

THE LEFT ATRIUM

Lifeworks

Beyond basic anatomy

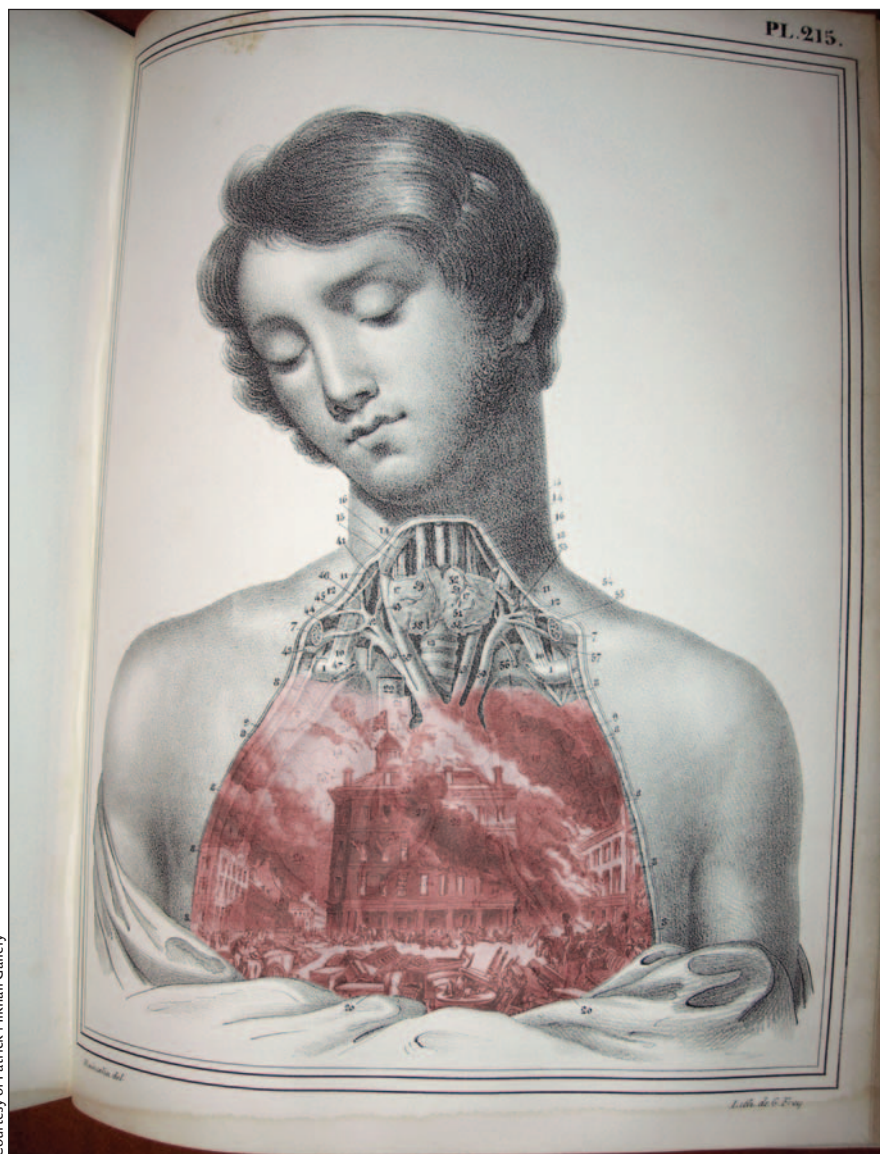
ANATOMIA

Cindy Stelmackowich
Patrick Mikhail Gallery
Ottawa, Ont.
Oct. 3–28, 2007

The human body has been arguably *the* defining subject for artists over the millennia; beautiful, infinitely variable and evocative, the body never fails to deliver aesthetically. Yet few artists have dared to peel back the skin, to find the beauty that literally lies within. And those who have done so were usually dubbed medical illustrators, not creative artists.

