

August 22, 2014 7:10 pm

Brooklyn's Morbid Anatomy Museum

By Ariella Budick

A new and resplendent temple of weirdness has opened in New York

“One of us, one of us, we accept her, one of us, gooble gobble, one of us.” If you, too, are one of us – that is, a slightly embarrassed devotee of all things creepy and surreal – you might recognise that chant. It comes from Tod Browning’s 1932 horror film *Freaks*, as a troupe of circus sideshow performers welcomes a horrified new member.

A similar fearful camaraderie unites those who make their way to the Morbid Anatomy Museum, a new and resplendent temple of weirdness in New York. With its collection of oddities – a wax model of a man disfigured by syphilis, a mummified rodent, and so on – the museum speaks to a cluster of fascinations that has only tangentially to do with death.

Rather, its aficionados – and I speak from the heart, here – are attuned to the slightly bizarre aspects of ordinary existence. We respond to the nostalgic frisson emanating from surrealist photographs, 17th-century cabinets of curiosity, graphic histories of hysteria, faked photos of seances, studies of conjoined twins, and Coney Island in its tawdry heyday. We claim a distinguished roster of elders: Edgar Allan Poe, Edward Gorey, Georges Bataille, WG Sebald and Susan Sontag. I imagine this conclave of eccentrics gathered around a Ouija board, with Freud acting as master of ceremonies. His concept of the uncanny – what he called a “ghastly harbinger of death” – hovers invisibly throughout the museum.

This indispensable new institution was founded and funded by a cadre of like-minded obsessives, led by creative director Joanna Ebenstein. Its growth was aptly idiosyncratic. Ebenstein opened her personal library to fellow researchers – gooble, gobble – and also used it to feed a website, which attracted a committed following. A few big donations and a Kickstarter campaign eventually yielded the new building, a former nightclub in Gowanus, Brooklyn, that architects Robert Kirkbride and Anthony Cohn have laminated in velvety black. The area looks too desolate to be so chic, which makes the Morbid Anatomy Museum an ideal neighbour.

The inaugural show, *The Art of Mourning*, squeezes 90 macabre souvenirs into a single high-ceilinged gallery. In a sequence of feathery daguerreotypes, mothers cradle their lifeless babies for the immortalising camera. On another wall, wreaths woven from human hair encircle images of departed loved ones. Most spellbinding of all is a series of commemorative medallions in which images of the deceased are as vividly preserved as the body of Lenin: a favourite post-departure photo was encased in a shiny celluloid bubble with an elaborate frame. Today it’s hard to imagine hanging a picture of an undertaker’s handiwork over the living room couch, but the welcoming of death into the family hearth was a common feature of life through to the 1920s. A large part of the museum’s mission is to bring mortality back from the margins of contemporary life, where it has been relegated by collective denial.

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There is more to this place, though, than coaxing society out of its squeamishness. Ebenstein has big ideas. In conversation, she speaks of “neglected histories”, of “highlighting the obscure, the forgotten and the strangely beautiful”. The museum puts these abstractions into practice in astonishing ways. It offers classes in areas where art and morbidity overlap: how to articulate a snake skeleton; how to stuff, mount and costume rabbits in anthropomorphic poses; how to draw a human skull. Almost nightly lectures merge the outlandish with the scholarly. “Lizard Mummies and Giant Squid Tentacles” gets behind the scenes at the



Photographs of mothers cradling their lifeless children, dating from c.1850 to c.1860, form part of 'The Art of Mourning' show

American Museum of Natural History, and “Industrial Ladies” examines early 19th-century department store wax mannequins. All this erudition supports the museum’s overarching point: that a concern with the once-alive and the eerily lifelike has long suffused modern culture.

The centrepiece of the museum’s permanent collection is not an object but a photograph of one: a life-sized nude woman in a swoon of voluptuous agony, with her torso slit open and her guts exposed. This is “La Venerina” or “Anatomical Venus”, made out of wax by the Florentine sculptor Clemente Susini in the early 1780s. She could almost be a martyred saint. Her hair is genuine and lustrous, her skin creamy, and her limbs shapely, but her abdomen is an open cavity filled with removable organs. Susini’s workshop and imitators turned out copies by the dozen to facilitate the study of medicine. Lay audiences, too, flocked like pilgrims to see these wax models abandon themselves to the combined assaults of Eros and Thanatos. In 1847, the Philosophical Hall in Huddersfield, in the north of England, advertised the display of “Signor Sarti’s Celebrated Florentine” for a shilling a peep.

The “Venerina” lies at the crossroads of the Morbid Anatomy Museum’s preoccupations. Packed into her pallid limbs are all the mysteries of science and art; life and death; knowledge and superstition, sublimity and kitsch. In an essay on medical Venuses, Ebenstein quotes Poe: “The death, then, of a beautiful woman, is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.” Ebenstein doesn’t delve into the themes of sexuality and necrophilia that weave through this appreciation of the beautiful corpse, but that makes a fine topic for a future show: *Desire and Disembowelment*, say?

Inevitably, there is a gift shop. Dubious merchandise seems a reasonable trade-off for a genuine enclave of the abnormal. Once, sovereigns scoured their realms for mutant animals and excitingly peculiar foetuses; now \$120 will buy you a two-headed duckling created by the Morbid Anatomy Museum’s taxidermist-in-residence. It takes a certain kind of person – one of us, perhaps – to wear a black T-shirt depicting a skeleton holding a pair of embryos like freshly caught trout. And where else can you go home with a real stuffed ferret in a green beret and Jedi outfit?

To December 4, morbidanatomymuseum.org

Photographs: *Stanley B Burns and the Burns Archive*

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