

Lifeworks

Missing persons

Wherever the physical body is represented in art, thoughts of its inevitable disappearance are rarely far away. This is the theme of *Body and Absence*, an exhibition of works from the permanent collection of the Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal, on view until March 23.

The 20 or so works assembled for this exhibition express the many possibilities of representing not only the physical body but what remains after the material self has gone. The impressive roster of international artists, including Louise Bourgeois, Marc Quinn, Geneviève Cadieux and Betty Goodwin, use an impressive breadth of media (painting, sculpture, photography, installation and sound) to leave a powerful imprint of both body and soul.

The British artist Marc Quinn gained fame in the early 1990s for his work *Self* (1991) — four and a half litres of the artist's blood frozen into a cast of his own head and exhibited in a refrigerated glass container. The effect was a frightening and peaceful remembrance of decay. The work exhibited in this show, *Coaxial Planck Density* (1999), demonstrates a similar sensitivity to our common mortality. The artist appears to have moulded his entire body in some material, which then collapsed after he removed himself from the mould. This collapsed form then appears as if cast in lead. The resulting sculpture lies vacuously on the floor, an empty and weighty skin pulled heavily to the ground in the absence of an inner spirit.

In *Broken Memory* (1995), by Canadian artist Geneviève Cadieux, it is the body that is absent, leaving only memories and grief. This work is housed in a separate room and is visible through the windowed door that leads to it. Inside, the space is filled with the sound of human sobbing. A smokey-gray glass box about the size and shape of a sarcophagus rests in the middle of the room. In it lengths of wire are coiled. Small speakers are embedded in the glass walls. The



Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

Andres Serrano, 1992. *Rat Poison Suicide* (from the series *The Morgue*). Cibachrome print, 125.7 cm × 252.3 cm

sobbing released by the speakers develops into wailing that is interrupted by moments of gulping and hyperventilation as the person implied by this distressed voice attempts to regain composure. The grief escalates, enveloping the listener in a lonely, bodiless desperation.

French sculptor Louise Bourgeois constructs a smaller, closed space in *Red Room — Child* (1994). Panels of old, chipped wooden doors stand in a circle like some ancient druidic formation. Windows allow us to look in. There is a stand holding large spools of twine. Red hands and arms made of wax and glass can be seen inside, as if this were the workshop of a highly-skilled puppet-maker who fashions human parts. This work shows creation in the absence of a creator.

The American photographer Andres Serrano is known for his controversial large-scale colour photographs. Included in this show is an image entitled *Rat Poison Suicide*, from his series *The Morgue* (1992). This is a photograph of a reclining woman, her face covered by a black shroud. Her hands are tightly

clenched, her arms flexed and raised slightly above her chest. The dramatic lighting on her rigid arms highlights the small hairs, standing straight and pulling the skin at the bases into small bumps. In this obvious confrontation with death, these goosebumps are an eerie suggestion of something still living.

Other works depicting the body in its wholeness or as a sum of its parts, such as John Coplan's huge black-and-white photograph of his hand, *Self-Portrait — Hand, Two Panels, Vertical* (1988–1990), carry a larger-than-life acknowledgement of our physical presence (see *CMAJ* 2002; 167[5]:517-8). In this exhibition, however, the works that focus on loss are the ones that strike most deeply. It is difficult not to be moved when confronted with the threat, memory or reminder of death. Although these works urge us to revel in the physical possibilities of being alive, they also force us to contemplate our end.

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