

Lifeworks

The beauty of the cure

Since its creation, photography has had an intimate relationship with the body. It was initially an art of identity, used to produce a mirror image of a person's true likeness. This focus on the body's appearance inevitably led many photographers to use the camera to document deviations of the body from what was considered its normal form. For the first time, it became possible to present the pathological or imperfect body. Because doctors relied on examining the external surface of the body to diagnose illness, they became one of the most notable groups to document physical abnormality. They then shared these images with their colleagues and students for educational purposes. Some of these early photographs were on display at the International Center of Photography in New York Jan. 11–Mar. 17, 2002, in an exposition called *Foreign Body: Photography and the Prelude to Genetic Modification*.



Alphonse J. Liebert, *Blanche Dumas*, ca. 1880, Albumen print. 9.4 cm × 5.6 cm

This exhibition opens a window onto human pathology and medical intervention from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, and leads the viewer to ask not only how previous knowledge and technologies look from the vantage-point of the beginning of the 21st century, but also how medicine has shaped human identity. Interest in unusual births and human oddities has been present for most of recorded history, but the scientific organization of this field under the title of *teratology*, the study of “monsters,” came about in the early 1800s. The scientific debates surrounding this study not only encouraged the photographic recording of these conditions for scientific purposes, but also generated publicity for the showmen who exploited these people for profit. One image in the show depicts a woman from behind, naked and lounging on a Victorian day-bed like an odalisque, a full third leg protruding from between her thighs. Some of the images, like the one reproduced here, make us feel uneasy because they disrupt our sense of the natural configuration of the body. They make us think of the lives of the subjects and force us to consider what it would be like to be like them.

Images of “human skeletons” also blur the boundary between medical artifact and peep-show spectacle. The people in these photographs were posed to accentuate their unusual physical condition. In *Human Skeleton*, 1870s, a man is clothed, but wearing shortened sleeves and pants, one arm placed on his hip, the other extending out and down onto a table, his knees and elbows painfully large in compari-



Unidentified photographer, *Human Skeleton*, 1870s. 8.1 cm × 5.2 cm

son with the long-bones of his limbs. Again we want to turn from this image in pity, but instead we feel a pang of guilt for returning our glance out of sheer curiosity.

The 17th-century philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote that we talk of the beauty of poetry rather than the beauty of medicine, because the beauty of poetry lies in its charm, while the beauty of medicine lies in the cure. This defines a certain role for both physicians and the field of medicine in general. Has the function of medicine become to define a common denominator? If medicine defines what is normal and healthy, does it then become responsible for maintaining that normality? Over time the deviant bodies pictured in this exhibit have become translocated from their place in the curiosity cabinets of the Renaissance

and their exploitation on the stages of carnival freak-shows, to their consignment within the realm of science. These “freaks” and “monsters” now require genetic or surgical reconstruction, or, if discovered early enough, elimination altogether. The images displayed in *Foreign Body* force us to consider illness and disfigurement, and in doing so provide a basis for us to contemplate and argue the role of medicine in shaping the human condition. Does medical intervention strive to increase a person’s standard of living, or has it become a process of normalization?

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Med lit 101

It has become aphoristic to say that we Canadians view our publicly-funded health care system as a defining feature of our national identity. One might find it curious, then, that this sense of ourselves is so seldom reflected in our literature. Wilderness, survival, isolation, cultural tensions, our un-Americanness: all of these are in the Canadian literary canon, but rare is any mention of the *Sturm und Drang* of health care. We mused aloud about what Can lit would look like if it were rewritten to reflect our national pastime of debating medicare reform. We offer this preliminary list, with apologies to the nation’s literary lights, past and present. — *CMAJ*

- As for Me and My Health*
- The Budget Carvers*
- Better Not Fall On Your Knees*
- The Doc Who Wouldn't Be*
- My Remarkable Premier*
- Roughing It in the Hospital*
- Sinking*
- The Shift That Ends the Night*
- Sphygmomanometer Rising*
- Stays of Short Duration*
- Such a Long Waiting List*
- They Shall Inherit the Problem*
- The Tin Ear*
- Two-tier Solitudes*

My white coat

Ode

My white coat
houses my prescription pad,
stethoscope and reference manuals
in roomy pockets —
as deep as insecurity —
tethering my tools to myself,
otherwise scattered and fragmented,
my brain a pulsating collage,
stories pushed down, one on top of
another, no space between:
a baby wails with his first shot,
a young woman dreams of death,
an elderly man struggles for breath,
and so it goes on ...

My white coat
masks swollen letdown milk,
soaking into tired office days;
it hides where a button flies off
in the morning rush between
a child’s drowsy goodbye —
softness on my cheek —
and the smile lingering
in twilight, on a hospital bed ...

My white coat
divides me from pus, and
sputum, and
blood, and
grief inside
eyes that would suck me in and
wring me dry,
whirling me around and around
a heady, confusing vortex:
doctor ...
mother, sister, friend ...

Postlude

In the year 2000,
mourning past ways,
I unmask for
appearances correct,
grey and neutral:
stethoscope looped around my neck,
Kleenex box placed between us —
where I can reach into it —
medical texts minimized
to the Palm Pilot
housed at my waist,
my white coat gone.

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