

THE LEFT ATRIUM

Lifeworks

The private and public nature of disease: art as a transformative medium

In Western society, with its emphasis on physical perfection, those who are ill or have “wounded” bodies become “the Other” — separated from society both physically, in institutions, and socially. This may well be more for society’s comfort than the individual’s given that, for the public, disease and intensive medical procedures are connected with taboo subjects, such as pain, blood, fragility and mortality.

The public exploitation of private matters for entertainment — the “Oprahization” (as it has been termed) of private lives in contemporary North American society — has resulted in private issues, such as divorce, sexuality and disease, moving, seemingly en masse, to the public domain. However, with the Oprahization of disease and medical procedures, the focus, and the fascination, tends to be on the medical issue, rather than the individual. Thus the person has remained “the Other”— unknown and ostracized.

Now, however, the extreme swing of the media-hyped sensationalist pendulum is being brought to a moderate position through the work of some visual artists, who are asking their viewers to contemplate why society creates “the Other,” and are placing the responsibility for the taboo and stigma not on the so-called “damaged” individual, but on society’s fears. This is a new view of disease and illness in the visual arts.

Included in this new focus is Ottawa, Ontario photographer Chantal Gervais’ series *Between Self and Others*, which examines bodies that have been transformed by age, accidents and surgery. These images invite viewers to rethink

what Gervais notes in an email interview as “the experience of living in the body” (www.artengine.ca/cgervais). Gervais’s work is a reminder to us all that we are our bodies, and that it is this amalgam of body/self that comprises our public persona. Her photographs, which detail the life experiences of her subjects’ bodies, challenge viewers to relearn about “living, feeling, and knowing.” Gervais says she hopes these subjects’ bodies

counteract the images of perfection that surround us that, she believes, detach us from our whole selves.

In contrast to Gervais, Sarah Small, a New York photographer, is interested in the aesthetics and the theatrical nature of the imperfections of scars, bruises and birthmarks as graphic designs on skin (www.SarahSmall.com). For example, she is “intrigued by the public’s reaction to one subject’s



Courtesy of Chantal Gervais

Chantal Gervais, “#4 (untitled),” *Between Self and Other* (2005). Chromogenic print. 123 × 123 cm. The artist documents “the experience of living in the body.”



Courtesy of Sarah Small

Sarah Small, "Sabine and Anthony's Eye," *The Delirium Constructions* (2008). Archival colour print. 68.6 x 101.6 cm.

birthmark that covers his left eyeball." She notes that she "was entranced by it alongside feeling mildly threatened." Her juxtaposition of subjects within a "frame" invites the public to ask questions about this dichotomy, and to question the meanings they impose on the people she photographs.

"We don't react neutrally to people's bodies," Small notes.

In her elegant "cakes," Hamilton, Ontario, artist fiona Kinsella uses skin, scabs and teeth as decorations (www.transitgallery.ca/). She presents the detritus of our body — "the other" in miniature — in a new way by framing them in a public environment, namely, glass boxes. These works, which depict



Courtesy of Sarah Small

Sarah Small, "Laura And The Scar Girls," *The Delirium Constructions* (2007). Archival colour print. 68.6 x 101.6 cm.

the intimate, private, discarded pieces of ourselves, remind us that we are both physical entities and mortal.

"These 'decorations' necessarily remind us of our own mortality," Kinsella states. She notes that she wants viewers to experience conflict when viewing her art, which she sees as a form of "personal pilgrimage" bringing "self-knowledge."

Australian artist Melinda Le Guay also deals with self-knowledge by making public her own "personal feelings about exposure and judgment" (www.brendamaygallery.com.au). Her depictions of bloody wounds and scars, like the works of Kinsella, are boxed and framed and presented as a series of displays. Le Guay explores the relationship between skin and the social stresses women experience. Body image disorders, Le Guay notes, sometimes involve "punitive rituals and physical [self] harm." The wounds she depicts remind the viewer that we are more than our surfaces.

A parasite infestation is not only very private and invasive, it is also frequently viewed as "dirty." Vancouver, British Columbia artist Kelly Hayden challenges these notions in her etchings of some of the parasites that once infested her own body (www.kellyhaydon.com/). Hayden was extremely ill when she was diagnosed with *Cryptosporidium*, *Giardia*, *Ascaris lumbricoides* and probably other parasites. However, she also found beauty in these parasites, and, as one means of coping with the infestation, decided to make her experiences public. In turn, she found that "people were genuinely interested and had their own stories to tell of [their own] experience."

