now rationalizes the freak show gaze as a form of 'sociological' knowledge gathering.⁸¹

Once the object of the curious stares of the freak show audience, the freak is now resurrected as the object of the critical gazes of the academic audience (what Mitchell & Snyder call the 'academic ballyplank').⁸²

Although Mitchell and Snyder offer a compelling argument as to the formation of a new type of gaze in academic (or even artistic) contexts, they oversimplify the process of transmutation between the original freak show and contemporary resurrections of it. Far from 'merely' giving way to a new formation of the gaze, a complex historical and ideological shift takes place between the two, in which nearly identical performances are understood in radically different ways. Fraser's freak show act (as well as his documentary and other performances) engages with an entirely different discursive framework, inviting speculation about his artistic intentions, the effectiveness of this form of activism, and its relationship with the history of exhibiting disabled/non-normative bodies. Love or hate his act, his choice to don the role of freak is seen *as* a choice rather than an inevitable destiny of his body, and he is held responsible for the aesthetic, narrative, and socio-political choices which it represents. In this way, I argue, Fraser is acknowledged as an artist, raising similar discussions as those associated with artists like Diane Arbus, albeit

80 David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "Exploitations of Embodiment: *Born Freak* and the Academic Bally Plank", *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25 (Summer 2005), accessed 9 April 2011, <http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/575/752%3f>.

81 Mitchell and Snyder, "Exploitations of Embodiment", unpag.

82 The ballyplank was a mini stage outside the freak show tent from which the 'talker' would stand with one or two teaser acts, in order to try and draw audiences inside ('the bally'). The word comes from 'ballyhoo', which means sensationalized promotion.

informed by his acknowledged role within disability arts activism. While I agree with Mitchell and Snyder's notion that this context – like the freak show – brings its own set of conventions, power relationships and rationalizations, this is not a simple repetition of the freak show gaze. Perhaps it is no less objectifying, but this mode of presentation is something different than the freak show mode, and should not be simply collapsed into the same criticisms.

The differences which separate Fraser's work from the original freak show are difficult enough to articulate, but the task is made more complicated when you consider his performances within Coney Island, where the line between theatre and freak show is particularly blurred. As part of his *Born Freak* documentary, Fraser was invited by owner Dick Zigun to bring his Sealo act to *Sideshow By The Seashore*, a 1980s Coney Island simulacrum of the original sideshows that once populated the area. [Fig. 1-14] Here, Fraser cut out much of the contextualising material that helped frame his earlier acts as clearly part of an activist discourse. Against the backdrop of a contrived banner-line, the spiel of 'talkers' and proximity to other freak show performers, Fraser's act begins to feel uncomfortably close to the early-twentieth century act from which his show derives. Without the rhetorical devices of the documentary framing his act, Fraser's live performances at Coney Island are, by default, mediated by the context of the freak show. Although some audience members – particularly those previously aware of Fraser and his involvement in disability arts and activism – might be prompted to critically reflect upon his presence within the contemporary sideshow, one has to also account for a range of audience responses. He notes being particularly uncomfortable during his turn with the talker on the ballyplank, standing on the stage outside the freak show trying 'to bring in the punters' with the spectacle of his body. Whereas a group of theatre- or museum-goers

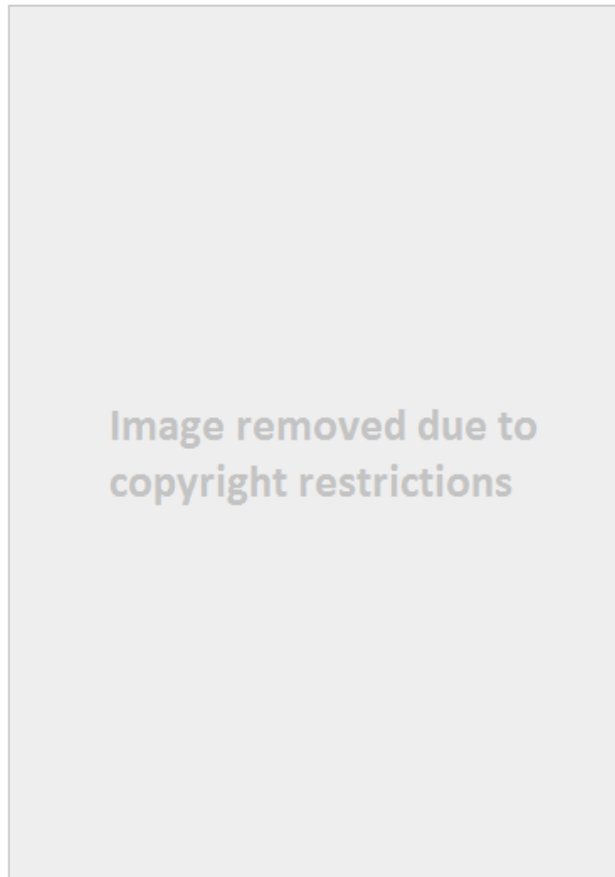


Fig. 1-14. Film stills taken from footage of Mat Fraser outside the freak show while performing as 'Sealo the Sealboy' at Coney Island, USA, 2001. Courtesy of Mat Fraser.

interested in seeing a provocative contemporary performance about disability might enter those spaces with particular expectations of how his act intends to engage with higher concerns,⁸³ the freak show also caters to those simply interested in being disturbed, titillated and amused by the spectacle of his body on display. Within Coney Island, his underlying agenda has more potential to be hidden or undermined by the powerful context of the freak show.

This is not entirely accidental. Researching the life of Stanley Berent, interviewing freak show performers and managers, and performing within the actual freak show circuit

⁸³ For instance, parts of his *Sealo* act were later incorporated into a show he called *Freak to Clique*, which used humour and cabaret-style acts to chart the history of disability, and was toured to theatre, arts festival and museum venues (including the V&A in 2010).

himself, Fraser reports that his attitude toward the freak show has slowly evolved over time. Although he began exploring the history of the freak show with a sense of contempt for its lasting legacy on perceptions of people with disabilities, he now acknowledges a newfound respect for the theatrical requirements of it. As he related to me:

Doing Sealó [at Coney Island] I couldn't believe how much performing it really required. I had to be on and high energy all the time, staying in character, keeping up the illusion....I think [the freak show] would be a good experience for any theatre student, learning how to keep an audience engaged and entertained like that all day long. I suppose I'm used to that kind of banter working as an emcee, but I was surprised at how much skill it really took to be a freak. It gave me new respect for Stanley [Berent] and his energy as a performer for all those years.⁸⁴

By acknowledging the skill required of freak show performers like Berent, Fraser helps to assert the freak as a theatrical tradition, requiring the active participation of performers. Although this surely varied between individuals and freak shows throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Fraser's statement nonetheless offers an alternative view of the freak as a skilled performer rather than passive exhibit. Furthermore, by including the Coney Island freak show among other theatrical venues, Fraser affirms the freak show as another viable performance option for contemporary disabled performers.

I would argue that Fraser's treatment of the freak show also goes hand-in-hand with his interest in the neo-burlesque scene, which similarly attempts to re-inscribe old-fashioned forms of performance as a way of challenging the visibility of the non-idealised body. The burlesque revival has been on the upswing since the 1990s, largely driven by amateur female performers with an interest in reviving the old-fashioned glamour of early-twentieth century striptease acts. Contrasted with more simplistic, commercial manifestations of burlesque, literary scholar Claire Nally has written about the potential for politically self-aware burlesque acts to creatively re-imagine hetero-normative ideals of the feminine and sexual body.⁸⁵ Featuring performers of all sizes, shapes, ages and colours,

⁸⁴ Mat Fraser in conversation with the author, 9 January 2013.

⁸⁵ Claire Nally, "Grrrly Hurly Burly: Neo-burlesque and the Performance of Gender" *Textual Practice* 23 (2009): 622-623. Claire Nally situates her treatment of neo-burlesque within a postfeminist discourse, aligning it with a queer and camp sensibility (albeit infused with a politicized criticality not afforded to

neo-burlesque emphasizes the 'tease' over the 'strip' in a range of creative, funny and raunchy performances which intentionally offer an alternative to the limited range of body types and views of sexuality offered by mainstream strip clubs. Often taking inspiration from retro acts and aesthetics, Annie Blanchette argues that neo-burlesque can be understood as a way of revisiting the past to 'foster new attachments' to non-normative identities deemed sexually undesirable, infusing aspects of nostalgia with gendered performance.⁸⁶

Attracted to its use of raunchy shock-humour, Fraser began getting involved in the neo-burlesque scene around 2005, when he started regularly hosting at The Slipper Room, a legendary burlesque house in New York City. Inspired to create his own disability-themed striptease, he began creating acts like *Criptease*, in which Fraser strips for the audience while wearing prosthetic arms. As he peels off his final layers of clothing, he provocatively drops the fake arms one at a time, as if they too are simply layers of clothing concealing the most erotic parts of his body. Once uncovered, Fraser seductively licks his 'flippers', re-positioning his 'deformity' as a sensual treat. Fraser seems to re-present his disability among the gambit of other burlesque gimmicks: disability presented as desirable variation, rather than freakish difference.

Although neo-burlesque places the focus on exaggerated performances of sexuality, it is ultimately a self-aware performance style which uses humour and irony in an attempt to re-inscribe historical presentations of the body with new meaning. In this way, Fraser's Coney Island *Sealo* performances could be seen as a similar method of revisiting the past to 'foster new attachments' to non-normative bodies, by reviving a passé form of performance in order to re-inscribe the freak body (and, by extension, the freak show) with

camp by critics like Susan Sontag). Through a lens of gender performance, Nally attempts to differentiate between subcultural and mainstream/commercial manifestations of neo-burlesque in order to analyse their potential for effective challenges to representations and constructions of sex and gender.

86 Annie Blanchette, "Revisiting the 'Pasée': History Rewriting in the Neo-burlesque Community", *Consumption Markets & Culture* (2013), 1-2, accessed 1 May 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2013.776307>.

alternative meanings. This connection between freak show and burlesque has even been directly explored in Fraser's recent work, *The Freak and the Showgirl*, a collaborative act with his wife, burlesque star Julie Atlas Muz, which combines traditional striptease with elements of his 'Sealo the Sealboy' act.⁸⁷

I have argued that as Fraser moves his performances through different contexts – the theatre, the freak show, the documentary, the burlesque stage – it works to challenge traditional presentations of the freak, attempting to re-inscribe historical constructions of the disabled body with new meanings. Like neo-burlesque, I suggest that Fraser revisits a passé type of theatrical performance in order to re-evaluate the significance of freak show and infuse with socio-political meaning. An important aspect of Fraser's strategy has been to not only challenge presentations of the freak body, but to experiment with re-locations of the freak show itself. Performing the freak within a range of display contexts and theatrical traditions, Fraser reclaims the conventions of the freak show to de-stabilize ingrained perceptions of looking at the disabled body. Arbus' photographs of freak show performers demonstrate a shift from the curiosity of the freak body to the unique vision of the artist; by simultaneously occupying both roles, Fraser's re-presentation of the freak show re-visits the bridge her work formed between those two modes of presentation. By taking on the role of both 'talker' and 'freak', presenting the freak as a legitimate type of theatrical role, and experimenting with re-locations of the freak show, Fraser challenges our assumptions and expectations of the freak show to question its role in shaping the

⁸⁷ Promotional material for *Freak and the Showgirl* describes the act as: 'The crazy blonde and the sealboy mutant perform a variety of set pieces containing songs, magic, freakshow, striptease, and double acts. As the show moves along at a fast pace, Julie's ukulele playing, Mat's singing, her award winning and world famous classic burlesque numbers, his traditional and genuine old time freak show act of Sealo the Sealboy, woven together by subversive songs, comedy turns and cameos, flesh, flippers and fun, and the sheer grinding bumping bumping freaking frolics all culminate in a dance off, a beer drinking competition with the audience, and then the finale, American Trilogy, ending literally naked, and upside down in as anti a perfect couple as you could wish to see, degenerating all that is good and holy into a cesspit of sex, song and sweat. Leave your political correctness, your stiff upper lip, your conservative streak and your head up your ass, and come to be freaked out and sexed up, with *The Freak and the Showgirl*.' Promotional description of *Freak and the Showgirl* taken from the artist's website, accessed 17 March 2013, http://www.matfraser.co.uk/news_pages/freaknshowgirl.php.

cultural heritage of disability.

Re-Framing the freak: Renate Lorenz and Pauline Boudry's N.O. Body

In her study of neo-burlesque communities and their relationship to representations of the idealised female body, Blanchette draws upon the work of queer theorist Elena Levy-Navarro to discuss the notion of 'queering time' as an alternative to the idealisation of the past. As she describes,

A queer sense of time can be used by those who associate their present identities with, and gain inspiration from, the past – the non-idealised one especially – however, authentic, hypothetical or imagined, rather than solely with an envisioned and progressive sense of the future or utopian past.⁸⁸

Acknowledging a temporal dimension in the formation of non-idealised or non-normative identities can provide a powerful potential for disruption within contemporary art and performance; by challenging conventional ideas of linear historical progress, artists are also able to address how perceptions of bodies are created through time.

Although their work doesn't engage directly with burlesque performance, this idea of 'queering time' in re-presentations of the body can be observed throughout the work of Berlin-based artists Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz. Throughout their collaborative practice, Boudry and Lorenz draw on historical portrait photography to address sexual identity and the visibility of 'Other' bodies, often re-staging old photographs through film and installation in order to question how meaning is generated through the processes of image-making.⁸⁹ Like Mat Fraser, they draw upon the history of the freak show to subvert traditional hierarchies of representation and to address constructions of the non-normative body.

⁸⁸ Blanchette, "Revisiting the 'Pasée'", 6. See also: Elena Levy-Navarro, "Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go from Here?" in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther D. Rothblum and Sondra Soloway (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 15-22.

⁸⁹ Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, "Laughing about N.O.Body" (2008), accessed 9 April 2011, <http://www.boudry-lorenz.de/static/files/Lorenz,%20Boudry%20-%20To%20laugh%20about%20N.O.Body.pdf>.

This section discusses Boudry and Lorenz's installation and film *N.O. Body* (2008), which incorporates representations of the freak to address its role in the construction and perception of queer identities. *N.O. Body* uses film, historical photographs and performance to re-enact the image of famous nineteenth-century bearded lady Annie Jones (1860-1902), who was presented in her day as both a freak performer in the Barnum Circus, and as a medical curiosity in the sexology textbooks of Magnus Hirschfeld. Presented in the freak show, the medical textbook and now an art gallery, Boudry and Lorenz explore how each of these different modes of display contribute to the way we understand her body. In this section, I discuss how *N.O. Body* uses gender-bending performance, the reproduction of historical photographs, temporality and laughter to disrupt expected readings of the bearded woman. By re-visiting different contexts of display around anomalous bodies, I ask how this work situates itself within a history of representing human curiosities, while exploring the presentation of the gendered body within freak and medical discourses.

In the opening scene of *N.O. Body*, a voluptuous bearded woman in elegant Victorian dress approaches the platform of an empty nineteenth-century style lecture theatre. Upon reaching the podium, she betrays the temporal setting by picking up a remote control and turning on a 1960s Kodak Carousel slide projector. As the projector flickers on, an old black and white photograph is beamed across the woman's body and onto the screen behind her. Projected onto the screen is a freak show *carte de visite* of bearded lady Annie Jones, who toured with P.T. Barnum's 'The Greatest Show on Earth' freak show and numerous dime museums over her thirty-six year career.⁹⁰ [Fig. 1-15] Both sporting a full beard, long hair and ruffled Victorian garb, the woman on the screen and the woman on the stage look remarkably alike, their bodies overlapping in the light beam of the projection. Displayed together, it is almost as if the photograph of Annie Jones is reanimated on the

90 J Tithonus Pednaud, "Annie Jones – The Esau Woman", *The Human Marvels* website (2008), accessed 19 November 2012, <http://thehumanmarvels.com/150/annie-jones-the-esau-woman/bearded>.

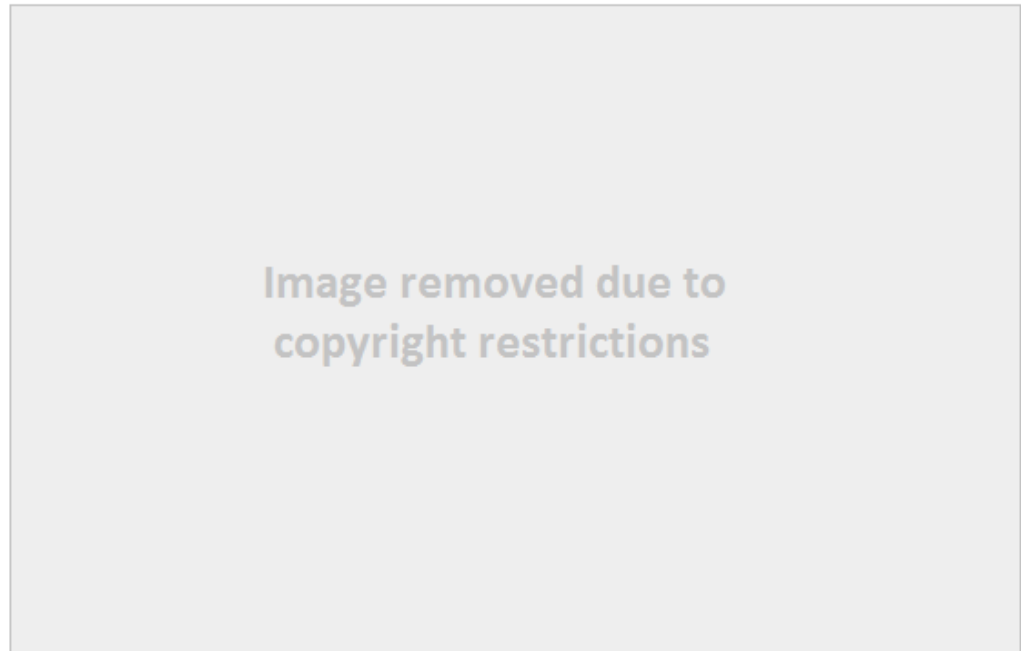


Fig. 1-15. Film still from Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, *N.O. Body*, 2008. 16mm film and installation. Reproduced from artists' website.

stage.

Although she is standing at the head of a lecture theatre, the bearded woman does not offer a typical disquisition. Instead of delivering a scholarly lecture or even a freak show spiel, when Annie Jones takes the stage she merely starts laughing. This enigmatic response is intended to override the system of specific meanings inscribed by institutions like the freak show or the medical theatre, by refusing to offer an explicit way of understanding monstrous bodies. As the artists explain:

The freak is a figure that acts and meddles in the practices of staring, knowledge production, and constellations of power and desire. Laughing than [sic] takes the place of a spoken statement, but unlike language, it does not produce a reproducible meaning based on social conventions. In the end it is not possible to understand or fix the precise meaning of laughing.⁹¹

Resisting the role of both freak show talker and scholarly expert, this laughter continues compulsively through the slide-show, growing hollow and forced as the slide show

⁹¹ Boudry & Lorenz, "N.O.Body", 4.

continues. The bearded woman is positioned to direct the meaning around her own body, but disrupts this expectation by resisting a specific narrative.

As the bearded woman on stage continues to flip through images on the projector, the pictures change to natural history illustrations of intersex animals and medical photographs of people with ambiguous sex and gender, taken from an early-twentieth century sexology textbook. [Fig. 1-16] Emphasizing issues of sexual ambiguity, Boudry and Lorenz borrowed the name 'N.O. Body' from the pseudonym used by the author of *'Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren (Memoirs of a Man's Maiden Years)'*, a 1907 autobiography of a person born ambiguously sexed, who was raised as a girl but chose to live his adult years as a man.⁹² Adding another layer of complexity to this material, the role of bearded lady Annie Jones is played by Werner Hirsch, a drag queen who frequently collaborates with Boudry and Lorenz. Blurring the boundaries between man-in-a-dress and woman-with-a-beard, in this role Hirsch poses a corporeal challenge to rigid binaries of sex and gender, and evokes key questions about the legitimacy of the curious body that punctuate the history of exhibiting bearded women. As Robert Bogdan notes in his history of the freak show, questions around the authenticity of bearded women were central to the publicity and display of their bodies: in other words, part of the thrill of looking at bearded women was the attempt to determine whether or not they were 'real'.⁹³ By challenging the dominant binary models of sex and gender, the display of a bearded woman invited viewers to analyse her body in relation to their definitions of what constitutes 'genuine' femininity, and decide for themselves whether or not they were looking at a 'true' bearded lady, or at a man in a dress.

Situating this work as a challenge to our historical and epistemological determination of gender, the bodies of Werner Hirsch and Annie Jones are juxtaposed with

92 Boudry & Lorenz, "N.O.Body", 1.

93 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 226-229.



Image removed due to
copyright restrictions

Fig. 1-16. Film stills from Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, *N.O. Body*, 2008. 16mm film and installation.

images taken from Magnus Hirschfeld's *Geschlechtskunde, Bilderteil* (Sexology, Pictures) (1930). Hirschfeld (1868-1935) was an influential German sexologist and early sexuality rights activist, who advocated a progressive view of sexuality/gender that incorporated multiple variations beyond the idealised binaries of male versus female and homosexual versus heterosexual.⁹⁴ He established the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (Institute for Sexual Research) in Berlin in 1919 where, as part of his scientific research, Hirschfeld photographed and catalogued sixty-four possible sexual types that ranged between a 'masculine heterosexual male' to 'feminine homosexual male', including those he termed 'Transvestit' (transvestites). Within the slide show of *N.O. Body*, Boudry and Lorenz include Hirschfeld's photographs of people in drag, crossdressers who 'pass', same-sex couples, fetishists, sadomasochism enthusiasts and ambiguously gendered individuals, all taken from the 800 pages of his eminent photographic study. Among them is image number 728, a striking freak show *carte de visite* with the caption '*Mrs. Annie Jones-Elliott, die außer männlichem Vollbart einen weiblichen Haarschmuck von ungewöhnlicher Länge aufwies*' (Mrs. Annie Jones-Elliott, showing unusually long, feminine hair along with her full, masculine beard).⁹⁵

Writing about the significance of such sexology studies for modern notions of sexual identity, Dana Seitler discusses how, during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, these body types belonged to a larger sociological sensibility which lashed together 'aberrations and sexual perversions', 'racial peculiarities', 'criminal deviants', and 'freaks' within a complex cultural construction of perverse bodies often surveyed by medical photography.⁹⁶ Seitler has argued that 'sexual science' like that employed by

94 Charlotte Wolff, *Magnus Hirschfeld: A Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology* (London and New York: Quartet Books, 1986). Sexology is the scientific study of human sexuality, including sexual interests, behaviour and function, a scientific discipline with its roots in late nineteenth-century Europe.

95 Pauline Boudry, Renate Lorenz and Andrea Thal, "Stages: A Conversation Between Andrea Thal, Pauline Boudry, and Renate Lorenz", in *Temporal Drag: Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz* (Lausanne, Switzerland: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 1863, 1877.

96 Dana Seitler, "Queer Physiognomies; Or, How Many Ways Can We Do the History of Sexuality?" *Criticism* 46 (2004): 74-76.

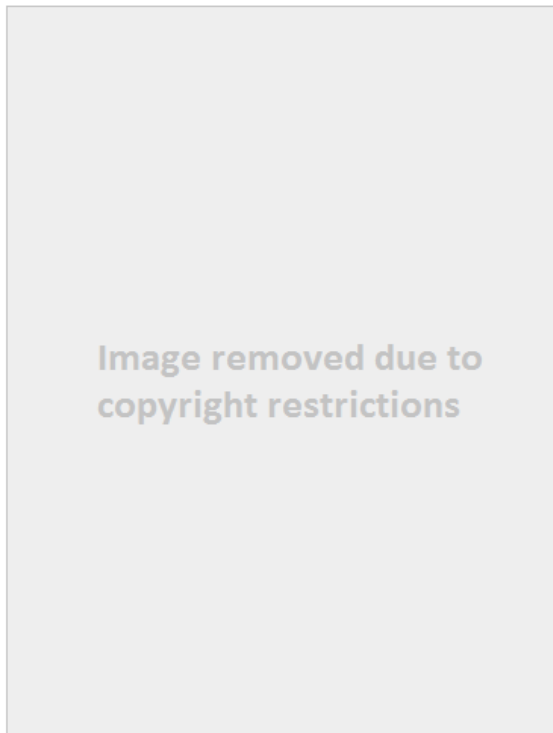


Fig. 1-17. Obermuller and Kern, "Annie Jones- Bearded Lady," 1885. Albumen print. Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann Photographs, Syracuse University Library. Reproduced from the Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann Photographs.

Hirschfeld can be understood as 'a site of contested narration', which problematically pathologized sexual deviance while also consolidating sexuality into an identity.⁹⁷ In other words, the more that medical discourses tried to define parameters of deviance (sexual and otherwise) and formalize the distance between normal and abnormal, the more that the body 'became open to interpretation'.

In the case of bearded women, this pathologization of their bodies began to take place in the late-nineteenth century, when Danish sexologist C. Krebs coined

the term 'hypertrichosis' to describe the medical condition associated with unusual hairiness, in his quest to find the scientific determination of gender.⁹⁸ During this same period, serious questions around the creation and authenticity of male/female identities were also being distilled into a form of popular amusement within the freak show. Bearded ladies were stock standard of any freak show, their appeal predicated on blurring the comfortable distinctions between men and women asserted by genteel Victorian society. Juxtaposed with the masculinity of their facial hair, white bearded women like Annie Jones were presented as the quintessence of ladylike decorum, wearing fashionable hairstyles and dresses that emphasized their feminine figure, and demonstrating a range of skills and

⁹⁷ Seitler, "Queer Physiognomies", 77-78.

⁹⁸ See: Rebecca Herzig, "The Woman Beneath the Hair: Treating Hypertrichosis, 1870-1930", *NWSA* 12 (Autumn 2000): 52.

manners to demonstrate their civility.⁹⁹ Annie Jones was no exception to this, presented as a woman of great beauty, strong moral character and musical talent.¹⁰⁰ [Fig. 1-17] A favourite subject of studio photographer Charles Eisenmann, Jones is the subject of the largest number of surviving photographs of freak show bearded ladies, and the high circulation of her images has meant that she became the quintessential bearded lady in the collective imagination of late-nineteenth century America.¹⁰¹

As the discourses of sexology situated Jones' body alongside bodies of sexual, corporeal and even moral deviance,¹⁰² the freak show, in contrast, asserted her middle-class respectability. That is not to say that the freak show was a more appropriate or respectful venue for displaying the body of the bearded woman: rather, the convention of presenting bearded woman as 'feminine' and 'civilized' was a device to emphasize the sexual disjunction of her appearance, thereby exaggerating the freakish interest of her body. In both the sexology textbook and the freak show, Annie Jones' body was put on display to highlight the incongruity of her gender; however, the former attempted to contemplate the construction of gender within a spectrum of masculinity/femininity, while the latter attempted to maintain this binary in order to sensationalize her body for profit.

Incorporated into *N.O.Body*, the photographs of Annie Jones oscillate between these contexts, defying a linear progression between the two. Each photograph of her on display is a single moment frozen in time; a particular historical moment captured on film and then organized to reflect a larger set of ideas. Within Werner Hirsch's performance of Annie Jones, that single moment is unfrozen in the present day in order to disrupt its temporal logic. By bringing Jones to life and placing her within overlapping historical contexts, Boudry and Lorenz can re-evaluate the significance of these moments for the ongoing

99 In contrast to bearded white women, women of colour with beards were often presented in exotic modes, as 'Missing Links' or other atavistic savages. See: Durbach, "The Missing Link and the Hairy Belle: Evolution, Imperialism, and 'Primitive' Sexuality", in *Spectacle*, 89-114.

100 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 224-229.

101 Burrows, "Jane Barnell", 34-35.

102 Seitler, "Queer Physiognomies," 87-97.

construction of sexed and gendered bodies. They also consider their own work within this ongoing sense of time: for instance, a recent catalogue of their work, entitled *Temporal Drag*, starts the page numbering at 1853 and ends on 2021, seeming to position their work within a non-specific historical continuum spanning from the mid-nineteenth century and into the near future.¹⁰³ Looping the film also highlights their engagement with temporality, challenging the idea of linear history with a clear beginning and end. To use Blanchette's term, these strategies can be seen as a method of 'queering time': taking inspiration from the past, without idealising it nor the narrative of linear progress.¹⁰⁴ This way, Boudry and Lorenz don't necessarily privilege the artistic context over earlier forms of display; rather, their depiction of Annie Jones is positioned as part of a larger cultural network that spans beyond the present moment. Identity is not just situated in body and culture, but also in history.

Mathias Danbolt has described this aspect of Boudry and Lorenz's work as 'queer archaeology', a series of 'excavations into archival material' which address sexual nonconformity.¹⁰⁵ Danbolt likens Boudry and Lorenz's use of anachronism to the co-existence of multiple temporalities within the cabinet of curiosity, a collecting ideal which was shifted by the museums of the eighteenth-century in favour of teaching a linear, accumulative notion of history.¹⁰⁶ This sense of chronological reshuffling is reflected in Boudry and Lorenz's strategy for dealing with archival material, such as the reproduction of forty-seven small photographs from Magnus Hirschfeld's *Sexology, Images* which they

103 The term 'temporal drag' was coined by Elizabeth Freeman, who proposes that 'the hidden referents of the postmodern, ironic reenactment that we call camp are time and class'. Emphasizing the historical contingency of camp, which has been described as a mix of scorn and longing for obsolete objects and subject-positions, Freeman adds a temporal dimension to the subject of drag as a way of theorizing the use of gendered performance in the work of Boudry and Lorenz. See: Elizabeth Freeman, "Normal Work: Temporal Drag and the Question of Class," *Temporal Drag: Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz*, ed. Jessica Dorrance et. al. (Lausanne, Switzerland: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 1976.

104 Blanchette, "Re-visiting the Passé", 6.

105 Mathias Danbolt, "Disruptive Anachronisms: Feeling Historical with N.O.Body," in *Temporal Drag: Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz*, ed. Jessica Dorrance et. al. (Lausanne, Switzerland: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 1983.

106 Danbolt, "Disruptive Anachronisms", 1986.

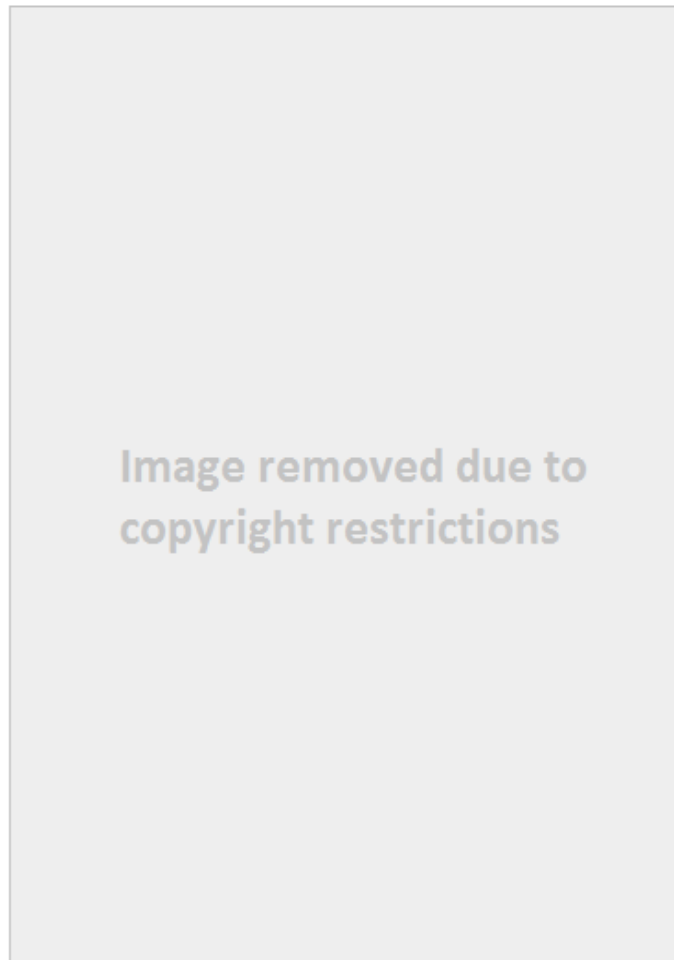


Fig. 1-18. Installation shot of pictures installed in Renate Lorenz and Pauline Boudry's *N.O. Body* (2008), at the Centre d'art contemporain Genève, July-August 2010. Photographed by Andrea Thal. Reproduced from artists' website.

install alongside the film. [Fig. 1-18] Contesting an authentic or official history, the artists reproduced the images by photographing them directly from Hirschfeld's book, and separating the images from their captions. Like their use of laughter in the performance, the separation of images and captions disrupts a predetermined reading of the bodies in the pictures. As Pauline Boudry asks:

What happens if the captions themselves are put under scrutiny in the same way that the deviant bodies are? What happens to these bodies if you don't have a caption that helps you to read them? Do they become more or less threatening to normality?¹⁰⁷

By resisting fixed meanings and chronology, Boudry and Lorenz present the 'freak' and the

¹⁰⁷ Pauline Boudry in Boudry et.al., "Stages", 2001.

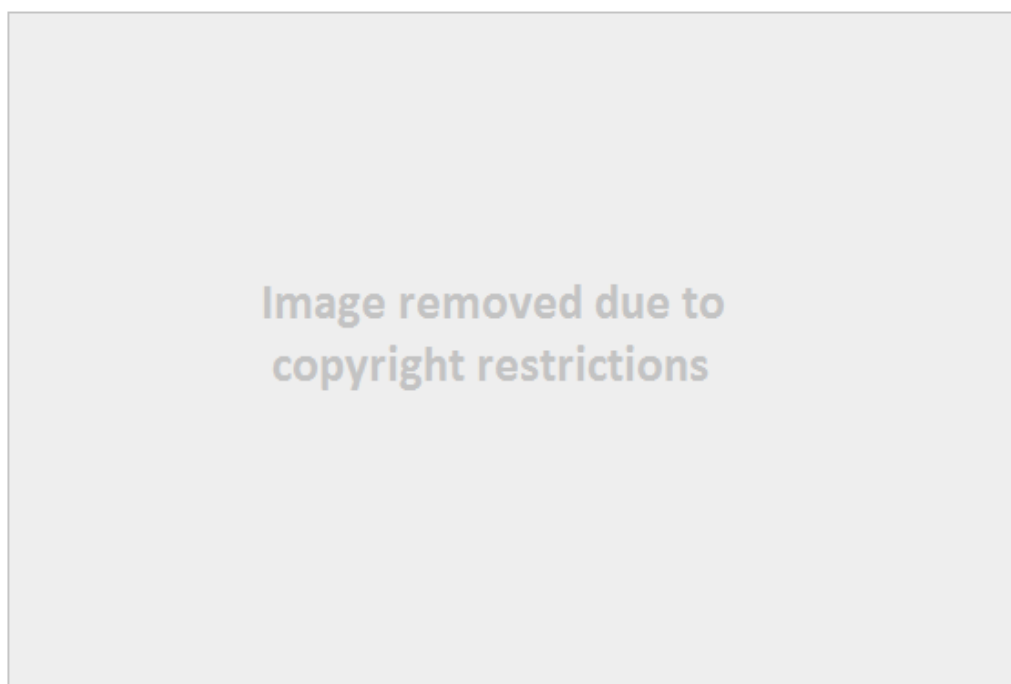


Fig. 1-19. Gallery visitor viewing Renate Lorenz and Pauline Boudry's *N.O.Body* (2008), at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, July-August 2010. Photographed by Andrea Thal. Reproduced from artists' website.

'patient' as endlessly transmutable categories which have the potential to be re-appropriated and re-defined according to the context of display.

Within the film *N.O.Body*, Werner-Hirsch-as-Annie-Jones presents her slide images to an empty lecture theatre, while laughing from her place on the podium. And yet, there is still an audience in front of her, looking at her unusual body as it exists the context of the artwork. [Fig. 1-19] Although Boudry and Lorenz resist dictating fixed meanings about the body of the bearded woman, the re-location of her image into the art gallery inevitably frames its meaning. The artists characterize their work as a form of collaboration with their nineteenth-century subjects,¹⁰⁸ but their role as artistic creators means they bear responsibility for directing the types of meanings which encircle her. Annie Jones was chosen by Boudry and Lorenz because her image moved between medical and freak discourses, demonstrating the shifts that took place between historical practices of

108 Danbolt, "Disruptive Anachronisms", 1984.

displaying difference.¹⁰⁹ But as they work to reveal these contested processes of curious representation, Boudry and Lorenz also participate in the discourse of the art institution, which subjects her body to its own aesthetic, cultural, and political values. Annie Jones was a 'freak', a 'medical subject', and now an 'artwork'. And, interestingly enough, 'artwork' is the only label Jones didn't voluntarily take on.

When Diane Arbus photographed the freaks of Hubert's Museum, they did not lose their status or identity as freaks, even within the images. Instead, the freak show mode of display was subsumed into the new framework of the art gallery, forming a bridge between these two modes of exhibiting human curiosities. By understanding Arbus' own integration into the canon of fine art (and its relationship to the dawn of (post-)modern photography supported by John Szarkowski at MoMA), we can observe the forces which helped drive the shift from the freak show stage to the art gallery. Framing both of these institutions as locations where powerful ideas can be directed toward the curious body, we can see how the representation of freaks in recent art has become more about exposing and critiquing the mechanisms which present these bodies as curious in the first place. For instance, in his resurrection of 'Sealo the Sealboy', Mat Fraser re-positions the freak as a theatrical role capable of being re-packaged in different performance contexts, rather than an inherent aspect of the disabled body. Utilising a similar tactic, Boudry and Lorenz reanimate bearded lady Annie Jones in order to question how perceptions of her body were formed as it moved between different institutional and discursive contexts. Re-visiting the bridge that Arbus' work formed between the art gallery and the freak show, these artists use representations of the freak to explore how histories of display contribute to ongoing perceptions of non-normative bodies. However, in their efforts to re-inscribe the freak body with new meanings, they also insert human curiosities into the space of the art gallery, a new institutional context with its own powerful sets of meanings and expectations. The

109 Boudry and Lorenz, "N.O.Body", 3-4.

next chapter will further discuss the implications of this new context, by addressing the representation of so-called 'self-made freaks' in the work of Marc Quinn, and how it engages with traditions of the ideal body in art history.

