



Features: REVIEW

'Anatomies' examines the beauty within

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Art and science have too often been consigned to opposite poles of human experience. The former gets slotted into the subjective realm while the latter refers to an objective system of knowledge. But these distinctions are arbitrary and wrong. Meticulous drawings of flowers and plants, made for botanical classification, radiate a beauty and elegance that transcends their scholarly purpose.

Anatomy, inextricably tied to painting since the Renaissance, has also produced masterpieces. Michelangelo performed his own dissections in 15th century Florence; Leonardo drew cross-sections of skulls, veins, arteries and nerves that almost define humanistic art.

"Visionary Anatomies," a Smithsonian-organized exhibit now on view at the Art League of Long Island, features artists who take the body's inner workings as a point of departure, reminding us that beneath our public identities lie clusters of organs and bones. They look at cells, ganglia, muscles and tendons, asking what it is that makes us more than so much machinery. And while the show seems to be about life, it also traffics in death - that is, in the fleshly engineering that inevitably grinds to a halt.

Katherine Du Tiel projects anatomical illustrations onto live bodies, and then photographs them. We see a breathing man's face under the outlines of a textbook diagram. In another image, a rendering of fibrous tissue is superimposed on someone's actual hand. Scientific drawings posit an ideal body that is paradoxically average, and the photographer wants us to consider how each of us matches the standard in some details, but strays from it in others. It's the intersection between Everyman and the particular man that captures Du Tiel's interest.

Joy Garnett explores similar ground. She bases her nine small paintings on X-rays a friend found discarded in the street. Garnett invokes the science of diagnostic imaging only to subvert it through painterly brush strokes that blur and distort the original. Her ghostly pictures bring out the inherent subjectivity in the interpretation of X-rays.

But they also suggest their own multiple readings. We might wonder, for instance, what became of the person whose insides we now inspect in the gallery. She may have died, or by some cinematic serendipity, might wander into the exhibit and recognize herself from the image of her bones. All we know of the person are these mysterious imprints, now twice removed from a living body. They, too, represent everyone and no one at all.

Photographers Mike and Doug Starn move simultaneously closer and farther away from the body. The bare, twisting limbs of their two wintertime trees recall branch-like dendrites protruding from and coiling around neurons. The Starns mean the comparison as metaphor. Just as trees seek out the light as they grow, they suggest, the mind winds its convoluted way toward enlightenment and knowledge.

It's an oddity of our culture that though we are obsessed with bodies, we know them almost exclusively by the outer wrapper. The insides are of interest only when there's a glitch - or when, as in this exhibit, an artist reminds us what frail, delicate systems we really are.

VISIONARY ANATOMIES. Through May 31 at the Art League of Long Island, 107 E. Deer Park Rd., Dix Hills. For information, call 631-462-5400 or visit artleagueli.org.