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Corporeal curiosity: seeking salubrity

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CORPOREAL CURIOSITY: SEEKING SALUBRITY

by

Angela Lena Dieffenbach

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Fine Arts degree in Art
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Assistant Professor Mathew Rude

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2011

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Angela Lena Dieffenbach

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Art at the May 2011 graduation.

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, the practices of the medical profession have never been considered so comprehensively; medicine and all its entirety is subjected to public scrutiny. The media plays a role in this by reporting on the many elements of medicine, including the interrelationship of expense and profits. “Medicine has assumed an extremely important place in our lives and consciousnesses; in its most audacious manifestations it is extolled as a panacea which promises an almost religious salvation”(Leismann 7).

The increasing specialization and growth of complexity in contemporary art parallels modern medicine. The connection between science and art is not new. Historically, the Greek goddess Techne inspired both science and art. Art and science was joined by Andreas Vesalius with his work “De humani corporis fabrica”; he was the first professional anatomist to transcribe the three-dimensional body into a two-dimensional image. “The aim was to create beauty as well as knowledge” (Wienand 12). The images of modern science are now made with the aid of technology allowing us to see inside and through the body (Leismann 11-13).

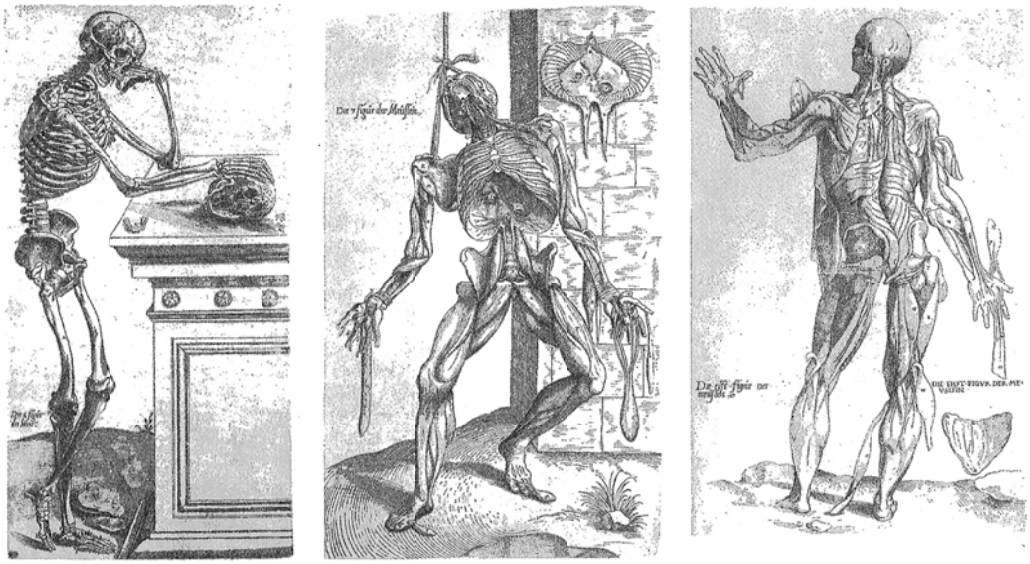

Figure 1. Vesalius, Andreas. *De humanis corpois fabrica*. 1551. Burkhard Leismann and Ralf Scherer, Diagnosis Art- Contemporary Art Reflecting Medicine. Wienand Verlag & Medien GmbH 2007.

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As a result of modern medical practices, our bodies are becoming increasingly transparent. This transparency not only adds to the perceived omnipotence of medicine, but to curiosities with these modes of bodily exploration. Even with this new visibility, many questions remain as curiosity continues.

Inspired by medical encounters, drug design, medicinal technology, healthcare, and the evolution of medical symbols, my work revolves around active interest and questioning. These visual inquiries emphasize interest with the aforementioned, while using experience as a catalyst for research and a basis to discuss the fragility of the body and its contingent relationship with the medical industry.

The results of these investigations are artifacts to my egocentric concerns and fascination with the body. More specifically, the evolution of medical/healthcare symbols seems to divulge current trends and concerns in the healthcare and the pharmaceutical industry.

Medicine is full of symbols because of its close connection with the contentment of humanity (Schouten, “The Pentagram” 7). Currently, it is common to see two different serpent designs used to represent or signify medical practice.