CHAPTER TWO:

Self-made Freaks and Traditions of the Ideal Body in Art

Self-made freaks in the sculptures of Marc Quinn

In a 2010 interview with *The Guardian's* Simon Hattenstone, British artist Marc Quinn addressed critics of his exhibition *Allanah, Buck, Cat Man, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* (2010), who had likened his series to a modern-day freak show.¹ 'Visibly upset' at the possibility of such a reading of his work, Quinn protested:

It's not a freak show. That's what someone who's a complete idiot might think, but it's actually a very human show. It's not about freakness, it's about humanity. I don't care [that I'll get those headlines]. I think they are extremes of how people live now, and you look at those very tabloids that will say they are freaks, and this is the fodder of those papers.²

Quinn's defensive reaction is unsurprising. 'Freak show' is a dirty word in the museum today, most often used in a derogatory context to refer to exploitative, unusual or merely spectacular ways of working.³ His reaction could even be seen as an assertion of the

1 Simon Hattenstone, "Marc Quinn: Just don't call it a freak show", *The Guardian* (1 May 2010), accessed 7 January 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/may/01/marc-quinn-interview>. Although Quinn does not refer to these reviews specifically, some of the criticisms of his work which compared this series to a freak show included: Ed Caesar, "The augmented reality of Marc Quinn", *The Sunday Times* (9 May 2010), accessed 7 January 2013, http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/arts/Visual_Arts/article281725.ece; Ben Luke, "Marc Quinn's freak show", *London Evening Standard* (6 May 2010), accessed 7 January 2013, <http://www.standard.co.uk/arts/marc-quinns-freak-show-7419735.html>.

2 Marc Quinn, as quoted in Hattenstone, "Marc Quinn".

3 For instance, between 2004 and 2008, the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) of the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester conducted a research project on the state of disability representation in museums in the United Kingdom, resulting in a series of reports, articles and exhibitions which investigated how material related to disability was being collected, displayed and interpreted. One noteworthy finding was the observation that many curators were hesitant to pursue topics related to disability for fear of evoking the freak show:

'The history of the freakshow, in particular, appears to cast a powerful shadow over contemporary practice. In the exhibition of objects related to disability, curators are anxious not to be seen to be promoting freakshow approaches through displaying difference in way which might encourage staring or ridicule, or be seen to be exploitative or sensational.'

See: J. Dodd et. al., "Beggars, Freaks and Heroes? Museum Collections and the Hidden History of

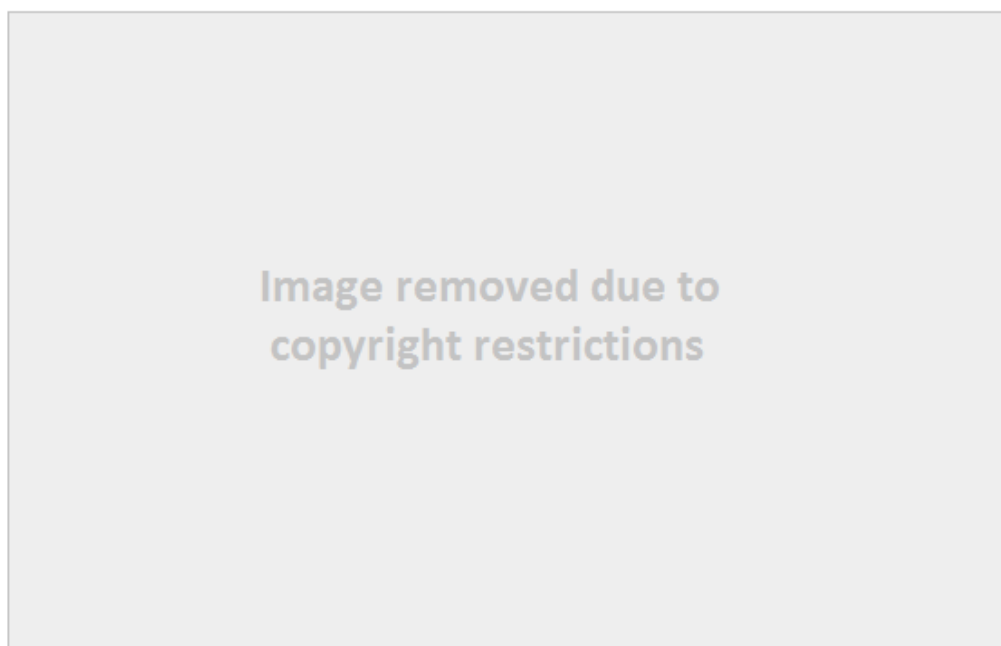


Fig. 2-1. Installation shots of Marc Quinn's *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* at the White Cube Gallery, London, 7 May 2010 – 26 June 2010. Reproduced from artists' website.

boundary between the high ideals of the art museum and the seedy reputation of the freak show; a division that was complicated by artists like Diane Arbus, as I discussed in the previous chapter. However, as Chapter One sought to demonstrate, this superficial understanding of the freak show undermines its historical significance as an institution where important cultural debates around the body were played out in a public setting. This chapter places Quinn's work in the context of this more nuanced understanding of the freak show, to explore how his work creates a dialogue between the freak show and the art museum around the values and traditions of displaying the human body.

Quinn's *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela and Thomas* series has drawn comparisons to the freak show because the people he has chosen to depict have all radically altered their bodies in extraordinary ways. Sculpted out of lacquered bronze and Carrara marble in the style of Neoclassical statues, Quinn's subjects include: Dennis 'Cat

Disability", *Museum Management and Curatorship* 20 (2005): 16. See also: J. Dodd et. al., *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries* (University of Leicester Research Centre for Museums and Galleries: December 2008), accessed 27 January 2009, <http://www.le.ac.uk/ms/research/pub1129.html>.

Man' Avner, who altered his facial features through surgery, dental implants and tattoos in order to look more feline; Chelsea Charms, an exotic dancer and model who is reported to have the world's largest artificial breasts; pre-operative transsexual porn stars Allannah Starr and Buck Angel; television star Pamela Anderson, famed for her surgically-enhanced chest; the late pop star Michael Jackson, whose bizarre forays into plastic surgery were the source of much tabloid speculation throughout the 1990s; and Thomas Beatie, a transgendered man who became the first legal male to give birth in the United States. [Fig. 2-1] Although the people Quinn presents in this series demonstrate a wide range of body types and personal motivations, they have all deliberately repudiated conventional notions of normality through the dramatic physical modification of their body. Furthermore, Quinn did not choose people who privately undertook physical transformations, but only those who have voluntarily participated in high-profile displays of their body, including performing in pornography, acting on television, modelling, giving concerts, or appearing on the talk show circuit. In fact, as I will discuss throughout this chapter, their cultivation of an extraordinary body was often a platform for achieving or enhancing their aspirations of fame and fortune.

Grouped together on display in the art gallery, Allannah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela and Thomas evoke what Robert Bogdan has described as the category of the 'self-made freak': freak show performers who purposely altered their bodies in extraordinary ways in order to appear unusual enough to be exhibited.⁴ For instance, one particularly intriguing example of a self-made freak was Jean Furella, who performed as 'The Tattoo Queen' in the sideshow of the travelling Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus in early twentieth-century America. [Fig. 2-2] According to her pitch card,⁵ Furella started her

4 Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8. For an in-depth description of the 'self-made freak' category, see pages 234-266.

5 Pitch cards were cheaply printed booklets sold at side shows, telling the (usually embellished or outright fabricated) 'True Life' biographical stories of freak show performers. Alongside collectible photographs of freaks, these pamphlets were sold for an additional fee on top of the admission price, as another way for

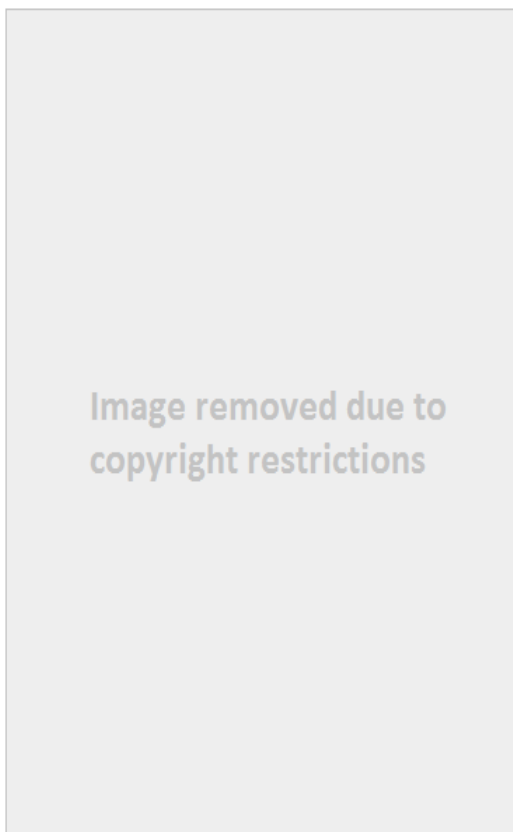


Fig. 2-2. Photograph of Jean Furella, 'The Tattoo Queen', ca 1940, from pitch card pamphlet entitled 'The Story of How I Became the Tatoon Queen' [sic]. Private collection of James Mundie. Reproduced from the Sideshow Ephemera Gallery.

career as a genuine bearded lady, until she fell in love with a circus barker who wouldn't kiss her with a beard.⁶ Rather than make the choice between her blossoming romance or her job in the freak show, Furella instead removed her beard and had her entire body covered in tattoos to become a 'human art gallery'.⁷ Although her tattooed appearance does not appear as unusual today, Furella's choice would have been a shocking transgression of normal feminine appearance and behaviour at the time.⁸ However, her transformation enabled her to maintain a stage career by transforming from a 'born freak' to a 'self-made freak'.

Furella's story has most likely been embellished for the pitch card, but she did indeed undergo a dramatic, permanent alteration of her body for the sake of the freak show: a transformative gesture which permanently placed her body outside the realm of the so-called normal. Why not just shave her beard and leave the freak show to get married and lead a so-called normal life? Beyond the unusual body itself, it is the desire to be a freak, and the decision to undergo radical modifications to one's body in pursuit of that desire,

performers to make extra income from the show patrons. See: Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 17-21.

6 A circus 'barker' is another term for 'talker', someone employed by the circus to draw audiences into the sideshow tents by giving compelling descriptions of the acts inside.

7 Jean Furella, "The Story of How I Became the Tatoon Queen"[sic], ca 1940, Sideshow Ephemera Gallery, accessed 5 January 2013, <http://www.missioncreep.com/mundie/gallery/gallery6.htm>.

8 For example, in Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero's 1893 criminological study of the 'inferior sex' (in which they applied early statistical methods to argue that female criminals were more cunning and dangerous than male criminals), they argue that tattooing was frequently a sign of criminals, lunatics and lower class prostitutes. See: Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute and the Normal Woman*, 1893, trans. Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 151-156. See also: Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 250-252.

that makes the self-made freak seem especially curious.

Most critical texts on the history and theory of the freak show have primarily focused on the category of the 'born freak', or those whose unusual bodies were the result of congenital abnormalities or unusual genetic development. However, the category of the self-made freak reveals the potential desirability of the freak body, complicating simplistic narratives which position unusual bodies as inferior or tragic. Like Jean Furella, the corporeal transformation of the subjects in Quinn's series challenge the default assumption that having a normal body is more desirable than inhabiting a curious one. Although Quinn resists comparisons of his work to the freak show, I argue that it can provide rich new readings of his work which consider how exhibition contexts – both actual and implied – contribute interesting new ways of understanding representations of the body on display. In particular, in this chapter I address how this evocation of the freak show forms a dialogue with his references to traditions of the ideal body within art history, especially to Neoclassical sculpture. I argue that Quinn's series offers up the self-made freak as an alternative model of the ideal body, which incorporates a personal vision of the ideal, celebrity and the embrace of artificial modification into its framework. Focusing on Quinn's *Allannah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* series, I analyse how his evocation of Neoclassicism engages with traditions of the ideal body in art while converging with notions of the self-made freak.

It should be clearly noted that I am not using the term 'freak' to ridicule Quinn's work or his subjects; rather, I aim to build upon the discussions presented in the previous chapter, by utilizing the 'freak' as a means of interrogating frameworks of display which exist around unusual bodies. Although I discuss the subjects of Quinn's series, and how representations of their individual bodies evoke particular associations within an art historical context, the larger aim of this chapter is to reveal the overlaps in these discourses

of display. By doing so, I analyse art as another mode of framing the extraordinary body within the history of exhibiting human curiosities, which is influenced by its own sets of underlying values and conventions.

The Cat Man, The Pregnant Man and the Neoclassical Ideal

In the catalogue published alongside the debut of *Allannah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* at the White Cube Gallery in London in 2010, Joachim Pissarro and Mara Hoberman suggest that Quinn's interest in these individuals lay in the fact that they each exemplify a disconnect between personal identity and physical form; that their radical transformations were an attempt to reconcile 'inner beings and their natural external appearance'.⁹ This relationship between corporeality and spirituality is a recurring theme throughout Quinn's work, stretching back to his association with the Young British Artists scene in the early 1990s. In particular, his experimentation with unconventional mediums has tested the boundaries of the body, using biological materials to reconfigure perceptions of the human figure within the space of the art gallery. For instance, one of his best known works is *Self*, an ongoing series of self-portrait busts made from his own blood, addressing the boundaries between the internal/external self and the fragility of the physical body. [Fig. 2-3] His explorations of the physical and spiritual make-up of the self continue in works like his biological portrait of geneticist Sir John Edward Sulston – the man who won the 2002 Nobel prize for his work on mapping the human genome – made from Sulston's DNA suspended in agar jelly. [Fig. 2-4] Using the body as both a subject and a medium, Quinn uses biological materials to explore the relationship between the physical body and our sense of self.

These questions of self extend beyond the personal when an extraordinary body is

⁹ Joachim Pissarro and Maura Hoberman, "Reality Show", *Marc Quinn: Allannah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela and Thomas* (London: White Cube Gallery, 2010), 81.

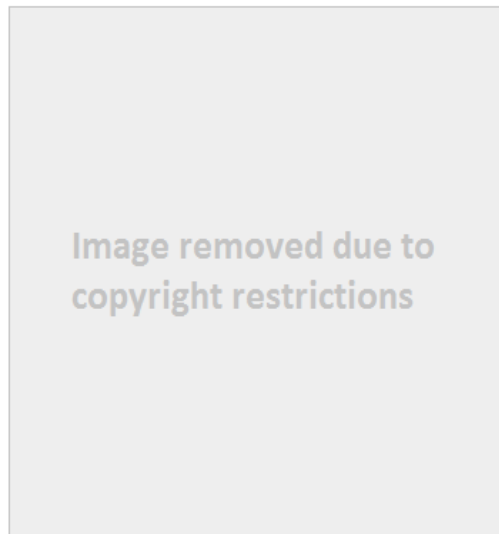


Fig. 2-3. Marc Quinn, *Self*, 2006 version. Artist's blood, liquid silicone, stainless steel, glass, perspex and refrigeration equipment, 205 x 65 x 65 cm. Photographed by Todd-White Art Photography. National Portrait Gallery, London, UK. Reproduced from National Portrait Gallery collection.

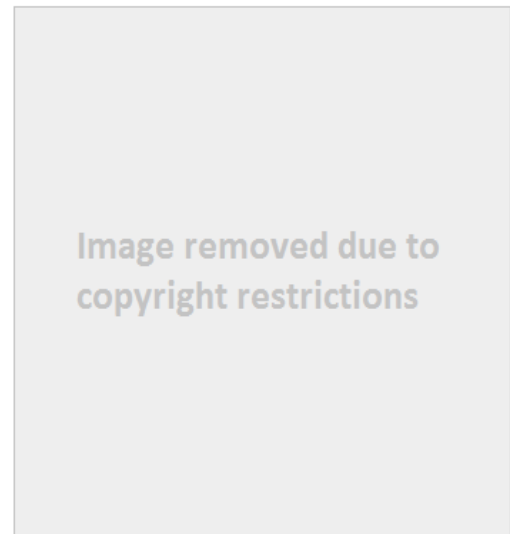


Fig. 2-4. Marc Quinn, *Sir John Edward Sulston*, 2001. Sample of sitter's DNA in agar jelly, mounted in stainless steel, 12.5 x 8.5 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London, UK. Reproduced from National Portrait Gallery collections.

displayed in public, transforming it into a site of debate around conceptions of the body. The sculptures in *Allannah*, *Buck*, *Catman*, *Chelsea*, *Michael*, *Pamela*, *Thomas* depart from Quinn's earlier experimentations with unconventional biological mediums, instead returning to more familiar aesthetic forms of the body in art. However, as in his earlier works, questions about the relationship between identity and physical form are as important as ever. In fact, Quinn has described his subjects in this series as artists who use their own bodies as mediums, suggesting that their corporeal modifications hold much in common with his own experiments in using biological matter as an artistic medium.¹⁰

One of Quinn's most radical subjects in this series is Dennis 'Cat Man' Avner, an American man who spent the last three decades of his life undertaking a series of extreme body modifications in order to achieve a more feline appearance. [Fig. 2-5] Before his

¹⁰ Marc Quinn in "The Journey not the Destination: Marc Quinn and Joachim Pissarro in conversation", in *Marc Quinn: Allannah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela and Thomas* (London: White Cube Gallery, 2010), 99.

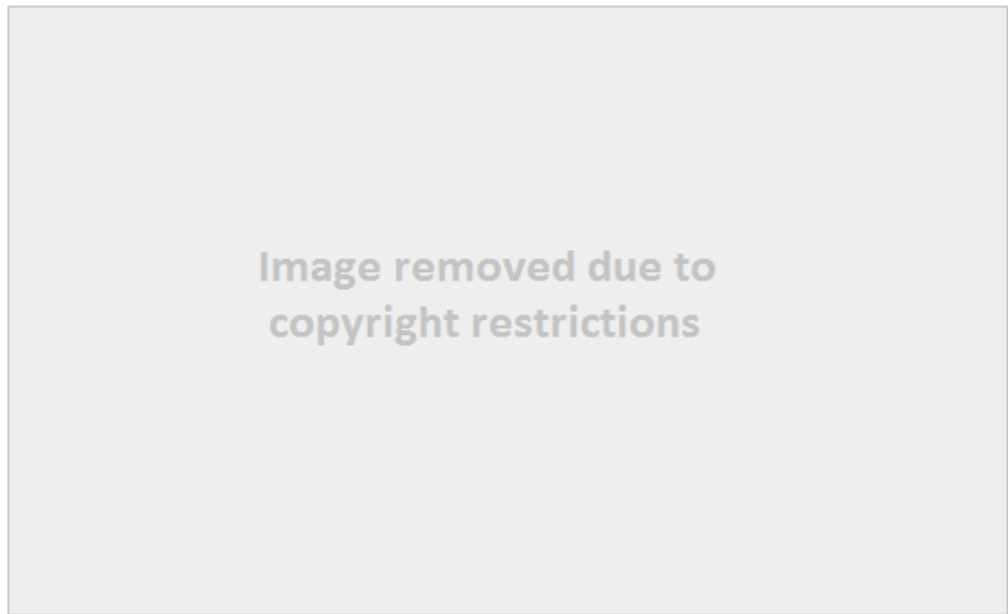


Fig. 2-5. Marc Quinn, *Cat Man* (front and side views), 2010. White Bianco marble, black Belgian Carrara marble overlay, stainless steel, 40 x 33 x 33 cm. Reproduced from artists' website.

death in 2012,¹¹ the procedures that Avner undertook included: tattooing his face with orange and black tiger stripes; inserting silicone implants in his cheeks and forehead; the bifurcation of his upper lip; reshaping his nose and eyebrow line; modifying his ears into a pointed shape; piercing his maxilla to mount plastic whiskers; strengthening his long fingernails with acrylic and shaping them into claws; changing his pupils to cat-like slits using special contact lenses; and replacing his teeth with feline-shaped dentures. [Fig 2-6] Understanding his body as a sculptural medium, Quinn's depiction of Avner as Cat Man represents a translation of his body into the language of the Western art canon and the ideals that it embodies.

Writing about people who initiate transformations into alternative animal personae, Marla Carlson observes: 'Performing an animal identity provides a way out of human norms that have become unduly restrictive and often enough has nothing at all to do with

¹¹ Dennis 'Cat Man' Avner passed away in November 2012 at the age of 54, allegedly from suicide. See: Shannon Larratt, "RIP Stalking Cat", *BME: Tattoo, Piercing and Body Modification News* (12 November 2012), accessed 13 January 2013, <http://news.bme.com/2012/11/12/rip-stalking-cat/>.

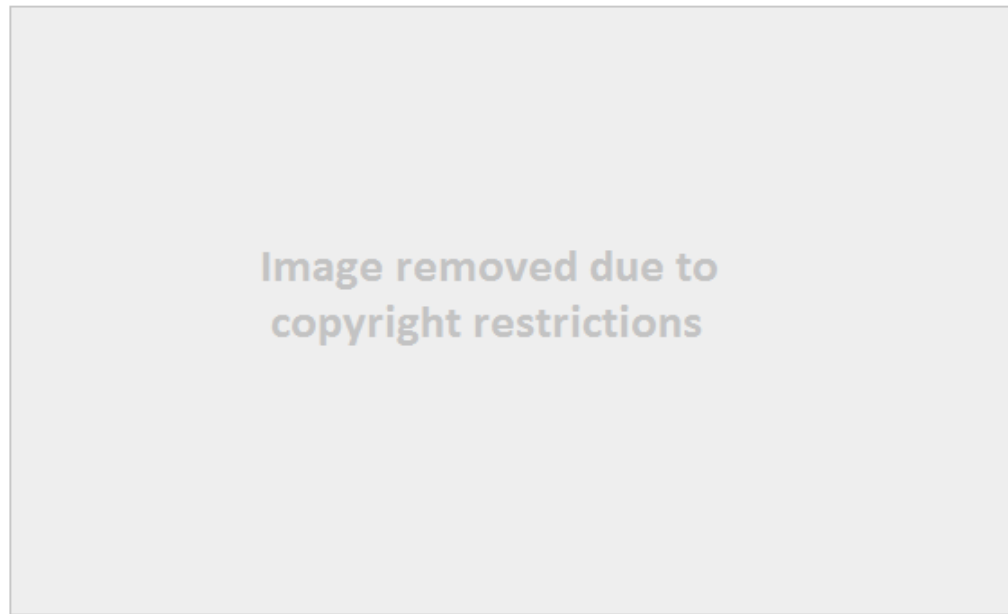


Fig. 2-6. Dennis 'Cat Man' Avner (centre) with Erik 'The Lizardman' Sprague and Danny 'The Wolf Man' Romas Gomez, at the opening of Ripley's Believe It Or Not odditorium, New York, 21 June 2007. Photographed by Susan Watts, NY Daily News Archive. Reproduced from Sara C Nelson, "Dennis Avner, 'Stalking Cat', Found Dead at 54 in Apparent Suicide", *The Huffington Post*, 14 November 2012.

animals'.¹² In the case of Cat Man, his pursuit of the extraordinary body goes beyond its specific feline manifestation, working to create a personal vision of the ideal hybrid body which merges his sense of self with his external appearance. A US Navy veteran and a college-educated computer and electronics engineer, the highly intelligent and articulate Cat Man described his radical body modifications as a way to physically embody his Totem animal, in a sort of modern interpretation of the spirit animal traditions of his Huron ancestry.¹³ As he related in a radio interview with body modification expert Shannon Larratt, Cat Man's pursuit of this transformation was an attempt to embody a more authentic sense of self that celebrated the spiritual unity he felt with cats.¹⁴ His corporeal modifications were not necessarily an attempt to become a cat *per se*, but to morph his body into a seamless animal-human hybrid which blurs the strict boundaries between the

12 Marla Carlson, "Furry Cartography: Performing Species", *Theatre Journal* 63 (May 2011): 195; accessed 11 January 2013, http://marlac.myweb.uga.edu/UGA/index_files/TJ63.2.carlson.pdf.

13 Carlson, "Furry Cartography", 192-193.

14 "Interview with Stalking Cat AKA Tiger AKA Dennis Avner", hosted by Shannon Larratt, BME Radio (BME Radio Archives, 2 June 2000), accessed 20 January 2013, <http://www.zentastic.com/blog/2012/07/16/bmeradio-archive/>.

two. In his radio interview, Cat Man also reflected upon his experiences growing up in rural Michigan with a biracial Caucasian-Native American identity, in which he felt socially excluded from both groups. Merging the spirit animal and tattooing traditions of the Huron people with the surgical technologies of the modern world, his transformation could be seen as the pursuit of the ultimate racial hybrid which exceeds both the social and physical conventions of the human body.¹⁵ Instead of trying to live up to standard social norms, Cat Man eschewed the mainstream for a self-designed body which refuses the rigid binaries of human/animal, normal/abnormal and White/Other.

The medical community would not facilitate Cat Man's transformation by conventional surgical methods, because his appearance was too far outside the realm of the 'normal' human body.¹⁶ Instead, he turned to Arizona body modification artist Steve Hayward to help design his metamorphosis. Subsequently gaining minor celebrity status and sense of belonging in both the body modification community and Furry fandom subcultures,¹⁷ Cat Man became part of two outsider communities which not only accepted his choice to radically alter his body, but celebrated it. Ironically, Cat Man's refusal of normal corporeal conventions resulted in greater social acceptance than he had ever felt before transitioning into his hybrid animal body. In many ways, his acceptance into these alternative subcultures parallels the emergence of the tight-knit freak show community in the late-nineteenth century, which developed as the formerly independent tavern displays of human curiosities were organized into formal freak shows.¹⁸ Travelling, working and

15 "Interview with Stalking Cat," BME Radio (2000).

16 Lisa Forsburg, "Stalking Cat, tiger modification, and the limits of consent", Practical Ethics blog, University of Oxford (22 December 2012), accessed 4 January 2013, <http://blog.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/2012/12/stalking-cat-tiger-body-modification-limits-consent/>. For more on cultural politics of the line between body modification and self mutilation, see: Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 24-26.

17 Furry fandom is a subculture which evolved out of the comic fan community, which is interested in anthropomorphic fictional characters, and whose members often take on animal 'fursonas' with back stories, fur costumes and performative animal behaviours. The Furry fandom often (but not always) incorporates a sexual component known as 'Yiffing', which refers to erotic encounters between members of the subculture. See: Carlson, "Furry Cartography", 195-197.

18 See: Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 69-70, 74-77.

living together, freak shows forged a sense of community, acceptance and solidarity among performers, characterised in part by their attitude toward and mistrust of the normal-bodied outsiders – the 'suckers' – who made up their audience.

Despite being frequently paid for appearances at tattooing and body modification conferences, events at Ripley's Believe It Or Not odditorium,¹⁹ and on daytime talk shows (which Andrea Stulman Dennett has called the modern relocation of the dime museum freak show²⁰), Cat Man repeatedly asserted that the possibility of exhibiting his body was not a factor in his decision to undergo his modifications. Instead, exhibitionism was seen as a mere by-product of the personal transformation he chose to undertake. Nonetheless, he seemed to delight in the public attention that came from his unusual appearance, once stating that he would consider a freak show career if the offer was lucrative enough to justify giving up the income and flexibility that his career as a freelance computer technician afforded him.²¹

In his sculpture of Cat Man, Quinn depicts him with his mouth open in a primal feline yowl, an expression which shows off Cat Man's feline dentures and the distinctive shape of his mouth and nose. [Fig. 2-5] To capture his distinctive facial tattoos, Quinn used a striking combination of white Bianco marble with a black Belgian marble inlay. The clean, graphic contrast of the black markings on the white face are sharp and symmetrical, which sets off the gleaming white teeth and thick, bobbed hair. With the smooth, polished marble in place of his skin, Cat Man's real-life transformation into an animal-human hybrid seems somehow more complete, a degree further removed from human likeness. In Quinn's

19 Ripley's Believe It Or Not, which Tony Bennett has described as a bowlderized version of the eighteenth-century cabinet of curiosities, is an international franchise dealing in strange events and items which are so bizarre that visitors might question their veracity. See: Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 103.

20 Andrea Stulman Dennett argues that, like the dime museum, the daytime talk show recycles many of the conventions of the freak show and appeals to a similar sense of popular voyeurism, specialising in addressing social taboos, the cult of celebrity and physiological anomaly. See: Andrea Stulman Dennett, "The Dime Museum Freak Show Reconfigured as Talk Show," *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of Extraordinary Bodies*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), 320-323.

21 "Interview with Stalking Cat", BME Radio (2000).

sculpture, the imperfections of Cat Man's real flesh are smoothed, the evidence of his painful procedures erased, and the gap between human and cat reduced. In many ways, Quinn seems to complete and perfect the physical transformation that Cat Man embarked upon, achieving an idealised template of the perfectly blended hybrid that Cat Man desired. Although Cat Man's real-life body represents a personal vision of ideal beauty, by placing it into this aesthetic context Quinn transforms it into a version that is more palatable to the viewer, and more compatible with conventional standards of beauty. Cat Man's rather rotund body seems to have been deliberately omitted, leaving his head balanced delicately on a smooth, round marble pedestal. Here, his overweight body and the vulgarity of self-exhibition are effaced, leaving his head as a beautiful object capable of being displayed and appreciated by the connoisseur.

This stylization of Cat Man's visage makes reference to the Neoclassical sculptural tradition, particularly in Quinn's embrace of idealism over strict realism or naturalism. In its broadest sense, Neoclassicism is a term used to describe the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revival of interest in the artistic forms of classical antiquity. As Linda Walsh describes, the term refers to artwork that imitates the Antique, but also implies a pursuit of 'nobility, authenticity, timeless truths and a rejection of distracting, merely fashionable detail'.²² Embracing the 'divine' idealism of classical sculpture espoused by Johann Joachim Winckelmann,²³ an influential eighteenth-century German art critic and scholar of Graeco-Roman antiquities, artists working in the Neoclassical style applied a stylized editing of the human form which rejected the representation of realistic wrinkles, veins, bumps and

22 Linda Walsh, "Canova, Neo-classicism and the sculpted body", in *Art & Visual Culture 1600-1850, Academy to Avant-Garde*, ed. Emma Barker (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), 220.

23 Johann Joachim Winckelmann was an eighteenth-century German art critic and archaeologist whom many consider the father of the discipline of art history. In particular, his 1764 text *Geschichte der Kunst des Althertum* (History of the Art of Antiquity) was extremely influential in the development of Neoclassicism, becoming a standard reference on ancient art into the nineteenth century. For an in-depth treatment of Winckelmann's influence on the development of art history, see: Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

imperfections.²⁴ Aspiring to a universal beauty supposedly epitomized by Classical (especially Greek) sculpture, Hugh Honour describes this aspect of Neoclassicism as the pursuit of a perfect nature 'purified of every imperfection'.²⁵ This perfection also extended beyond the corporeal: artists of the period looked to Greek and Roman sculpture not only as models of perfect physical beauty, but also as embodying associations with higher social, moral, intellectual and aesthetic values.²⁶

Winckelmann's writings – particularly his 1764 *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthum* (History of the Art of Antiquity)²⁷ – had considerable influence in positioning the classical tradition as the point of departure for the Western canon of art, embedding the values of Neoclassicism within the foundation of the discipline of art history itself. Of course, this canon is not a stable entity, but shaped by various public institutions, complex value systems, aesthetic judgements, and rationalizations which shift through time.²⁸ Nonetheless, Neoclassical notions of the ideal body became a deep-seated aspect of the institutions which shape and study art, bound up in the political, philosophical and aesthetic concerns which govern them. For instance, in his essay on the canonical status of the Parthenon Marbles (also known as the 'Elgin Marbles') within Western art history,²⁹ Colin Cunningham discusses the role played by institutions like the British Museum and the Royal Academy in establishing their importance.³⁰ As Cunningham points out, the assumption of the canonical status of these sculptures is largely based in the attitudes of

24 Walsh, "Canova", 227-232.

25 Hugh Honour, *Neo-Classicism* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), 104-106.

26 Walsh, "Canova", 222.

27 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, 1764, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006).

28 Gill Perry and Colin Cunningham (eds.), *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999). This edited volume aims to map out some of the values which have underpinned the development of the western canon of art, focusing on case studies in the academic traditions of British art in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century.

29 The Parthenon marbles refer, of course, to the group of fifth-century classical Greek statues taken from the Parthenon temple on the Athenian Acropolis, and brought to England in 1807 by Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, following his tenure as British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1799-1803.

30 Colin Cunningham, "The Parthenon Marbles", in *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art*, ed. Gill Perry and Colin Cunningham (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 43-84.

eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars like Winckelmann, who regarded the fifth century BCE as the high point of ancient art.³¹ Up until this point, British artists and scholars mostly had access to Roman copies of Greek sculptures, so the fragmented bodies of the Parthenon marbles were seen as important aesthetic and archaeological treasures for the nation. Incorporated into the British Museum in 1816, their accession greatly enhanced the reputation and value of the national collection, which until that point was regarded as greatly inferior to the collections of the Louvre in Paris.³² Exhibited in a manner to emphasize the pedimental figures and the frieze without relating them to their original architectural setting,³³ the display of the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum related to Winckelmann's humanist vision of the antique ideal embodied as the perfect, sovereign subject imagined in isolation from the world.³⁴ Considered an important resource for the artists of Britain from the beginning, visiting the British Museum to sketch Antique sculpture became a central part of artistic education for students training at the Royal Academy (not to mention the collection of plaster casts which had been considered a staple of artistic education since the Renaissance).³⁵ By emphasizing the importance of the Parthenon Marbles to the emerging artistic elite, the idealised bodies of classical sculpture were further cemented into the Western canon of art history, as a fundamental element of these emerging artistic practices. Fragmented, the original colour worn away, and viewed in isolation from their architectural context, the display of Antique figurative sculpture within the British Museum sets up a specific corporeal encounter framed by a particular set of aesthetic, political and philosophical ideals.

Within his *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* series, I

31 Cunningham, "Marbles", 72.

32 Cunningham, "Marbles", 75-76; See also: Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 241.

33 Cunningham, "Marbles", 80-81. See also: Walsh, "Canova", 232-233.

34 Potts, *Ideal*, 145.

35 Cunningham, "Marbles", 76; MacGregor, *Curiosity*, 88-89; 242-246.

argue that Quinn's evocation of this history does not necessarily intend to de-construct the art historical framework around classical beauty, but instead sets up an encounter between it and contemporary visions of the body in order to reveal the layers of meaning which inform our perceptions of the ideal human form. Although he certainly challenges the stability of canonical beauty, Quinn experiments with Neoclassical aesthetics to expand the potential inclusivity of these forms, rather than deride or dismiss them altogether. Barbara Sliwinska characterises the use of the term 'classicism' in the context of Quinn's work as a recognizable trope, which is used to denote authoritative notions of the proportional, harmonious and symmetrical body, but has historically functioned as a contestable term open to interpretation.³⁶ Tracing the variability of the term throughout different historical contexts, Sliwinska embraces the ambiguity of 'classicism' as a methodological tool for understanding how Quinn's work plays with conventions of beauty and perfection through the human form. Just as Alex Potts has observed about the writings of Winckelmann, 'beauty' within Quinn's work functions as a mediating concept between ideal vision and the physical realities of the body, rather than something definite or even wholly comprehensible.³⁷ In this view, it is the artist's task to negotiate the relationship between the two in their artwork, and Quinn uses the trope of Neoclassicism in order to assert the legitimacy of alternative forms of beauty produced in the contemporary world.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has raised similar observations pertaining to the representation of disabled bodies within conservative, formal portraiture, arguing that such a convention-bound genre bestows cultural capital on its subject by evoking the dignity and importance conferred by particular visual traditions.³⁸ Quinn's most prominent exploration into this subject is his *Complete Marbles* series, which contests internalised

³⁶ Barbara Sliwinska, "Venus in the 'Looking-glass': para-classicism and the trans-body in the works of Igor Mitoraj and Marc Quinn" (PhD thesis, Loughborough University, 2010), 32-35.

³⁷ Potts, *Ideal*, 156.

³⁸ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Picturing People with Disabilities: Classical Portraiture as Reconstructive Narrative", in *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, ed. Richard Sandell et.al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 23-40.

social narratives about the desirability of disabled or non-normative bodies, using the visual language of Neoclassical sculpture. In this series, Quinn questions modern perceptions of the body by depicting people with malformed and missing limbs, drawing parallels to broken sculptures like the Venus de Milo which are often held up as the apex of ideal beauty in the Western canon. Furthermore, Quinn's series alludes to the embrace of Neoclassical ideals of the body within fascist regimes like the Third Reich, pointing to the way these forms of art have been appropriated as a means of explicitly asserting ideologies of bodily perfection. Drawing upon notions of heroism, beauty, and perfection which run through classical traditions of sculpture, Quinn challenges stereotypical portrayals of disabled bodies within contemporary visual culture.

Included in this series, for instance, is *Kiss* (2001), a sculpture depicting performance artist Mat Fraser (whose artistic explorations of freak shows are discussed in the previous chapter) embracing Catherine Long, a performance artist and art therapist who was born with one arm and impaired hip and knee functions. [Fig. 2-7] Posed in a sensual embrace that echoes Auguste Rodin's iconic *The Kiss* (1889), this work addresses the visual contradiction within the legacy of Neoclassical beauty, which venerates the fragmented body of Graeco-Roman sculpture, but rejects representations of disabled bodies with similar limb malformations. In what he calls the 'compensation of the nude', Lennard Davis has even suggested that when it comes to Classical sculpture, art historians unconsciously 'fill in the blanks' in order to retain them as objects of desire.³⁹ Quinn – who studied art history as an undergraduate at the University of Cambridge – expands the potential meanings of fragmentation within Neoclassical sculpture, loading it with political significance that addresses the dearth of images in which disabled bodies are presented as beautiful and/or sexually desirable.

These associations were driven even farther when the *Complete Marbles* series was

³⁹ Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 135.

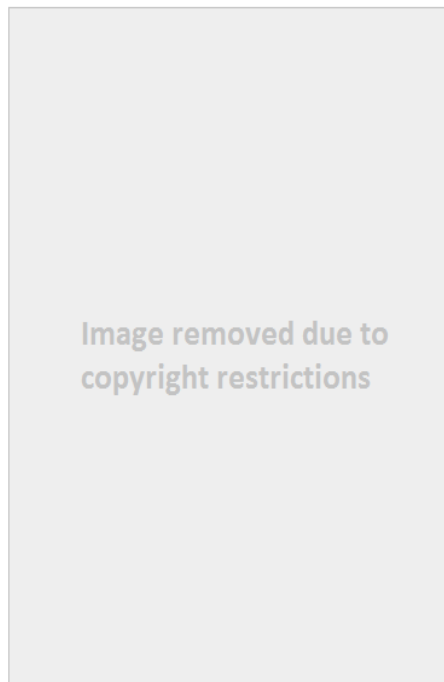


Fig. 2-7. Marc Quinn, *Kiss*, 2001. The Complete Marbles series. Marble, 184 x 64 x 60 cm. Graves Gallery, Museums Sheffield, Sheffield, UK. Reproduced from The Art Fund.

