Photography has a long and intimate relationship with the body. Since its creation the camera has been used as a tool to document our outward appearance and to highlight the grace and beauty of the human form. The history of photography is filled with images that allow us to reflect on our physicality. Perhaps it was in reaction to this that photographers also began to use photography as a way to reconsider the body and to look for beauty in unconventional presentations of sick and disfigured people. An exhibition at the Ricco/Maresca Gallery in New York City from October 17 to November 16, 2002, brought together selected historical and contemporary photographs of the curious, the deformed and the deceased from the collection of the Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

The Mütter Museum originated with Dr. Thomas Dent Mütter, a 19th-century surgeon who collected unique anatomical specimens and models for teaching purposes. In 1856 his collection was offered to the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, and under their care the collection has not only survived and grown, but has also found an extra-medical audience. Today, the collection includes over 20,000 items, including fluid-preserved anatomical specimens, medical instruments, pathological models and medical illustrations and photographs. The museum also boasts popular exhibits on conjoined twins, along with the “Secret Tumor of Grover Cleveland” and the “Thorax of John Wilkes Booth.”

In addition to attracting curious members of the public, the museum has drawn the attention of many photographers who have been inspired by its bizarre and eerie contents. Although the exhibition at Ricco/Maresca contained some early medical photographs of physical deformity and pathology, the predominant focus of curator Laura Lindgren was the contemporary fine-art photographers who have found their inspiration in this strange side of medicine.

As in any good show, the individual pieces worked together to present a wide range of views on a common theme. This is easily the stuff of nightmares: severed heads in boxes, deformed babies preserved in jars, and two-headed skeletons. It would be effortless to make viewers quiver at the gruesome contents of these images, but significantly more difficult to make us feel sad for these bodies that once were or to laugh at their playfulness or marvel at their formal beauty. Viewed with an open mind, this show provides the opportunity for all of these.

Some of the more remarkable photographs are Mark Kessell’s daguerrotypes of skeletons. Daguerrotypes are created through an antiquated photographic process that captures a unique image on a plate of highly-polished silver. The effect is an image that appears to be floating in a mirror. Although other photographs in this show represented death, none were more haunting than these daguerrotypes, which seemed to be actual photos of ghosts. As we look into these pictures, we see not only strange, floating faces of death, but also our own faces, like a reflection of our own mortality.