

words that pour into the room with the deadly weight of quicksilver, words that will weigh upon them so heavily for the rest of their lives, words that soon trail off into mere vibrations devoid of meaning. I am so sorry. *I am so sorry, we did everything we could ...*

They hold each other, dissolving in shared tears of anguish. My words spoken, I feel myself disappear from their consciousness. I wait. Half in, half out of the room and their world, I wait to know what to do next, I wait for some measure of certainty. I go to step back, and then check myself. I cannot and should not leave. I lean forward, and stop. To what end will I enter? I sense above me the doorway bisecting my two limited choices. Neither seems adequate. One step back into the corridor and I will be back in my world, a busy medical world filled with new problems to solve and new patients to treat. One step back and I will be gone forever, an elusive figure who appeared briefly in a

doorway. One step forward and I will be in their room, in their world of grief. I can see nothing that my presence in the room would or could add. I wait in this state of limbo, watching their grief, which my gaze does not penetrate. They are alone as I watch. And as I wait I realize that my task is to move neither forward nor back but to pursue a third option: simply to witness this family's

suffering, this love for their father and compassion for one another. I can do nothing more, other than write these words, with which I hope have honoured what I witnessed that day in the doorway.

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Send us your regrets

"Experience," Oscar Wilde wrote, "is the name everyone gives to their mistakes." So let us have the benefit. Why not write about the things you've learned the hard way in medicine? How would you replay the scenes that weren't in the script? We welcome submissions of unpublished poetry, memoir and fiction for The Left Atrium. The writing should be candid, but patient confidentiality must be respected. A sense of humour never hurts, and anonymity is optional. In general, prose manuscripts should be limited to 1000 words and poems to 75 lines. We won't launder the truth, but neither will we hang you out to dry. Send us your regrets at annemarie.todkill@cma.ca

Lifeworks

Thomas Eakins: an American in Paris

Now considered one of the most important painters in the history of American art, Thomas Eakins was a controversial figure in his day. Trained in Pennsylvania, he left in 1866 to study at the *École des beaux-arts* in Paris for three years. Returning to his hometown of Philadelphia, Eakins joined the staff of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1876, introducing the methods he had learned in Europe. He insisted, for example, that students draw directly from the nude human body rather than from plaster casts of antique sculptures (the standard procedure in American art schools at the time). When, in 1886, Eakins was given the option of either changing his teaching policies or resigning, he chose the latter. The artist's battle with the Pennsylvania Academy is well known, and Eakins is now often depicted as a rebellious innovator committed to challeng-

ing the prudish mores of 19th-century America. This conflict, however, was not the guiding narrative of *Thomas Eakins 1844–1916: un réaliste américain*, presented at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris in February. Originating from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, this exhibition of paintings and photographs shed light on the painter's fascination with the human body.

At a time when landscape painting was dominant in the United States, Eakins maintained that art students should be trained in anatomy and participate in dissections to the same degree as medical students. Anatomical lessons were indeed an important part of Eakins' training at the *École des beaux-arts*, but he also frequented the anatomical amphitheatre at the *École de médecine* as well as at the Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. Eakins also encouraged the production



Thomas Eakins, *John Biglin in a Single Scull*, 1873–74. Oil on canvas.

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven

of anatomical *moulages* for use by his students. These wax sculptures of the human body were already standard teaching tools at medical schools. Some of the wax fragments used by Eakins were installed in a glass case at the Musée d'Orsay; representations of a neck and part of a shoulder as well as a foot and hand were hung from hooks like slabs of meat, surrounded by the framed paintings and photographs that Eakins produced.

The artist's interest in anatomy is apparent in many of his works. When Eakins painted his friend John Biglin rowing (*John Biglin in a Single Scull*, 1873–74) he featured the athlete's body leaning forward, with face, neck, arm and leg muscles tensed in anticipation of the next stroke. Although it may seem only logical that Eakins emphasized the mechanics of the body in an image of sport, he did so even in a rare religious work. *The Crucifixion* (1880) shows Christ's head bowed and in shadow, while light draws attention to the fleshly details of his physique, including the carefully rendered texture of his skin and thin layer of body hair. Christ's fingers curl, and his wrist bones surface under the weight of his heavy body. In this painting Eakins

seems to have been more interested in the structure and form of the male body than in creating a spiritual experience for the viewer.

Of course, Eakins is now most famous for his paintings of anatomy theatres. When students at the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania commissioned Eakins to paint a portrait of their professor of surgery, he created *The Clinic of Doctor Agnew* (1889). Agnew is shown stepping away from the operating

table to lecture to his students. These men, who fade into the darkened background of the amphitheatre, demonstrate various reactions to the medical spectacle before them: some lean forward with interest or strain to see the stage more clearly, others slump with boredom and even fall asleep. Eakins, selected to produce this work because he had himself observed many



Thomas Eakins, *The Clinic of Doctor Agnew*, 1889. Oil on canvas.



Thomas Eakins, *Study of Movement: History of a Jump*, 1885. Contemporary print from original negative.

of Dr. Agnew's lessons, is among the students shown in attendance. Appearing at the extreme right side of this large canvas, Eakins was painted by his wife, Susan Macdowell Eakins.

Although in many ways an illuminating exhibition, *Thomas Eakins 1844–1916* included little discussion (despite its title) of "realism." Nevertheless, a kind of definition emerged from the show. Realism was revealed as an approach to artistic production that required artists to undergo extensive training in order to see the world — and in this case, the body — in a particular way. Drawing numerous links between medicine and art making, the installation at the Musée d'Orsay ultimately portrayed Eakins as a painter who strove to see the human form with the disciplined eyes of a 19th-century surgeon.

Thomas Eakins 1844–1916 will appear at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from June 18 to September 15, 2002.

Lianne McTavish

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