



Lifeworks

Anomalies and anonymity

Face to Face: Four Centuries of Portraits, a major exhibition on view at the Vancouver Art Gallery until September 26, traces the aesthetic and social conventions of Western portraiture from Renaissance painting to 20th-century photography. The two images reproduced here demonstrate how, by its very nature, photography opened new horizons for the creation of “likenesses” — a capability that naturally served the ends of scientific medicine. Photography was quickly embraced by physicians to meet a need for realistic illustration and to provide evidence of cures. But the ways in which medical phenomena are recorded are determined not only by technology but also by the social framework within which we see — or are willing to see — them. A documentary urge sometimes collides with propriety in interesting ways.

The photograph attributed to Philadelphia photographer William Bell (1830–1910) of a man with a gunshot wound incurred in the Civil War appears to be one that Bell took while he was



Attributed to William Bell. Civil War veteran: gunshot fracture of the upper third of the left femur united with slight deformity, c. 1865. Albumin silver print. National Gallery of Canada

working for the Army Medical Museum in Washington, DC. The museum was founded in 1862 by the US Surgeon General’s office to collect “specimens of morbid anatomy, surgical and medical, which may be regarded as valuable; together with projectiles and foreign bodies removed, and such other matters as may prove of interest in the study of military medicine or surgery.”¹ In this photograph the norms of the studio portrait prevail. The photographer’s chair, with its Victorian fringe, seems a ludicrously conventional prop in view of the subject matter. The man has disrobed only to the minimum extent necessary, and the use of the mirror, as well as showing the bullet’s entry and exit, allows him to confront the camera directly. There he stands, a human being entire. A modern clinical photograph would only show a piece of him.

The illustration of gross abnormalities and pathologies was an area in which early medical photography rapidly took hold. That being said, the motivations of New York photographer Charles Eisenmann appear not to have been scientific; he made a successful career photographing the human exhibits of the “freak shows” and dime museums of the Bowery district of New York City, satisfying the Victorian taste for the grotesque with P.T. Barnum-style showmanship.² The sitters for his portraits had a harrowing range of congenital and metabolic abnormalities; many made a living presenting themselves to the public as the “Lobster Boy,” “Elastic Skin Man,” “The Living Skeleton,” “The Four-Legged Woman,” and so on. This photograph of a woman with a hydrocephalic baby is by no means the most unsettling of Eisenmann’s portraits but is one of the most haunting. From the beginning of clinical photography, the medical establishment was uneasy about the voyeurism it made possible, a voyeurism demeaning both to the subject and the viewer.³ But, as exploitative as they are, Eisenmann’s photographs have the effect of making us wonder what the quality of his subjects’ existence must



Charles Eisenmann. Woman with a hydrocephalic baby, c. 1875. Albumin silver print. National Gallery of Canada

have been like. Inadvertently or not, they raise the problem posed much later by the photography of Diane Arbus (1923–1971), who famously remarked that “It’s impossible to get out of your skin into somebody else’s. ... Somebody else’s tragedy is not your own.” These days medical photography neatly avoids the problem by taking a more technical, fragmentary and anonymous view of the body, one that, with new standards of propriety, leaves the person behind.

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References

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2. Mitchell M. *Monsters of the gilded age: the photographs of Charles Eisenmann*. Toronto: Gage; 1979.
3. Kemp M. “A perfect and faithful record”: mind and body in medical photography before 1900. In: Thomas A, editor. *Beauty of another order: photography in science*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press; 1997. p. 125-6.