But Cindy Stelmackowich not only finds the art, she adds her vision to remake a number of these already beautiful 19th-century anatomical illustrations into post post-modern art works. The result is her new exhibition: *ANATOMIA or some Physiological Descriptions Illustrative of Clinical Dissections of the Human Body with Inquiries and Observations of Disaster thereupon*. Anatomia is the Greek word for separating, cutting up and cutting open, while the longish subtitle is derivative of the titles of the anatomic atlases that form the basis for this exhibit.

During the Ottawa artist and art historian's research toward a doctorate degree in the history and theory of art, Stelmackowich toured some of the world's greatest medical libraries (most notably the Osler History of Medicine Library Collection at McGill University in Montréal), marvelling in particular at the beautifully rendered, poetic 19th-century anatomic atlases that were the first serious attempt to map the human body. Although empirically correct, these lithographic illustrations borrowed much



Courtesy of Patrick Mikhail Gallery

Cindy Stelmackowich, *Great Fire at Montréal — July 9, 1852* (2007). Ultrachromium print on lustre paper. 36.8 × 52 cm.

from the classic Greek ideal of the perfect body; there is no sign of fat or blood, the undissected parts — mostly heads and hands — are beautifully drawn, and

the figures turned just so to reveal what lies beneath. Obviously the subjects were dead — draping cloths and pins and other tools of the trade are sometimes

evident — yet in these renderings the figures are animated by a turn of the head, a blush on the cheeks, a gesture. And despite the obvious violence being wrought on them, they are paradoxically peaceful looking, perhaps an effort to belie then-common assumptions about grave robbing and the dark side of the burgeoning subspecialty of pathology.

Rather than purely objective and empirical renderings, Stelmackowich views these medical mannequins as symbolic and allegorical, and uses sophisticated digital imaging to heighten this impression by adding desires, speculations, fantasies and fears to the illustrations.

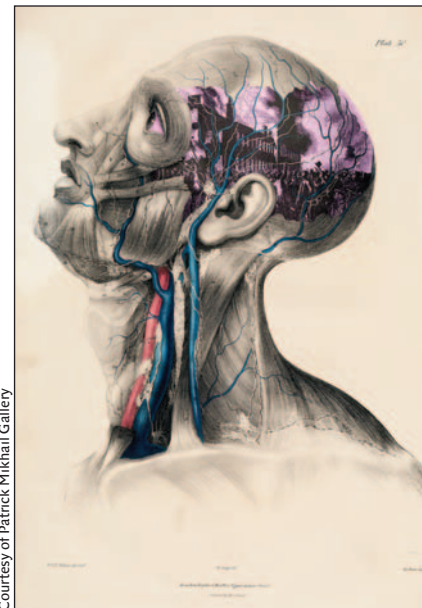


Courtesy of Patrick Mikhail Gallery

Cindy Stelmackowich, "M" (Magenta) (2006). Ultrachromium print on lustre paper. 61 × 81 cm.

Stelmackowich's long abiding interest in the juxtaposition of art and science, in particular medical science, is evident in many of her art works; she has exhibited since 1997 with 6 major solo shows. This exhibit comprises 2 parts: *The Disaster Series* (8 works) and *Blinded by Science* (7 works).

In *The Disaster Series* (2007), Stelmackowich selected anatomic illustrations and added, within the revealed interiors, colourized lithograph and engraved scenes of disasters — such as fires, a volcanic eruption and shipwrecks — culled from 19th-century publications including the *Illustrated London News*, *Canadian*



Courtesy of Patrick Mikhail Gallery

Cindy Stelmackowich, *Burning of the Houses of Assembly, Montréal — April 25, 1849* (2007). Ultrachromium print on lustre paper. 34 × 52 cm.

Illustrated News and *The Graphic*. Thus we have the a depiction of the great fire at Montréal (July 9, 1852) burning in the chest of a young man, and the burning of the Houses of Assembly, also in Montréal (Apr. 25, 1849), ablaze in a cranium.