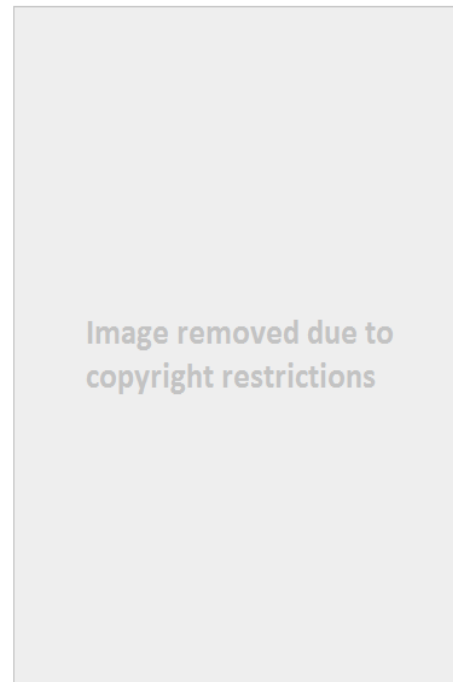


Fig. 2-8. Antonio Canova, *The Three Graces*, 1814-1817. Carved marble. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Reproduced from V&A collections.

installed within the sculpture gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, as part of the *Give and Take* exhibition in 2001. In this installation, eight of Quinn's nude, life-size sculptures of real men and women with missing limbs were placed alongside Neoclassical sculptures including Antonio Canova's *The Three Graces* (1814-1817) [Fig. 2-8] and *Theseus and the Minotaur* (1782). Placed side by side, Quinn's sculptural portraits challenge the dominant presence of the perfected nude in the the museum, revealing engrained expectations about the kinds of bodies we usually encounter in these spaces. As an institution with a historical mandate of educating artisans and bettering the working class through exposure to the best art and design,⁴⁰ the installation of Quinn's sculptures within the V&A also reveals how ideal bodies have figured within ideologies of social

⁴⁰ See: Christopher Whitehead, *The Public Art Museum in Nineteenth Century Britain: the Development of the National Gallery* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 78.

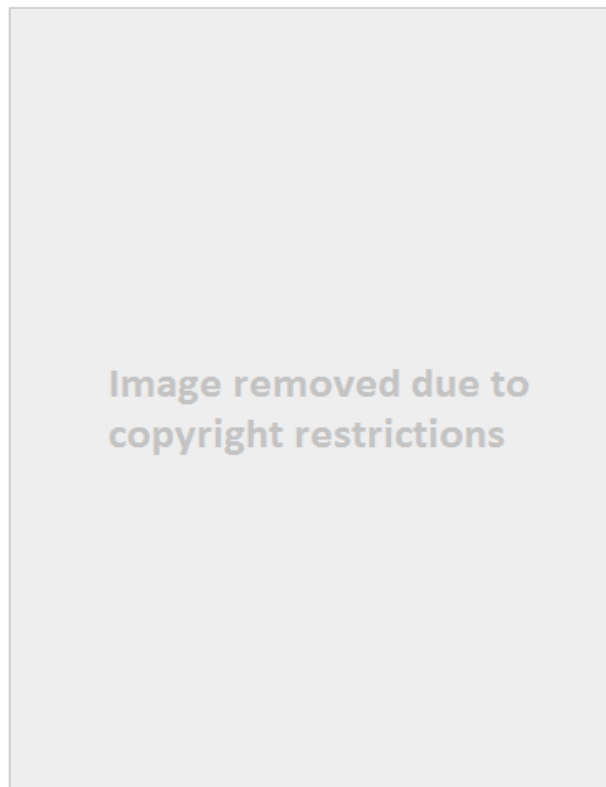


Fig. 2-9. Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, 2005. Marble, 355 x 180.5 x 260 cm. Fourth Plinth, Trafalgar Square, London. Photographer unknown. Reproduced from Bridgeman Education.

advancement. Beyond critiquing the exclusion of non-normative bodies in museums, this series also interrogates how art institutions might legitimize particular kinds of bodies over others.

Quinn's most famous work in this series, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005), engaged with similar issues of public display when it was chosen to occupy the fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square in 2005. [Fig. 2-9] The thirteen-tonne, white marble sculpture depicts disabled artist Alison Lapper, nude and eight months pregnant. The high-profile public location of the work in the busy London square positioned her body as a site of debate around the politics of public representation in contemporary visual culture.⁴¹

⁴¹ An in-depth treatment of these debates and the politics around this sculpture, particularly as they relate to the discourse of disability studies, can be found in Ann Millett-Gallant, "Chapter Two: Sculpting Bodily

Supporters of this work lauded the choice, seeing it as a positive attempt to represent people who have been historically under-represented in public monuments – in this case pregnant women, disabled people, and individual portraits of women – providing a refreshing alternative to the airbrushed, youthful bodies that saturate public visual culture in the form of advertising.⁴² These supporters viewed this as an opportunity to open a critical dialogue around the notion of who is excluded in public visual culture and why. The response, however, was not universally positive. Other critics felt that Quinn – like any freak show producer – was simply capitalizing on the shock value of disabled bodies in public spaces, turning the abnormal body into a public spectacle, and treating disability as inherently shocking or taboo. Others accused him of simply being overly politically correct, claiming that the 'human interest' story of Lapper as a single, disabled mother-to-be overshadowed any aesthetic value, and evoked the cliché that disabled people deserve pity.⁴³ However, as Millet-Gallant argues, both sides of the debate around this work seemed to problematically turn Lapper's body into a lesson in order to justify or deride its public display.⁴⁴

Quinn's *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* series adds another layer of complexity to these debates, by depicting those who have voluntarily cultivated non-normative bodies, and capitalized on the sensationalism of the public display of corporeal anomaly. Although it has become increasingly taboo to ridicule people

Ideals”, in *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 51-82.

42 See, for example: Hadley Freeman, “Why shouldn't my body be art?”, *The Guardian* (17 March 2004), accessed 7 September 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/mar/17/art.fashion>; Rachel Cooke, “Bold, brave, beautiful”, *The Observer*, (18 September 2005), accessed 7 September 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2005/sep/18/art>; Ann Millett, “Sculpting Body Ideals: *Alison Lapper Pregnant* and the Public Display of Disability”, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28 (2008), accessed 7 September 2011, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/122/122>. See also: Millett-Gallant, *Disabled Bodies*, 52-56.

43 See, for example: Jonathan Jones, “Bold, graphic, subversive – but bad art”, *The Guardian* (16 March 2004), accessed 7 September 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/mar/16/arts.ourcritics>; Richard Dormet, “An empty monument to the artist's smugness”, *The Telegraph* (16 September 2005), accessed 7 September 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1498489/An-empty-monument-to-the-artists-smugness.html>; Brendan O'Neil, “Statue of limitations”, *The Guardian* (17 May 2007), accessed 7 September 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/may/17/statueoflimitations>.

44 Millett-Gallant, *Disabled Bodies*, 67.

with disabilities, the choice to alter one's body in extreme or non-normative ways still seems to invite harsh derision; in other words, unusual bodies are still seen as an easy target for criticizing corporeal non-conformity, so long as the freakishness did not occur through nature or accident. Because the subjects in Quinn's *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* series already engage with the public exhibition of their bodies in their real life, his portraits are not responsible for inviting them into the realm of public debate and discussion, as it might be said about *Alison Lapper Pregnant*. Instead, I would like to argue that in these works his evocation of Neoclassicism serves to add a degree of legitimacy to the already sensationalistic displays of their bodies, asking that their choice to repudiate normality be considered alongside higher aesthetic and philosophical questions of the ideal body in art.

For instance, any criticism that the sculpture of Alison Lapper pregnant is shocking in its subject matter is quickly overshadowed by Quinn's larger-than-life sculpture of the heavily pregnant Thomas Beatie, the first legal male in the United States to give birth. Beatie made headlines around the world in 2008, when he was announced as the 'World's First Pregnant Man'.⁴⁵ The declaration has an air of P.T. Barnum-style sensationalism to it and was not, as the name seemed to imply, the result of some miraculous scientific intervention which allowed a physiological male to become impregnated. Rather, Beatie is a transgendered male, who was born as a biological female named Tracy LaGondino in 1974. Although he underwent chest reconstruction and testosterone therapy, and was legally declared a male through the support of his doctors and psychologists, Beatie had not (yet) altered his female reproductive organs when he decided to start a family with his wife Nancy in 2007. Nancy, however, had undergone a hysterectomy two decades earlier,

⁴⁵ Thomas Beatie's unique situation was first publicized in a 2008 article he wrote in *The Advocate*, an American gay and lesbian news magazine. Beatie's pregnancy reached widespread public consciousness with an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show in April 2008 and a high-profile interview with Barbara Walters in November 2008. See: Thomas Beatie, "Labor of Love", *The Advocate* (14 March 2008), accessed 5 October 2013, <http://www.advocate.com/news/2008/03/14/labor-love>.

so the couple decided to have Thomas carry the child rather than finding a third-party surrogate. As he described, 'In a technical sense I see myself as my own surrogate, though my gender identity as male is constant'.⁴⁶

In a television interview with Barbara Walters in 2008, Beatie explained that he decided to go public with their unusual situation in order to put their story in their own words, and to resist any feeling they had something to be ashamed about.⁴⁷ It is unclear whether or not he expected such intense media interest but, nonetheless, his body quickly became the site of very public debate over the ethics of reproductive technologies, the role of reproduction in perceptions of sex and gender, and the binaries of female/male, mother/father, and normal/abnormal. In some ways, the public debates and display of Beatie's body mirrors Rachel Adams' characterisation of the late nineteenth-century freak show:

Although they have been treated as an ephemeral form of amusement, freak shows performed important cultural work by allowing ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme and terrifying forms of Otherness they could imagine, from exotic dark-skinned people, to victims of war and disease, to ambiguously sexed bodies. [...] With its heterogeneous assemblage of bodies, the sideshow platform is both a source of entertainment and a stage for playing out many of the century's most charged social and political controversies, such as debates about race and empire, immigration, relations among the sexes, taste and community standards of decency.⁴⁸

Like the freak show, the public exhibition of Beatie's body on talk shows, in magazine photographs and news stories became a means of testing the public's moral and political convictions around a set of loaded cultural issues, playing on fears about the instability of family and gender roles in the twenty-first century. Although the majority of the media around his pregnancy depicts Beatie and his family in a very sympathetic and likeable manner, the public attention his extraordinary body received also provided an opportunity

⁴⁶ Beatie, "Labour of Love", 3.

⁴⁷ "Journey of a Pregnant Man: Barbara Walters interviews Thomas Beatie", *ABC 20/20* (14 November 2008), accessed 20 December 2012 via Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jho1UCPDqXg>.

⁴⁸ Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 2.

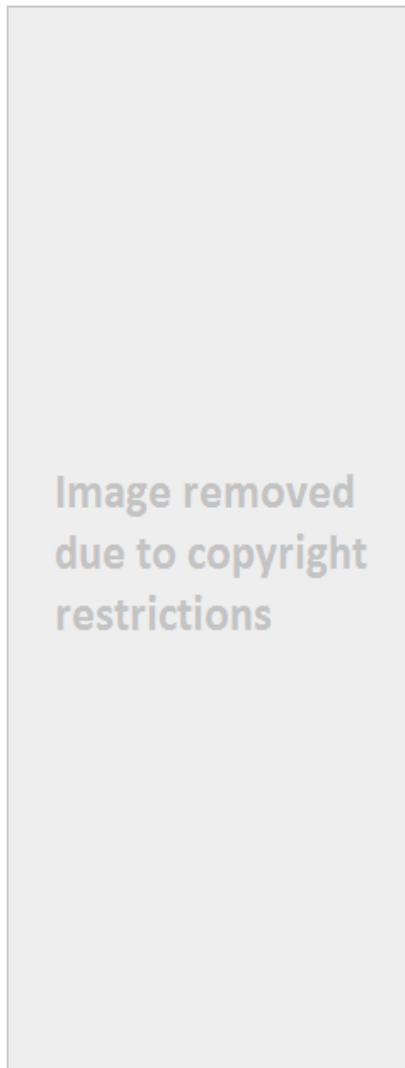


Fig. 2-10. Marc Quinn, *Thomas Beatie*, 2009. Bianco P marble, 251 x 84 x 70 cm. Photograph Roger Woolridge. Reproduced from Giovanni Aloï, "Marc Quinn @ White Cube", *whitehot Magazine*, 2010, accessed 5 January 2013.

for the public to marvel at his unusual choices.

Depicted with a trim goatee and toned upper body, Quinn's sculpture of Beatie would be a very normal-looking figure of a man were it not for the jarring addition of a protruding pregnant belly. In the quiet contemplation of the gallery space, Quinn captures Beatie in a serene moment of reflection, the gallery walls seeming to act as a respite from the glare of the media spotlight. [Fig. 2-10] Tenderly cradling his swollen belly while dressed only in boxer shorts, Beatie is captured in a private moment marvelling at the transformation taking place within his already-transformed body, highlighting the incredibly personal aspects of a body that holds such public interest.

Depicted in marble, Beatie's body is frozen in a state of becoming, memorialised in the moment his body is at its most extraordinary. Rosemary Betterton describes such representations of the pregnant body as 'promising monsters'; not because they provide a superior vision

of maternity, but in their potential to confound the relationship between 'culturally constructed maternal bodies and embodied and imagined differences'.⁴⁹ Quinn's sculpture does not efface the controversy around Beatie's body, but places it in a context which challenges the public vision versus personal experience of the body.

The treatment of the folds and creases of Beatie's loose-fitting boxer shorts recall

⁴⁹ Rosemary Betterton, "Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity and Maternal Imagination", *Hypatia* 21 (Winter 2006): 97.

the drapery of classical sculpture, while the contemporary garment places his body squarely in the present day. The folds of the fabric serve to conceal Beatie's genitals, hiding the body part upon which public debates about his unusual body symbolically focus. Kenneth Clark discusses the use of draped fabric primarily in relation to depictions of female nudes in classical Greek sculpture, describing it as a device to render the curves of the female figure 'both more mysterious and more comprehensible'⁵⁰; likewise, the drapery in Quinn's sculpture of Beatie simultaneously adds to the cryptic ambiguity of his body while modestly shielding him from crude speculation. Here, Beatie's body is presented as an expression of ambiguous beauty which evokes but doesn't live up to Neoclassical ideals. The smoothness of the marble, his affectionate pose and exquisitely rendered features are presented as aesthetically pleasing; and yet, his unusual body does not quite achieve the youthful musculature of male Neoclassical sculpture, nor the sensual curves of the female.

There is some precedence for such bodies in the history of Classical sculpture: a famous example is the so-called 'Sleeping Hermaphroditos' in the Louvre Museum in Paris, a second century A.D. Roman copy of a sleeping figure. [Fig. 2-11] Approached from behind, it appears to be the reclining figure of a voluptuous woman, but the reverse side reveals a sculpted penis: a visual trick which has the potential to inspire curiosity, surprise, sensuality or loathing in the modern and ancient viewer alike. The 'hermaphrodite' was a popular and prevalent theme in Ancient art, based around the cult of the androgynous deity Hermaphroditos, and valued for its ability to arouse such a set of delightfully conflicting sensations.⁵¹ In the context of Classical sculpture, however, the titillation of the curious body is presented as a legitimate aesthetic conundrum; a visual problem to be solved by the artistic prowess of the sculptor, and appreciated by the viewer for its skilful rendering.

Quinn's sculptures of both Cat Man and Thomas Beatie are presented in a similar

⁵⁰ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude* (London: John Murray Publishers Ltd., 1973), 68.

⁵¹ Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Duckworth, 1995), 119.

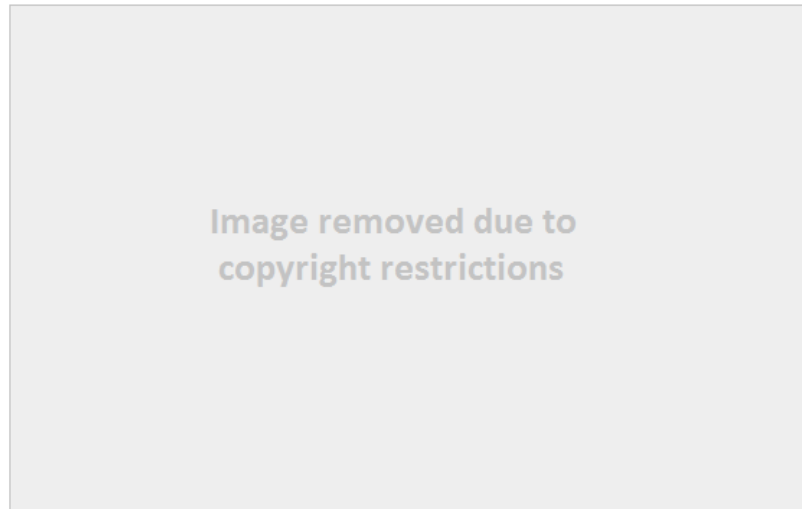


Fig. 2-11. Sleeping Hermaphroditos, second century AD Roman copy of a Greek original. Marble sculpture, 169 x 89 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris, France. Reproduced from Louvre Museum collections.

way. To borrow Sliwinska's phrase, Quinn draws upon the 'trope of the Neoclassical' to engage not only with aesthetic concerns of the body in art, but also with the spiritual and ethical debates around non-normativity. In doing so, he elevates the conversations around their bodies above the tawdry 'fodder of the tabloids'.⁵² There is clear value in this: within the context of his work, the bodies of Cat Man and Thomas Beatie become monuments to important cultural debates about the assumed binaries of our cultural make up, the politics of representation and display, and the business of personal expression. Where the freak show would exaggerate the sensationalism of their bodies, he effaces the potential titillation in order to anchor this form of public display within higher intellectual realms. Quinn even describes the physical transformations of his subjects as quasi-religious journeys, deliberately relocating their bodies from the profane to the sacred.⁵³

The celebrity freak: cultivating the ideal freak body

Although Cat Man and Thomas Beatie radically altered their bodies for deeply

⁵² Marc Quinn, as quoted in Hattenstone, "Marc Quinn".

⁵³ Quinn, "Journey", 99.

personal – and, arguably, spiritual – reasons, Quinn's strategy also risks undermining the choice to pursue an unusual body *for* the spectacle of display. For instance, as the description of Tattoo Queen Jean Furella [Fig. 2-2] aimed to demonstrate, the desire to cultivate a freak body for the purpose of performing on the freak show stage might be seen as strange, but it is nonetheless a legitimate decision that many have made throughout history. Today, with the prevalence of reality television programmes, overnight internet stardom and televised talent competitions, the pursuit of celebrity feels more tangible and comprehensible than ever. And yet, the sacrifice of normality/obscurity for the purposes of public display is still commonly seen as shocking at best, or as the symptom of mental illness at worst. However, although the curiosity of the self-made freak is usually presented in terms of sacrifice (such as the loss of normality, the absence of conventional beauty standards, etc.), I would like to suggest that it is best understood in terms of gain (such as the benefits of fame, increasing sense of individuality/specialness, etc.). Focusing on Quinn's sculptures of Michael Jackson, this section considers the notion of celebrity and public performance in pursuit of the freak body, positioning his 'freakness' as a part of a self-engineered strategy of publicity. Like his sculpture of Thomas Beatie and Cat Man, Quinn elevates the sensationalism of Jackson's body by placing him in the context and traditions of Neoclassical sculpture, but I discuss how these aspects overlap with notions of the celebrity in the self-made freak.

Christopher Forth argues for a conception of the modern ideal body which incorporates notions of performance with that of appearance:

...the twentieth-century century's ideal body is not merely a matter of *aesthetics* but is equally bound with notions of *performance* that increasingly demanded that individuals extend their physical capacities beyond what would have been considered 'normal' or 'healthy' in earlier centuries, notably in the domains of sexuality, labor, and athletics.⁵⁴

Beyond carrying out specific bodily tasks, Forth describes the role of the body in the

⁵⁴ Christopher E. Forth, "Beauty and Concepts of the Ideal", in *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Modern Age*, ed. Ivan Crozier (New York: Berg, 2010), 127.

twentieth-century as one that was increasingly conceived as an active agent in service of sexuality and seduction, prompting both men and women to mould their bodies in response to shifting notions of ideal body and character. In particular, he notes the increasing cultural valence of Hollywood stars and professional athletes as representing the ideals of body (especially sexual) performance and appearance, positioning them as models for pushing the body beyond its 'normal' or 'natural' capacities using newly developing technologies of enhancement.⁵⁵ Fame and performance of beauty is therefore incorporated into the fabric of the ideal body in the twentieth-century, alongside the higher moral, intellectual and aesthetic values already embedded within notions of ideal beauty since Neoclassicism.

Undoubtedly the most famous person in Quinn's series, Michael Jackson is remembered both for his significant contribution to American pop music and for his eccentric behaviour and bizarre appearance, the result of multiple plastic surgeries. His dogged pursuit of youthfulness and addiction to plastic surgery was the frequent subject of tabloid gossips in the two decades leading up to his death in 2009. Characterising Jackson as the ultimate 'Celebrity Freak', David Yuan has described the self-designated 'King of Pop' as an agent of his own enfreakment, whose multidimensional artistry was increasingly overshadowed by the public's interest in bizarre stories about him.⁵⁶ Despite record-breaking sales of his music since the mid-1980s and a reputation as a genuinely innovative singer, songwriter and dancer who broke through significant artistic and social barriers while still holding mass appeal,⁵⁷ Jackson exceeded his own fame through the cultivation of an unusual body and outlandish persona. Through his series of plastic surgeries and

⁵⁵ Forth, "Beauty", 140, 144.

⁵⁶ David D. Yuan, "The Celebrity Freak: Michael Jackson's 'Grotesque Glory'", in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), 369.

⁵⁷ Jackson, for instance, was the first performer to surpass Elvis Presley in record sales, a cultural event which was seen as breaking the ceiling for African-American performers in America. See Yuan, "Celebrity Freak", 368-369.

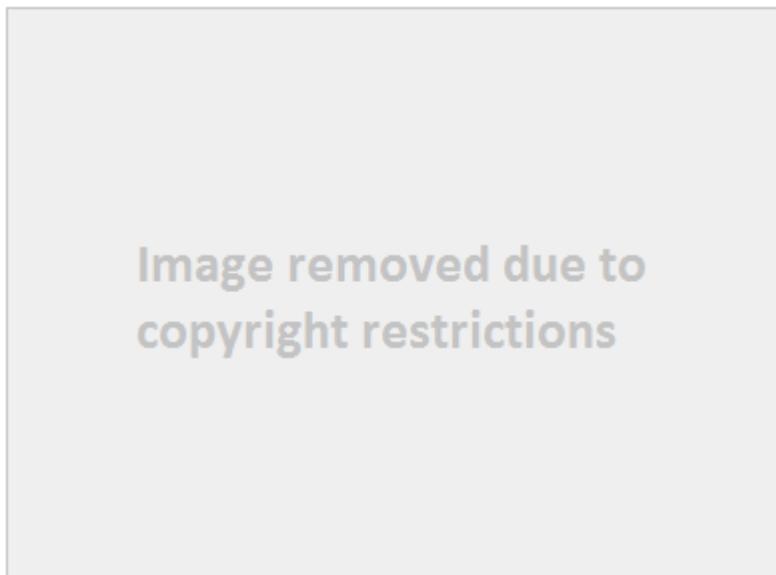


Fig. 2-12. Marc Quinn, *Man in the Mirror (Monochrome Reversal)*, 2010. White Bianco P marble and black Belgian marble, head: 95 x 104 x 112 cm., hand: 70 x 42 x 29 cm. Reproduced from artists' website.

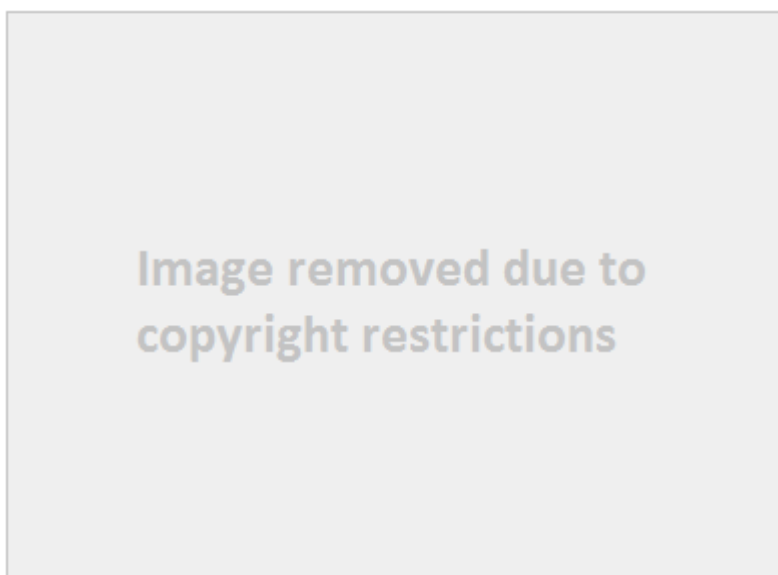


Fig. 2-13. Marc Quinn, *Man in the Mirror*, 2010. White Bianco P marble and black Belgian marble, head: 95 x 104 x 112 cm., hand: 70 x 42 x 29 cm. Reproduced from artists' website.

strange publicity stunts, the public began to increasingly see him in terms of his corporeal pursuit of whiteness and a bizarre approximation of androgynous youthfulness. Building on Sander Gilman's theories of 'passing' in relation to plastic surgery,⁵⁸ Bernadette Wegenstein has identified this as a 'cosmetic gaze': technologies mobilized by Jackson to divert the gaze of his audience and defy his own blackness, maleness and ageing.⁵⁹ Further adding to perceptions of the singer as a monstrous figure, Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg argue that his bizarre appearance seemed to become a manifestation of moral monstrosity when he was accused of pedophilia in 2005.⁶⁰

Quinn's twin sculptures of the head and hand of Jackson (*Man in the Mirror*, 2010) are completed in a graphic contrast of black and white marble, created in a monochromatic reversal of each other. [Figs. 2-12 and 2-13] Both the title and this reversal make reference to Jackson's colossal hit song of 1988, 'Man in the Mirror', a song about self-reflection and using the image of oneself as a catalyst for self improvement.⁶¹ Despite the mass appeal of his message of self-improvement, however, Jackson's own body modifications were generally perceived as being self-destructive rather than positive changes. In this way, Quinn's choice of colour could be seen to reference one of the most controversial aspects of Jackson's corporeal alterations: his radical skin lightening. Popular opinion often identified his increasing whiteness as a desire to reject his own blackness in favour of a more mainstream Caucasian look; however, his pursuit of skin lightening was more likely

58 See: Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). Tracing the history of aesthetic surgery around the world, Gilman discusses how surgical interventions have been turned to in order to 'pass' as a member of a group which it would be advantageous to be a member of.

59 Bernadette Wegenstein, *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 2012), 88, 95.

60 Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, "The Face of Ruin: Evidentiary Spectacle and the Trial of Michael Jackson", *Social Semiotics* 17 (2007).

61 Michael Jackson's *Man in the Mirror*, released in January 1988, was the fourth single from his seventh solo album, *Bad* (written by Glen Ballard and Siedah Garrett, and co-produced by Michael Jackson and Quincy Jones). One of Jackson's most critically acclaimed songs, *Man in the Mirror* topped the Billboard charts in the US for two weeks when it was released in 1988, and re-entered the charts in 2009 following news of Jackson's death. The colour palette could also be seen to make associations with Jackson's 1991 single 'Black or White?', a chart-topping dance number about racial harmony.

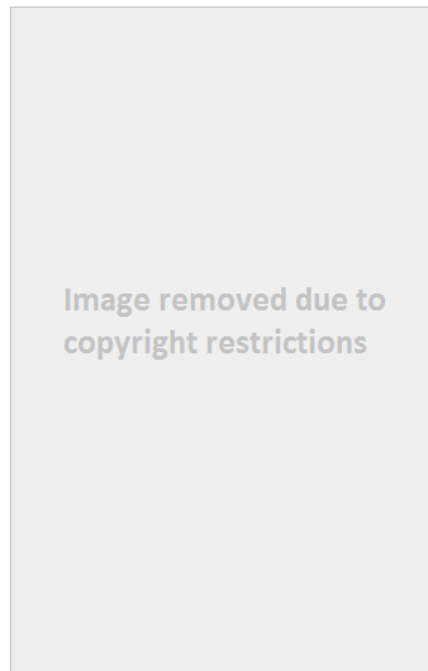


Fig. 2-14. Carte de visite of “The Wonderful Leopard Boy and his Pet Snake”, late nineteenth century, taken at Webster’s Gallery, Louisville, KY. Reproduced from Sideshow World.

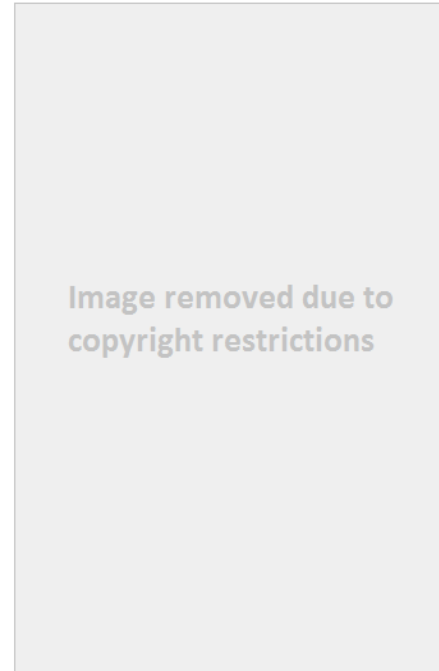


Fig. 2-15. Unknown artist, *Portrait of Mary Sabina (b. 1736)*, ca 1745. Oil on canvas, 75 x 62 cm. Hunterian Museum, The Royal College of Surgeons of England, London, UK. Reproduced from BBC “Your Paintings”.

an attempt to counter his vitiligo, a skin condition which causes patchy de-pigmentation.⁶²

In an interesting parallel to freak show history, this condition of mottled skin was sought after by exhibitors like P.T. Barnum, who would promote people with the condition as 'Human Leopards' or 'Zebra People': atavistic presentations which presented the black/exotic body as animalistic spectacles.⁶³ [Fig. 2-14] Capitalizing on theories of Darwinian 'Missing Links' popularized at the end of the nineteenth century, primitivist representations of people with vitiligo also found their way into medical collections – such as the portrait of Mary Sabina in the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons in London [Fig. 2-15] – where they presented a superficial visual link between black and white bodies. Beyond these more sensational associations, Quinn's choice of colour also relates to loaded cultural associations within the colour choices of Neoclassical sculpture,

⁶² Yuan, “Celebrity Freak”, 369-370.

⁶³ Yuan, “Celebrity Freak”, 378;

where whiteness gained 'metaphorical meanings of refinement and purity', tied to the 'civilising' ideologies of eighteenth-century Europe.⁶⁴ Ironically, Jackson's pursuit of a more normalized body by lightening his skin to disguise his skin condition may have led to his obsession with plastic surgery, which left him with a strange, mask-like visage; the extreme measures he took to avoid being a 'born freak' contributed to his popular persona as a 'self-made' one.

Yuan problematizes the popular narrative of Jackson as a tragic and unhinged celebrity, however, arguing that Jackson had a hand in strategically cultivating his bizarre public persona, partly inspired by the showmanship of P.T. Barnum. Yuan even describes an incident in which Jackson gave his manager a book about P.T. Barnum, saying: 'This is going to be my bible and I want it to be yours. I want my whole career to be the greatest show on earth'.⁶⁵ Making these connections to the conventions of the freak show even more explicit, in 1987 Jackson engineered a classic Barnum-style publicity stunt by leaking to the press that he had attempted to purchase the remains of John Merrick, The Elephant Man (which, in true Barnum style, turned out to be a hoax).⁶⁶ At least to a degree, Jackson's public persona was as purposefully engineered as his surgically altered body. The self-declared 'King of Pop', Michael Jackson not only exists within the realm of popular imagination, but sought to rule it by purposefully using techniques taken straight from the spectacle of the freak show.

Alongside the other bodies of the series and their reliance on narratives of the ideal body, Quinn's sculptures transcend this low-brow spectacle of the freak show, giving Jackson's transformation a more legitimized aesthetic and cultural meaning within the

64 Walsh, "Canova", 251-254. Walsh notes, however, that the late eighteenth-century taste for 'exotic' subjects became fashionable, where representations of black servants were rendered in a hybrid classical-naturalistic manner in black stone or black-painted plaster. For instance, in Jean-Antoine Houdon's *Head of a Negress*, the classical desire for uniformity of colour is combined with a naturalistic depiction of the eyes, nose and lips that suggest observation of a real model.

65 Michael Jackson, as quoted in Yuan, 372; cited from J. Randy Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness* (New York: Ballantine, 1992), i.

66 Yuan, "Celebrity Freak", 370-373.

space of the art gallery. This, of course, is not the first time Jackson's likeness has made its way into the realm of art: for example, Jeff Koons's 1988 Neo-Baroque sculpture of a white-skinned Michael Jackson with his pet chimpanzee was created around the time rumours of Jackson's skin lightening were beginning to hit the press.⁶⁷ [Fig. 2-16] Created with a porcelain and ceramic blend commonly used for collectible figurines, in a gaudy white and gold palette, Koons' sculpture forms a dialogue with both Baroque and Rococo artistic traditions. In this work, Koons uses Jackson as a recognizable icon of the decadence and absurdity of contemporary celebrity culture, a tribute to kitsch and the allure of celebrity gossip. Compared to Koons' take, Quinn's depiction of the singer is a highly stylized counterpoint to Jackson's legend as tabloid fodder. This mirrors Neoclassical reactions to the flamboyancy of mid-eighteenth century Rococo, which equated the ornamentation and sensuousness of the style with the corrupt decadence of the French aristocracy.⁶⁸ Aligning the austere beauty of Greek and Roman art with higher social, aesthetic and moral ideals of a progressive society, the Neoclassical body was imbued with a political and moral significance that extended beyond the beautiful body itself. In comparison to Koons' version, Quinn's sculptures of Michael Jackson restore a sense of dignity to his form, contemplating his legacy among serious questions of aesthetic and cultural significance rather than kitsch or commercial celebrity.

In particular, Quinn's depiction of Jackson makes reference to the Colossus of Constantine, a colossal statue of late Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, whose giant white marble head and hand now remain in fragmentary form. [Fig. 2-17] Like the sculpture of Constantine, Quinn's sculpture of Jackson is slightly abstracted, an idealised depiction intended to memorialise a great (albeit controversial) legacy. Although it would

⁶⁷ For a discussion of Jeff Koons' relationship to the 'Neo-Baroque' logic of contemporary art, see: Raphaël Bouvier, "The Baroque and the New: Jeff Koons and the Concept of Baptism", in *Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art*, ed. Kelly A. Wacker (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 116-143.

⁶⁸ Walsh, "Canova", 222-224.

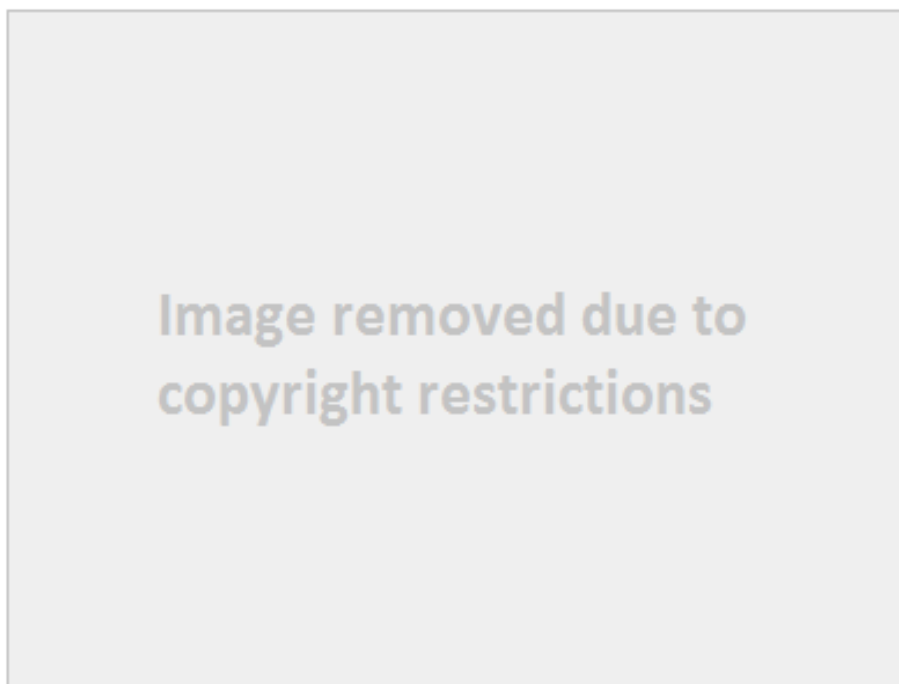


Fig. 2-16. Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988. Ceramic, glaze and paint, 106.68 x 179.07 x 82.55 cm. Collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Reproduced from SFMOMA collections.