The single serpent design references Asklepios, the Greco-Roman god of medicine (Wilcox and Whitham 673). The Aesculpain symbol of the rod and serpent not only symbolizes the art of healing, but good and evil. The snake is humanity’s enemy as well as protector; the earthly life of the serpent involves constant dying and resurrection which supports these contrasting roles. FIGURE 2 is an example of the rod and serpent of Asklepios which was adopted by an international congress of the medical profession in Havana in 1956 CE (Schouten, “The Rod” 1-3 & 5-6).

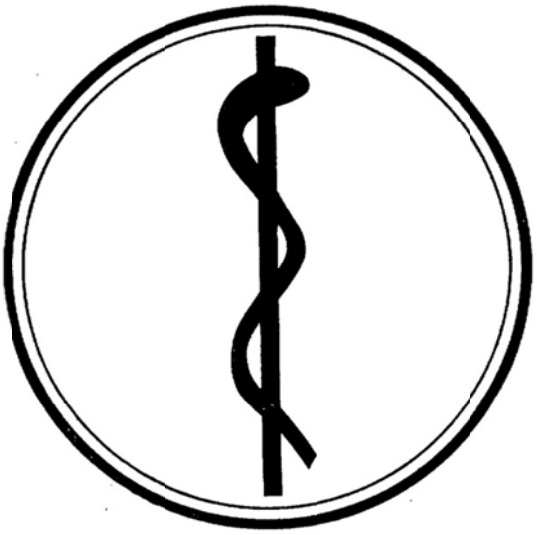

Figure 2. Aesculapian emblem from the 10th General Assembly of the World Medical Association, Havana, 1956, Dr. J. Schouten. The Rod and Serpent of Asklepios. Amsterdam: Elsevier Publishing Co., 1967.

Figure 3. The U.S. Army Medical Corps Branch Plaque. The 1902 adoption of the caduceus for U.S. Army medical officer uniforms popularized the symbol throughout the medical field. Accessed March 20st, 2011. <http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/48146>.

The medical caduceus is associated with the ancient caduceus of the god Hermes (Wilcox and Whitham 673). Hermes is known as the souls' guide between the realms of the dead and the living. "He is also called 'the divine deceiver' and the protector of thieves" (Schouten, "The Rod" 117). The caduceus of Hermes was not an ancient medical symbol, but it has been used as one in the West since the Renaissance (Schouten, "The Rod"118). This symbol, with two serpents and a winged staff, is old, but it has represented "commerce and gainful trade or luck throughout most of its history" (Geelhoed 1159). The U.S. Army Medical Corps can be linked to the spread of the modern caduceus and this possible misinterpretation of iconography and mythology due to their implementation of this design at the start of the 20th century (Wilcox and Whitham 673).

Revealing Asclepius & Hermes, FIGURE 4, is an interpretation of the history and development of these serpent designs. The merging of the historic and contemporary symbols creates a hybrid icon for contemporary medicine using elements from both the Asclepius and Hermes design. Additionally, the porcelain calls attention to the cost and perceived purity of the pharmaceutical industry.

The symbol of one serpent on a staff may have origins before Aesculapius. The parasite the guinea worm or *Dracunculus medinensis* is believed to be referenced in the Old Testament as an aliment affecting the Israelites fleeing Egypt. The treatment for the parasitic worm was to gradually wind the worm on a small stick when it surfaced from the body to lay its eggs (Geelhoed 1159). This led to a theory that the medical symbol was not snakes or serpents, but worms. This wrapping of a worm on a stick was a real medical practice; the worm would be curled around the stick bit by bit each day (McNeil). Interestingly, parasitic worms may be a cure for many autoimmune diseases. Children in industrialized counties are much more likely to have autoimmune disorders as adults; this is likely due to modern hygiene (Newman). Ironically, there is a possibility

that there may be worm based drugs or treatments in the future. FIGURE 5 is a synthesis of this research exploring the possibilities and the implications of a parasitic cure.

Artistic observation, reflection, and self-awareness have the potential to present a valid or authentic view of medicine while asking essential life questions. Through my pursuit of salubrity, I seek truth within visual inquisitions. Interest and questioning exposes the vulnerability of the body.

Figure 4. Revealing Asclepius & Hermes, 5 x 12 x 2”, slip cast porcelain and water slide decal. Sculpture by author, Iowa City. 12 March, 2011. Photograph by Nathan Tumminello. JPEG file.

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