These speak to the fear and phobias (the psychological and physical disasters) that are imminent or hidden but lie within the seemingly peaceful, perfect anatomic portrayals. They are evocative of disease as an internal battle, a disaster even, and they also mirror the violence inherent to the process of dissection.

Stelmackowich further integrates these aspects by borrowing the captions used in the publications to name the art works, and by colourizing aspects of lymphatic and other systems as they enter into the news images, so that the body's routes and passages seemingly feed the disaster images. Thus the disaster is linked organically to the body; one cannot function without the other. The result is at once aesthetically pleasant and intellectually intriguing.

In *Blinded by Science* (2006–2007), Stelmackowich juxtaposes images from the anatomic atlases with photographs of brightly hued glassware, such as bowls, vases and even an enlarged toothpick holder. The bodies seem to

spill into these fragile vessels, evoking the idea of delicacy and transparency, thus mirroring the fragility of the body itself. The images are labelled by letter only, to spell out RGBCMYK, the colour codes of digital imaging. "G" depicts the airways seemingly emptying into a green bowl, as if it could contain life's breath. "B" features a blue vase that

contains a side view of a torso, creating an illusion of a body under water, and obscuring while, paradoxically, revealing the torso beneath. Although these pieces are not as nuanced as the Disaster series, they are visual gems.

Together, these digital images spin a narrative of fears and fragility, and offer comment on the limitations of

even the most beautifully done anatomic renderings and, arguably, modern imaging techniques, as they attempt to truly reveal what lies within the human body.

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Short fiction

Borodin

Borodin's alarm went off at its long-set 5:20 am time. The renowned vascular surgeon bolted upright in his single bed and was overcome with a sense of acute, profound dread. Should he get out on the right side or the left side? And with which foot? Wear slippers or not? Shower or bathe? For every decision he had previously made with no hesitation, now presented itself as a critical dilemma. He had heard of streptococcal throat infection in children causing an instant form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Had the venison he had eaten the night before been tainted? The rye bread been tinged with the mouldy precursor of LSD?

His mind had long worked by way of differential diagnosis ("a systematic elimination of possibilities in search of the truth," is how he presented it to his rather awestruck students). Only once had he been dead wrong in his powers of deduction. He had accused his long-suffering wife Ada of having an affair. And she had left him at once. Bad enough to have lived 20 years with his absence, how dare he invoke another loving presence for her that did not even exist.

It occurred to him then that one never knows what straw will break the camel's back.

Borodin padded to the bathroom and fretted whether to lift the toilet seat or not. Was the discomfort in his abdomen a sign that he needed to defecate or urinate? (He sat in terror and did both.) He brushed his teeth until his gums bled, as at least this act posed no alternative. Until he remembered



Fred Sebastian

his dentist's injunction to floss, which he felt compelled to do immediately.

But wait, should he not have performed this ritual after his breakfast?

The kitchen was yellow and defiantly cheerful, a remote act of will on Ada's part.

Should he lift the blind or not? Coffee or tea? Oatmeal or eggs? Paper or cloth napkin? These choices now mocked him and made him weak in the knees.

Ada had made so many of them when she lived there. But surely these dilemmas could not be attributed to her absence! She had already been gone 6 months. Being completely unsentimental, Borodin had not realized that Sept. 13 (that very day) was the anniversary of their wedding in the Rostow countryside. How many times had he forgotten

it and disappointed Ada? Now he had seemingly forgotten it for himself.

There had been a stillborn along the way as well. Also in September. But as a routine medical event, it registered not even a small blip on his radar.

Borodin gulped some instant coffee, having put on the kettle for tea. He carried his cup (not mug) to the door and fetched the morning paper. What if he were to read it right to left or back to front? What would happen then? What if he didn't read it at all or read only the sports section, which he detested, having been completely unathletic as a child? But was it not too late to take up squash as his young protégé Horowitz had prodded? But then there would be the question of which club. Club A had