

ART

Joanna Ebenstein's morbid obsession

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She takes photographs of objects on the blurred historical boundaries between art and medicine. They're pictures of anatomical models, of skeletal remains, of pickled body parts. She has assembled a travelling exhibition of her work called *Anatomical Theatre: Depictions of the Body, Disease, and Death in Medical Museums of the Western World* and maintains a blog called *Morbid Anatomy: Surveying the Interstices of Art and Medicine, Death and Culture*. Joanna Ebenstein has been called dead-stuff obsessed. But it's far more complicated than that.

"These artifacts are as much about culture as they are about the human body," says the 38-year-old, Brooklyn, New York-based graphic designer, photographer and cultural historian. "I didn't want them to be viewed as pure spectacle, although there's always that element when the human body is displayed. What I wanted was for people to see them as historical and art objects that should be treasured and preserved as things that can tell us more about the past."

Ebenstein's fascination began in her childhood; her grandfather was a physician and her father was an amateur naturalist who kept her supplied with formaldehyde so she could preserve the dead animals she found. "I don't love dead things as such, but I see the beauty in them," she says.

Growing up, Ebenstein considered becoming a biologist, but instead pursued a degree in intellectual history, then launched a career as a graphic designer. However, her childhood fascination with the natural sciences kept asserting itself. Finally, two items she stumbled upon conspired to send her down her current path of inquiry. One was a calendar of anatomical specimens put out by the Mütter Museum of the College of Physi-



Joanna Ebenstein

This wax model of the eye apparatus and related structures by Clemente Susini in the late 18th or early 19th century, was photographed at the Museum of Anatomical Waxes, Bologna, Italy.



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This is a detail of the "Statue of a Young Man Showing the Course of the Arteries" at the Museum of Natural History of Florence, Italy. The wax model was probably modelled by Clemente Susini around 1790.



Joanna Ebenstein

An artful presentation of 20th-century anatomical preparations at the Vrolik Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

cians in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The other was a 2001 book by Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums*.

In 2007, without knowing exactly where it would take her, she embarked on a pilgrimage to some of the leading medical museums in the United States and Europe, where she took thousands of photographs of anatomical artifacts.

“I called it ‘The Project,’ but I didn’t know what it was,” she says. “I just had a feeling I’d know what to do with the photos when the time came.”

Ultimately, “The Project” evolved into *Anatomical Theatre*, an exhibition intended to help rescue anatomical artifacts from the dustbin of history by reframing them as artist or artisan-created objects rather than as scientific relics.

Among the landmarks she toured were the Museum of Natural History in Florence, Italy, and the Josephinum in Vienna, Austria, both of which are renowned for their collections of luminously lifelike, 18th-century Italian wax anatomical models. She also visited such institutions as the Hunterian museums in London, England, and Glasgow, Scotland, and the Vrolik in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where she photographed hundreds of anatomical specimens, some dating back to the 16th century.

The Italian waxes, Ebenstein observed, reflect a time when science was still entwined with religion and magic. “It was before doctors had to present themselves in the blank, neutral way that became the hallmark of science and medicine,” she says. “Here, there’s a pleasure taken in aesthetics and beauty, merged with being informative, that’s really exciting. I think the waxes are absolutely art.”

But body parts in jars? “I wouldn’t say those were art,” she says. “But I do see the waxes and the wet specimens on the same continuum. They’re not just neutral objects. The dissectors were using body parts to present information. And that takes some level of aesthetic decision-making and artisanal skill.”

“Anatomy is an ideal,” she adds, “it’s not a particular person, whereas, a pathology is a very specific portrait of something unusual or unique. To me, the things that were most shocking were the wet specimens. Now, instead of being ‘James Good,’ it’s ‘tumour, comma, pineal gland.’ It says something about the depersonalization of science and medicine. And that’s something I wanted to explore with this series.”

Something else that intrigues Ebenstein is what these objects tell us about the physicians who originally amassed them.

“From what I’ve learned about early medicine, when collections of specimens were privately held — this was before they moved on to universities and museums — they were intended on a certain level to communicate the doctor’s authority and professionalism,” she says. “They communicate to your colleagues and your patients who you are.”



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These assorted anatomical models were found in a drawer in a back room of the National Museum of Health and Medicine, Washington, DC.



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These wax moulages, probably made by Carl Henning (1860–1917) or Theodor Henning (1897–1946) were photographed at the Museum of Pathological Anatomy, Vienna, Austria.

A compulsive collector of objects and images herself, Ebenstein is fascinated by what lurks behind the acquisitional impulse. “Collecting is kind of pathology in itself,” she says. “There’s a certain psychology about it that’s not pretty. And I imagine there’s something you have to reconcile when, as a doctor, you want to collect this amazing speci-

men and it’s a child’s head in a jar.”

Something else that hit home for Ebenstein is that medical artifacts are not bearing up all that well in the current slash-and-burn fiscal climate. “I’ve heard a lot of sad stories about significant collections being entirely lost,” she says. “And a lot of the things that have survived are very fragile, especially the

waxes. Even the things in formalin or formaldehyde require constant upkeep. So people are really worried that a lot of these collections that are still intact might decay. And that’s one thing I really wanted to do with [the blog] *Morbid Anatomy* is try to bring some attention to these artifacts and raise appreciation of them.”

In that, she has had some success. The website has proved unexpectedly popular. So too has her travelling exhibit, *Anatomical Theatre*, which opened at the University of Alabama’s Museum of Health Sciences in Tuscaloosa in the fall of 2007. Then there was a follow-up show, *The Morbid Anatomy Gallery: Gallery as Wunderkammer*, featuring her photographs of privately held collections in the United States.

She has also been organizing a series of presentations under the umbrella “Morbid Anatomy Presents” at the Observatory Gallery, Brooklyn, New York. One of the latest was “Bodies Embalmed by Us NEVER TURN BLACK!”: A Brief History of the Hyperstimulated Human Corpse.” To her surprise, the evenings have attracted capacity audiences.

In addition to all of this, Ebenstein has created a small Morbid Anatomy Library housed at the Proteus Gowanus Interdisciplinary Gallery and Reading Room near her Brooklyn home. Here, members of the public can, by appointment, spend some time with the many books and artifacts, ranging from miniatures of death masks to skulls, photos of people in coffins to stuffed animals, that she has been collecting since she was 17.

“There’s a real interest,” she says. “You know, I’ve liked things like this all of my life and I’ve never felt part of a community of people who also liked it as much as I do now. It’s amazing to me.”

David McDonald
Writer and filmmaker
Ottawa, Ont.

David McDonald’s most recent documentary, *Cereal Thriller*, is about the unintended consequences of a 1955 cereal-box promotion.



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A detail from “The Slashed Beauty,” a wax model with human hair in the Museum of Natural History in Florence, Italy. It was probably modelled by Clemente Susini around 1790.