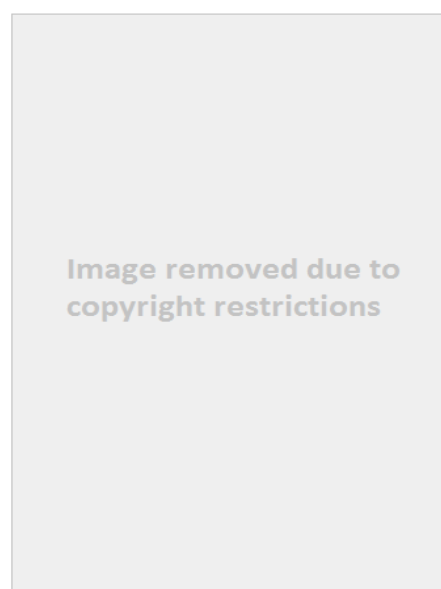
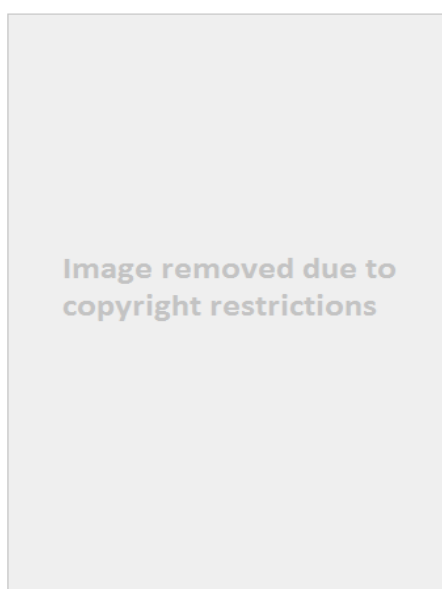


Fig. 2-17. Colossus of Constantine (head and hand), ca 315 – 330 A.D., Rome. Marble. Photographed by Mary Ann Sullivan, Bluffton College.

be a mistake to interpret his sculpture as attempting to 'rescue' Jackson from the tabloid rhetoric of the self-made freak, by placing him within this aesthetic context, Quinn restores the potential to genuinely contemplate the larger significance of Jackson and his unusual body, beyond questions of pop culture.

In addition to the *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* series, Quinn reinforces these associations by depicting Jackson a second time, as a full body bronze statue evocative of Michelangelo's sixteenth-century sculpture of *David*. In this sculpture, Quinn re-interprets Jackson's obsession with maintaining a youthful appearance, giving him the chiselled musculature, *contrapposto* pose, and body position that mimics an iconic symbol of youthful beauty. [Fig. 2-18] However, although the stance and musculature recall Michelangelo's *David*, the use of bronze and the slightness of Jackson's torso recall another iconic statue: that of Donatello's bronze *David*, made around the 1440s. [Fig. 2-19] The first free-standing male nude completed since Antiquity, this work is also notable for its sexual ambiguity, expressed in the effeminate posture, slight, boyish build and rounded stomach – a radical departure from sculptural conventions of the time.⁶⁹ Since at least the 1950s, scholars have speculated about its potential homoerotic content and the intentions of Donatello,⁷⁰ noting that this statue is dissimilar to anything else produced in the period, as well as to the rest of Donatello's body of work.⁷¹ Regardless of the true intentions of the artist, it is the unusualness of the figure which makes it distinctive and intriguing. Its distinctiveness does not subtract from its beauty or its appeal, but contributes to the sustained interest in its aesthetic and cultural significance.

Besides the associations with Jackson's own ambiguous sexuality, Quinn's sculpture likewise contextualises Jackson's body in terms of a simultaneous idealism and

69 Robert Williams, "Virtus Perficitur": On the Meaning of Donatello's Bronze 'David', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 53 (2009): 217, accessed 16 September 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41229900>.

70 See: Williams, "Donatello", 217-218, for an overview of the scholars who have discussed the homoerotic significance of Donatello's *David*.

71 Clark, *Nude*, 49.

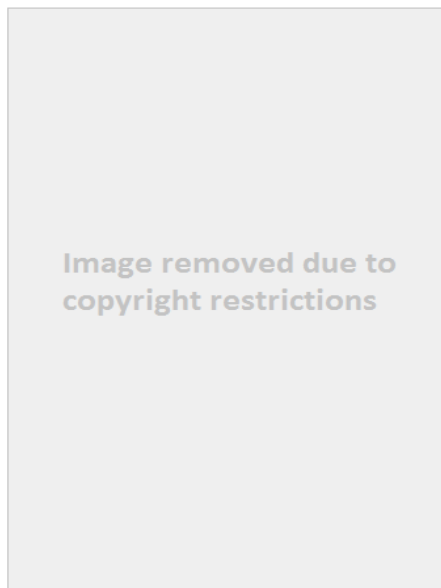


Fig. 2-18. Marc Quinn, *Michael Jackson*, 2010. Bronze. Armory Show, New York, 2011. Reproduced from SVA Continuing Education blog.

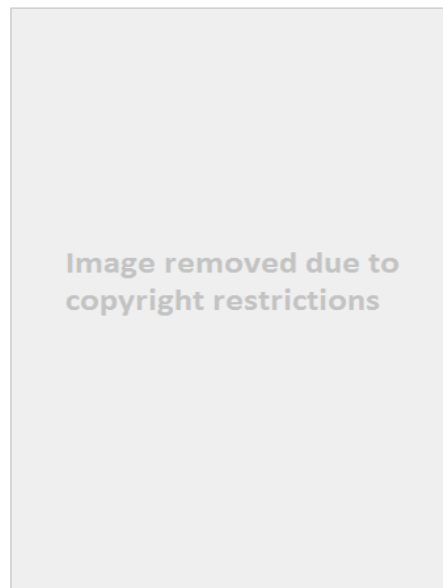


Fig. 2-19. Donatello, *David*, ca 1440. Bargello Palace and Museum. Photographed by Patrick A. Rodgers. Reproduced from Wikimedia Commons.

freakishness, grounded in the deliberate spectacle of his body: the ultimate celebrity freak. The performance of celebrity demands a degree of moulding one's body into a version of the modern ideal, and yet Jackson's extreme personal transformation is seen as unfathomable. Repositioning his repudiation of normality as an aspect of his celebrity performance rather than counter to it (in the tradition of the self-made freak), Jackson's distinctive body becomes just another dimension of his artistry. In this way, Quinn's monuments to Jackson's curious corporeality can be understood as a form of artistic homage, which reinterprets Jackson's self-designed body within the aesthetics of the Classical and Neo-Classical body.

Embracing artificiality: the beauty of the self-made freak

In his discussion of the legacy of Antique ideals in the present day, Michael Squire

describes modern practices of body-building and the pervasive rhetoric of self-improvement as an attempt to mould ourselves after internalized images of the classical ideal.⁷² Squire gives the example of Eugen Sandow, the 'father of modern body-building' who popularized modern practices of weight-lifting through his strongman circus act in the early-twentieth century.⁷³ Inspired by Greek and Roman statuary he had seen on travels through Italy in his youth, Sandow modelled his body on these sculptures through weight training, even measuring museum statues to enable him to cultivate the exact proportions of the Antique ideal.⁷⁴ In the late-nineteenth century, Sandow performed his barbell strongman act in sideshows all over Europe and America, rapidly becoming a well-known celebrity who counted King George V, Thomas Edison and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle among his friends. Sandow would 'white up' with talcum powder to further emphasize the association between his body and the polished, white marble of the sculptures, and sell postcards of himself in classical poses as an erotic muscular spectacle.⁷⁵ [Fig. 2-20] A shrewd businessman, Sandow capitalized on his celebrity to design and sell exercise equipment, write exercise manuals and host a series of strongman competitions, and is credited with making exercise fashionable in the early-twentieth century.⁷⁶ As a performer in the freak show, Sandow was a self-made freak who transformed his body for the sake of publicly exhibiting it. And yet, by blending the tactics of the freak show with classical body sculpting, his manner of moulding his body into the extraordinary fits neatly within our vision of acceptable bodily standards. In fact, not only does his body fit within

72 Michael Squire, *Art of the Body: Antiquity and its Legacy* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 16-18. See also: Forth, "Beauty", 138.

73 Caroline Daley, *Leisure & Pleasure: Reshaping and Revealing the New Zealand Body 1900-1960* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003), 41-82. See also: J Tithonus Pednaud, "Eugen Sandow-Father of Bodybuilding", *The Human Marvels*, accessed 16 September 2013, <http://thehumanmarvels.com/138/eugen-sandow-father-of-bodybuilding/strong>.

74 Pednaud, "Eugen Sandow...", unpag.

75 The evocation of classical bodies in the freak show was itself was not an unusual tactic – for instance, poses as the Venus de Milo were very common for women with truncated limbs. A famous example was Frances O'Connor (1914-1982), whose freak show persona was 'The Living Venus de Milo', and who was featured in Tod Browning's film *Freaks* in 1932.

76 Pednaud, "Eugen Sandow...", unpag.

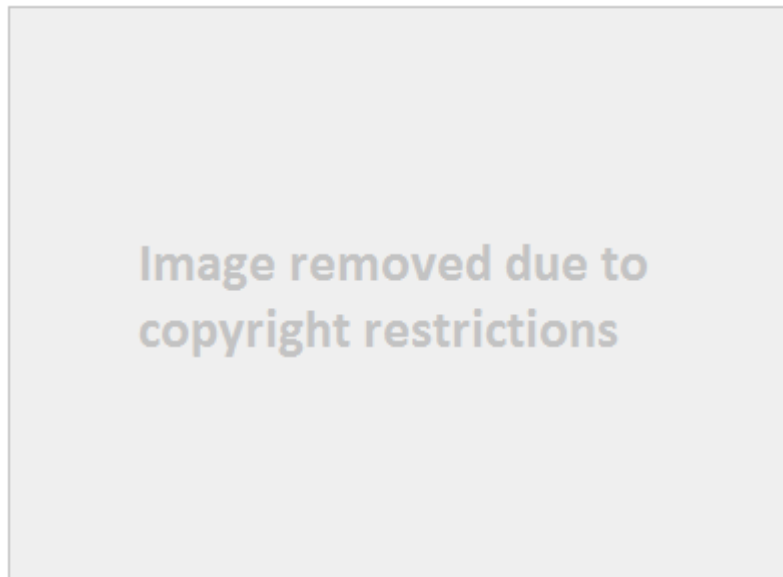


Fig. 2-20. Eugen Sandow posing as the statue *The Dying Gaul*, 1894. Photographed by Benjamin J. Falk. Reproduced from Wikimedia Commons.

conventional notions of masculine beauty, but his popularization of weight-lifting significantly contributed to cultural imperatives for physical self-improvement that have taken hold in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.

Discussing Quinn's sculptures of Pamela Anderson and Chelsea Charms, this section explores how artificial interventions to the body figure within our cultural investment in ideals of physical beauty, and how the subjects of Quinn's *Allanah*, *Buck*, *Catman*, *Chelsea*, *Michael*, *Pamela*, *Thomas* series both approximate and exceed this ideal. I argue that, together, the bodies in this series present the self-made freak as a potential model for a new form of the ideal that embraces artificial modification of the body, and extends it into the realm of the extraordinary.

Cast in lacquered bronze, and oddly demure in a bra and panties, Quinn's sculpture of Pamela Anderson presents a set of bodily interventions that aren't difficult to comprehend, because her physical enhancements remain much closer to familiar beauty ideals than the other subjects in his series. [Fig. 2-21] As Quinn puts it, 'The notable thing about Pamela Anderson – and what makes her unique in the context of this group – is that

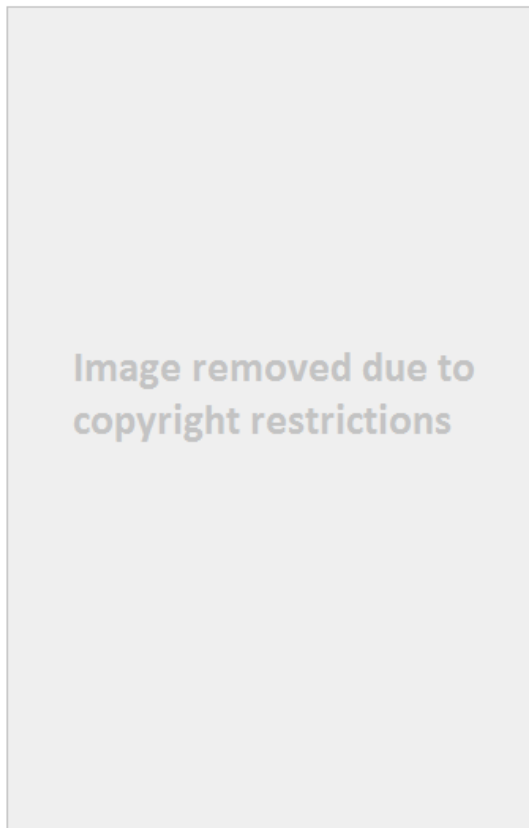


Fig. 2-21. Marc Quinn, *The Ecstatic Autogenesis of Pamela*, 2010. Orbital-sanded and flap-wheeled lacquered bronze, 163 x 103 x 78 cm. Reproduced from artist's website.

she is the only person using surgery within the parameters of cultural or tribal norms'.⁷⁷ Beginning her career as Playboy cover model in 1989, Pamela Anderson underwent breast implant surgery shortly thereafter, which helped launch her into television roles, some minor film work and additional modelling. In addition to her tenure as a Playboy Playmate, her best known role was on *Baywatch* during the 1990s, a lifeguard show notorious for gratuitous slow-motion beach runs which showed off the bodies of the actresses. At the height of her fame in the late 1990s, Anderson's augmented body was the epitome of what it meant to have a sexy figure; not beautiful, not cute, but *sexy*, an aesthetic category that implies a degree of visual display for the purpose of (male) erotic stimulation.⁷⁸ Despite

⁷⁷ Quinn, "Journey", 99.

⁷⁸ Although an in-depth feminist critique of the implications of this sculpture is beyond the scope of this chapter, it draws on important work by feminist scholars on the ideological dimensions of artistic representations of the nude (or semi-nude) female body. See, for instance: Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), which discusses how female artists have drawn on the concept of ambiguity to dismantle conventional frameworks of the

being known for her ample artificial breasts, her body falls within conventional notions of modern beauty, and is even held up as a sexual ideal. Other than her breasts, Anderson also displays a fairly typical range of cosmetic interventions for the modern female celebrity, which has normalized a regimen of make-up, diets, exercise, fake tans, hair dye, lip injections, teeth whitening and plastic surgery to achieve the requisite beauty standard for fame.

Quinn's sculpture of Anderson addresses the powerful cultural imperative to disguise any and all 'imperfections' of the female figure, relating it to the conventions of Neoclassicism which likewise rejected naturalism in favour of a stylized idealism. However, perhaps because they are difficult to translate into bronze, Anderson's signature beautification techniques have not completely materialised in Quinn's sculpture, which does not closely capture her likeness: Anderson's bleach blonde hair has not been teased enough, her heavily lined lips aren't quite the right fullness, and her eyes have not been accentuated with the smoky black eyeliner that is a staple of all her public appearances. [Fig. 2-22] In this statue, aspects of Anderson's personal transformation have been stripped away, taking along with it some of the celebrity associated with her famous visage. And yet, Anderson's famous breasts have become such a standard pop culture trope that the reference to her is clear, even beyond her facial likeness or the use of her name in the title: her extraordinary corporeal modification is essentialised as her defining characteristic.

Far from allowing Anderson to remain comfortably in the domain of the conventional, however, Quinn depicts Anderson as a set of twins, one with a belly button

classical ideal in art; Rosemary Betterton, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), which interrogates the role of psychoanalysis in feminist theories of embodiment, relating the female body in art to notions of technology and 'body horror'; Elizabeth A. Grosz and Elspeth Probyn, eds., *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1995), a collection of essays which probes the notion of 'sexiness' and the female body through the lens of queer studies; Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: Allegories of the Female Form*, 1985 (London: Vintage, 1996), which explores the role of female bodies as standing in for allegorical figures (for concepts like charity, liberty, wisdom, etc.) instead of specific portraits; and Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Woman, Art and Ideology*, 1981 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), which discussed the reduction of the female body in art to a motif, arguing that such images reproduce the asymmetrical balance of power between men and women.

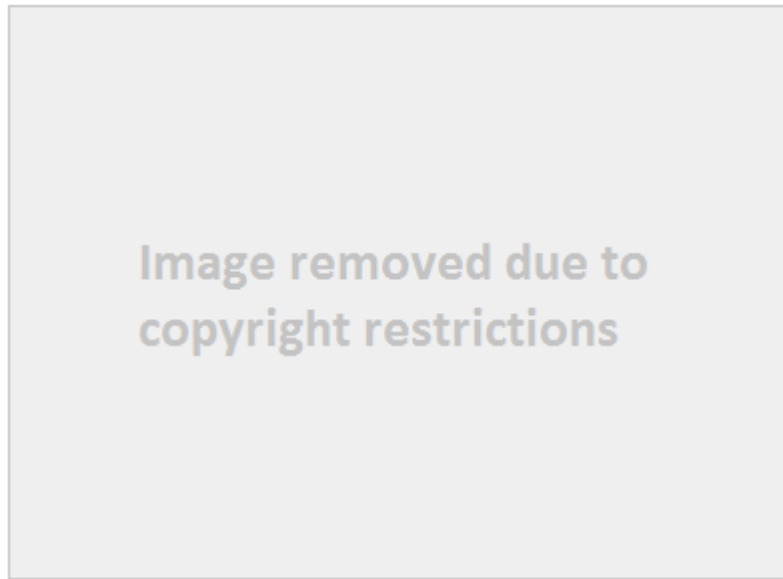


Fig. 2-22. Marc Quinn, *The Ecstatic Autogenesis of Pamela* (detail), 2010. Orbital-sanded and flap-wheeled lacquered bronze, 163 x 103 x 78 cm. Reproduced from Artnet.

and one without. In addition to evoking the standard freak show trope of conjoined twins and Freud's uncanny notion of the *doppelgänger*⁷⁹ – both classic examples of the anxiety around the division of the self and the other – Quinn's choice speaks to the role of the artificial in the very make up of the self. Without a belly button, one twin appears to be a clone created *ex utero*. But rather than a purely biological copy, the twin retains the artificial breasts and tattoos of the first, suggesting that they might be engrained in her very being. Blurring the line between natural and artificial, by depicting her as conjoined twins, her body is presented as a potential amalgamation of born freak and self-made freak.

In this way, Quinn builds upon his previous explorations of biological notions of self (which he initiated in works like *Self* and *Sir John Edward Sulston* [Figs. 2-3 and 2-4]), extending it into notions of the post-human. Broadly speaking, concepts of the post-human emerged at the end of the twentieth-century to describe the potential for technological and genetic developments to extend the capabilities of the human body

⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, 1919, trans. David McLintock (New York and London: Penguin, 2003).

beyond our biological limitations. Further developing Donna J. Haraway's notion of the cyborg, the concept of the post-human incorporates artificial intelligence and genetic alteration to create a being beyond the 'pure' human, as a means of challenging the very idea of the embodied self and its associated moral frameworks.⁸⁰

Within contemporary art, the notion of the post-human was interrogated within an important 1992-1993 exhibition entitled *Post Human*, curated by Jeffrey Deitch at the FAE Musée d'Art Contemporain in Lausanne, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Rivoli in Torino, and Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art in Athens.⁸¹ This exhibition and its accompanying catalogue drew largely upon figurative sculpture and references to pop culture, to consider the impact of technology on constructions of the self. Deitch's conception of the post-human is ambiguous, incorporating artworks that play with futuristic conceptions of time, hybrids of the animal/human body, the aesthetics of robotics and psychological states of unease alongside photographs of celebrity plastic surgery in the context of ethical debates around genetic engineering.⁸² Within the space of the art gallery, the hybrid bodies presented in his exhibition present a reinvented form of the Classical ideal which disrupt traditional categories of identity through alterations to the 'natural' body. Similarly, Quinn's sculpture of Anderson resists being seen as a simple depiction of a woman who has cultivated a futuristic version of the ideal body through cosmetic intervention; by presenting her in the form of twins, her body exceeds traditional conceptions of the human body by incorporating the artificial into her very being. In this way, the stylistic idealisation of Neoclassical sculpture is pushed beyond an aesthetic

80 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 149-181. See also: Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), ACLS Humanities E-Book, accessed 12 October 2013, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.05711.0001.001>; and Margrit Shildrick, "Posthumanism and the Monstrous Body", *Body and Society* 2 (1996): 1-15.

81 Jeffrey Deitch, *Post Human* (Hamburg: Deichtorhallen Hamburg, 1992).

82 Works in the *Post Human* exhibition include, for example, the abject bodies of Kiki Smith, Cindy Sherman and Paul McCarthy, the mannequins of Charles Ray, the technological aesthetic of Kodai Nakahara, the dystopian futures of Yasumasa Morimura, the kitschy sculpture of Jeff Koons, stuffed animal hybrids of Mike Kelley, the disembodied body parts of Robert Gober, and the retail excess of John M Armleder, Suzan Etkin and Sylvie Fleury.

choice, re-framed as a potential for transforming fundamental notions of the self.

Helen McDonald has argued that artists' embrace of hybrid categories like the post-human since the 1990s have repositioned art practices so that the conception of a single ideal female figure becomes increasingly intangible, forcing us to reconsider the very status of art as rooted in Neoclassical ideals.⁸³ However, she notes that as artists embraced the hybrid ambiguities of the post-human, the category of art has been preserved carefully in its function as a prompt to consider the ethics and social justice of the body.⁸⁴ In a discussion of 'hybrid ambiguities' within contemporary art, McDonald gives the example of Orlan, whose work she characterises as a feminist performance of the post-human that is staged in response to the hegemonic, social, cultural and representational structures that regulate the female body, including the Classical ideal of female beauty.⁸⁵ Orlan is a French performance artist best known for a series of plastic surgeries from 1990-1993, which she undertook in order to modify her appearance into a grotesque physiognomic combination of iconic female figures from art history, including Botticelli's *Venus*, Gerôme's *Psyche*, and Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. Later, Orlan had two prostheses normally used for cheek implants inserted on either side of her head, resulting in horn-like bumps above her brow (*Omniprésence*, 1993). [Fig. 2-23] For this Operation/Performance, the surgery was broadcast live to galleries in New York, Canada and France, and photographs of the surgery and healing process were displayed in a follow-up exhibition entitled *This is my body...This is my software* in 1995.

Although Orlan's dramatic physical modifications are still seen as extraordinary, by locating this display in the context of the art gallery the 'sacrifice' of Orlan's 'normal' body is afforded a much richer set of meanings than the self-made freak. According to Carey Lovelace, for example, Orlan engages in these modifications as a positive embrace of a

⁸³ McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities*, 187.

⁸⁴ McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities*, 217.

⁸⁵ McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities*, 192-193.

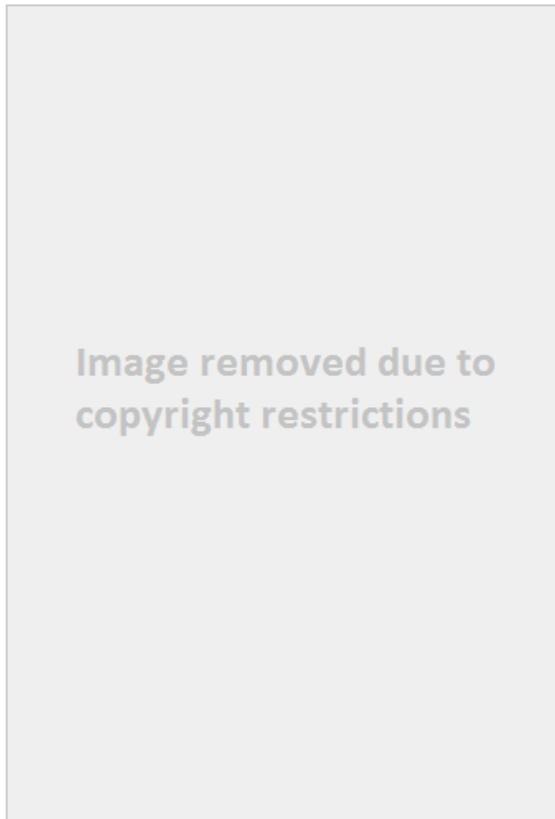


Fig. 2-23. Orlan, as photographed in 1999. Reproduced from Art Gallery of New South Wales archives.

futuristic, post-human creation of the body; although Lovelace acknowledges the absurd and gruesome aspects of Orlan's 'aesthto-medical' work, she nonetheless praises Orlan's surgeries as 'an authentic attempt to expand the perimeters of performance, a revolutionary work located squarely in one branch of the modernist tradition, raising questions about the relationship of identity to the body, of life to art'.⁸⁶ In a slightly different vein, Anja Zimmerman understands Orlan's work as an attempt to subversively expose of the violent

invasion of women's bodies in the context of art and medicine. Zimmerman suggests that by introducing the sort of voyeuristic perspectives usually reserved for the scientific gazes of the surgeon or anatomist into the art gallery, Orlan disrupts the aesthetic gaze that normally takes place there.⁸⁷ Although these readings of her work are certainly provocative and insightful, it is the artistic context of such interpretations that validate Orlan's acts of body modification, placing it in dialogue with the Neoclassical traditions implicit within the historical framework of the art gallery. If Orlan's performances were relocated to the freak show stage, it would not necessarily efface the significance of her act, but it would significantly shift the meanings accorded to it. The art museum is a platform which allows

⁸⁶ Carey Lovelace, "Orlan: Offensive Acts", *Performing Arts Journal* 17 (January 1995): 13-14, accessed 23 July 2009, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3245692>.

⁸⁷ Anja Zimmermann, "Sorry for Having to Make You Suffer: Body, Spectator, and the Gaze in Performances of Yves Klein, Gina Pane, and Orlan", *Discourse* 24 (Fall 2002): 27-28, 42-43.

a specific corporeal encounter with the body, legitimising it within a higher philosophical, aesthetic, ethical and economic realm than the freak show.

Just as Orlan's surgical interventions exceed the Classical ideal within the space of the art museum, Quinn's sculpture of Chelsea Charms presents an extraordinary alternative to the conventions of artificial beauty embodied by his sculptures of Pamela Anderson. Charms is a self-described 'internet model' and exotic dancer, who purportedly has the world's largest artificial breasts, each weighing over thirteen kilograms. As she described in an interview on a British morning show in 2011, her motivation to undergo breast modification was due to her desire to be a professional exotic dancer and model.⁸⁸ Charms underwent three different breast augmentations to increase the size of her natural breasts, first increasing to a DD cup, then using an unconventionally large insertion of saline (2000cc implants instead of the standard 1000cc) to further increase her breast size to an HH cup a year later. Her final breast surgery was not a traditional saline implant like the first two, but a now-banned technique which involves inserting polypropylene string implants into the breasts. Rather than padding the size of the breasts as saline implants do, the polypropylene string irritates the chest tissue, causing the breasts to gradually swell through inflammation and fluid retention. Charms didn't anticipate that her breasts would become quite so big, although she insists that she enjoys the attention, income, and moderate level of celebrity that their massive size have afforded her. Defending her decision to alter her breasts in such an extreme way, Charms has said, 'My body is my business. Some people think I'm a freak, but I wouldn't have it any other way'.⁸⁹

In the catalogue for *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas*, Pissarro and Hoberman describe the impetus to undertake extreme body modifications as

⁸⁸ Chelsea Charms, as interviewed on "Chelsea Charms Has The World's Largest Boobs", *This Morning*, ITV (UK), 11 May 2011, accessed 5 December 2012, <http://www.itv.com/thismorning/hot-topics/chelseacharmshastheworldslargestboobs/>.

⁸⁹ Charms, ITV interview, 2011.

belonging to the universal desire to maintain control over one's appearance:

While these 'surgery junkies' may initially appear freakish, they are quite literally, through the very flesh and skin of their own bodies, acute embodiments of the universal – and distinctly human – desire to control one's own physical appearance in order to accurately project one's true inner self to the world.⁹⁰

But I argue that in the case of Charms in particular, her body modifications go beyond this desire to *control* her appearance, as Pissarro and Hoberman describe. Instead, I argue that Charms demonstrates an extreme example of the (equally legitimate) impulse to exploit her appearance. In fact, the nature of her chosen method of implant – which causes uncontrollable growth of the breasts – demonstrate her willingness to relinquish that control in order to achieve an extraordinary body that she can display. It is this impulse that sets the self-made freak apart from those who pursue 'normal' cosmetic enhancements. These subjects have not embraced surgery to normalize their bodies, or, as Christopher Forth has described, to 'approximate the aesthetic ideals that might facilitate membership in this or that group'.⁹¹ Rather, it is the spectacle that is at stake: self-made freaks are not motivated by the desire to belong, but to stand out by exceeding the categories of the ideal inscribed within the contemporary imagination by Classical aesthetics. In this way, I suggest that Quinn's series presents the self-made freak as a potential model for a new form of the ideal that embraces artificial modification of the body, and extends it into the realm of the extraordinary.

Quinn depicts Charms as what he calls an 'extreme form of Aphrodite'⁹²: an exaggerated embodiment of feminine beauty, pleasure and love. [Fig. 2-24] Specifically, she is presented as an extraordinary version of the Neo-Platonic *Aphrodite Pandemos* (or her later incarnation as the *Venus Vulgaris*), an embodiment of carnal love and human desire, a symbol of the beauty found in the material world.⁹³ Although Charms' lower body

⁹⁰ Pissarro and Hoberman, "Reality Show", 81.

⁹¹ Forth, "Beauty", 127.

⁹² Quinn, "Journey", 105.

⁹³ In contrast, *Aphrodite Ourania* (or *Venus Coelestis*) stands for celestial or spiritual love. These two embodiments of the Aphrodite figure were not seen in opposition, but rather as two related embodiments

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Fig. 2-24. Marc Quinn, *Chelsea Charms*, 2010. Bianco P Marble, 169.5 x 59 x 52 cm. Reproduced from artist's website.

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Fig. 2-25. Statue of 'Capitoline Venus'. Marble copy of Praxiteles' Cnidian Venus (fourth century BCE), 193 cm. Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy. Reproduced from Wikimedia Commons.

is draped in fabric, her upper body is unadorned, clearly displaying her gigantic breasts. But, here, Charms' profession as a niche pornographic model is re-imagined in the visual language of the Classical nude, where her (partial) nudity is presented as a form of dress that is sensual but acceptably academic.⁹⁴ As if to emphasize her primary erotic asset, Charms cradles one of her breasts with a manicured hand, while her left arm lifts across

of the nature of beauty; imagined as mother-daughter figures by Plato, and as twins by Renaissance philosophers. See: Clark, *Nude*, 64-65.

⁹⁴ An overview of naked and the nude in art history can be found in Kenneth Clark's 1956 study of the nude, in which he argued for a distinction between art that represents a particular body (the naked) and art that represents an ideal body (the nude). See: Clark, *Nude*, 1-25. John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing* (1976), contested Clark's characterisation of the nude, instead arguing that it is a form of dress, whereas the naked is without disguise. See: John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1976). For an overview of theory concerning the female nude, particularly recent feminist critiques of these perspectives which argue that the 'naked' is also culturally encoded, see: McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities*, 7-30.

her serene face and holds the back of her head in a manner that is mildly suggestive; in this way, she deviates strongly from the feigned modesty of *Venus Pudica* figures like the Hellenistic Capitoline and Medici Venuses, whose arms make a gesture of shielding the breasts and vagina. [Fig. 2-25] As is fitting with her profession, Quinn's sculpture presents Charms as embracing the spectacle of her body: she does not shy away from the gaze, but delights in it and exploits it for her own gain.

In his influential study of the nude in art, Kenneth Clark conceptualised the body as an imaginary ideal, made up from a composite of ideal body parts amalgamated under the hand of the artist to evoke corporeal perfection. Clark recounts the tale of the artist Zeuxis who selected the best body parts of five of the most beautiful virgins in Croton in order to sculpt the ideal body of his Venus.⁹⁵ A beautiful arm here, a lovely nose there; Clark positions the ultimate (female) nude as one that is fragmentary, but also bound up with Hellenic notions of harmony and proportion. Throughout Quinn's *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* series this aspect of the ideal body seems to be taken literally, presenting a group of subjects who have created their own version of the ideal by using the advances of modern technology to choose and shape individual body parts at will. One could even imagine a futuristic gallery filled with possible body parts to choose from, in which Charms represents the extreme end of possible breast sizes.

Building upon this notion of the amalgamated ideal, Quinn's series engages with the scale of relative normality, rather than relying upon an overly simplistic normal/abnormal binary imagined to underpin the freak show (or, in the case of the art museum, the binary of beautiful/grotesque). Alongside his statue of Pamela Anderson, Quinn's sculpture of Chelsea Charms forms a scale of breast sizes which pushes the extreme limits of the female body, hinting that her body too has the potential for 'normality' within shifting

⁹⁵ Clark, *Nude*, 10-13. See also: Honour, *Neo-classicism*, 106.

cultural perceptions.⁹⁶ In a somewhat hopeful tone, Pissarro and Hoberman speculate:

Given the relatively short trajectory during which breast augmentation has gone from being unthinkable to being a routine operation (the first silicone breast implantation was performed in 1962), it seems safe to assume that at some point in the not too distant future, Charm's body type – and by extension all of Quinn's models' physiques – will appear no more scandalous than Anderson's does today.⁹⁷

With access to technologies like plastic surgery, the corporeal mean is skewed upward toward the altered body, with the average being recalculated to account for those who modify parts of their bodies larger or smaller. Quinn's sculpture of Charms explores the potential for disrupting the entire system of normality, redefining the limits of female beauty and normality. But Charms' presence alongside Anderson's more 'conventional' modifications also echoes the function of the freak show as it served to secure the relative normality of the audience's own bodies. As Quinn has said of his series: 'These people are all about themselves, but they're also about communicating with the world, because their difference is only different in relation to other people's normality'⁹⁸

Of course, it is also prudent to remember that as a white, hetero-normative, able-bodied male, Quinn's own body type is absent from this series; the 'abnormality' of Allannah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela and Thomas are defined in relation to the 'normality' of bodies like his. In his studies on subcultures and style, Dick Hebdige draws on the theories of Louis Althusser to argue that cultural hegemony and ideology maintain power by remaining invisible, making the dominant social groups seem naturalistic, and thereby defining the alternative in relation.⁹⁹ Quinn inhabits the type of body that has had the historical and cultural privilege of collecting, defining and displaying strange bodies, creating a power imbalance which is not resolved in this series. Although Quinn seems motivated by a genuine desire to communicate the humanity of his subjects,

⁹⁶ It could be argued that a third continuum on Quinn's scale of normality between Pamela Anderson and Chelsea Charms exists in his sculptures of model Kate Moss, whose thin, small-breasted body is yet another extreme of a modern female ideal.

⁹⁷ Pissarro and Hoberman, "Reality Show", 82-84.

⁹⁸ Quinn, "Journey", 105.

⁹⁹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979).

his ability to recognize and mark them out as unusual is a form of cultural knowledge that is underpinned by normative power structures.

Quinn has described his subjects in *Allannah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* as works of art who use their own bodies as canvasses.¹⁰⁰ By understanding their corporeal transformations as art, and transcribing their extraordinary bodies into more conventional forms of sculpture, Quinn legitimises their choice to cultivate a freak body by placing it within a tradition of Neoclassical aesthetics. Quinn resists the characterisation of his subjects as freaks, positioning the framework of art as means of restoring aesthetic legitimacy to their unusual bodies, and presenting an alternative to conventional notions of ideal beauty. And certainly, compared to the freak show, art is seen as a far more appropriate and intellectually-grounded space to contemplate the significance of the body in all its forms.

However, as I argue throughout this thesis, art is still a particular mode of framing the extraordinary body, influenced by its own set of underlying values, conventions and power dynamics, and therefore part of the history of exhibiting human curiosities. Utilizing the 'freak' as a means of interrogating the frameworks of display that exist around extraordinary bodies in art, in this chapter I analysed how Neoclassical traditions of the ideal body converge with notions of the self-made freak in Quinn's sculptures. By doing so, I have argued that Quinn's series presents the body of the self-made freak as potential new model for ideal beauty in the modern world, which embraces a personal vision of beauty, celebrity, and artificial modification, and extends it into the realm of the extraordinary.

100 Quinn, "Journey", 99.

CHAPTER THREE:

Curious Art in the Medical Museum

Rendering the curious body legible

Upon entering the Wellcome Collection's *Medicine Now* exhibition in London, visitors are greeted with a spectacular sight. Displayed prominently near the centre of the exhibition space, John Isaacs' wax sculpture *I Can't Help The Way I Feel* (2003) depicts a monstrous figure whose portly legs stick out beneath gigantic fleshly malignancies that completely encase its head and torso. [Fig. 3-1] Its skin is dotted with angry red welts, stretched thinly over webs of blue veins hovering just underneath the thick, lumpy mountains of flesh. At once a repulsive and engrossing sight, the prodigious tumours and rolls of fat which consume this body seem to express every preconceived notion of abnormality and disease that a visitor might bring to the museum with them. However, although his sculpture appears to exhibit an extreme pathological condition, Isaacs' hyper-realistic style merely creates a convincing illusion of a fictional medical condition: the figure, after all, has no head. Its plausibility is enhanced, however, by the historical precedent set by this and other nearby London institutions, in which bodies with extraordinary abnormalities were placed on display. This figure would not, for instance, feel out of place among the anatomical specimens of the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons, or even within Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors wax museum.

This artwork was purchased in 2007 by the Wellcome Collection, a museum that

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Fig. 3-1. John Isaacs, *I Can't Help The Way I Feel*, 2003. Wax, resin, polystyrene, steel, 220 x 150 x 170 cm. Wellcome Collection, London, UK. Reproduced from Aeroplastics Gallery, <http://isaacs.aeroplastics.net/>.

focuses on the history of medicine and contemporary issues in global health. Promoting itself as 'a free destination for the incurably curious',¹ the museum opened in 2007 in a building on Euston Road in London.² However, the museum's holdings are largely based in the massive collection of medical curiosities amassed during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries by its namesake, pharmaceutical mogul Sir Henry Wellcome (1853-1936), creating a unique interplay between historical collecting practices and contemporary museological agendas.³

This chapter addresses the installation of John Isaacs' *I Can't Help the Way I Feel* (2003) in the Wellcome Collection, to discuss the role that art plays in articulating notions of disease and abnormality within medical collections. Installed within one of the museum's permanent exhibitions, I argue that Isaacs' sculpture disrupts traditional models of rendering the curious body legible in the medical collection, by resisting a diagnostic gaze and evoking the pathos of pathology. Throughout my previous two chapters – particularly through discussions of the work of Diane Arbus and Marc Quinn – I discussed how placing extraordinary bodies into the framework of art has powerful consequence for the way we understand human curiosities. This chapter builds upon those ideas by discussing how those meanings are shaped when the discursive boundaries between art and medicine are blurred.