Katherine Sherwood, a visual artists

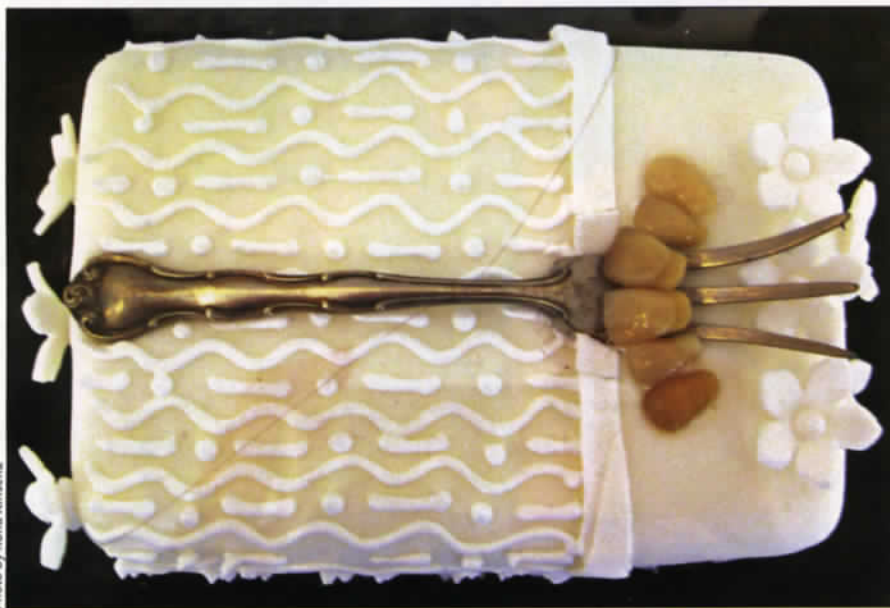


Photo by fiona Kinsella

fiona Kinsella, "cake: porcelain," *Ingest* (2008). Royal Icing, silver fork, teeth, hair of a stranger, glass, wood, fondant icing. 20 x 25 x 20 cm.

Courtesy of Brenda May Gallery



Melinda Le Guay, "Wound," *In Touch* (2008). One in a series of 10. Mixed media on gessoed canvas. 15 × 15 × 2.5 cm. Making wounds was integral to the artist's investigation into conflict and ways of healing.

based in San Francisco, California, was using brain imagery as the subject matter for her artwork to illustrate metaphors found in Chinese literature, but after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage and viewing the images of the ar-

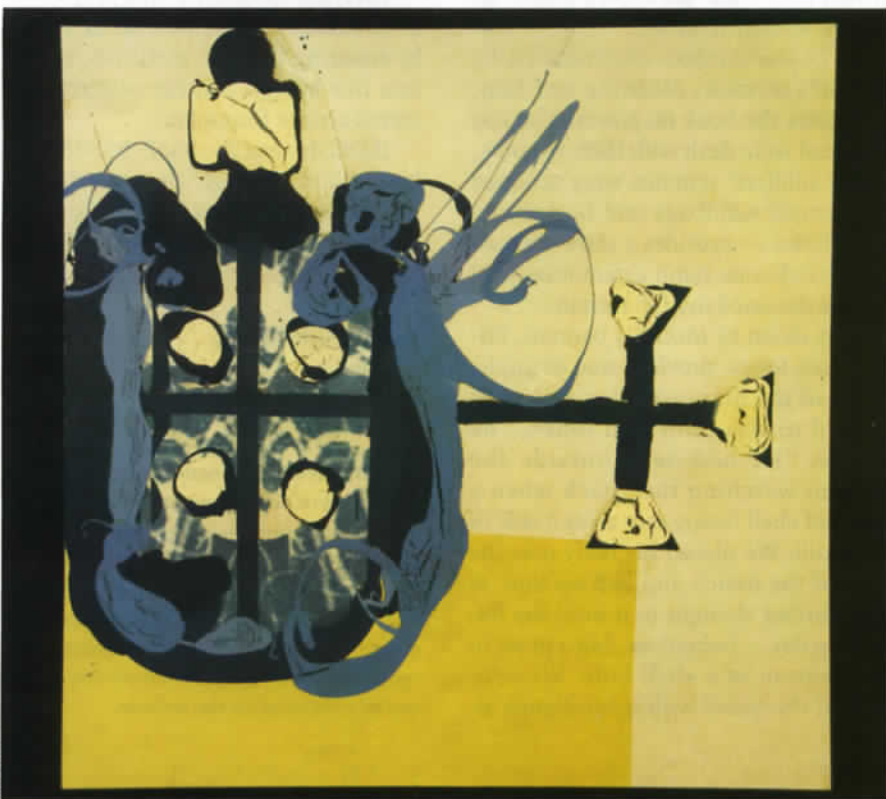
terial system of her brain, she knew she had to incorporate them into her art (www.gallerypauleanglim.com). She creates digitally printed images of her arterial system, noting that some viewers like the work and others "can't see them without projecting their own fears of illness and disability."

What is represented in these artists' exploration of disease and "the Other" is that the crossing of social taboos and boundaries can be a positive experience that encourages introspection and reflection.

What do we fear from "the Other?" Art can negotiate an answer for us. By examining our personal reactions to illness and disease, by making the private public, a dialogue can be initiated. Ironically, the arbitrary nature of disease and illness means that "the Other" may not always be a stranger, "the Other" may become ourselves.

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Katherine Sherwood, "Transports Instanteously," *Golgi's Door* (2007). Mixed media on canvas. 183 × 183 cm.



Photo by Kelly Hayden

Kelly Hayden, "ps16," *The Parasite Project* (2005). Etching: ink on paper. 7 × 30.5 cm.