

# ART PAPERS

## REVIEWS | SOUTHEAST

### ATHENS, GA

While injury and disease are ubiquitous threats shared by every living being, the individual's response to illness remains one of the most private of human experiences. In *Bodies in Crisis* [ATHICA, Athens Institute for Contemporary Art; January 30—March 6, 2005], ten artists explore

of sheer colorless fabric panels is an enclosed interactive interior space offering a sterile and private antithesis to Eakins' crowded, blood-splattered realism.

The work offers viewers a somewhat sacred, otherworldly experience as they navigate tight corridors lined with ghostly, translucent Old Masters nudes and antique anatomical imagery. The

umphs. Her direct gaze is frequently confrontational, begging the viewer to witness the changing moods of a fellow human who, wrecked by disease and poison, continues to experience life.

Conveying fear, fatigue, silliness, and strength, the images form a subtle and complete portrait of an individual who remains human while struggling for her

human machine as well as to the incessant, and ultimately futile, quest to preserve it.

In contrast to Bergmann's rather gruesome constructions, Roger Reeves' series of textured canvases and wall installations, oversized depictions of wounds and scars, play out as beautiful abstractions. Calling to mind ethereal skyscapes, these images not only suggest physical vulnerability, but also allude to the psyche's eternal susceptibility to wounding and pain.

The relationship between the physical and the psychological is magnificently communicated in James Barany's haunting short film, *My Most Important Self-Portrait*, 2004. Chronicling the artist's struggle with obesity, its underlying causes, and his determination to overcome the disease, this black-and-white film combines images of the semi-nude artist with gorgeously-rendered chalkboard animations. This unforgettable montage is simultaneously confessional, instructional, and inspirational.

The rhythmic soundtrack includes fragments of monologue overlaid with hypnotic singsong and whispers, drawing the viewer into a surreal experience that is somber, enchanting, and profound. Subtly laced with humor, the piece succeeds in conveying the seriousness of an often-dismissed disease that is unique because it requires sufferers to accept it as a personal responsibility to conquer it.

Angie Grass relies on a similarly subtle humor in her series of comic books, goofily-illustrated accounts of her battle with fibromyalgia and Chronic Fatigue Immune Disorder Syndrome. Vividly descriptive, the panels chronicle day-to-day struggles that call to mind the charming sadness of R. Crumb and Harvey Pekar's collaborative work.

Grass' penchant for irony in the face of pain also informs her collection of altered found objects, including a cane and crutch outfitted with wheels, which offer a tongue-in-cheek statement on disability and hampered mobility.

Despite the inevitable effect of illness on every human being, it is a subject often avoided in polite



James Barany, composite of stills from *My Most Important Self-Portrait*, 2004, video, 7 minutes

illness, surgery, and recovery, highlighting the fragile relationship that develops between private experience and public expression when mortality looms.

Cristin Millet's ambitious *Teatro Anatomico*, 2004, occupies most of the gallery space. This circular labyrinthine installation explores art history's ideals of feminine beauty alongside the misogyny of medical history's relation to women's reproductive system.

Inspired by anatomy theaters, a subject with a long art historical pedigree from Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, 1632, to Thomas Eakins' controversial painting, *The Gross Clinic*, 1875, and beyond, Millet's construction

destination is a central space where their own countenance is projected upon a nude female that, lying prostrate, is prepared for surgery. The tranquil mystery is most appropriate to a work that juxtaposes the feminine reproductive system's life-giving forces to science's hand of God interventionism.

Ruth Adams' *unremarkable*, 2002-2004, enlists a similar immersive effect as she lines the gallery's walls with over 350 Polaroid photos. These are all self-portraits of the artist, documentation of her yearlong treatment and recovery from Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Scrawled notes at the bottom of each image relate the daily details of the artist's struggles and tri-

very life, emerging victorious and stronger for the suffering she has endured.

While Adams' composite portrait presents humanity's triumph over disease, Malena Bergmann's pair of sculptures infers the development of a horrifying symbiotic relationship between the weakened body and invasive machines when serious illness settles in. Constructed of organic and synthetic materials, these cyborg-like sculptures suggest decay while simultaneously paying homage to the supremacy of the life force. Clumps of human hair, dried earthworms, clods of clay, tubing, latex, wiring, and clamps fuse into cohesive structures that allude both to the strength and fragility of the