Of course, the inclusion of art in medical and anatomical collections is not a recent phenomenon.⁴ Rather, as Samuel J. M. M. Alberti has described, since the earliest days of

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- 1 From the marketing materials of the Wellcome Collection, including printed material and information on the museum's website, accessed 9 July 2013, <http://www.wellcomecollection.org/>.
 - 2 The Euston Road building now occupied by the Wellcome Collection formerly held the administrative offices of its umbrella organisation, the Wellcome Trust, a charitable trust dedicated to supporting research in human and animal health and the medical humanities.
 - 3 For an overview of Sir Henry Wellcome's life and his collecting practices, see: Frances Larson, *An Infinity of Things: How Sir Henry Wellcome Collected the World* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2009); Ken Arnold and Danielle Olsen, eds., *Medicine Man: The Forgotten Museum of Henry Wellcome* (London: British Museum, 2003); Ghislaine M. Skinner, "Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum for the Science of History", *Medical History* 30 (1986): 383-418.
 - 4 In fact, explorations of the relationship between art and medicine has been the subject of a number of major exhibitions over the last two decades. One of the most important of these was *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now*, curated by Martin Kemp and Marina

anatomical museums, curators juxtaposed medical specimens with a wide range of interpretative material, including anatomical drawings, wax models, text labels and (later) photographs.⁵ In the Hunterian Museum, for example, text panels, clinical photographs and wax models are displayed alongside their extensive collection of wet and dry preparations of anatomical specimens in order to render the diseased body legible within the framework of medical understanding. The inclusion of artwork serves to animate preserved body parts within the medical collection, providing an alternative way of visualizing and therefore understanding disease and abnormality: what Alberti calls 'pathological intermediality'.⁶ Often displayed directly alongside organic specimens, artistic renderings of the body even provided some advantages over preserved body parts. For instance, anatomical illustrations accurately recorded the immediate appearance of the post-mortem body, including any colour and texture that might be lost during the preservation processes, and wax models provided a more durable three-dimensional representation of the body which sometimes appeared even more 'life-like' than the decaying original.⁷

However, the inclusion of art in medical collections does not always take on such a clear pedagogical or illustrative role. For instance, tucked in a back corner of the Hunterian Museum, there is a small gallery filled with painted portraits of human curiosities such as Daniel Lambert, a famed obese man who lived in the late-eighteenth century [Fig. 3-2]; Mary Sabina, a slave girl with vitiligo [Fig. 2-15]; and conjoined twins Chang and Eng, the original 'Siamese Twins' [Fig. 3-3]. What role do these images legitimately play within a context designed to provide medical professionals with a comprehensive understanding of

Wallace in 2000 at the Hayward Gallery in London. Tracing the role and creation of anatomical images from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century alongside contemporary artistic representations of the body, this exhibition (and subsequent publication of the same name) attempted to describe how portrayals of the human body figured within both aesthetic and medical contexts. See: Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace, *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now* (London: Hayward Gallery and University of California Press, 2000).

5 Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities: Medical Museums in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4, 126-131.

6 Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities*, 142.

7 Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities*, 142-154.

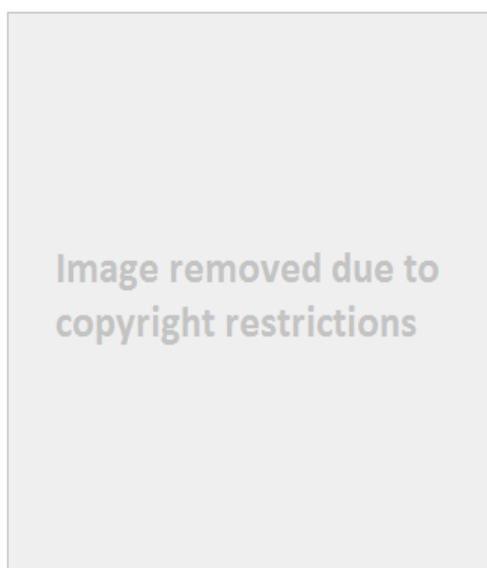


Fig. 3-2. Benjamin Marshall, *Daniel Lambert 1770-1809*, early nineteenth century. Oil on canvas, 75 x 60 cm. Hunterian Museum, Royal College of Surgeons England, London, UK. Reproduced from BBC "Your Paintings".

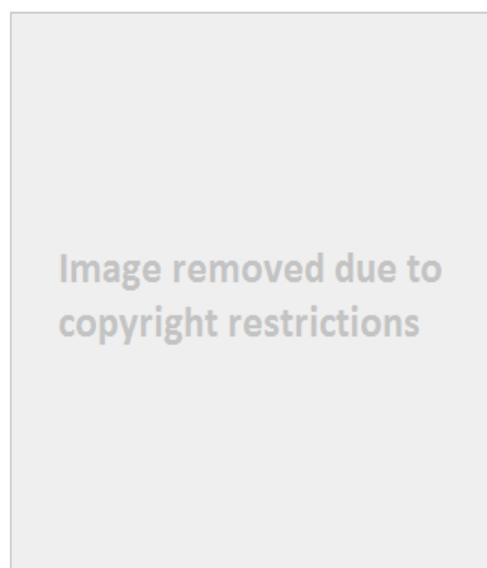


Fig. 3-3. Irvine, *Chang and Eng, the Siamese Twins, in 1830*, 1830. Oil on canvas, 60 x 52 cm. Hunterian Museum, Royal College of Surgeons England, London, UK. Reproduced from BBC "Your Paintings".

the pathology of the human body?⁸ Fully clothed and depicting a particular person rather than an anonymous subject, these portraits are not medical illustrations in the traditional sense.⁹ However, these portraits do provide another view of anomalous bodies that could be seen as part of the larger drive to render the curious body legible in these spaces, although they may not fit comfortably within the justification of medical knowledge.

Sir Henry Wellcome collected a vast number of artworks that had any relation to the history of medicine, such as anatomical illustrations, images of laboratories and operating theatres, scenes of doctors examining patients, apothecaries and alchemists at

8 In 2011, similar questions were raised as part of a project exploring portraits of so-called human curiosities in the collection of the Royal College of Physicians in London, which analysed the significance of these images within the framework of contemporary disability studies. For a more in-depth discussion of the role of such portraits of people with disabilities play in medical collections, see: Bridget Telfer et.al. (eds.), *Re-framing Disability: Portraits from the Royal College of Physicians* (London: Royal College of Physicians, 2011).

9 For a discussion of the conventions of clinical photography, particularly as it relates to freak photography, see: Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 113-118, 127-129.

work, saints healing the sick, and sculptures of Greek gods and goddesses of medicine.¹⁰ As Frances Larson has described, Wellcome was completely indifferent to artistic merit, originality or even accuracy: he was concerned only with the content of the images, and how they could help create a comprehensive and inspiring vision of the history of medicine.¹¹ However, the line between entertainment and erudition could be somewhat unclear: Wellcome also commissioned a number of illustrators to create images that dramatically recreated past events in a way that could convey the 'emotional power of disease'.¹² For instance, in 1909 Wellcome commissioned Richard Tennant Cooper to create a series of gruesome watercolours 'illustrating the various great diseases that had afflicted humanity', which primarily served to elicit an emotional response in the viewer, rather than reveal any useful historical or medical information about these ailments.¹³ Cooper's image of the effects of chloroform, for example, shows a group of demons attacking a naked, unconscious man with surgical tools [Fig. 3-4]. In this way, art operated beyond its capacity as medical illustration within these collections, sometimes even serving as a means of enhancing the drama of these spaces.

Within the Wellcome Collection, Isaacs' *I Can't Help The Way I Feel* exceeds the role of the traditional wax model or anatomical illustration. Although Isaacs' sculpture also contributes to rendering the curious body legible within this space, its designation as contemporary art sets up a particular kind of encounter with this monstrous figure that is informed by the frameworks of both art and medicine. Building upon the arguments set out in the previous chapters, this chapter examines how Isaacs' artwork works to spectacularly illustrate the narratives of the museum, while simultaneously disrupting the diagnostic gaze that the space elicits. First, I give a brief overview of the history of the Wellcome

¹⁰ Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 165.

¹¹ Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 165-167. See also: Skinner, "Wellcome", 404.

¹² Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 169-170.

¹³ As described in a letter from Charles Thompson (Wellcome's chief aide and collecting agent) to Henry Wellcome, 11 January 1910; as cited in Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 169.

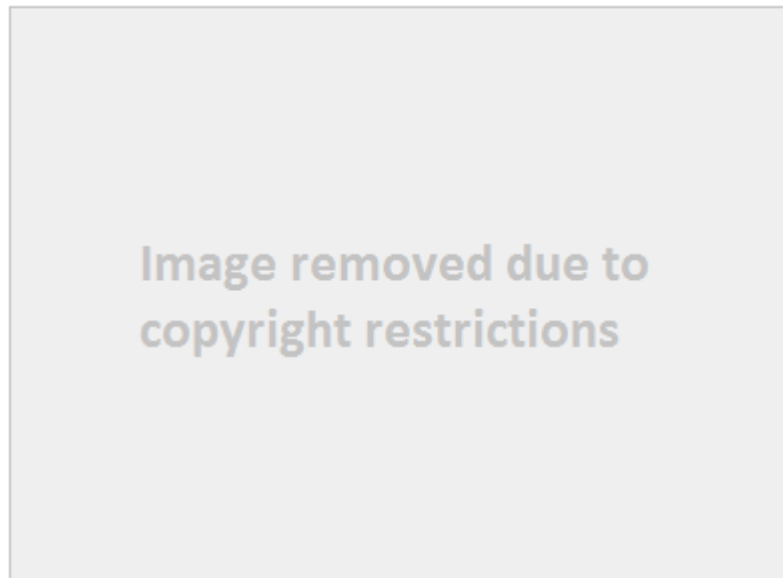


Fig. 3-4. Richard Tennant Cooper, *Chloroform*, 1910. Wellcome Images: Wellcome Collection Trust, London, UK. Reproduced from Wellcome Images.

Collection, and how it was historically positioned as part of a culture of medicine that endeavoured to operate beyond 'mere curiosity'. Second, I discuss the sculpture of John Isaacs, and how it disrupts medical models of viewing the body by expressing the pathos of pathology. Finally, I discuss the incorporation of Isaacs' work into the contemporary Wellcome Collection, to explore how the meaning of the monstrous body in *I Can't Help the Way I Feel* oscillates between the contexts of art and medicine.

Beyond 'mere curiosity': Sir Henry Wellcome's collection

Eager to set themselves against the 'vulgar' public spectacle of human curiosities, Victorian medical collectors of 'human monsters' strategically positioned their scientific interest in these bodies as a more righteous and intellectual form of enquiry than the sensational curiosity that motivated freak show audiences. In addition to the museum setting – itself an implied symbol of legitimacy – this sentiment is also echoed in late

nineteenth-century medical texts on monstrous births, such as George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle's medical encyclopaedia of monstrosities, *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*.¹⁴ Published in 1897, their illustrated compendium reflects the considerable interest in monstrous births in the medical community at the time, compiling hundreds of 'rare and extraordinary cases, and the most striking instances of abnormality' from an exhaustive review of medical literature throughout history. Although generously peppered with extraordinary accounts from less scholarly sources, Gould and Pyle are careful to declare that their collection of bizarre cases must be seen to 'have function far beyond the satisfaction of *mere curiosity*' (emphasis mine).¹⁵ This assertion positions their attempt to pathologize monstrous bodies as a more legitimate pursuit than popular interest in deformity. By juxtaposing fantastic tales, popular accounts and folklore with medical diagnoses, the authors justify their interest in these bodies according to scientific rationalism, established as a more respectable task than 'mere curiosity'. However, as Ken Arnold argues, such attempts to cultivate scientific respectability never fully effaced what he calls the 'gore factor': the blood and guts that these collections inevitably gesture toward.¹⁶

In the early twentieth century, the collection of Sir Henry Wellcome was likewise amassed and exhibited under the rubric of serious research for the erudition of medical professionals, rather than for 'mere curiosity'. As Wellcome described,

There are two kinds of museums; one is simply for entertainment, a place where people go to see curious and attractive things, freaks and objects of that sort; and the other museum which is designed for intellectual and scientific study.¹⁷

Wellcome felt strongly that his collection and its exhibition should be part of this latter category, envisioning an institution that would educate and enrich its visitors. To fully

¹⁴ George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle. *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*, (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1897).

¹⁵ Gould and Pyle, *Anomalies and Curiosities*, 2.

¹⁶ Ken Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2006), 172.

¹⁷ Henry Wellcome, quoted in the minutes of the Royal Commission on National Museums and Galleries (1928), 104; as cited in Larson, *An Infinity of Things*, 149.

understand the role that Isaacs' monstrous sculpture plays in the contemporary medical museum, it is useful to first discuss how Wellcome's collection of medical curiosities was positioned in relation to his vision of scientific research and to popular displays of freakery. In this section, I provide a brief introduction to the history of the Wellcome Collection, in order to show how the aims of the medical museum – and, by extension, the role of art within it – have shifted through time. By doing so, I ask how the legacy of these collecting practices in the contemporary medical museum converge with the framework of contemporary art to frame Isaacs' wax sculpture.

Sir Henry Wellcome was an American-born entrepreneur who made his fortune by co-founding the pharmaceutical company Burroughs Wellcome & Company with Silas Burroughs in London in 1880. Although Wellcome was a lifelong collector of artefacts, his collecting practices took on a grand scale in 1903, as he began to plan an ambitious exhibition of the global history of medicine. Using objects in his collection to tell the story of human health around the world, Wellcome intended that his exhibition would serve the research interests of medical professionals and work as a promotional tool for his international pharmaceuticals firm.¹⁸ Although originally planned to coincide with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Burroughs Wellcome & Company in 1905, the scale of Wellcome's vision delayed the exhibition for nearly a decade, as he and his collecting agents travelled the world collecting ever more medical curiosities.¹⁹ Wellcome's encyclopaedic collecting approach covered everything from the history of surgery, chemistry, pharmacy, anatomy, pathology, nursing, quackery and alchemy (just to name a few), and he endeavoured to collect any and all art, photographs, books, letters, medical instruments, prescriptions, anthropological artefacts, shop fittings, amulets, costumes, antiquities, furniture and advertisements he could find to illustrate these themes.²⁰

¹⁸ Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 8-62; Skinner, "Wellcome", 385-386.

¹⁹ Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 63-64.

²⁰ Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 67; Skinner, "Wellcome", 383.

Including over a million objects, Wellcome's collection of curios brought together anatomical models and shrunken heads; votive offerings and artificial limbs; rubber teats and preserved animal specimens; holy water and tattooed skin.²¹

After years of obsessive collecting and preparation, the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum was finally opened in 1913 in a space on Wigmore Street in London, where it remained in operation for nineteen years. Museums at the time were regarded as locations where the science of history was practised,²² and Wellcome clearly intended his exhibition to operate as an intellectual laboratory and research resource for medical professionals.²³ Frequently asserting its 'strictly scientific' nature, Wellcome restricted admission to members of the scientific and medical professions, overtly banning members of the general public only there to be gratified by the entertainment of 'strange and curious objects'.²⁴ Further affirming Wellcome's vision of a research museum for the intellectual elite, the opening of the museum was timed to correspond with the Seventeenth International Congress of Medicine, which was taking place in London for the first time since 1881.²⁵

The museum began in the 'Hall of Primitive Medicine', which consisted of diverse ethnographic objects from 'primitive' societies around the world, intended to demonstrate different cultural attitudes to health (although, as Larson argues, this largely served to assert the superiority of Western medical advancements and technologies).²⁶ From there,

21 This small list of types of objects in Wellcome's collection was inspired by some of the objects featured in *The Phantom Museum and Henry Wellcome's Collection of Medical Curiosities* (2003), in which contemporary writers were invited to respond to objects in the Wellcome Collection. See: Hildi Hawkins and Danielle Olsen, eds., *The Phantom Museum and Henry Wellcome's Collection of Medical Curiosities* (London: Profile Books, 2003), 193-205.

22 Arnold, *Cabinets*, 23.

23 Skinner, "Wellcome", 393. See also: *Masterpieces from the Sir Henry Wellcome Collection at UCLA* (Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles, 1965), 6.

24 Wellcome, as quoted in "Great Britain, Royal Commission on national museums and galleries, 'Oral evidence memoranda and appendices to the final report'", 1929, 107; cited in Skinner, "Wellcome", 400.

25 Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 143, 149.

26 Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 144-145. In 1965, a major portion of Wellcome's collection of archaeological and ethnographic objects was gifted to the University of California Los Angeles, to become part of the newly established Museum and Laboratories of Ethnic Arts and Technology. See: *Masterpieces from the Sir Henry Wellcome Collection at UCLA* (Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles, 1965), 5-7.

visitors could pass through exhibitions on the history of the microscope, a hall of statuary, a collection of surgical instruments, a display of charms and talismans, a picture gallery, exhibitions of physical abnormalities, a library of manuscripts and books, histories of hygiene, nursing and orthopaedics, a display of medieval torture instruments, and an exhibition of medical photography (among others).²⁷ Where original artefacts were not available, Wellcome commissioned fake replicas to take their place, marking little distinction between fact and fiction in his vision of the past. As Larson argues, Wellcome's commitment to providing a comprehensive and compelling vision of the history of medicine took primacy over providing a rigidly authentic one.²⁸

Although his overall intention was for serious research into the history of medicine through material culture, Wellcome did not sacrifice spectacle in his delivery of the exhibition. The museum's *pièce de résistance* was a series of medical dioramas occupying the entire basement level, which used historical objects to re-create scenes from the history of medicine, such as a barber-surgeon's shop [Fig. 3-5], a seventeenth-century Italian pharmacy, an apothecary, and a Roman surgery.²⁹ Owing, in part, to Wellcome's close relationship to the heirs and proprietors of Madame Tussauds wax museum,³⁰ the scenes were occupied by waxwork mannequins in period costumes, a device associated more closely with popular amusement than serious research institutions.³¹ Although dedicated to displaying a comprehensive view of medicine, Wellcome was, foremost, a businessman who understood the importance of captivating his audience: his museum, after all, was

27 Skinner, "Wellcome", 386-393, 396-397.

28 Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 171-173. Replica artefacts included, for example, a re-created thirteenth-century vellum scroll with anatomical diagrams, fake bronze surgical instruments, and a plethora of plaster casts of original sculptures, anatomical models, and medical tools.

29 Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 143-147.

30 Larson, *Infinity of Things*, 174-175. Madame Tussauds is a famous wax museum in London (although it now has branches in many other cities), founded in 1835-1836 by Marie Tussaud, a French wax sculptor best known for her uncanny wax sculptures of famous figures, and for her murder-themed 'Chamber of Horrors' exhibits.

31 This display strategy caused at least one scholar, Charles Singer, to be dubious of the academic value of Wellcome's vast collection, reportedly saying: 'It is no good laying out a lot of instruments and having a sort of Madame Tussaud's show and saying "This is the History of Medicine"'. See: Charles Singer, as quoted in a report from Malcolm to Wellcome on 6 January 1927; cited in Skinner, "Wellcome", 411.

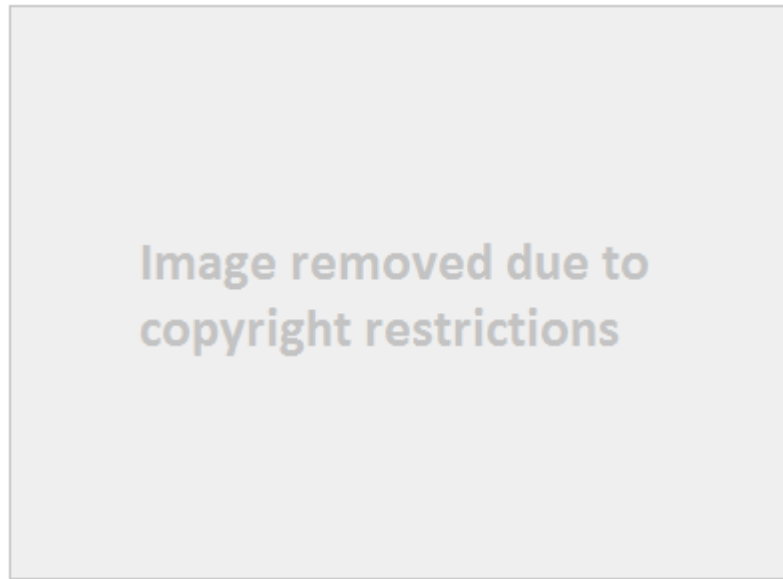


Fig. 3-5. Reconstruction of a barber-surgeon's shop in the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, Wigmore Street, London. Reproduced from Frances Larson, *An Infinity of Things* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 174.

never entirely separate from his pharmaceutical company, and must be considered in relation to his other business enterprises. Wellcome must have understood the appeal of what Uta Kornmeier calls the 'waxwork moment' – the frisson created in the suspended moment in which a viewer hasn't yet determined whether they are looking at a lifeless object or an actual human³² – relying on this to help bring the history of human health to life for his visitors.

Wellcome's museum on Wigmore Street stayed open to a restricted audience for nineteen years, until the lease on the building expired in 1932. Plans to re-locate the museum were put into motion, with the intention that the collection would be displayed in a building on Euston Road that was being designed to house the company's administrative offices. However, Wellcome's death in 1936 halted plans for the exhibition space

³² Uta Kornmeier, "Almost Alive: The Spectacle of Verisimilitude in Madame Tussaud's Waxworks," in *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, edited by Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 67.

indefinitely, and the massive collection – which then totalled more than a million objects – was kept in various storage locations until being transferred to the Science Museum in the 1970s.³³ The Wellcome Trust was established upon his death, which operates as a global charitable foundation supporting research and education in human and animal health, including the administration of the collection.³⁴ When the Wellcome Trust administrative offices were moved to a new location in 2007, the building on Euston Road was finally realised as a dedicated museum space for Wellcome's collection of medical curiosities.

Designed to extend Wellcome's vision by opening up his collection to the general public, the present-day Wellcome Collection displays highlights from his extensive collection alongside contemporary art and artefacts. In addition to a changing agenda of temporary exhibitions, the Wellcome Collection features two permanent exhibition spaces: *Medicine Man*, which gives an introduction to the life and collecting practices of Sir Henry Wellcome, and *Medicine Now*, which places the objects in his collection in dialogue with contemporary issues in worldwide health. Through informative displays and objects, *Medicine Now* places a large focus on artistic and visitor responses to modern medical issues and the lived experience of illness.

Included among the displays in *Medicine Now* is Isaacs' wax sculpture *I Can't Help the Way I Feel*, which was purchased by the Wellcome Trust to coincide with the opening of the new museum in 2007.³⁵ The juxtaposition of artwork like this with objects of clinical medicine – such as pills, anatomical models and teaching aids – invites new possibilities for understanding the objects and issues at hand. Rather than showcasing a comprehensive history of medicine as Sir Henry Wellcome originally intended, the contemporary museum

33 Skinner, "Wellcome", 383.

34 See: "About Us: Wellcome Trust", Wellcome Collection website, accessed 23 December 2013, <http://www.wellcomecollection.org/about-us/wellcome-trust.aspx>.

35 Some of the other works purchased and/or commissioned by the Wellcome Collection include: Alastair Mackie's *Mosquito Coast* (2002), a map made of dead insects which explores the transmission of malaria; Mauro Perucchetti's *Jelly Baby 3* (2004), a translucent polyurethane sculpture which acts as a metaphor for cloned humans; and Annie Cattrell's *SENSE* (2001-2003), a sequence of resin sculptures which illustrates brain activity as it responds to each of the five senses.

endeavours to reveal provocative and multifaceted perspectives on health and disease, which visitors might not have previously considered. As Wellcome Collection curator Ken Arnold explained, this exhibition (and the museum as a whole) intends to act as a sort of modern cabinet or experimental laboratory, which reveals the complexities of seemingly simple issues in health and medicine, rather than trying to break ideas down into simple terms.³⁶ The inclusion of work like Isaacs' sculpture attempts to defy a rationalist museum experience, which presents a straightforward historical or scientific narrative.

Although Wellcome did collect artworks among his other medical curios, the role of art has fundamentally shifted within the new iteration of his museum. As I shall discuss in the next section of this chapter, art in the Wellcome Collection no longer operates to illustrate a history of medicine, but is included to offer new perspectives in the philosophical, historical, ethical or aesthetic understanding of medicine. The following section discusses the work of John Isaacs and the installation of his sculpture in the Wellcome Collection, in order to unpack the ways that *I Can't Help the Way I Feel* activates an exchange of meanings between the contexts of art and medicine. By doing so, I show how these overlapping contexts frame the monstrous body in this sculpture, working to both exceed and extend the tradition of the medical curiosity.

The pathos of pathology: John Isaacs' *I Can't Help the Way I Feel*

Born in Lancaster, UK in 1968, Isaacs studied fine art at Cheltenham College of Fine Art and the Slade School of Fine Art, where he specialized in sculpture. Now living and working in Berlin, he makes work in a wide range of mediums and styles, but is perhaps best known for his hyper-realistic wax sculptures which explore the grotesque and

³⁶ As described by curator Ken Arnold, in conversation with the author, Wellcome Trust, London, 1 November 2011. For a more in-depth discussion of the larger institutional shifts that have taken place in the practices of museology since the early modern period, see his book: Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious* (2006).

fantastical body. Before moving into the realm of art, Isaacs originally studied biology at university, influenced by an early love of natural history museums and youthful exposure to the images he found in his physician father's medical journals.³⁷ His artistic practice has been profoundly impacted by these first studies, often drawing upon medical views of body parts, theories of biological evolution, and the slippery division between art and science. His motivation to study art was inspired, in part, by his resistance to the notion of objective truth, which he feels is a myth perpetuated by scientific education. To Isaacs, the authority of scientific methods – often perceived as the only legitimate mode of acquiring knowledge – is fundamentally problematic, emphasizing Western methods of empirical observation at the expense of some of our most powerful ways of engaging with the world: our intuition, emotional heritage, and gut reactions.³⁸ Many of his earlier works in particular show a recalcitrance towards this culture of science and the pursuit of observable 'truths' of the world, such as the cheeky act of defiance in *Say It Isn't So* (1994) [Fig. 3-6] or the condemnation of medical testing in *Untitled (Monkey)* (1995) [Fig. 3-7]. As Isaacs' practice matured, however, this tendency towards a dichomatic approach that pits art against science, subjectivity against objectivity, and emotion against medicine evolved into a more nuanced exploration of how these relationships overlap. As Isaacs puts it, he stopped trying to make contrarian statements with his work, instead trying to use his artistic practices as 'a means of asking questions'.³⁹ *I Can't Help The Way I Feel*, created in 2003, can be considered a part of these later explorations, engaged with overlapping perspectives of the body.

Although Isaacs works across a wide range of mediums and subject matter, a fascination with bodily abjection repeatedly emerges throughout his work, in chunks of

³⁷ John Isaacs, in conversation with the author, Berlin, Germany, 23 May 2012. Unless otherwise stated, all biographical and contextual information about John Isaacs are taken from this interview, which I conducted with the artist at his studio in Berlin.

³⁸ Isaacs, in discussion with the author, 2012.

³⁹ Isaacs, in discussion with the author, 2012.

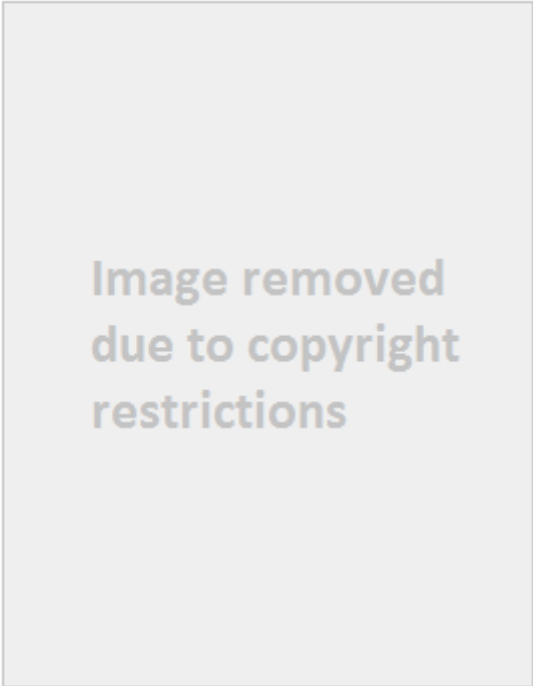


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Fig. 3-6. John Isaacs, *Say It Isn't So*, 1994. Wax, steel, hair, glass and fabric, 204 x 129 x 132 cm. Reproduced from artist's website.

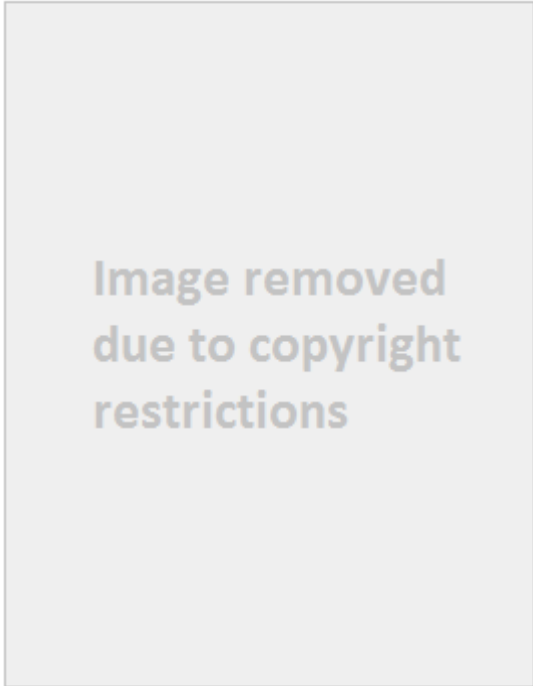


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Fig. 3-7. John Isaacs, *Untitled (Monkey)*, 1995. Wax, hair, glass, metal, plastic, 50 x 40 x 30 cm. Reproduced from artist's website.

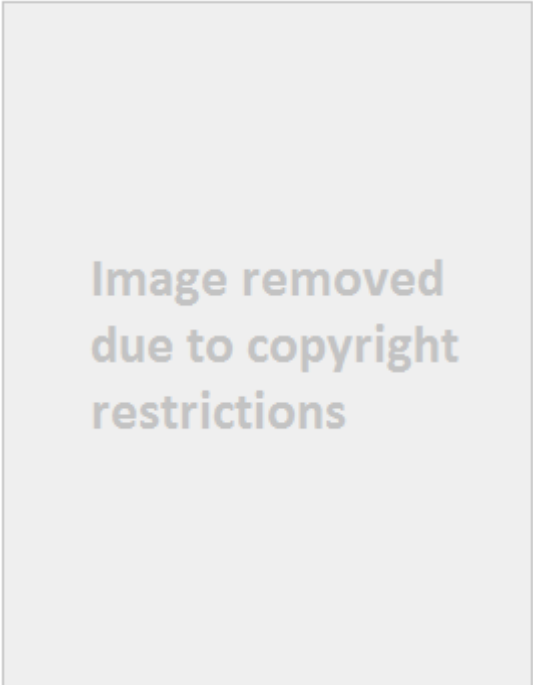


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Fig. 3-8. John Isaacs, *Let the Golden Age Begin*, 2004. Wax, polyester, paint, 70 x 70 x 70 cm. Private collection Switzerland. Reproduced from Aeroplastics Gallery.

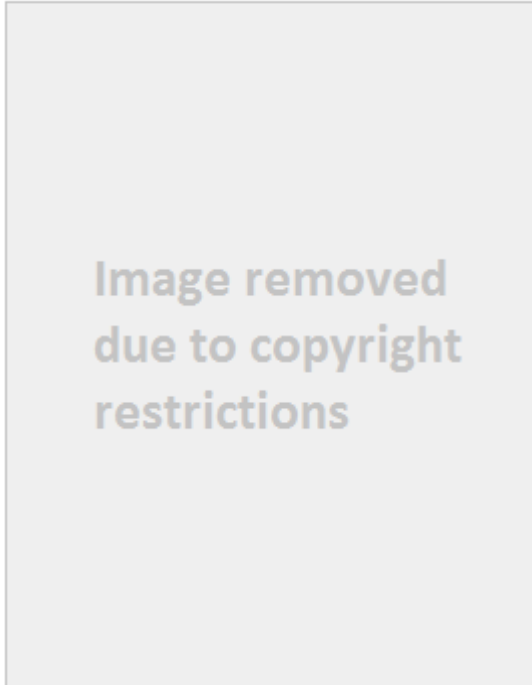


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Fig. 3-9. John Isaacs, *Everyone's Talking About Jesus*, 2005. Wax, epoxy, resin, polystyrene, 200 x 160 x 180 cm. Private collection. Reproduced from Aeroplastics Gallery.

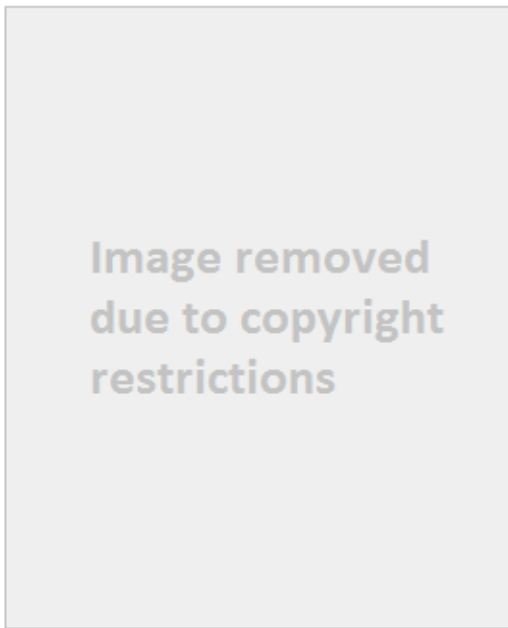


Fig. 3-10. John Isaacs, *Bad Miracle*, 2002. Steel, wax, glass, expanding foam, 190 x 150 x 150 cm. Reproduced from artist's website.

bloody flesh, intestinal forms, mounds of fat, lumps of shit, disembodied appendages and diseased bodies. For example, some of his better-known waxworks are *Let the Golden Age Begin* (2004), a large, meat-like cube with thick veins of fat running through it [Fig. 3-8]; *Everyone's Talking About Jesus* (2005), a hyper-realistic chunk of shark flesh [Fig. 3-9]; and *Bad Miracle* (2002), a monstrously obese man whose skin has erupted in painful-looking boils and tumour-like growths. [Fig.

3-10] This aspect of Isaacs' practice activates Julia Kristeva's notion of abject horror, which describes the reaction we experience when there is a breakdown between subject/object or self/other.⁴⁰ As Kristeva has described, it is not the lack of health or cleanliness which evokes abjection, but 'what disturbs identity, system, order' and 'does not respect borders, positions, rules'.⁴¹ In this way, abjection is conceived as a reaction to what could be described as the monstrous object, which reveals the alien potentiality of our own body parts. Often returning to imagery of diseased and destroyed bodies, Isaacs' work evokes this by deliberately eliciting a sense of repugnance through the uncanniness of his wax body parts, fluids and textures.

Isaacs explains that his intention is to shake the art viewer out of complacent looking and the religious-like veneration of the art object, by candidly introducing the less-than-beautiful views of the body usually reserved for medicine.⁴² Considering Isaacs'

⁴⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1980, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2-3. In particular, Kristeva gives the example of the corpse, which has the power to remind us of our own materiality, but the confrontation with the abject can also be triggered by an open wound, sewage, bodily fluids or even the skin on the surface of milk.

⁴¹ Kristeva, *Abjection*, 4.

⁴² Isaacs, in discussion with the author, 23 May 2012.

interest in biology, I would argue that Isaacs' explorations of the abject body do not fully relinquish the biological imperative of disgust – the experience of physical revulsion to avoid possible contagion. Instead, Isaacs' work can be seen as resisting a strictly constructivist notion of disease, revealing the ambivalence that takes place within the encounter with a monstrous other. However, rather than advocating a purely objective or medical gaze towards the monstrous body, I suggest that Isaacs' practice also works to reveal the highly emotional reactions that are inevitably present within the framework of medical spaces. Displayed in the context of the medically-focussed Wellcome Collection, the grotesque figure in Isaacs' *I Can't Help The Way I Feel* reveals the pathos of pathology: the drama and emotional resonance extant in displays of diseased, deformed and monstrous bodies.

Although, as I discussed in the previous section, medical collections like Wellcome's were positioned as operating beyond 'mere curiosity', this did not necessarily efface the appeal of the curious spectacle: evidence of the inescapable emotional resonance of these bodies can be found throughout the history of medicine. For instance, most contemporary narratives around Joseph Merrick – commonly known as 'The Elephant Man' – describe the triumph of modern medicine over the spectacle of the freak show. This version of events has been largely perpetuated by the autobiography of Dr Frederick Treves, who claimed that he 'rescued' Merrick and brought him to be studied and treated in the Royal London Hospital in 1886.⁴³ However, despite the superiority of his attitude toward the freak show, Treves' descriptions of Merrick are far from neutral or scientific. For instance, the way that Treves recounts his first encounter with the 'Elephant Man' dramatizes the monstrousness of Merrick's body:

⁴³ This enduring narrative and subsequent 'enfreakment' of the 'Elephant Man' has been discussed by David Hevey, who uses text and film to restore the humanity of Merrick, and relate his story to the lived experiences of disability. See: David Hevey, "Behind the Shadow of Merrick", in *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, ed. Richard Sandell et.al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 79-91.

The thing arose slowly and let the blanket that covered its head and back fall to the ground. There stood revealed the most disgusting specimen of humanity that I have ever seen. In the course of my profession I had come upon lamentable deformities of the face due to injury or disease, as well as mutilations and contortions of the body depending upon like causes; but at no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this lone figure displayed.⁴⁴

Pointing to the emotional language of horror and disgust that pervades Treves' writings about Merrick, Nadja Durbach offers a reappraisal of the competing narratives between the freak show and culture of medicine in Victorian Britain. She argues that despite the objectivity claimed by medical institutions, its manner of dealing with the curious body was 'dependent upon and deeply enmeshed in more popular and commercial discourses and practices surrounding the display of spectacular bodies'.⁴⁵

Isaacs confronts the viewer with the emotional impact of the morbid and monstrous body, revealing a messy overlap between artistic and medical gazes and our expectations of the body in each setting. As the title of the work suggests, *I Can't Help the Way I Feel* is intended as a physical manifestation of an emotional experience, a pathos which exceeds traditional medical models of understanding the body. In the Wellcome Collection, this reading of his work is guided by a small label accompanying the sculpture, bearing Isaacs' explanation of the piece:

In this work lies an interest in a representational possibility of the emotional landscape of the body becoming manifest in its surface. Visually, the way in which the flesh grows, erupts and engulfs the body can be seen as a metaphor of the way in which we become incapacitated by the emotional landscape in which we live and over which we have little control. Of course, the body also appears to be suffering from some kind of malignancy, as in cancer, but, for me, the image of the figure, coupled with the title, leads one into an open contemplation of the plight of the individual.⁴⁶

In this way, Isaacs' sculpture can be seen as giving physical form to the unseen emotional turmoil associated with disease. Using the visual language of the monstrous body already familiar in medical spaces, visitors to the Wellcome Collection are guided to read his work

44 Sir Frederick Treves, *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1928), 11-12.

45 Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010): 34.

46 Wellcome Collection museum label for John Isaacs, *I Can't Help The Way I Feel* (2003), London, Wellcome Collection (October 2011).

metaphorically, as a way of introducing the lived experiences of illness into the exhibit. The corporeality of the sculpture works in tandem with this sense of psychological unease, reflecting the tendency of medicine to slip between physical/mental and subjective/objective realms.

Any empathy potentially evoked by this sculpture is delayed, prefigured by the initial sensationalism of the work. Larger than life-sized, uncanny in its realism, and grotesque in its form, the immediate encounter with Isaacs' sculpture is dominated by the viewer's own emotional experience of seeing this body: our own shock, disgust, and perverse curiosity. Intended as a catalyst for understanding the deeper significance of the monstrous form, Isaacs' sculpture spectacularly demonstrates the gap between our gut reactions and a considered, intellectual response. Critic Robert Brown has suggested that the unifying theme in Isaacs' work is his propensity for revealing the 'ugly and uncomfortable truth(s)' about human behaviour and beliefs that exist just below the 'surface of conventional reality'.⁴⁷ Indeed, one of these 'uncomfortable truths' that *I Can't Help The Way That I Feel* addresses is the way that the curious body still holds the power to shock, disgust, thrill, horrify and fascinate. Whether this reaction is grounded in cultural conditioning, psychological trauma or biological imperative, Isaacs' sculpture confronts the viewer with their own unsophisticated response to the monstrous body.

By drawing focus to the way we see the monstrous body, I argue that Isaacs' sculpture begins to break down distinctions between different types of looking that take place within medical museums like the Wellcome Collection. In her study of the Mütter Museum, a Victorian-era medical museum in Philadelphia, Nora L Jones argues that there are distinct and often conflicting ways of viewing bodies in medical museums, such as the tourists who see curious differences as entertainment, the medical view which sees the

47 Robert Brown, "John Isaacs: Chant Down Babylon", Aeroplastics Gallery (July 2003), accessed 9 September 2011, <http://isaacs.aeroplastics.net/text.php?lang=en>.

clinical or scientific body, and artists who see the aesthetic body.⁴⁸ Acknowledging the polysemy – the possibility of multiple interpretations to exist simultaneously – of museum exhibitions, Jones argues that each group of users holds particular attitudes and beliefs about the pathological body, which produce recognizable patterns of understanding or seeing the bodies on display.⁴⁹

Within the context of the Wellcome Collection, the impact of the medical gaze is particularly apparent, working as the dominant mode of framing the objects it contains. Questions of pathological significance and an expectation of diagnosis are inherent in the encounter with bodies on display: what disease does it have? Is it real? Is it curable? Is it normal? In this setting, the prodigious malignancies and rolls of fat in *I Can't Help The Way That I Feel* operates under the same diagnostic gaze. Yet, this is not a disease which exists. Despite the plausibility achieved in the hyper-realistic wax technique, Isaacs' figure has no head or torso; it is an imaginative condition which begs to be pathologized, and yet simultaneously denies the medical gaze. In fact, the body in this sculpture does not fulfil any of the traditional roles performed by the curious body in medical collections. It does not illustrate an existing condition, nor serve a pedagogical function in the sense of the preserved specimen; it is not a useful tool of comparative anatomy or demonstrative of any medical technique.

The ambiguity of Isaacs' sculpture within the medical collection is further intensified by his use of wax, a material which resists an aesthetic gaze in its uncanny verisimilitude of human flesh. Despite the fact that wax has had a presence throughout art history in the form of objects like wax portraits and votives, only recently have art historians begun to critically analyse its role in earnest, apart from some isolated studies in the early twentieth century. Georges Didi-Huberman suggests that art history has

48 Nora L Jones, "The Mütter Museum: The Body as Spectacle, Specimen, and Art" (PhD thesis, Temple University, 2002), accessed 9 December 2012, <http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/wava/nora/>.

49 Jones, "Mütter Museum", 2-4.

disregarded wax because its ability to mimic human flesh is so uncanny that it dispels an aesthetic gaze, creating a realism that reinforces its link to craftsmanship rather than art.⁵⁰ Moreover, Didi-Huberman writes about the aesthetic and psychic viscousness of wax, describing how the plasticity of the material invests it with a sense of unease, as if the potential for metamorphosis gives it a life of its own.⁵¹ In this way, the aesthetic and physical qualities of wax are bound up with a haunting psychological resonance which unsettles the relationship between an object and the viewer. In figurative waxworks like Isaacs' sculpture, this material liminality contributes to the object's uncanny appeal. Mirroring the malleability of the material itself, his wax figure psychically shifts and slips between lifelike and lifeless, aesthetic and medical, subject and object.

Around the year 2000, Isaacs spent time researching the wax models within 'La Specola' (Museo di Storia Naturale) in Florence, Italy, an eighteenth-century museum best known for its collection of high-quality anatomical waxworks. In particular, he was drawn to the exquisitely modelled 'Anatomical Venuses' produced in the workshop of sculptor Clemente Susini in the 1780s, which are famous for their dramatic expressions and detailed anatomy. [Figs. 3-11 and 3-12] Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace connect the elaborately constructed settings of these waxworks to the theatricality of Isaacs' own wax sculptures, which likewise take on the form of hybrid objects halfway between art and science.⁵² The realism of these forms captures a simultaneous beauty and gruesomeness, eliciting both medical and aesthetic gazes.

However, Isaacs' sculpture perhaps has more in common with the wax models of physical abnormalities which grew in popularity during the nineteenth century, than with the idealised anatomy of the earlier Anatomical Venuses. Depicting diseased and deformed

50 Georges Didi-Huberman, "Viscosities and Survivals: Art History Put to the Test by the Material", 1998, trans. Jane Marie Todd, in *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 155-156.

51 Didi-Huberman, "Viscosities", 155.

52 Kemp and Wallace, *Spectacular Bodies*, 159.

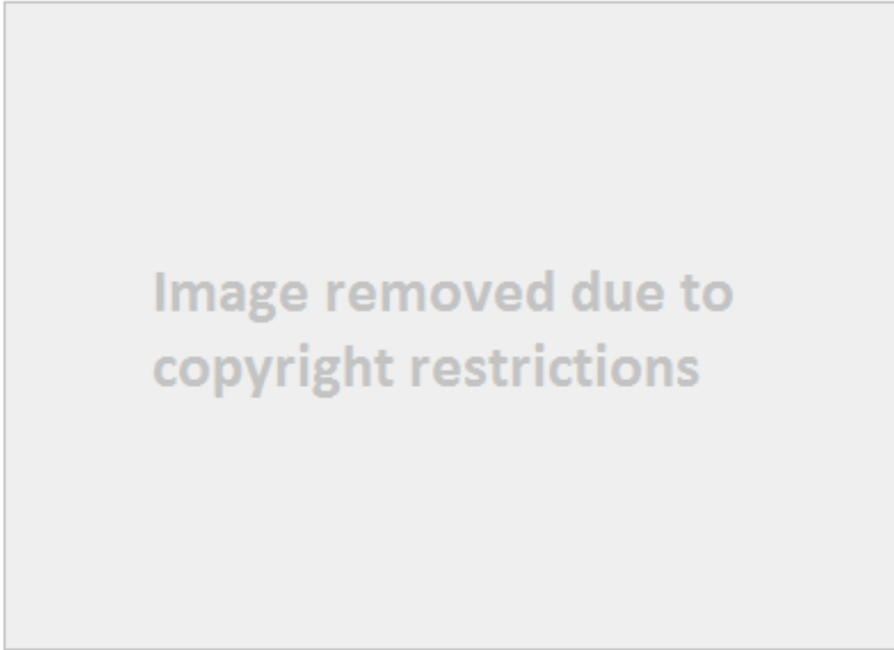


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Fig. 3-11. Joanna Ebenstein, "Anatomical Venus", from *Anatomical Theatre* series, 2008. Dissectible model with human hair and pearls in rosewood and Venetian glass case, probably modelled by Clemente Susini, ca 1790. Museo di Storia Naturale (La Specola), Florence, Italy. Reproduced from Joanna Ebenstein, "Anatomical Theatre", 2008, accessed 9 September 2013.

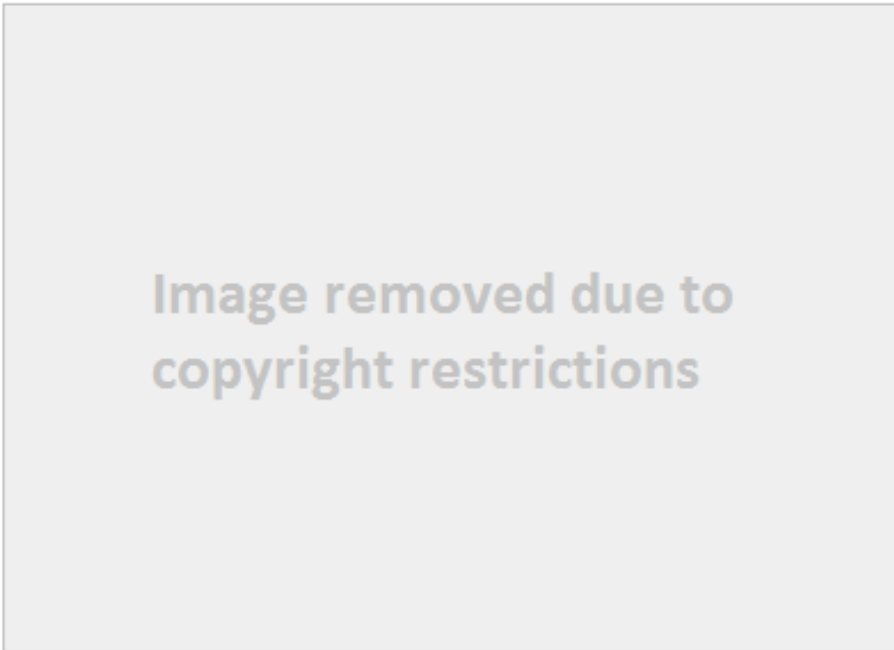


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Fig. 3-12. Joanna Ebenstein, "The Slashed Beauty", from *Anatomical Theatre* series, 2008. Dissectible model with human hair and pearls in rosewood and Venetian glass case, probably modelled by Clemente Susini, ca 1790. Museo di Storia Naturale (La Specola), Florence, Italy. Reproduced from Joanna Ebenstein, "Anatomical Theatre", 2008, accessed 9 September 2013.

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Fig. 3-13. Joanna Ebenstein, 2013. Wax anatomical model, nineteenth century. Museo di Anatomia Patologica dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze, Florence, Italy. Reproduced from Joanna Ebenstein, via Flickr.

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Fig. 3-14. Joanna Ebenstein, "Luigi Cattezneo", from *Anatomical Theatre* series, 2008. Wax anatomical model of conjoined twins, nineteenth century. Museo delle Cere Anatomiche 'Luigi Cattaneo', Bologna, Italy. Joanna Ebenstein, "Anatomical Theatre", 2008.

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Fig. 3-15. John Isaacs, detail of *I Can't Help The Way I Feel*, 2003. Wax, resin, polystyrene, steel, 220 x 150 x 170 cm. Photographed by Rama Knight. Wellcome Trust Collection, London, UK. Reproduced from Wellcome Trust Medicine Now Press Images.

bodies, these wax models provided a means for medical students and anatomists to study rare physical abnormalities in three dimensions, when living examples or preserved specimens were impractical or unavailable. [Figs. 3-13 and 3-14] Able to capture the colour, texture and other visual detail, wax was the ideal material for creating a realistic depiction of disease and deformity for close study. Like Isaacs' sculpture, the realism of these waxes creates a compelling tension between repugnance and pleasurable curiosity. [Fig. 3-15] Particularly in the case of monstrous bodies, wax figures could be seen as the perfect receptor for the curious gaze, providing the pleasure of looking at the human body with the ethical neutrality of gazing at an inanimate object.

Isaacs' monstrous sculpture exceeds the function of rendering the curious body

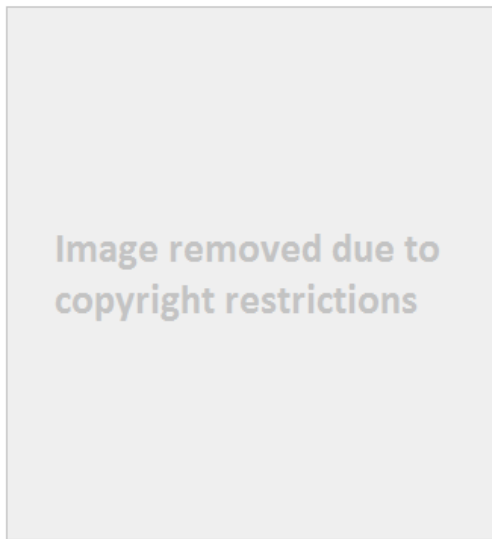


Fig. 3-16. Artist unknown, *Daniel Lambert*, eighteenth century. Oil on canvas. Wellcome Collection, London, UK. Reproduced from BBC "Your Paintings".

legible, instead soliciting critical engagement with the larger *meaning* of the curious body. In this way, art as a whole is given a greater authority within the modern Wellcome Collection than in the past, where its role in the medical collection was primarily (but certainly not exclusively) illustrative. For instance, Isaacs' sculpture recalls another representation of corpulence on display in the nearby *Medicine Man* exhibition: an eighteenth-century portrait of

obese man Daniel Lambert. [Fig. 3-16] Born in Leicester, England in 1770, Lambert was an unusually corpulent gaolkeeper who became famous for exhibiting himself as a human curiosity throughout England in the first decade of the nineteenth century.⁵³ At the time of his death in 1809, Lambert reportedly weighed over 335 kg (52 ³/₄ stone), despite claiming to drink only water and eat moderately. Painted by an anonymous artist, the portrait of Lambert in the Wellcome Collection is intended to document an extraordinary medical case rather than serve the critical perspective of the artist, demonstrate artistic merit or originality, or offer new ways of understanding the curious body. The Wellcome Collection also owns a number of other images of Lambert in their archive, demonstrating the importance placed on the curious subject matter over the artwork itself. In contrast, *I Can't Help The Way I Feel* is expected to perform a function beyond 'rendering the curious body legible' or documenting human curiosities. Rather, its presence as a contemporary art object presupposes the expectation it will serve as a catalyst to critically reflect upon the issues at hand. As Arnold puts it:

⁵³ Thomas Seecombe, "Lambert, Daniel (1770-1809)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, rev. E.L. O'Brien (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), accessed 17 November 2013, <http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/15932>.

The ability that medical museums have to directly probe some of humanities most profound hopes and fears also provides a key to another potential aspect of their reinvigorated relevance- namely the fascination and eagerness that the contemporary art world has shown in finding, treasuring and investigating their content and meanings.⁵⁴

As museums like the Wellcome Collection have moved away from their original focus of serving the educational and research needs of medical professionals, contemporary art like Isaacs' sculpture play an important role in re-shaping the relevance of such collections in the contemporary cultural landscape. In this case, the display of the monstrous body is understood as an art object rather than as a human curiosity, in a context where art is relied upon to provide criticality and emotional depth to the issues at hand.

Regardless of this increased authority of art, however, the context of the medical collection still provides a powerful lens for viewing the artworks installed in the museum, adding new associations that might not be apparent if the work was installed in a more traditional art space. For instance, comparing Isaacs' sculpture to the portrait of Daniel Lambert not only highlights the shifting role of art, but also significant changes in the socio-cultural perception of extreme fatness, a condition that has moved from medical oddity to prevalent cultural epidemic in Western countries. These associations are made explicit in the installation of *I Can't Help The Way I Feel* alongside a display case featuring objects relating to the clinical treatment of obesity, such as diet books, a gastric band, models of food portions and diet pills, prompting spectators to connect its prodigious mounds of flesh with the lived experience of obesity and drawing out the pathos of pathology. [Fig. 3-17] For instance, in a review of the newly opened Wellcome Collection in 2007, Hilary Rose and Steven Rose describe their first encounter with the exhibition in a way that assumes a direct relationship between Isaacs' work and the displayed objects:

A conventional display of diet books, obesity drugs, and surgical treatments is set beside a disturbing 2.5 metre high sculpture of human obesity—all trace of personal identity lost in the enveloping rolls of flesh. Yet the pain of this anonymous flesh reaches out and touches us; no viewer can dismiss or patronise such suffering.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious*, 173.

⁵⁵ Hilary Rose and Steven Rose, "The Wonders of the Recurated Wellcome Collection", *The Lancet*

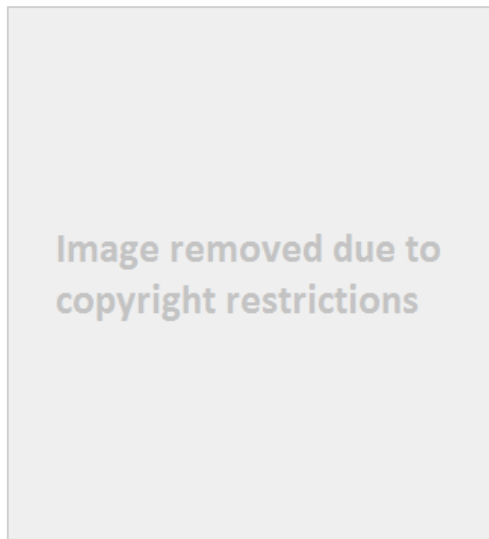


Fig. 3-17. Display case featuring objects related to the modern obesity epidemic, in the *Medicine Now* exhibition of the Wellcome Collection, 2011. Photographed by Nadejah Williams.

Within this medical context, the grotesque body in *I Can't Help The Way That I Feel* serves to provide emotional depth to the topics tackled in this space. Isaacs' sculpture becomes the embodiment of an emotional landscape, representing an imagined experience of obesity rather than real physical corpulence. However, the relationship of Isaacs' sculpture to these issues is intended to be somewhat ambiguous. Rather than offering a straightforward narrative about obesity, the

work serves Wellcome Collection's mandate by offering a multiplicity of potential readings.

Isaacs created this sculpture in response to a research trip to Midwest America, where he was struck by the fundamental contradiction of obesity epidemic: the prevalence and size of extremely fat bodies make them hyper-visible, and yet they are nearly absent from mainstream visual culture, rendering the obese culturally invisible.⁵⁶ Although Isaacs' sculpture alludes to these issues, *I Can't Help The Way I Feel* nonetheless depicts an imaginary medical condition rather than an explicit representation of obesity. Moving beyond the notion of obesity as a medical 'fact', Isaacs instead presents it as an imagined construct that slips between medical, social and aesthetic realms. In this way, his sculpture serves to animate the objects on display, whilst they likewise provide new ways of

370:9582 (14-20 July 2007): 125. In another example, Joseph Ting likewise relates Isaacs' sculpture to the obesity theme, speculating that it represents the ugly embodiment of the obesity epidemic and the negative judgment placed upon fat bodies. See: Joseph Ting, "Medicine Now, at the Wellcome Collection London: Obesity, The Body, Malaria and Genomes", *The Stringer* (23 December 2013), accessed 23 December 2013, <http://thestringer.com.au/medicine-now-at-the-wellcome-collection-london-obesity-the-body-malaria-and-genomes/#.UripwGHKIIIE>.

⁵⁶ Isaacs in discussion with author, 2012.

understanding his work.

As Isaacs' work demonstrates, contemporary art can provide a means of representing non-normative bodies in the medical museum that resists traditional models of displaying curiosities, and introduces new (and often more critical) ways of understanding their presence within these spaces. This speaks to larger shifts that have taken place in the way objects are relied upon to produce meaning within medical collections, which have taken place as the institutions themselves have evolved through time. Throughout his study of the role of curiosity in early English museums and its implications for modern museum practice, Arnold probes the function of the museum object. Arnold analyses its capacity to produce knowledge through looking, and how these meanings are re-written as the role of institutions change:

Against a shifting backdrop where collections are perpetually caught between different systems of meaning, and where museums as institutions strive to fulfil various roles, the idea that objects in museum might be *useful* and that real knowledge could be generated through an examination of their function, has encouraged research perpetually to reassess the essence of their objects.⁵⁷

Although Arnold is specifically discussing the practice of re-examining objects to determine new significance about their original function, this idea could also be applied more generally to the role of art within museum collections: as medical museums have evolved beyond a pedagogical function and opened up to public access, the re-definition of these spaces have opened up the potential for artworks like Isaacs' sculpture to both contribute and absorb new meanings. In the present-day Wellcome Collection, Henry Wellcome's ambitious vision of presenting a comprehensive history of medicine has evolved into a space for critical reflection upon issues in contemporary global health. This is no less 'serious' a remit than in Wellcome's original exhibition, but the shift in intention generates new sets of meaning for the objects contained therein. Today, contemporary artworks retain more agency than in the original collection, and the 'mere curiosity'

⁵⁷ Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious*, 166-167.

renounced by Wellcome and his contemporaries is re-packaged into a more critical form.

However, although Isaacs' wax sculpture takes on new sets of meaning within the medical collection, the spectacular appeal of the monstrous body is not necessarily effaced. As I've argued, *I Can't Help The Way I Feel* draws on the emotional resonance of the medical curiosity, channelling it into a form that prompts critical reflection of the issues surrounding these bodies; its role as an art object urges a viewer to consider its *meaning*, in addition to – but not exclusive of – the sensationalism or curiosity associated with displays of unusual bodies. In doing so, the simultaneous repulsiveness and curious attraction that gives these bodies their appeal is maintained, but imbued with new critical significance. Artworks like Isaacs' sculpture do not merely render the curious body anatomically legible when they are integrated into the medical collection, but activate more complex ways of seeing the body beyond its initial visual impact. As the contexts of art and medicine meet, the spectacle of the curious body is not effaced, but instead revealed as having significance beyond 'mere curiosity'. Building on these discussions of curious art in the medical collection, the next chapter will address two photographs of a preserved head of a bearded woman in a Paris anatomy museum, to discuss how contemporary artists can take on the role of curious collector themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR:

The Contemporary Artist as Curious Collector

The preserved head of a bearded woman

In an obscure archive of the Musée d'Anatomie Delmas-Orfila-Rouvière (more often referred to as simply Musée Orfila) at Paris Descartes University, the taxidermied bust of a bearded woman sits in a glass bell jar. Her femininity is indicated by her earrings and the lace collar that encircles her neck, contrasting the masculinity of her features and the thick, fair beard that covers her face. Her skin is weathered and pale, but has been well preserved by what appears to be a method of mummification. Her display, however, has been designed to de-emphasize her presentation as a corpse: her eyelids have been positioned open, fitted with glassy, artificial eyeballs that peer slightly upward, giving her otherwise neutral expression an eerie animate quality. Beneath the lace collar, her shoulders are modestly covered in a practical fabric, to signal to the viewer that they are looking at a demurely clothed woman and not at a naked body. These humanizing gestures seem at odds with her display within the anatomical museum, where the body is normally expected to remain impersonal and objective: in this setting, the curiousness of her body is not just situated in her corporeal anomaly, but in the compelling discordance of her display.

The striking appearance of the bearded woman in the bell jar at Musée Orfila caught the eye of two different artists in the last two decades: in 1991, Zoe Leonard featured her image in a series of five black and white photographs known as *Preserved*

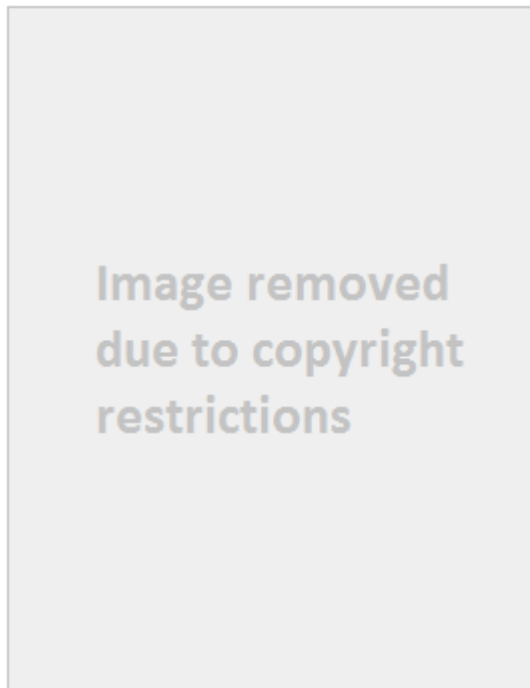


Fig. 4-1. Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, Musée Orfila, 1990. Image E, from a series of five gelatin silver prints, 81.3 x 59 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Reproduced from Centre Pompidou collections.

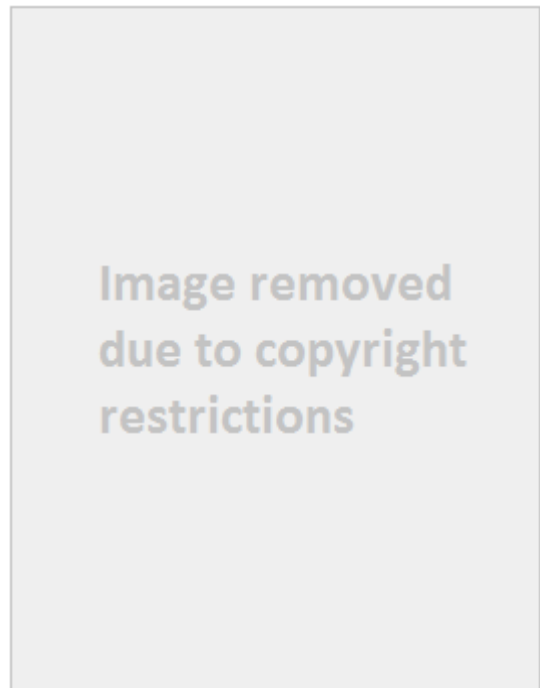


Fig. 4-2. Joanna Ebenstein, *Femme à Barbe (bearded lady under bell jar)*, 2009. Digital photograph, edition of 8, taken as part of the *Secret Museum* series, 2010. Reproduced from Joanna Ebenstein, "The Secret Museum", 2010.

Head of a Bearded Woman (Musée Orfila) [Fig. 4-1], and in 2010 Joanna Ebenstein photographed her body again for *The Secret Museum*, a series documenting hidden and curious objects in museum collections [Fig. 4-2]. In the twenty years that passed between these two encounters, the expertly preserved bearded woman peered out from the glass jar unchanged as cultural attitudes toward her curious body have gradually shifted. In the previous chapter, I discussed an example of a contemporary artwork that has been integrated into a medical museum, in order to address the potential exchanges of meaning that take place between art and medicine around the curious body; this chapter builds upon those ideas by turning to two artists who use the collecting practices of historical medical museums as source material for questioning the significance of curiosities in the contemporary world. I examine how the image of the bearded woman is situated within the

context of each of these artists' larger practises, and how the differences in their approach relate to an ever-changing history of collecting, depicting and displaying human curiosities.

Despite the fact that Zoe Leonard and Joanna Ebenstein have photographed the same bearded woman, I investigate their distinct motivations for photographing her, and how their larger practices produce different ways of understanding her unusual body. I argue that Zoe Leonard takes a more critical position, which challenges the institutional frameworks that surround the display of the bearded woman. I suggest that Leonard's images reflect a desire to restore the bearded woman as a human subject rather than a medical object, by exposing the patriarchal and normative gazes of the medical collection. Ebenstein, on the other hand, is less critical of the historical museum space, and her interest in the bearded woman is motivated by a nostalgic affection for curious collecting practices. Discussing the role that her blog, *Morbid Anatomy*, plays in the presentation and distribution of her photographs, I argue that Ebenstein embraces the curiousness of the bearded woman, as part of her larger project of reinventing curious collecting practices for the digital age.

Although their interest in the bearded woman is different from one another, I also discuss how both artists use photography to activate a mode of collecting, strategically re-framing images within their own modern day collections of curiosities. Discussing Leonard's photography as a form of taxidermy, I argue that these artists also become part of this tradition, ultimately taking on and re-characterizing the role of curious collector. In particular, I suggest that both artists frame the historical practices of collecting curiosities as an anachronistic curiosity itself. In other words, I will argue that the artists use photography to collect the curious collection. Positioning the contemporary artist as participants within the tradition of collecting curiosities rather than neutral observers, this chapter analyses Leonard's and Ebenstein's images of the bearded woman in order to

unpack how their photographs both challenge and extend the meanings bestowed upon her curious body within various contexts of display.

Looking at the bell jar: Zoe Leonard

When Zoe Leonard encountered the bearded woman in the early 1990s, she was shocked and horrified by the sight, a reaction in line with emotional responses traditionally associated with displays of human deformity throughout history.¹ [Fig. 4-3] However, unlike traditional horror-based responses, which interpreted deformities as ominous signs or divine retribution, Leonard's reaction was not caused by the sight of corporeal anomaly itself, but by the institutional systems which had authorized the bearded woman's morbid exhibition. As Leonard described in an interview with Laura Cottingham in 1993:

I was shocked when I came across the bearded woman's head. I couldn't believe that here was this woman's head, stuffed and mounted, in a jar. The bell jar was just sitting on a file cabinet in a corner of the room, in an obscure museum in Paris, a place completely closed to the general public... Her head was placed in the jar to be looked at. But it's not just her head that I see. I see the bell jar, the specimen identification card, the carved wooden pedestal. I see a set of implied circumstances. Who was in charge? Who put this woman's head in a jar and called it science? I am moved by her, anxious to know more about her life, the quality of her life. But, these pictures don't tell us all that much about her. You cannot see her or know her by seeing only her severed head. These pictures are about our culture, about an institutional obsession with difference.²

Concerned with the humanity of the bearded woman and critical of the institutional frameworks responsible for her display, Leonard's interest in the preserved head of the bearded woman is not based in the curiousness of the unusual body, but in the processes which present that body as curious in the first place.

Leonard's disgust at the sight of the bearded woman in the bell jar was compounded by the lack of information available about her; despite a campaign to find out more about her personal history, all Leonard was able to discover was that the bearded woman had

- 1 Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Natures, 1150-1750* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1998), 177-189. In their study of the cultural history of wonder and wonders in early modern Western Europe, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park identify horror as a key emotional response to monstrous births, connected to interpretations of deformity as ominous signs and divine retribution.
- 2 Zoe Leonard, as quoted in an interview with Laura Cottingham, "Interview: Zoe Leonard", *Journal of Contemporary Art* 6:1 (1993), accessed 6 October 2012, <http://www.jca-online.com/leonard.html>.

Images removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 4-3. Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, Musée Orfila, 1990. Series of five gelatin silver prints, 94 x 67.8 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

worked in a circus and died around the turn of the century.³ Publicly available records from the anatomy department of the Paris Descartes University simply refer to her body as '*Buste momifié, grandeur nature de 'Germaine D...', femme à barbe*' (life-sized mummified bust of Germaine D, bearded woman).⁴ The label in her bell jar, visible in Leonard's photograph, gives only a reference number – 000297 – and the name 'Professor A. Delmas'. [Fig. 4-4] This suggests that the head of the bearded woman was added to the collection during Prof. André Delmas' tenure as curator from 1947, when he began work to extensively expand and restore the original collection of anatomical specimens.⁵ Within the confines of the anatomical museum, the identity of the bearded woman is extirpated by the exclusive interest in the unusual aberration of her body: her personal history is severed along with her body, her humanity reduced to a museum accession number, and her name replaced by that of her collector.

3 Leonard, as quoted in Cottingham, "Interview: Zoe Leonard", unpag.

4 "Buste momifié, grandeur nature de 'Germaine D...', femme à barbe", Musée Anatomique Delmas-Orfila-Rouvière, accessed 5 September 2012, <http://www.biomedicale.univ-paris5.fr/anat/IMG/pdf/barbe.pdf>.

5 Adding further weight to this assumption is the fact that the bearded woman is also absent from the museum catalogue compiled by Charles-Nicolas Houel in 1881. See: Charles Nicolas Houel, *Catalogue du Musée Orfila* (Paris: Paul Dupont-Masson, 1881), accessed 17 September 2012 via Google Books Library Project, <http://dbooks.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/books/PDFs/590505937.pdf>. Information on Professor Delmas via the Anatomy Department, Paris Descartes University, accessed 1 October 2012, <http://www.biomedicale.univ-paris5.fr/anat/spip.php?article38>.

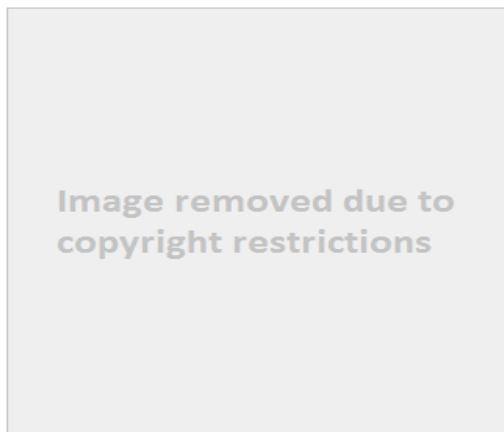


Fig. 4-4. Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, Musée Orfila (detail showing specimen identification card), 1990. Image A (detail showing museum label), from a series of five gelatin silver prints, 104 x 75 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Reproduced from Centre Pompidou collections.

Leonard photographed the bearded woman in the early 1990s, during a period when she was interested in examining representations of the female form within institutions where presentations of femininity are highly regulated, such as medical museums, fashion shows, and the canon of art history.⁶ Using black and white photography to isolate images of the female body from their larger contexts, Leonard re-frames them for the

viewer, highlighting the contradictory absurdity and beauty in their presentation. Her images of female wax anatomical models, for example, reveal the submissive poses of their bodies and the curious addition of details like pearls and wigs; artistic touches which serve no medical purpose except to mark the bodies as figures of beauty for the visual pleasure of male medical students in the eighteenth century. For example, in *Seated Anatomical Model* (1991-1992) [Fig. 4-5], Leonard captures the fearful pose of the wax figure, borrowed from allegorical paintings of the time, and the unsettling contrast of the model's naked flesh against the gaping exposure of her guts. Leonard presents the pathos of these models in contrast to the supposed disinterest of the male scientific gaze tacitly asserted by the context of the medical museum.⁷ Alongside other photographs that she

6 Regarding this period of her artistic practice in the early 1990s, Leonard said, '[T]he objects I chose to spend a lot of time with and photograph were objects that had to do with the representation of women, the presentation of beauty, the control of sexuality. Pictures like the chastity belt, the wax anatomical model, the fashion show work, the beauty calibrator, the dress and suit [...] I'm interested in the objects we make and the things we display...how we display them reveal who we are as a people and what we care about and how we think of the world around us [...] This is really an extended way of saying that the politics is always there, it's more embedded in an examination of power dynamics.' Zoe Leonard, in *Zoe Leonard Fotografías: Encuentro con Zoe Leonard*, Blip video, interview with the artist by exhibition curator Lynne Cooke, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, (3 December 2008, 37:35 – 39 :10), accessed 6 October 2012, <http://blip.tv/museo-reina-sofia/encuentro-con-zoe-leonard-1577901>.

7 An overview of issues of power and objectivity/subjectivity within the politics of display, particularly as it is relevant to museums with a scientific or medical focus, is laid out by Sharon Macdonald in "Exhibitions of power and powers of exhibition: An introduction to the politics of display," in *The*

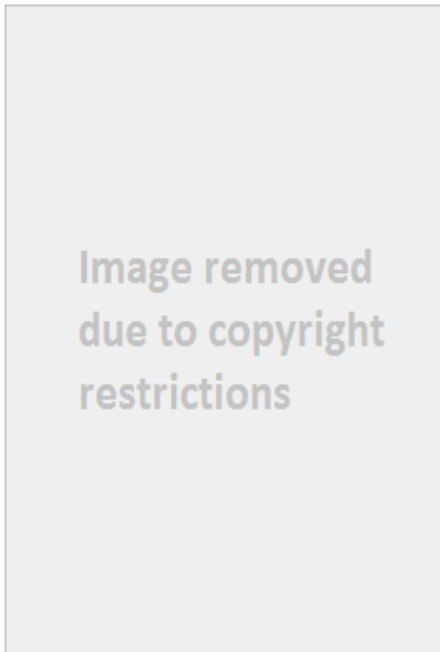


Fig. 4-5. Zoe Leonard, *Seated Anatomical Model*, 1991-1992. Gelatin silver print, edition of 12, 45.5 x 30.5 cm. Reproduced from Christie's.

produced in this period – such as the tortuous looking beauty calibrator used to measure female features in comparison to a standard canon of beauty, the voyeuristic up-skirt shots of models on a fashion catwalk, and a bridal mannequin with broken fingers [Figs. 4-6 to 4-8] – Leonard's images point to an underlying violence toward the female body that reaches its gruesome climax in the decapitation of the bearded woman.

However, although it is tempting to read her photographs from this period as straightforward criticism of the patriarchal systems which frame the

female body, she is not interested in merely recycling one-dimensional critiques of the male gaze; although Leonard certainly acknowledges its role, she activates interesting new dimensions in both institutional critique and feminist art practices by shifting emphasis from women being *looked at* to women *looking*, within the spaces of traditionally male-oriented medical museums.⁸ In this way, Helen McDonald places Leonard's work alongside feminist artists like Fiona Foley and Mary Duffy, whose work of the late 1980s, she argues, represents a shift in feminist enquiry from danger to pleasure; moving away from investigation into the patriarchal ways women are 'looked at', to the way women themselves negotiate images of the female form.⁹ For example, in a filmed interview with

Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture, ed. Sharon MacDonald (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 1-24.

8 In regards to her installation of photographs of female genitalia among images of females in eighteenth century painting in the Neue Galerie as part of Documenta IX, Zoe Leonard has said: 'I was aware of the omnipresent male gaze, and I do think that the piece addresses that, but what's far more interesting to me are the thoughts I had about these women. [...] I'm not interested in remaining trapped forever in a critique of the male gaze. I have my own gaze to think about.' As quoted in Cottingham, "Interview with Zoe Leonard", 1993.

9 Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 38-52.

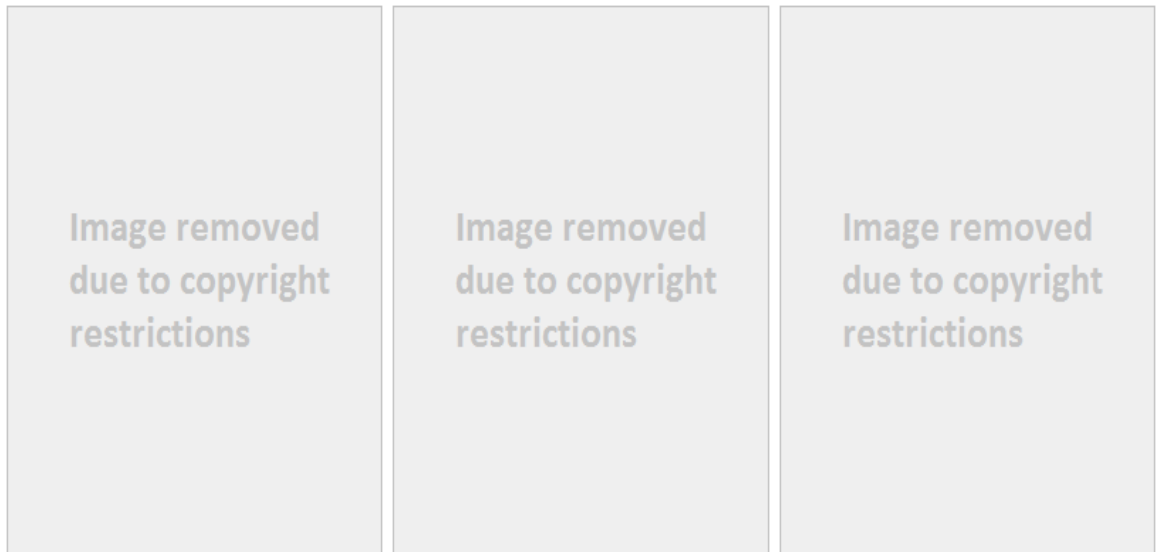


Fig. 4-6. Zoe Leonard, *Beauty Calibrator*, 1993. Gelatin silver print, edition of 6, 24 x 17 inches. Reproduced from Christie's.

Fig. 4-7. Zoe Leonard, *Rear View (Geoffrey Beene Fashion Show)*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 38.25 x 26.75 inches. Reproduced from MOCA North Miami collections.

Fig. 4-8. Zoe Leonard, *Bride With Broken Fingers (No. 2)*, 1995-1997. Gelatin silver print, 15.75 x 11.02 inches. mumok, Vienna, Austria. Reproduced from mumok collections.

curator Lynne Cook at the Reina Sofia in 1998, Leonard describes her experience of taking photographs of a wax model in a museum where photography was not permitted.¹⁰ Waiting until the security guard was distracted, she covertly climbed on his chair in order to photograph the model from above, thus activating a transgressive modality of looking which defies both the institutional rules and the omnipresent male gazes of the museum space. [Fig. 4-9]

Parallels can be drawn here between Leonard's work and Christine Borland's *This Being You Must Create (Spy in the Anatomy Museum)* (1997), in which Borland snapped forbidden photographs in the Montpellier Anatomical Museum in France using a tiny spy camera. [Fig.4-10] Although the well-known anatomy museum was once open to the public by appointment, access to the space had become more strictly regulated in the mid-1990s, and Borland's request to view the collection was originally denied; she was only given permission to enter after persistent appeals by the curator to the Dean of the school, who overruled the decision of the anatomy faculty with the provision that Borland only be

¹⁰ Leonard, in *Zoe Leonard Fotografias* video, 2008.

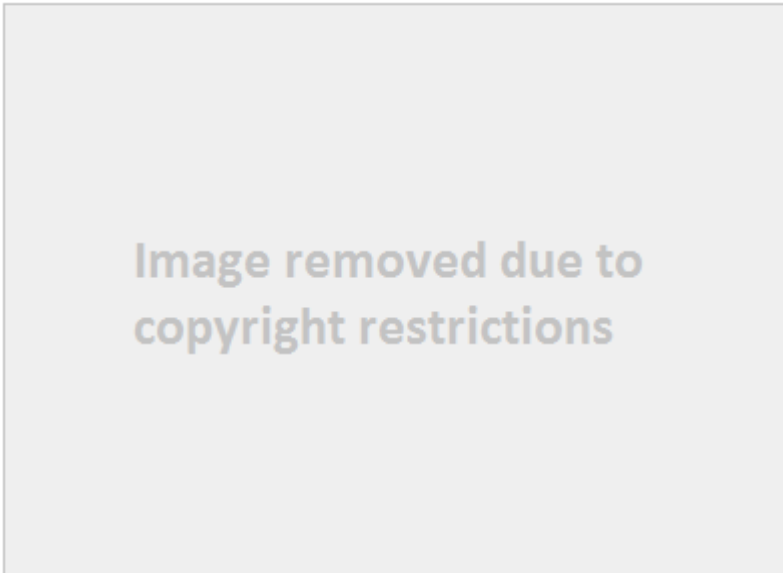


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Fig. 4-9. Zoe Leonard, *Wax Anatomical Model (Shot Crooked From Above)*, 1990. Gelatin silver print on paper, artist proof 1/2, from an edition of 6. Tate Modern, London, UK. Reproduced from Tate collections.

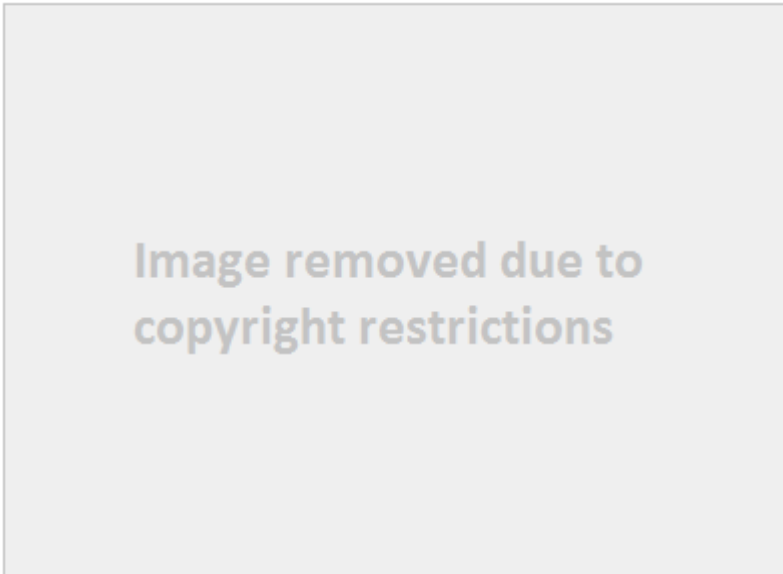


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Fig. 4-10. Christine Borland, *This Being You Must Create (A Spy in the Anatomy Museum)* (detail), 1997. Eighty laminated cibachrome prints on perspex, 15.25 x 20.32 cm. Reproduced from "Hygiene: The Art of Public Health", London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

allowed to draw in the space.¹¹ Borland's covertly taken images are blurry and grainy, and she presents them in the form of a slide show, where they are shown in rapid succession alongside her drawings. These presentation techniques disrupt the ease of looking at the anatomical subjects, using the visual disruption to make the viewer hyper-aware of the regulated forms of seeing privileged within the space of the museum. Like Leonard's photographs, Borland's re-framing of the anatomical collection is not merely concerned with objects of curiosity, but with transgressing authorized or official forms of looking.

In her *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman* series, Leonard defies the medical gaze which frames the bearded woman as an anatomical specimen, by introducing what Susan Sontag has described as 'photographic seeing': guiding the viewer to see what an individual observes of the world.¹² As Leonard describes,

It's not just what I'm looking at but how I look. Photographs play with the idea of absolute truth. When people look at a photograph, they believe it. We believe that it exposes reality. That a portrait can show someone's true character. If you see a picture of something, you believe it really happened that way. Pictures are proof. My photographs crawl along that edge. I document the world, but from my own biased point of view. I want to draw the viewer into the process of looking so we can look at these things together. I want to show you what I see.¹³

Leonard, I argue, introduces her own manner of 'photographic seeing' by guiding the viewer to look *at* the bell jar instead of through it, in order to expose the display conventions that frame the bearded woman as a medical curiosity. In Image B of the series, for example, Leonard's use of black and white photography works to highlight the reflections on the surface of the bell jar, emphasizing the glass that separates the bearded woman from the viewer. [Fig. 4-11] The photograph is cropped closely around the woman's head, so that the shape of the bell jar is almost hidden, blurring the boundaries

11 As recounted by Christine Borland in Anne Morgan Barclay, "Memorial for Anonymous: An Interview with Christine Borland", *Sculpture Magazine* 18 (October 1999), accessed 1 November 2012, <http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag99/oct99/borland/borland.shtml>.

12 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1977 (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 88-89. Sontag argues that the notion of the camera as reproducing an objective view of the world gave way to a realisation that photographs are 'not just a record but an evaluation of the world' which reflects the photographer's particular way of seeing the world.

13 Leonard, as quoted in Cottingham, "Interview: Zoe Leonard", unpag.

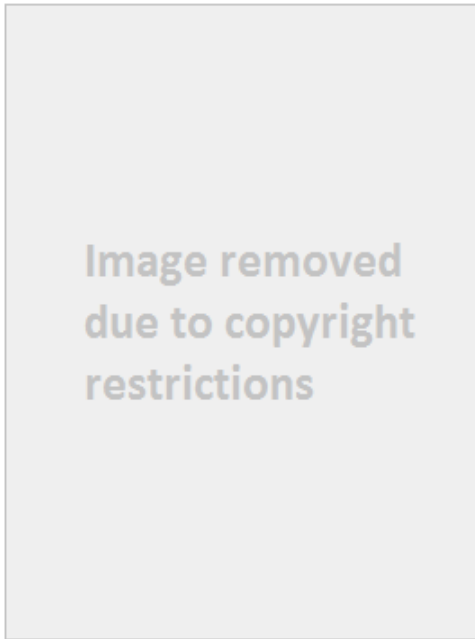


Fig. 4-11. Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, Musée Orfila, 1990. Image B, from a series of five gelatin silver prints, 72.5 x 54 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Reproduced from Centre Pompidou collections.

between the jar and the background. The bearded woman's shoulders blend into the shadows at the bottom of the image, almost restoring the wholeness of her body. Leonard also leaves traces of image making – marks on the negative, small scratches and imperfections created during hand developing processes – as a way of signalling to the viewer that they are looking at a created image, and not at neutral documentation.¹⁴ [Fig. 4-12] These visual tell-tales draw attention to the fact that the artist's own biases and viewpoints are likewise intrinsically engrained within the image.

By guiding the viewer to see the bearded woman in isolation from the medical gaze, Leonard challenges the authority of the anatomical collection over the bearded woman's display. Leonard undermines the scientific justification for her display by questioning the authenticity of the anatomical specimen:

What I think is interesting about that piece is that there is no proof of gender in the bell jar. That could be a man with earrings and a lace collar on. I was told that it is the head of a bearded woman, but there is no proof of gender in the head. So the real question about that piece is: what is this head doing here? If there's no proof of gender, there's nothing to study, no scientific purpose. Why is she in the bell jar?¹⁵

As Leonard observes, despite the implied authenticity of the specimen in the anatomy museum, there is little medical evidence of the object's veracity as a 'genuine' bearded woman (at least, none that could be easily accessible to a non-specialist audience). The

¹⁴ Leonard in Cottingham, "Interview: Zoe Leonard", unpag. David Davies further explores the treatment of photographs as created images in comparison to more obviously created mediums like painting, in relationship to ethical responses to curious bodies in the work of Diane Arbus. See: David Davies, "Susan Sontag, Diane Arbus, and the Ethical Dimensions of Photography", in *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2011), 212-214.

¹⁵ Leonard, as quoted in Cottingham, "Interview: Zoe Leonard", unpag.

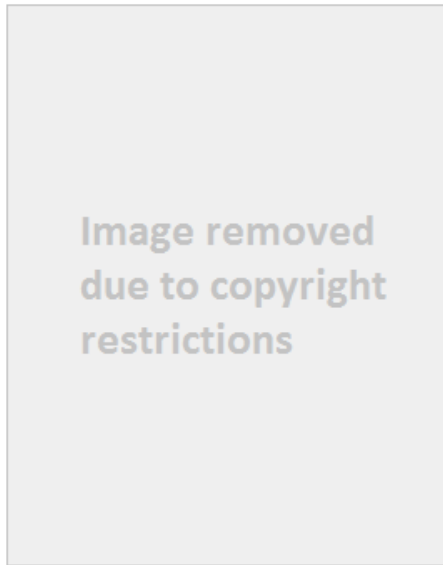


Fig. 4-12. Close up details showing small imperfections in the photograph. Zoe Leonard, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman* (detail, Image B), 1991.

anatomical display instead relies upon the expected legitimacy of the institution in combination with cultural signifiers like the earrings and lace collar, which are unrelated to her anatomical determination of gender.¹⁶ By pointing out this absence of proof, Leonard questions the relevance of the bearded subject to the study of anatomy at all, undermining the implied institutional justification for the bearded woman's collection and display.

However, Leonard too integrates the image of the bearded woman into a particular institutional and collection context: like many of the artists I have discussed in my previous chapters, Leonard transforms the curious body into an artistic subject as a way of critiquing other forms of displaying non-normativity. In 2008, Leonard's series was purchased by the Centre-Georges Pompidou in Paris. Collected and legitimized within an important art collection, the meaning of the bearded woman becomes framed by aesthetic and political frameworks of the art museum. When Leonard's photographs were displayed at the Pompidou as part of an exhibition featuring the work of female artists in the collection, this quote from Leonard was included on the accompanying wall label:

I can't speak for the 'Bearded Woman' or to her. But in the darkroom that first time I knew that I was another person, along with the taxidermist and directors of the Musée Orfila, that

¹⁶ As Robert Bogdan notes in his history of the freak show, questions around the authenticity of bearded women were central to the publicity and display of their bodies: in other words, part of the thrill of looking at bearded women was the attempt to determine whether or not they were 'real'. By challenging the dominant binary models of sex and gender, the display of a bearded woman invited viewers to analyse her body in relation to their definitions of what constitutes 'genuine' femininity. Within the freak show, the potential for fakes was expected, but the authority of a medical museum lent the display of bearded women an air of implied authenticity. Nineteenth-century freak show organisers would even solicit endorsements from anatomists and other medical professionals who would testify that their freaks were the genuine article, capitalizing on the legitimacy that associations with their institutions would lend them. See: Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 226-229. See also: Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (London: University of Chicago Press, 27-29.

had control of her image.¹⁷

From this quote, it is clear that Leonard is aware of the dilemma of her own authority over the display of the bearded woman. I would argue that Leonard's technique of leaving traces of image making – such as small marks and imperfections on the negatives – is a means of helping to reveal the subjective viewpoint of her photographs. However, if this is indeed her strategy, its effectiveness is contingent upon a type of close looking that only further affirms the photograph's position as an art object.

By transforming the bearded woman from specimen to artwork, Leonard participates in a history of exhibiting monstrous bodies. As I will argue in the final section of this chapter, Leonard takes on the role of curious collector by using photography as a form of taxidermy, which preserves the bearded woman and the curious display practices which frame her. First, however, I contrast Leonard's work with the images of Joanna Ebenstein, who photographed the same preserved head of a bearded woman in 2009. By discussing how Ebenstein's practice embraces the culture of curiosity that Leonard critiques, I show how the context of each artist's practice frames the image of the bearded woman in a particular way. Despite the differences in their approach to the bearded woman, I argue that both artists operate as curious collectors, who frame the anachronistic collecting practices of the anatomy museum *as* a curiosity itself.

A contemporary cabinet of curiosities: Joanna Ebenstein

In 2009, Joanna Ebenstein visited the Musée Orfila as part of an ongoing project to document curious, morbid and bizarre objects in collections across the United States and Europe. Like Leonard, Ebenstein was captivated by the marvellous sight of the bearded

¹⁷ Zoe Leonard, as quoted on the interpretation panel accompanying this piece in the exhibition *elles @ centre pompidou*, Georges Pompidou Centre, Paris (27 May 2009- 21 February 2011). Original source listed on panel as: Zoe Leonard, interview by Anna Blume in Zoe Leonard, cat. Expo. Vienne, Wiener Secession, 1997.

woman in the bell jar, and felt compelled to document the strange exhibit.¹⁸ [Fig. 4-2] However, unlike Leonard's image of the bearded woman, which operates as a criticism of the institutional systems that have interred her curious body, Ebenstein situates the bearded woman within a history of collecting that she more or less embraces. Contrasting Ebenstein's image of the bearded woman with Leonard's, this section discusses Ebenstein's interest in curious collecting practices, and how her photographs position these collections *as* the curiosity. Operating on the fringes of a fine art context, I argue that Ebenstein's photograph of the bearded woman is not about the non-normativity of the monstrous body, but mainly serves her larger interest in re-imagining curious collecting practices for the internet age. By doing so, I seek to demonstrate how, using a similar image, both artists turn collection into curiosity, with differing intentions and results.

Although Ebenstein identifies herself as an artist, she also calls herself a blogger, historian, photographer, collector, curator and cabinetist, reflecting the multiple facets of her heterogeneous practice. Her educational background is not grounded in fine art, but in the study of history; Ebenstein received her BA(Hons) in Intellectual History at the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1994 and has since been building a library and collection that specializes in the topic of morbid collections and medical curiosities. Ebenstein is best known for her blog, *Morbid Anatomy*, which she started in 2007 as a way to organise and reflect upon the images and archival material she collects during her photographic explorations of medical museums around the world. Since its inception, the audience and scope of *Morbid Anatomy* has grown substantially, becoming a digital hub for individuals and organisations interested in morbid curiosities and the history of medical collections.¹⁹ Ebenstein also runs the Morbid Anatomy Library and Cabinet, a research

18 Joanna Ebenstein in conversation with the author, London, UK, 30 September 2012. Although she was aware of Zoe Leonard's photographs of wax anatomical models, Ebenstein wasn't previously familiar with Leonard's photographs of the preserved head of the bearded woman, so her discovery of the unusual exhibit in the Musée Orfila came as a surprise.

19 Morbid Anatomy Blog, accessed 30 December 2013, www.morbidanatomy.blogspot.com.

library and museum that acts as a real-world counterpart to the blog, located within the Proteus Gowanus Interdisciplinary Gallery in Brooklyn, New York. [Fig. 4-13] As she describes, *Morbid Anatomy* is an artist's project 'committed to celebrating and providing materials dedicated to the places where death and beauty intersect'.²⁰

Morbid Anatomy has also become a platform for Ebenstein's photography practice. Although Ebenstein's photographs have been exhibited in several minor gallery exhibitions, her work has been predominantly shown through online exhibitions which she publishes in conjunction with her blog.²¹ Despite the substantial reach of the blog and her prominence within circles related to the history of medical collections and curios, Ebenstein has little presence within the art world. Her photographs, in other words, have not been integrated into any substantial critical or theoretical conversations around their function as visual imagery. As I discussed in the previous chapter, John Isaacs' sculpture in the Wellcome Collection is expected to critically engage with the space and his monstrous subject matter, because his wax figure is understood to operate as art. Because Ebenstein is largely absent from the conventional frameworks of art, her photographs do not axiomatically activate these modes of seeing. This, of course, impacts how Ebenstein's photograph of the bearded woman is understood – particularly in contrast to Leonard's images, which are fully established within a fine art context. Although I would argue that Ebenstein's heterogeneous activities do operate as an unconventional artistic practice, her photographs have been primarily presented and understood as they relate to the culture of

20 "The Morbid Anatomy Library and Museum", *Morbid Anatomy* blog, accessed 30 December 2013, <http://morbidanatomy.blogspot.co.uk/p/morbid-anatomy-library.html>.

21 Ebenstein's solo gallery exhibitions include (among others): "Ecstatic Raptures and Immaculate Corpses: Visions of Death Made Beautiful in Italy", Viktor Wynd Fine Art (London, 2012); "Private Cabinets and Public Collections: A Panorama of Collecting in Photographs", Columbia University (New York, 2009); "The Morbid Anatomy Cabinet: Gallery as Wunderkammer", Barrister's Gallery (New Orleans, 2009); "Savior of Mothers: The Forgotten Ballet of Dr. Ignaz Semmelweiss", David J. Spencer Museum (Atlanta, 2012). A full list of her exhibition history can be found here: "Exhibition History", accessed 30 December 2013, <http://www.astropop.com/exhibitions.html>. Ebenstein also hosts a separate but related website which features an online portfolio of her photography, called Astropop Productions: "Astropop Productions: The online portfolio of Joanna Ebenstein", accessed 30 December 2013, <http://www.astropop.com>.

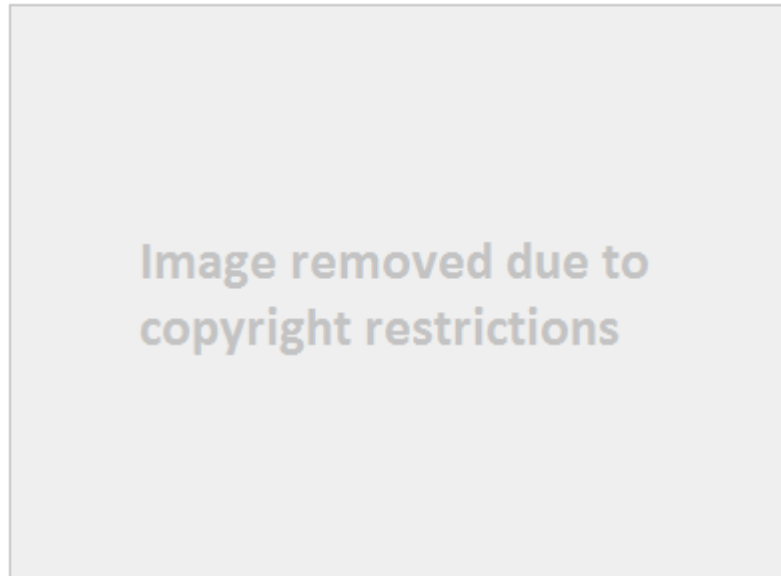


Fig. 4-13. Installation view of Joanna Ebenstein's Morbid Anatomy Library and Cabinet, Proteus Gowanus Gallery, Brooklyn, New York. Reproduced from Morbid Anatomy blog.

curiosities, rather than as artistic images. In this way, Ebenstein can perhaps be better understood as an internet phenomenon, than as an artist (in a traditional sense of the word).

Over the last ten years, Ebenstein has visited dozens of public and private collections to document morbid curiosities that are often hidden from public view. Rather than employing a predetermined methodology, her process for selecting things to photograph is largely intuitive, simply responding to scenes and objects that, in one way or another, fascinate her: wax anatomical models, taxidermy, medical specimens, *memento mori*, surgical instruments, pickled bodies, anthropomorphic objects, church relics, skeletons, unusual art, and bizarre museum displays (just to name a few).²² [Fig. 4-14] I argue that her choice of abnormal, strange and arcane objects reflect a contemporary re-imagining of the eclectic collecting traditions of the cabinet of curiosities. Cabinets of curiosities were the encyclopedic collections of wealthy Europeans in the sixteenth to

²² Joanna Ebenstein in conversation with the author via Skype, 26 August 2011. Unless otherwise stated, all contextual and biographical information is taken from two interviews I conducted with the artist, on 26 August 2011 (via Skype) and 30 September 2012 (at Viktor Wynd Fine Art in London, UK).



Image removed due to
copyright restrictions

Fig. 4-14. Selection of images from Joanna Ebenstein's *Secret Museum* exhibition, photographed in a variety of private and public collections between 2009-2010. Digital photographs. Reproduced from Joanna Ebenstein, "The Secret Museum", 2010, accessed 9 September 2013.

eighteenth centuries, who gathered together both natural and man-made oddities in order to create (in the words of philosopher Francis Bacon) 'a model of universal nature made private'.²³ This included objects such as rare birds and animals, 'evidence' of mythical creatures like unicorns or the vegetal Lamb of Tartary, precious minerals and engraved gems, bezoars, paintings of human rareties, petrified objects, fossils, outright fakes like mermaids and basilisks, optical toys, Classical antiquities, ancestral weaponry, anomalous animal specimens, and *vanitas* paintings (just to name a few). While not seeking to replicate the philosophical motivations for the Renaissance cabinet, Ebenstein's taste in strange and curious objects indeed mimics the eclectic collecting strategy of the cabinetist, re-imagining the predilection for strange and wondrous object in the form of digital photographs. It should be noted that human curiosities – or *lusus naturae*, to use the term most often employed in reference to these cabinets – are not specifically targeted by Ebenstein; rather, curious specimens like the bearded woman are merely included in a larger collecting practice loosely tied together under this cabinet-esque approach.

Ebenstein's interest in photographing medical museums is motivated by her desire to demonstrate the aesthetic qualities of these collections, re-presenting them as objects of technical and creative virtuosity rather than as neutral implements of science. If there is a critique present within her photographs, it is not directed toward the collecting practices themselves, but toward the prudish attitudes to death and dying that exists in mainstream American culture. Ebenstein presents her photographs of morbid curiosities as meditations on the contemporary and historical relationship to death, which, she argues, has been sanitised from modern society.²⁴ As Ebenstein describes,

23 Francis Bacon, *Gesta Grayorum* (1688), 123. For an overview of the history and definition of the cabinet of curiosity, see: Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunstkammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art and Technology*, trans. Allison Brown (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1995). See also: Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 44-54.

24 Ebenstein in conversation with the author, 2011 and 2012.

Death is, in my opinion, the most profound question of humanity and it's what makes us who we are. Lots of animals, we now know, have language or make tools, but I'm not so sure that lots of animals have fore knowledge of their own death, and I think that this is what the human condition is. It's knowing we are going to die and creating some sort of meaning in the world despite that. And so, for me, looking at morbid objects in medical museums was...about why these objects seem so bizarre to us, and why death is hidden away like it's a secret.²⁵

Although she acknowledges the problematic aspects of displaying corporeal anomaly, Ebenstein advocates so-called 'curious' exhibition practices which address themes of death in the display and preservation of bodies and objects, preferring it over the conventional avoidance of morbid subject matter.²⁶ Ebenstein's interest in the head of the bearded woman is not in restoring her lived humanity, but in how her preserved body can be re-imagined as an object of beauty. In her photograph of the bearded woman, Ebenstein asks the viewer to consider why we see it as strange or morbid, and what our answer says about the modern relationship to death.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, monstrous bodies are inextricably bound up in the display contexts in which we encounter them: unusual bodies only become monstrous when they are framed as such, the products of stylized modes of presentation. Leonard's photographs seek to undermine the authority of the medical gaze conferred upon the bearded woman by the context of the anatomical museum; Ebenstein's photograph, on the other hand, firmly locates the bearded woman within the visual culture of medical curiosities encountered in the museum. For example, Leonard's photographs are tightly cropped to the face of the bearded woman, and use black and white photography to obscure her location within a medical display; Ebenstein's colour photograph is a slightly wider, photo-journalistic shot which clearly locates the head of the bearded woman among the museum collection. From the carved wooden pedestal, to the neatly printed accession card, to the shelves of colourful objects displayed behind her in the collection storeroom, Ebenstein's photograph lucidly documents the circumstances of the bearded woman's

²⁵ Ebenstein in conversation with the author via Skype, 26 August 2011.

²⁶ Ebenstein in conversation with the author, 30 September 2012.

display. Ebenstein's images, in this way, are also photographs of collections, rather than just photographs of individual objects in collections.

However, although the bearded woman has obviously been photographed within a collection storeroom, without prior knowledge of this object it would be difficult to identify the setting as a specific museum, because the background looks relatively generic. The curious objects in Ebenstein's photographs come from a wide range of disparate collections, which further defies the contextual specificity of individual images. Taken together, her photographs seem to allude to an imagined space where these objects might co-exist in a single collection. In fact, because her photographs are often presented without individual labels, someone without prior knowledge of Ebenstein's practice could easily assume that her images document a single cabinet still in existence. The photographs become stand ins for the objects within them, forming a new collection of curiosities located in cyberspace.²⁷

Playing with the various meanings that emerge from the juxtaposition of disparate objects, Ebenstein often reshuffles selected photographs from her larger image collection into smaller thematic exhibitions. For instance, in 2010, her photograph of the bearded woman was incorporated into a collection of images entitled *The Secret Museum*, which was shown at the Observatory Gallery in Brooklyn, New York and now lives on in the form of an online exhibition of the same name:

²⁷ Although an in-depth discussion of the internet's role in contemporary collecting practices is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to briefly acknowledge the potential for the photographs in Ebenstein's virtual collection to get re-posted in other contexts around the internet. Because Ebenstein's photographs do not immediately demonstrate a distinctive artistic style, her images are, arguably, more vulnerable to de-contextualisation than artists like Zoe Leonard or Diane Arbus, whose styles of photography are more recognizable as the work of specific artists. The consequence of this for the bearded woman is the potential for her image to become even further entrenched in enfreakment, isolated from the mediating contextualisation of an artist's practice or even the framework of the medical museum. Of course, the reverse is also true: it is also possible that the woman's image might be re-appropriated into more humanizing contexts or alternative socio-historical narratives. Because, as I have argued, the meanings of monstrous bodies are intertwined with the display context in which we encounter them, the nature of Ebenstein's practice opens up the potential for the significance of the bearded woman to be re-imagined as Ebenstein's image is reproduced in other digital contexts. This, in a sense, further de-stabilizes the reading of Ebenstein's practice as art.

The exhibition *The Secret Museum* showcases a collection of photographs from Ebenstein's explorations— including sites in The Netherlands, Italy, France, Austria, England, Poland, and the United States— which document these spaces while at the same time investigating the psychology of collecting, the visual language of taxonomies, notions of "The Specimen" and the ordered archive, and the secret life of objects and collections, with an eye towards capturing the poetry, mystery and wonder of these liminal spaces.²⁸

Culled from a wide range of countries, museum types and time periods, the most substantial link between the curiosities featured in *The Secret Museum* is Ebenstein herself. Her images are presented almost like souvenir photographs of her personal 'Grand Tour' of Europe's great medical collections, seeming to allude to a personal rather than historical engagement with their hidden histories.²⁹

In this way, Ebenstein takes on the role of an auteur-collector, whose vision and collecting sensibilities determines the nature of the collection and the meaning of the objects within it. The preserved head of the bearded woman becomes doubly collected, first by Professor Delmas (the name on the label in the bell jar) and now by Ebenstein. In other words, in addition to the image of the bearded woman, the original act of curious collecting is represented in Ebenstein's photograph. Her photographs function as souvenirs of her journeys through medical collections, but they also re-imagine historical practices of collecting curiosities by including the museums themselves within her purview. I argue that like Leonard's photographs of the bearded woman, Ebenstein's image presents the museum display as an anachronistic curiosity. However, unlike Leonard, Ebenstein's interest in revitalising curious collection practices also works to affirm the bearded woman as a morbid curiosity.

28 Press release for the Secret Museum exhibition, accessed 20 November 2012,

<http://www.astropop.com/SecretMuseumPressRelease.pdf>. For the online exhibition, see: "The Secret Museum", accessed 20 November 2012, <http://www.astropop.com/secretmuseum/>.

29 In conversation with the author (2011), Ebenstein described her travels from the United States to Europe as both a 'pilgrimage to the great medical museums of Europe' and as her own 'modern-day *Grand Tour*' (emphasis mine), two traditions linked deeply to the history of collecting. For a description of the impact of the Grand Tour tradition on evolving criteria of taste and collecting practices, see: Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 97.

Preserving the bearded woman

Although they take a very different approach, both artists' photographs testify to the peculiar conventions of displaying curious bodies. As I have argued, Leonard is critical of these forms of collecting; Ebenstein returns to them in a more connoisseur-like manner, exploring how they might be re-imagined in the era of digital collecting. Both, in different ways, are concerned with the nature of curious collecting practices, and their photographs of the preserved head of the bearded woman serve to illustrate the anachronistic curiosity of her display. This final section addresses how, in photographing her, these artists take on the role of curious collector. In particular, I discuss Leonard's photographs of the bearded woman and how it works as a form of taxidermy, akin to the preservation techniques used to collect her in the first place. Although I focus on Leonard's work in this section, I build upon the previous section to argue that both Ebenstein and Leonard collect images of curious collecting practices. As taxidermy froze the bearded woman in time, so too does Leonard's camera freeze a moment in the history of collecting curiosities, framing the collection itself as an anachronistic curiosity. I suggest that Leonard uses this approach in order to memorialise the bearded woman, invoking a complex relationship between practices of preservation and the themes of memory and loss which run throughout her practice.

Jean Baudrillard describes collecting and collections as 'an everyday myth capable of absorbing all anxieties about time and death', which can symbolically transcend the limitations of our own mortality:

The man who collects things may already be dead, yet he manages literally to outlive himself through his collection which, originating within this life, recapitulates him indefinitely beyond the point of death by absorbing death itself into the series and the cycle.³⁰

³⁰ Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting", excerpt from *Le Système des objets*, 1968, trans. Roger Cardinal, in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books

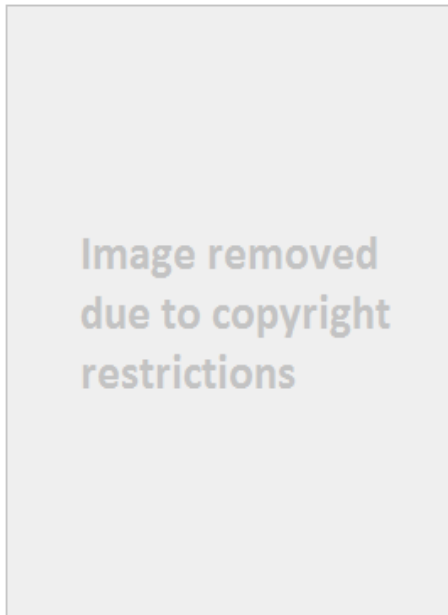


Fig. 4-15. Zoe Leonard, *Carnivores*, 1992. Gelatin silver print on paper, 56.1 x 36.1 cm. Tate Modern, London, UK. Reproduced from Tate collections.

Moreover, Baudrillard characterizes collecting as a way of establishing dominion over time, an act of mourning for and metaphorically playing out our own deaths. Leonard likewise describes her interest in collections as the human urge to hold onto things past their time, as a way of avoiding our universal fear of death.³¹ She also identifies the preoccupation with memory and the passage of time as key themes throughout her artworks. Although critical of the lopsided power structures inherent in museum collections, Leonard is drawn to the techniques it employs to defy loss. For example, Leonard's captivation with taxidermy can be seen throughout her extensive photographic explorations of natural history museums during the late 1980s and early 1990s, in works such as *Carnivores* (1992) [Fig. 4-15].

Leonard's interest in taxidermy and its relationship to loss and memory is most powerfully manifested in her installation *Strange Fruit (For David)* (1992). [Fig. 4-16] In 1992, shortly after making *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, Leonard was faced with the death of close friend and fellow artist David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS-related complications. A meditation on loss and a tribute to his memory, *Strange Fruit* consists of orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon and avocado peels, painstakingly repaired with crude stitching, zippers and buttons, into grotesque caricatures of their former selves. [Fig. 4-17] The stitching in the fruit recalls an iconic photograph of Wojnarowicz with his lips sewn shut, taken by Andreas Sterzing in 1990. [Fig. 4-18] The stitched lips in this portrait make reference to scenes in Wojnarowicz's controversial unfinished film *A Fire in My Belly*

Ltd, 1994), 17.

31 Leonard in *Zoe Leonard Fotografias: Encuentro con Zoe Leonard* video, 2008.

Images removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 4-16. Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit (For David)* (installation view), 1992-1997. Orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon and avocado peels with thread, zippers, buttons, sinew, needles, plastic, wire, stickers, fabric and trim wax, dimensions variable. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Reproduced from Philadelphia Museum of Art collections.

Fig. 4-17. Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit (For David)* (detail), 1992-1997. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Reproduced from Philadelphia Museum of Art collections.

Fig. 4-18. Andreas Sterzing, *David Wojnarowicz (Silence=Death)*, 1990. PPOW Gallery, New York. Reproduced from Emily Colucci, "All I Can Feel Is the Pressure and the Need For Release", *Art21 Magazine* (9 December 2011).

(1986-1987), in which a mouth is sewn shut as a powerful statement about the dominant voices being heard in official culture during the AIDS crisis.³² The title of Leonard's work, *Strange Fruit*, refers to the Billie Holiday song – originally penned as an anti-racism protest song against the practice of lynching African Americans in the early twentieth-century – and to 'fruit' as pejorative slang for gay males.³³ Leonard, a fervent AIDS activist during the late 1980s and early 1990s, uses this titling along with the disfigured fruit to censure official reactions to the AIDS epidemic during the time, likening it to an act of political violence against a disenfranchised minority.³⁴

The act of reconstituting the fruit skins into empty, distorted semblances of their original form can be seen as a crude form of taxidermy, creating a poignant relationship to her interest in preserved specimens like the bearded woman. Both take the skin of something formerly living, empties it of internal matter, and reconfigures its outer shell in order to make a peculiar semblance of the living thing. Taxidermy's success is often gauged by how well it can evoke the living essence of the original form: it is qualitatively evaluated by its ability to erase the process of its making, and to disguise the transition between life and death.³⁵ In *Strange Fruit*, Leonard plays with the absurdity of this process, and the bizarre expectation that the remains of something dead could be used to suitably

32 The scenes of a mouth being sewn shut in David Wojnarowicz's unfinished *A Fire In My Belly* (1986-1986) are juxtaposed with video footage such as ants crawling over a crucifix, a loaf of broken bread being re-sewn together, bull-fighting and cock-fighting, a dancing puppet, newspaper clippings of violent deaths, wrestling scenes and paraphernalia, a performing monkey, etc. David Wojnarowicz, *A Fire In My Belly* (unfinished), 1986-1987, Super 8mm film.

33 Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object in Contemporary Art* (London & Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 144.

34 Leonard was deeply involved in activist movements like ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a group formed in 1987 to advocate for legislation and medical research in support of treating the AIDS crisis on a pandemic as well as social level, and to support those living with AIDS. Strongly committed to grassroots activist movements, Leonard was also involved in feminist artist collectives and activist groups like Gang and Fierce Pussy.

35 Theoretical and historical investigations into taxidermy have increasingly gained scholarly traction in recent years, and there are a number of recent studies which address the intersection of taxidermy, museum culture and art history in more detail than can be covered here; see, for example: Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Petra Lange-Berndt, *Animal Art. Präparierte Tiere in der Kunst, 1850 – 2000* (Munich: Silke Schreiber, 2009); Melissa Milgrom, *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010); Dave Madden, *The Authentic Animal: Inside the Odd and Obsessive World of Taxidermy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011).

represent its life. The crudeness of Leonard's stitching draws attention to these seams, instead of disguising them; she draws attention to the ultimate failure of the taxidermied object to stand in for the living thing. However, despite its inadequacies, her relationship to taxidermy does not seem to be completely critical; rather, the tenderness Leonard employs in mending the fruit peels connects to the earnest human desire to preserve the memory of something beloved.

As a memorial for a dead loved one, the material decomposition of *Strange Fruit* adds additional layers of complexity to the artwork and its relationship to the limitations of taxidermy. Leonard actively decided against heroic measures of preservation designed by conservators, which – perhaps surprisingly – did not deter the Philadelphia Museum of Art from acquiring the work.³⁶ In regards to her decision not to pursue conservation measures to maintain the objects, Leonard stated:

For me, preserving the object is like preserving the experience, the memory, or the set of associations. *Strange Fruit* deals with the conflict between hanging on and letting go. Which in a way is what mourning is. The conflict in that piece is that every scrap is saved, painstakingly mended, but since the peels themselves are not preserved, they continue to decay. Over time, they shrivel, fade. The piece itself is slowly disintegrating.³⁷

Although her technique of reconstituting fruit peels recalls the processes of taxidermy, she resists extreme measures of conservation as a way of reflecting upon the relationship between preservation and mourning. In this way, the use of taxidermied fruit peels in *Strange Fruit* reflects the desire to physically halt the processes of loss, but hints at the impossibility of truly restoring the living essence of someone who has passed away.

These meditations on death and preservation can also be observed in *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, where Leonard's photographs of a taxidermied body form a complex relationship to its status as a collected museum object. With few exceptions, museums collect objects, not living people; here, death can be seen as a divisive process

³⁶ Buskirk, *Contingent Object*, 143-147.

³⁷ Zoe Leonard, as quoted in an interview with Beth Dungan, "An Interview with Zoe Leonard", *Discourse* 24 (Spring 2002): 83.

which transforms the subject (the living person) into an object (the dead body/corpse). Within the Musée Orfila, the bearded woman is presented without a name or any information about her life, affirming her status as a dead object. And yet, details such as her open eyes, clothing and accessories seem to evoke a living subject. Taxidermy – particularly of a human – has a strange relationship to the morbid transformation between subject and object: skilful taxidermy is intended to conjure up an idea of the animated living body, but does so through the reconstitution of the inanimate corpse. As a form of preservation, taxidermy collapses and confuses the division between live person and dead body, subject and object.

The unsettling categorical collapse initiated by taxidermy is mirrored within Leonard's approach to photography. Like taxidermy, photography freezes something in a moment in time, but the representation never quite manages to replace the original. Despite her initial reservations, Leonard eventually allowed the Philadelphia Museum of Art to preserve twenty-five sample fruits from *Strange Fruit*, intended to operate as remnants of the larger piece rather than constituting the piece itself.³⁸ As she described in an interview with Anna Blume, these samples 'serve almost as photographs of the piece'.³⁹ As Leonard describes:

I'm interested in the power objects hold for us. We rely on them to represent our ideas, philosophies, beliefs, and memories. You see this in our relationship to religious objects and relics or souvenirs and snapshots, or even physical evidence presented at trial. They are not the idea, place, person, or action itself, but a representative of it.⁴⁰

In this view, the preserved object and the photograph can be seen as conceptually interchangeable, where both operate as talismans to conjure ideas and memories, but cannot wholly replace the original thing.

³⁸ Buskirk, *Contingent Object*, 145.

³⁹ Zoe Leonard in an interview with Anna Blume, "Zoe Leonard Interviewed by Anna Blume," *Secession: Zoe Leonard* (Vienna: Wiener Secession, 1997), 18. As quoted in Buskirk, *Contingent Object*, 145. For more about the circumstances and theoretical concerns surrounding the preservation and decay of *Strange Fruit*, see Buskirk, *Contingent Object*, 143-147.

⁴⁰ As quoted in Dungan, "Interview", 83.

However, the photograph and the taxidermied object also operate on a special level in their relationship to death, because they are both so inescapably intertwined with their referent. Mediating on similar themes of death, memory and the photograph, Roland Barthes described the relationship of the photograph to the subject in *Camera Lucida*:

A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represented), or at least it is not *immediately* or *generally* distinguished from its referent...By nature, the Photograph has... something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe. It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures...⁴¹

In other words, when we look at a photograph of someone, it is difficult to separate the person themselves from the person in the photograph. A purely inanimate object – such as the earrings worn by the bearded woman – might be used to call up memories or represent ideas about her. But photographs of her operate much like taxidermy: they seem to have an immediate physical connection to her living body which make these forms of representation slide between subject and object in strange ways.

Leonard's photographs of the preserved woman form a complex relationship to this slippage between museum object and living subject. Treating photography like a bizarre form of taxidermy, Leonard turns her camera toward the museum in order to freeze a moment in time, empty it of its pre-existing assumptions, and re-stuff it full of new meaning. She points at the bizarre contradiction of taxidermy, which is used to prevent loss or decay of the object, but simultaneously initiates the loss of humanity through the transformation of (living) subject to (dead) object. Leonard's photographs work to preserve the *act* of preserving the head of the bearded woman, just as the anatomy museum preserved her body in the first place. By doing so, Leonard challenges the objectification of the bearded woman within the anatomy museum, attempting to restore a sense of the woman's lived humanity.

41 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1980), trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 5-6.

In the anatomy collection, the bearded woman is displayed as a curious medical specimen; in Leonard's photograph, the curiosity is the museum practices which authorized the collection of the bearded woman. I argue that Leonard – like Ebenstein – takes on the role of curious collector, using photography as a form of taxidermy in order to preserve and collect her own type of curiosity. Both artists treat historical practices of collecting curiosities as another form of curious object, which they incorporate into their own collections of photographs in order to give it new meaning.⁴² However, the context of their respective practices frame their museum photographs in different ways: Ebenstein's images are included within a larger collection of photographs that re-imagine curious collecting practices for the modern age, whereas Leonard's images critique the normative power structures inherent in these forms of display. In this way, both artists extend the tradition of curious collecting into the present day, using photography to turn anachronistic museum practices into collectible objects.

This strategy, however, still relies on the visual representation of the preserved head of the bearded woman. Both artists present an image of her curious body, projecting new sets of meaning and associations onto it in the framework of their respective art practices. In Leonard's photographs, the image of the bearded woman is understood as the product of the normative culture and curious collecting practices that turned her into a medical curiosity: it is seen as displaying the display of curiosities, or re-framing the frame. The meaning of the bearded woman is contingent upon our knowledge and interpretation of the artist's wider practice and intentions, and the notion that the images operate under the rubric of art. Because Ebenstein's identity as an artist is not as secure, her photograph of the bearded woman is chiefly associated with the culture of curiosities she studies. If this seems less justifiable than Leonard's use of the bearded woman's image, it is because art is

⁴² A notion which is indebted to the work of David Lowenthal, whose detailed study of how we shape, collect, remember and re-imagine history presents the malleable 'past' as a form of otherness. See: David Lowenthal, *The Past Is A Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

positioned as a more culturally acceptable mode of exploring this imagery. However, like other forms of exhibiting monstrous bodies throughout history, this too is a mode of display which frames human curiosities within in a particular set of conventions and values. Although we may understand art as an appropriate means of determining the meaning of monstrous bodies at this point in history, it still relies upon the vision of the artist to create its meaning. Leonard and Ebenstein use the image of the bearded woman to re-frame the act of collecting curiosities *as* a curiosity. By taking on the role of curious collectors themselves, they give her unusual body new meanings, thereby extending those same traditions of displaying human curiosities into the present day.

CONCLUSION

The fascination with strange, unusual or abnormal bodies has been a remarkably enduring phenomenon throughout recorded history, and this interest has manifested in many forms of representation and display. So-called human curiosities can be found on the shelves of anatomy museums and on the stages of freak shows; in collections of curiosities and in journals of pathology; on the pages of crudely illustrated broadsheets and on the walls of art galleries. Although the meanings accorded to human curiosities have shifted in different display contexts and with changing socio-cultural values, their significance as ‘monstrous’ bodies is inextricably bound up in the institutional and discursive frameworks in which we encounter them.

The last two decades have witnessed a surge of scholarly interest in critiquing historical displays of ‘freakery’,¹ particularly through the work of Robert Bogdan, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Rachel Adams, Richard Sandell and Nadja Durbach, whose research can be situated in interdisciplinary humanities fields such as disability studies, museology, history of science and literary and visual studies. Concurrently, a remarkable number of contemporary artists have also turned to imagery of monstrous bodies to explore the aesthetics and politics of non-normativity in all its forms. Analysing the work of a number of these artists, this study has addressed the critical gap between these two parallel domains of inquiry. Drawing upon recent studies of the history of exhibiting human curiosities, I have discussed how contemporary artists have simultaneously confronted and

1 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity”, in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York and London: New York University Press), 1-19.

extended these traditions through their artworks.

This thesis has not attempted to determine *why* the interest in human curiosities has endured; rather, I sought to analyse how that interest has manifested in various forms of display, and how these shape our understanding of monstrous bodies. In particular, this thesis has investigated the role contemporary art plays within that history, addressing artworks by Diane Arbus, Mat Fraser, Pauline Boudry & Renate Lorenz, Marc Quinn, John Isaacs, Joanna Ebenstein and Zoe Leonard to determine how art challenges the history of exhibiting human curiosities while simultaneously adding to it. Two key questions which guided my research were: (1) how do these artistic representations disrupt modes of exhibiting human curiosities in spaces like the freak show or the medical collection? And (2), how does the framework of art also confer a particular set of meanings onto the monstrous body, thereby extending these exhibition traditions into the present day? To answer these questions, each chapter examined a distinct institutional context that frames the display of monstrous bodies in a particular way: the anatomical collection, the freak show, the art gallery, and the contemporary medical museum. I analysed how a selection of contemporary artists have responded to the display of extraordinary bodies in each space, bestowing new meanings upon these forms within the context of their various art practices. However, I also discussed how artists can take on a role akin to curious collectors or freak show talkers, revealing the potential for art to act as yet another framework to display anomalous bodies.

After outlining a brief history of exhibiting monstrous bodies and the associated scholarship in my introductory chapter, I began this task in Chapter One by discussing the work of Diane Arbus. Building upon arguments put forth by Rachel Adams, I examined how Arbus' photographs of freaks form a bridge between the freak show and art gallery modes of display. Focusing on Arbus' photographs of freak show performers from Hubert's

Dime Museum in New York in the 1960s, I discussed how Arbus' images are interpreted differently from conventional freak show photography. In particular, I argued that by photographing freak performers like Eddie Carmel or Andy Potato Chips in domestic settings, her pictures show freaks as no longer contained to the stage of the freak show.² Rather, Arbus' photographs of freak show performers are just a part of her larger collection of 'assorted monsters and borderline cases' (to borrow a phrase from Susan Sontag³) that she finds throughout society. Arbus does not attempt to efface the 'freakness' of the Hubert's performers; but she does not differentiate it from the other 'freaks' and strange characters she photographs.

Hubert's Museum was one of the last surviving freak shows in New York City. Just as it closed for good in the mid-1960s, Arbus brought freaks from the stage of the dime museum to the walls of the art gallery. Arbus' photographs represent an important transitional moment between the freak show and the art world, in which readings of the curious body become framed by the context of artistic practice. Although it is impossible to overlook the significance of her subjects, I argued that the interpretation of Arbus' photography demonstrates a shift from the curious body to the artist herself. In other words, Arbus' photographs are valued differently than earlier freak show photography, because the interest in her photographs is directed toward the vision of the artist rather than just the content of her images.

In Arbus' case, I have argued that this is partly due to the influence of John Szarkowski, the Curator of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who helped to establish the understanding of photography as an art form that reflects the unique vision of an artist. Szarkowski was attracted to Arbus' work for its ability to substantiate his vision of photography; this, in turn, helped to legitimise Arbus' artistic contribution. In

2 Diane Arbus, *Jewish Giant at Home with his Parents in the Bronx, NY, 1970, 1970*; Diane Arbus, *Three Russian Midget Friends in a Living Room on 100th Street, NYC, 1963, 1963*. See Figs. 1-6 and 1-8.

3 Susan Sontag, *On Photography, 1977* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 32.

this framework, Arbus didn't just photograph freaks: she *created* the freaks in her photographs. Although several decades separate Arbus from the rest of the artists discussed in my thesis, her work demonstrates an important shift between modes of displaying human curiosities that took place in the mid-twentieth century: it was the first time an artist's vision was considered as a significant factor in how we see the representation of a human curiosity. As contemporary artists have returned to this type of imagery in the last two decades, their approach to the material has been rather different to Arbus', but their role as artistic creator has remained as important as ever.

The dime museum and freak show industries were in a state of decline when Arbus photographed freaks in the 1960s, but they never totally disappeared. In recent years, a resurgence of the freak show has taken place, mostly as a form of critical performance art which emphasizes 'self-made' over 'born' freaks. Within this context, I discussed the work of British performance artist Mat Fraser, whose mix of disability activism and shock tactics characterise a practice that spans theatre, contemporary art and burlesque. As a disabled performer himself, Fraser re-stages a freak show act in order to explore its influence on perceptions of disabled bodies and their cultural visibility. By occupying the role of both 'artist' and 'freak', I argued that Fraser revisits the bridge between freak show and art modes of display, in order to 'foster new attachments'⁴ to the curious body.

In particular, I focused on Fraser's performance *Sealboy: Freak*, which re-stages the 'Sealo the Sealboy' act originally performed by Stanley Berent in early-twentieth century freak shows. Although Fraser faithfully re-creates elements of the Sealo act – such as using his 'little handsies' (as he puts it) to saw wood or clap like a seal – Fraser challenges the conventions of the freak show by also taking on the role of the 'talker', thereby controlling his own narrative. Furthermore, by providing biographical details about

4 Annie Blanchette, "Revisiting the 'Pasée': History Rewriting in the Neo-burlesque Community", *Consumption Markets & Culture* (2013), 1-2, accessed 1 May 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2013.776307>.

Berent in his spiel, Fraser presents Berent as a performer who *played* the role of a freak, rather than presenting him *as* a freak. In this way, I argued that Fraser re-positions the 'freak' as a legitimate theatrical role, capable of being transplanted and re-imagined within multiple performance contexts. Fraser challenges our perceptions of both the freak body and the freak show, revisiting an outdated mode of performance in order to infuse both with new meanings.

When Fraser staged his 'Sealo' act in a Coney Island freak show, his performance veered uncomfortably close to traditional freak show forms. However, I argued that Fraser's performances are nonetheless understood as the product of his artistic vision, a way of re-imagining his own cultural heritage as a performer with a disability. Although many elements of his performance recycle freak show conventions, he is held accountable for the aesthetic, theatrical, narrative and socio-political choices that are made in the course of his work. It is this artistic agency that most fundamentally differentiates his performances from the acts of the original freak show. However, where Arbus' photographs shifted primacy from the curious subject to the artist and her vision, Fraser takes on the role of both artist and freak in order to challenge our perceptions of disabled performers.

Renate Lorenz & Pauline Boudry are collaborative artists who have also drawn upon the history of the freak show in order to challenge historical presentations of non-normative bodies. In the final section of Chapter One, I discussed their film and installation *N.O. Body* (2008), which addresses the various presentations of nineteenth-century bearded lady Annie Jones. In their film, drag performer Werner Hirsch plays the role of Annie Jones, blurring the boundaries between man-in-a-dress and woman-with-a-beard. Standing in front of a lecture theatre, he/she presents a slide show which explores how Jones' unusual body was framed as sexually ambiguous within the contexts of freak show photography and sexology studies. In the freak show, for instance, Jones' polite, middle-

class femininity was emphasized in order to highlight the sexual disjunction of her beard. In the sexology textbook of Magnus Hirschfeld, her hirsutism is pathologized, placed within a study that sought to establish a scientific determination of sex and gender.

I argued that Boudry and Lorenz draw upon this imagery to explore how various representations of non-normativity influenced conceptions of the queer body, which shifted meaning as it moved between different discursive frameworks. Instead of offering another set of meanings around Annie Jones' body, Hirsch-as-Jones just laughs as he/she flips through the images of ambiguously sexed humans and animals. Boudry and Lorenz also use the strategy of 'queering time'⁵: disrupting temporal logic as a means of challenging linear narratives around Jones' display. For instance, the artists juxtapose her Victorian dress with a 1960s Kodak projector, the film is shown on a continuous loop, and the pages of their catalogue are numbered 1853 to 2021 in order to position Jones' body within a non-specific temporal continuum. The artists also display an archive of reproduced images from Hirschfeld's sexology textbook, re-shuffled and presented without captions to allow the bodies of the subjects to remain ambiguous.

However, although the artists employed these strategies to resist projecting specific meanings onto Jones' body, I argued that they cannot avoid it altogether. Boudry and Lorenz insert representations of Annie Jones into the context of art, which possesses its own set of assumptions and values. Jones was a freak in the freak show, a case study in a sexology textbook, and is now the subject of an artwork. Furthermore, 'artwork' was the only framework Jones did not voluntarily participate in. However, this observation is not intended as a dismissal of this (or any other) artwork. Instead, I have suggested that by placing contemporary art within the tradition of exhibiting human curiosities, it opens up new opportunities for understanding the larger cultural significance of these bodily displays.

5 Blanchette, "Revisiting the 'Passée'", 6.

For instance, in my discussion of the work of Marc Quinn in Chapter Two, I used the notion of ‘self-made freak’ to describe how the subjects of his *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* series present a re-imagined form of the ideal body. Depicted in the style of Neoclassical statues, Quinn's series portrays a group of people who have all undertaken extraordinary physical alterations and participated in some form of public display of their unusual bodies. To describe the connection between Quinn's subjects, I borrowed upon Robert Bogdan's definition of the self-made freak, which describes people who permanently altered their bodies in order to perform in the freak show.⁶ Although Quinn rejects the label ‘freak’ to describe them,⁷ I argued that ‘freak’ can be used as a method for interrogating the frameworks of display inherent in the art museum, revealing it as a space with its own conventions for framing the body. I described how notions of the ‘self-made’ freak converge with traditions of the ideal body in art in his series, to present a re-imagined form of ideal beauty which incorporates personal vision, celebrity and artificial modification into its framework.

I started by discussing Quinn's sculpture of the late Dennis 'Cat Man' Avner, who underwent a series of body modifications in order to achieve a more feline appearance. I argued that Quinn's sculpture presents an idealised version of Cat Man's face, achieving a more perfect human-animal hybrid than Cat Man was able to attain in real life. Although Cat Man's unusual appearance represents a personal rather than universal version of the ideal body, Quinn evokes Neoclassical aesthetics by presenting an idealised rather than naturalistic version of Cat Man's body. I argued that Quinn borrows upon the conventions of neoclassicism in order to give Cat Man's extraordinary body a sense of legitimacy, using a convention-bound genre to bestow his subject with cultural capital. I expanded this idea

6 Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 234-266.

7 Marc Quinn in Simon Hattenstone, “Marc Quinn: Just don't call it a freak show”, *The Guardian* (1 May 2010), accessed 7 January 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/may/01/marc-quinn-interview>.

by discussing Quinn's sculpture of Thomas Beatie, a transgendered man who made headlines around the world as the 'world's first pregnant man' in 2007. Frequently appearing in magazines, news stories and talk shows, Beatie's body became a site of debate around the ethics of reproduction, the state of the modern family, and the determination of gender. Quinn depicts Beatie tenderly cradling his pregnant belly in a moment of peaceful contemplation, using the space of the art gallery to give the image of Beatie's controversial body respite from the sensationalistic tone of these public discussions. In this way, I argued that Quinn's sculpture removes Cat Man and Beatie from the tabloids and talk shows, using the visual language of Neoclassicism to position their unusual bodies as a set of aesthetic choices which express a personal vision of the ideal.

However, the subjects of *Allannah*, *Buck*, *Catman*, *Chelsea*, *Michael*, *Pamela*, *Thomas* have all embraced exhibitionism in one form or another, and their unusualness is an essential aspect of their notoriety. Quinn, after all, did not choose to depict people who privately modified their bodies, but selected a group of individuals who all participated in high-profile public displays. In fact, I argued that the desire for celebrity forms an important aspect of the modern ideal that Quinn's subjects embody. For example, I discussed Quinn's sculptures of the late Michael Jackson, arguing that Jackson purposely cultivated the spectacle around his extraordinary body to hide his increasing vitiligo and to further enhance his level of musical fame. In other words, Jackson cultivated the body of a self-made freak in order to increase and maintain control over the public interest in his unusual body. Quinn depicts Jackson as a giant head and hand like the Colossus of Constantine, in two versions that are in monochromatic reversal of each other. In this way, Jackson's status as a pop culture icon is presented with the same aesthetic reverence as the Roman Emperor, nodding to the desirability of his renown. In another sculpture, Quinn depicts Jackson as a bronze statue that evokes the mysterious sexual ambiguity of

Donatello's bronze *David*. As I discussed, the peculiarity of Donatello's sculpture does not constitute its value, but it does add an additional layer of interest in the work; likewise, Jackson's bizarre forays into plastic surgery created new public interest in his body, on top of his existing fame. In this way, I argued that Quinn's series presents the *interest* in extraordinary bodies as a key part of the ideal. In an age of celebrity worship, the fact that people want to look at and talk about curious bodies is part of what makes the self-made freak so desirable.

In the final section of the chapter, I addressed Quinn's sculptures of actress Pamela Anderson and pornography model Chelsea Charms, to discuss how the embrace of artificial modification forms another aspect of the new ideal body. I started with a brief discussion of Eugen Sandow, a freak show strongman who modelled his body on Greek statues, and is credited as the father of modern body-building. I argued that shaping and modifying one's body is expected of modern celebrities who, like Pamela Anderson, use hair dye, make-up, dieting, plastic surgery, and teeth whitening to modify their appearances. Quinn depicts Pamela Anderson as a set of conjoined twins, who are identical except for the absence of a belly-button on one. This, I discussed, might suggest that one has been artificially generated, like an ex-utero clone. The copy, however, also has Anderson's tattoos and fake breasts, implying that these artificial modifications have become an intrinsic part of her body. Discussing the threshold between culturally acceptable forms of corporeal modification and those deemed 'freakish', I then turned to Quinn's sculpture of Chelsea Charms, who is known for having the world's largest artificial breasts. Depicting her as an extreme form of Aphrodite, Quinn's sculpture of Charms creates a scale of normality with his sculpture of Anderson. In other words, Charms' monstrous breasts make Anderson's seem relatively normal, revealing the potential for extreme artificial modifications to shift our corporeal standards. I argued that Quinn's

sculptures embrace artificial modifications as part of the modern ideal body, using the trope of Neoclassicism to re-frame it as an idealising gesture.

Through my discussions of his *Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela, Thomas* series in Chapter Two, I argued that Quinn's sculptures of 'self-made freaks' uses the visual language of Neoclassicism to present a re-imagined vision of ideal beauty. This new form of the ideal incorporates a personal rather than universal vision of beauty, the desire for fame, and an acceptance of artificial modification to achieve the ideal. Although Quinn resists of the term 'freak' to describe his subjects, I argued that the 'self-made freak' provides a model which embodies all of these traits. In this way, placing art within the traditions of displaying human curiosities provides new ways of understanding the significance of the bodies represented by Quinn's sculptures.

Chapter Two focussed on how 'art' frames the extraordinary body, by asking how traditions of the ideal body in art converge with notions of the self-made freak in Quinn's sculptures. In Chapter Three, I built upon these ideas by asking how this mode of seeing is affected when art is placed within the context of a medical museum. I discussed *I Can't Help The Way I Feel*, a hyper-realistic wax sculpture by John Isaacs that depicts a man engulfed in monstrous, fleshy malignancies. The sculpture is on display in the Wellcome Collection in London, a museum whose holdings are based on the early-twentieth century collection of Sir Henry Wellcome. Discussing the role that art has traditionally played in 'rendering the curious body legible' within medical collections, I argued that Isaacs' sculpture exceeds this function by disrupting the medical gaze and emphasizing the pathos of pathology. I suggested that the presence of art in this space invokes an exchange of meaning that introduces new modes of seeing to the medical museum, while adding new associations to Isaacs' work.

I first briefly described the collecting practices of Sir Henry Wellcome and the

contemporary museum that bears his name, in order to contextualise the role of both art and medical curiosities in its history. In particular, I discussed how Wellcome's original museum was formed in a culture that consciously endeavoured to differentiate its practices from 'mere curiosity', providing a respectable resource for scientists and medical professionals to gain knowledge of the history of human health. However, this intention does not efface the drama and emotional resonance extant in displays of diseased, deformed and monstrous bodies in the medical museum. Isaacs' sculpture, I argued, teases out the sensational aspects of viewing an anomalous body in these spaces, confronting the viewer with its powerful ability to shock, disgust, thrill, horrify and fascinate.

By giving physical form to the emotional turmoil of illness, I argued that Isaacs' sculpture breaks down distinctions between expected modes of seeing in the medical museum. For instance, Isaacs' use of wax makes a connection with the use of ornate anatomical models in such collections, uncanny bodies which oscillate between artistic and medical associations. Furthermore, *I Can't Help the Way I Feel* does not depict a disease that really exists, thereby resisting the penetrative medical gaze that seeks to diagnose its condition. It also does not illustrate an extraordinary medical case, nor help to 'render the curious body legible'.

Instead, I argued that visitors are guided to understand Isaacs' work metaphorically, as an embodiment of the lived experience of disease. As the role of medical museums are re-imagined beyond their capacity to educate medical professionals, artworks like *I Can't Help The Way I Feel* provide critical reflection and alternative viewpoints on the issues addressed in the space. As Isaacs' work demonstrates, contemporary art can provide a means of representing non-normative bodies in the medical museum in a way that resists traditional models of displaying curiosities, and introduces new, more critical ways of understanding their presence within these spaces.

After discussing an artwork that has been integrated into the collection of a medical museum in Chapter Three, my final chapter addressed two artists who turn to medical museum collections as a point of inspiration for their work. Chapter Four discussed two photographs of the same preserved head of a bearded woman in the Musée Orfila in Paris, in order to discuss how artists can act as curious collectors. The first set of photographs were made in 1991 by Zoe Leonard, whose feminist critique of museum collections frame the bearded woman as a means of undermining the authority of the museum over her display. I argued that Leonard's series attempts to re-present the bearded woman as a once-living subject, rather than the curious object she became in the context of the anatomy museum. Leonard's photographs undermine the justification to behead, preserve, and display this woman in the name of science, by revealing its limited contribution to scientific knowledge and the potential for fakery. I suggested that Leonard's images shift the curious gaze from the body of the bearded woman to the absurdity of the museum practices which entombed her in the bell jar: Leonard directs the viewer to look *at* the bell jar, rather than just at the woman within it. In this way, I argued that Leonard frames the museum itself as the curiosity.

Joanna Ebenstein's photograph of the bearded woman is situated within a multi-disciplinary artistic practice that embraces the curious collecting practices that Leonard critiques. Ebenstein's interest in the bearded woman forms part of a larger project photographing morbid objects in museums, archives and private collections across Europe and America. These photographs of curiosities are presented through Ebenstein's prominent *Morbid Anatomy* blog, which re-imagines the cabinet of curiosities for the internet. She is interested in revealing the beauty and technical virtuosity of curiosities, using photography to incorporate them into digital exhibitions that explore themes like death and deviance in the history of collecting. However, although Ebenstein calls herself

an artist, she also identifies as a blogger, intellectual historian, collector and photographer; Ebenstein works on the fringes of a fine art context and, in turn, her image of the bearded woman operates more as a curiosity in her photography collection rather than as a free-standing artwork. I argued that Ebenstein's photograph firmly locates the bearded woman within the context of a museum collection; her images are pictures of collections, as much as they are pictures of medical curiosities *in* collections. In this way, I suggested that the anatomical collection itself is positioned as a curiosity among Ebenstein's larger collection.

In the final section of Chapter Four, I returned to Leonard's photographs of the bearded woman, to argue that she uses photography as a form of taxidermy. I argued that both artists use the medium of photography in a way that mirrors the preservation techniques used to preserve the bearded woman in the anatomical collection. I suggested that Leonard uses this approach in order to memorialise the bearded woman, invoking a complex relationship between practices of preservation and the themes of memory and loss that run throughout her practice. In particular, I gave the example of Leonard's artwork *Strange Fruit*, in which she stitched up fruit peels as a tribute to the late artist David Wojnarowicz. By emptying the fruit of its internal matter and re-stitching the peels into a grotesque caricature of their former selves, Leonard employs a perverse form of taxidermy which evokes memories of the original object but it is unable to replace it. Leonard, I argued, approaches photography in a similar way: she uses photography to preserve a moment in time, but empties it and re-stuffs it full of new meaning. The photograph, in this way, evokes the original subject but does not reconstitute it. By turning her camera toward the museum practices that collected the bearded woman, Leonard preserves the scene in order to give the display of the bearded woman new meaning.

However, I pointed out that Leonard's strategy still relies on the visual representation of the bearded woman, which she places in the institutional context of the

art museum. Although their aims are quite different, both Leonard and Ebenstein take on the role of curious collectors, who use photography to capture her image and integrate it into their artistic body of work. I argued that both artists present an image of a human curiosity, projecting new sets of meaning onto her body within the discursive frameworks of contemporary art. The bearded woman is displayed in the context of art instead of anatomy, but she is still on display; the significance of her curious body is still determined by the agendas and interests of a maker, framed by an institutional context with a particular set of values and expectations.

Throughout my four chapters, I argued that most of the contemporary artists working with representations of human curiosities do so to critically address the aesthetics and politics of non-normativity. For instance, Mat Fraser re-stages the freak show performances of ‘Sealo the Sealboy’ to challenge perceptions of disabled performers; Pauline Boudry & Renate Lorenz turn to bearded lady Annie Jones to examine how different historical contexts have framed queerness; Marc Quinn uses the visual language of Neoclassicism to depict people who have modified their bodies, in order to legitimise alternative forms of corporeality and present a re-imagined form of ideal beauty; John Isaacs uses a wax sculpture of a monstrous body to undermine the objective ‘truth’ of science and reveal the pathos of pathology; and Zoe Leonard photographs the preserved head of the bearded woman to expose the normative practices and gazes of the medical institution. In a variety of ways, these artists project particular agendas upon representations of human curiosities in order to communicate new ways of understanding unusual bodies, the politics of representation, and frameworks of normality. These artists also engage with histories of exhibition in order to consider how different institutional frameworks have shaped our perception of the body.

However, this thesis also discussed two artists who provide an exception to this

pattern: Joanna Ebenstein and Diane Arbus. Neither artist is overtly critical of the curious forms of display that they draw upon. Instead, they both use the medium of photography to create their own collections of curious people or morbid objects. However, both artists, in different ways, show how powerful art has become as a framework for exhibiting human curiosities. For instance, although Ebenstein photographed the same bearded woman as Leonard, her image is seen very differently than Leonard's. Partly because her position as an artist is not as stable, Ebenstein's photograph of the bearded women is seen as part of a larger interest in curiosities rather than as an artwork that challenges those frameworks. As I discussed in Chapter Three in regards to John Isaacs' sculpture in the Wellcome Collection, contemporary art is expected to offer a critical perspective on the subject matter, which offers a built-in justification for using the image of the unusual body. Because Ebenstein operates on the fringes of a fine art context, the image she has produced does not sit as comfortably within this framework. Arbus, on the other hand, has become firmly established within the canon of twentieth century art, but her work also does not operate within the same critical structures that later artists have employed. Instead, Arbus' photographs of freaks assert their otherness as part of the freakishness that runs throughout society. Because her work forms a bridge between 'freak' and 'art' modes of viewing curiosities, it has attracted censure from critics like Susan Sontag, who saw it as an inappropriate or harmful obsession with deviance.⁸ In this case, the status of the artist is not in question; rather, the concern lies in the capacity of art to overcome exploitative modes of displaying 'deviant' bodies. Both Arbus and Ebenstein demonstrate how the discursive context of an image is essential in determining how we understand the display of a monstrous body, before we even consider the intentions of an individual artist.

One of the key implications of this research is that the understanding of monstrous bodies is inextricably bound up in the context in which they are displayed. Building on

⁸ Sontag, *On Photography*, 32-39.

Robert Bogdan's notion of the social construction of freaks,⁹ I presented a view of monstrous bodies as a form of representation rather than a particular type of body. I have argued that contemporary art should be understood as providing a framework which projects a particular set of values onto the unusual body, and therefore forms part of the history of exhibiting human curiosities. Although the majority of artists I discussed use representations of monstrous bodies as a way of redressing the politics of non-normativity, their work nonetheless participates in a tradition of projecting meaning onto the unusual body. This relies on the assumption that art offers a more appropriate or effective means of representation than the forms of displaying human curiosities that have come before. Many of the artists in my study have acknowledged this difficult position: for example, Renate Lorenz & Pauline Boudry use laughter to resist giving a specific set of meanings around bearded lady Annie Jones, and Mat Fraser took his 'Sealo' act to the Coney Island freak show as a way of exploring the hierarchies of performance. But such strategies are limited by the fact that they still rely on the visual representation of the unusual body to achieve their aims.

This is the first study that has attempted to explicitly link a history of exhibiting monstrous bodies with representations of human curiosities in contemporary art. By doing so, it shows that art provides new ways of understanding and challenging past forms of display which contribute to our perceptions of normality. But this thesis has also been critical of the wider role that art plays in the creation of meaning around curious bodies. I have attempted to show how contemporary art adds yet another chapter to the history of exhibiting bodies, by projecting a new set of meanings onto representations of human curiosities. At their core, displays of human curiosities have always served to generate meaning about normality, according to the agendas of the exhibitor. As I described in the

⁹ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 25-116.

introduction, for example, sixteenth-century broadsheets used images and texts of monstrous births to warn against the consequences of sinful or non-normative behaviour; anatomical museums collected curious specimens in order to gain knowledge of normal and abnormal physiology; and freak shows capitalised on the desire to gaze at bodies whose unusual forms maintained the relative normality of the audience. As old modes of understanding and displaying the body fell out of favour through history, new ones emerged in their place to consider the significance of anomalous bodies. By using representations of human curiosities to challenge various cultural frameworks of normality in the modern world, contemporary artists have created a new stage in the history of exhibiting monstrous bodies. Although this is an acceptable means of critical interrogation within our time, it relies on inserting representations of human curiosities into a particular display context, directed by the framework of art and the agendas of the artist.

I do not intend this observation as an outright criticism of artistic representations of human curiosities. This thesis did not address the ethics of displaying human curiosities within contemporary art, nor did I attempt to determine what constitutes a ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ representation of an anomalous body. Instead, by addressing the relationship between contemporary art and the history of exhibiting monstrous bodies, I was able to explore the myriad of potential meanings beyond this dichotomy. As Ann Millett-Gallant argued in her study of the disabled body in contemporary art, being overly concerned with determining ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ forms of representation limits our critical engagement with these images, ignoring the potential for representations of human curiosities to take on a range of different meanings according to the context of display.¹⁰ Like monstrous bodies themselves, representations of human curiosities are unstable, ambiguous and rife with slippages. Rather than attempting to classify them according to a restrictive ethical binary,

¹⁰ Ann Millett-Gallant, *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 17.

more productive meanings can be gleaned by teasing out the multiplicity of associations and determining the different ways they engage with a history of exhibiting monstrous bodies. Although art is currently a more acceptable means of displaying human curiosities than other stages in this history, this reveals more about our expectations of art than it does about any ethical determination of otherness.

A number of important limitations of this study need to be considered. First of all, to analyse the relationship between representations of human curiosities in contemporary art and the history of exhibiting monstrous bodies, I focussed on artworks that engaged with these forms of display. One limitation of this approach is that, like so many of these institutional spaces, I have considered the experience of looking at 'human curiosities' at the expense of understanding the lived experience of people with non-normative bodies. In this way, my thesis also participates in a history which describes and discusses unusual bodies, privileging the voices of those who displayed monstrous bodies over the voices of those who were displayed. Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell have called this the 'academic ballyplank'¹¹: resurrecting the 'freak' for the critical gaze of an academic audience. My hope, however, is that like many of the artists I discussed, this work helps to understand the processes of cultural enfreakment, even if it doesn't overcome them altogether.

Secondly, because the potential scope of this project was so large, I chose artists whose subjects fit into a rather narrow concept of the 'monstrous body', based on body types that have traditionally been displayed as human curiosities in other exhibition contexts (such as bearded women, self-made freaks, or the 'Sealboy'). Further research could expand this definition of curious bodies, potentially using the work of other artists to explore how these boundaries are pushed into new forms of the monstrous. Moreover, this

11 David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "Exploitations of Embodiment: *Born Freak* and the Academic Bally Plank", *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25 (Summer 2005), accessed 9 April 2011, <http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/575/752%3f>.

project was also limited to Euro-centric exhibition spaces and museological practices; further research is needed to understand how non-Western forms of display and non-traditional exhibition spaces¹² might influence our perception of human curiosities in art and beyond.

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, over the last two decades contemporary artists have often turned to representations of human curiosities in order to address the history and politics of non-normativity. However, in doing so, they ultimately add to the very historical constructs that they critique, by placing unusual bodies into a new institutional framework with its own set of agendas and values. In other words, by re-imagining ‘freaks’, ‘curiosities’ or ‘human monsters’ as artistic subjects, artists project new sets of meaning onto anomalous bodies. However, this is not an inherently negative gesture; rather, by exploring representations of human curiosities in contemporary art and their relationship to the history of exhibiting monstrous bodies, we gain new ways of understanding how curious bodies are used to both challenge and extend ideas about abnormality. As Rachel Adams argues about the freak show, exhibitions of monstrous bodies can be seen as public stages where important cultural debates are played out around issues of race, class, gender and normality.¹³ As I have sought to show, art too provides an acceptable space for these multifaceted debates to unfold in the present day. Through a better understanding of the relationship between human curiosities in contemporary art and the history of exhibiting monstrous bodies, new frameworks for understanding anomalous bodies can emerge.

12 Such as the practices of internet collecting and sharing, which I briefly touched upon in my discussion of Joanna Ebenstein.

13 Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (London: University of Chicago University Press, 2001), 2-3.

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