

Joanna Ebenstein on the pleasures of morbidity



September 29, 2016 - In addition to co-founding Brooklyn's Morbid Anatomy Museum (with Tracy Hurley Martin), Joanna Ebenstein recently published *The Anatomical Venus*. The illustrated book examines the allure and mystique surrounding a famed wax figure created in 18th-century Italy for the purpose of teaching anatomy at the first public science museum in Florence. The Venus is a life-sized, fully-dissectible wax woman with real human hair, glass eyes, and a string of pearls. She's captured in a pose that suggests a kind of metaphysical ecstasy.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3940 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#).

From what I understand, the concept of Morbid Anatomy originated from one of your photographic projects.

Yes. I've always thought the way I do photography is not so much as a photographer but as a curator... and that maybe all photography is curation to some degree? I went to a show maybe 15 years ago that included Diane Arbus' proof sheets. With proof sheets they print out all of the negatives from a roll of film and you see all of the images next to each other. In the show, you could see the images from the proof sheets that Arbus had circled. You see the ones she's singled out, which tells you a lot about how she's thinking. You see that Diane Arbus is a photographer who's taking pictures that essentially look like everybody else's, but the ones she's picking are the "off" ones-or what most people call "off."

I remember how struck I was by that. I began to think about the relationship between curation and the photographic eye at that point, and that's when I was doing photography a lot myself. I began to think about photography versus other forms of art like painting or drawing where the labor is so intensive you can't really afford to throw away 100 efforts for every one keeper. So I began to think about how the style of the photographer is dictated by what they don't show, maybe more than what they do show, and that's influenced how I've thought about things ever since.

So with *The Anatomical Venus* book-and even in here at the museum-this enterprise really started for me as a photography project called Morbid Anatomy. In 2007, I got a commission to do an exhibition about medical museums around the world. So I traveled, met with curators, took photographs, and-this being the digital age-came back with probably tens of thousands of images. I came home and tried to make sense of all these things I collected. What is the story you want to tell? How do you tell it? How do groupings tie into that? What do you show and what do you not show?

So I started this blog called Morbid Anatomy to support the project, which was really my way of starting to parse all the photographs I had taken, all the articles I was reading, all the online resources I'd found, all the things I was working with to try to figure out what this show would be.

Then I did the exhibition and it launched at the University of Alabama, Birmingham and I gave a talk. I'd received a small fellowship so I was required to talk at the opening and I was really, really nervous about it. I don't like public speaking, I have to do it all the time now, but back then I wasn't used to it at all. People had wine beforehand and looked at the photographs and the exhibition, and were like "Oh yeah that's interesting," but I realized that after I gave the talk, people went back and looked at the pictures in a totally different way. They were engaged in a different way, and they got what I was trying to communicate. And I suddenly thought, "OK, this isn't a photo project, this has to be something else." For what I wanted to communicate, photos alone didn't do it.

I feel like since then, I've been struggling for a definition for what I do. I don't know what to call what I am. I'm not an artist, I'm not a writer, I'm not really a designer, but I'm all of those things together and it's the actual relationship between them that interests me. What I'm interested in is telling stories through a combination of pictures and words, within the unifying factor of design. That's what I like to do but there's no name for that.

It's a kind of curation on multiple fronts.

Yeah, I suppose so. I think there is definitely an element of curation in all of those things. Certainly in my photography. I also oversee all the exhibitions here at the Morbid Anatomy Museum, which is a very curated space. I also feel a sense of curation in the book projects I've done. I mean this, *The Anatomical Venus*, is a very curated thing. I wrote it, certainly, and I had my own ideas, but I'm also curating the ideas of everyone I found influential.

The other big project that I did, *The Morbid Anatomy Anthology*, was right before we launched the museum. We tried to make \$8,000 and eventually made \$46,000 on Kickstarter, which is why the finished book is so beautiful. I spent a year designing it, I edited it-well, Colin Dickey actually did most of the editing-but so did I. This kinda sums up what I like to do. It was bringing together all these interesting thinkers for this one concept. It was making sure that together they become something more than the sum of their parts and figuring out how these themes emerged when you started to put all of these different things side by side.

I also really love the collaboration involved. I really enjoyed working with Colin Dickey, who ended up being the Managing Director here at the museum for a while. This book was very much a product between two of us. I really like working with other people, that is something else that I've learned in doing these projects.

I like how if you just Google the Morbid Anatomy Museum the first thing you read is that it's a "death centric" museum. Like your book, the museum is filled with all sort of ostensibly macabre things-medical ephemera, taxidermy. What is it that draws you specifically to this kind of material? What do you think it is that draws people to want to come look at these kind of objects?

People often ask me how I got into this, and my response is usually something along the lines of... I think all kids are into this when they are young and then they have it beaten out of them in some way as they grow older-especially if you're a girl. I think I was just really lucky in that my dad really wanted me to be a science geek, so he bought me formaldehyde to put dead animals in and things like that.

When I was a kid I really wanted to be a veterinarian. I wanted to be a wildlife photographer. I loved nature. I think how I got into medical museums and how I got into these human bodies in museums is really through loving natural history museums... looking at animal specimens in museums. I think there's something really interesting about a love of nature that takes in both the light and the dark aspects of life.

I think children are like that. Like when I was a kid, if I saw a dead bird on the street, I was fascinated. There's a beauty to it. From a pure aesthetic point of view, there's something just as fascinating about a dead bird on the street as a live bird-at least to me. I think that continues to be true.

Let me backtrack for a second. When I went to Europe for the first time when I was 16, I remember seeing all of these really beautiful fine art representations of death, or places where death and beauty co-mingled, and it just blew my mind. I was from California. I had grown up where the only representations of death I ever saw were horror movies, and maybe goth subcultures... things like that. And then I went to these churches in Germany where you can see these beautiful adorned skulls from the 17th century. Or you'd see these relics covered in jewels, actual dead bodies covered in jewels, and it just blew my mind. I didn't know that could exist. So from then on-and this goes back to theme of curation-I started to collect images and data.

I recently found a project I did a long time ago. Right after college, I took a bunch of art classes and we had to create a diorama of an exhibition that we wanted to stage. Mine was about comparative representations of death, which is no surprise. I've been interested in this for a long time. I think part of the reason it interested me is that it has gone missing from our culture, and it was part of every other culture as far as I could see. So it started as a visual interest and an interest in collecting, and then it became something to seriously think about it. Like, why is this the case? It seems to be true that every other culture except ours has some dignified discourse around this thing that is going to happen to each and every one of us, and we are the only ones who don't? Why is that?

So what I studied at school was art and intellectual history. Intellectual history is really looking at primary sources from different time periods and talking about the times. I

really began to think critically about this... and by critically I mean relativistically about our own time, saying "Well, this particular take we have on death is unprecedented, as far as I can see, and why is that the case?" I think when things aren't spoken about in any legitimate, sanctioned way it becomes interesting to all sorts of artists and thinkers. That's the first level of why it's interesting to people. It's this big white elephant in our cultural room, which is just like... we are all going to die. We don't talk about it, we don't have meaningful rituals around it anymore in a largely post-religious world. I think the fascination doesn't go away and ultimately I do believe that one of the things we are meant to do with our time on earth—one of the things we have to do—is come to terms with death. That's part of what life is. Life and death don't exist without the other.

Even with the name *Morbid Anatomy* what I was kinda trying to do was reclaim this word, "morbid." I've been called morbid my whole life, as long as I could walk, since I was eight probably. And I used to just say, "Oh yeah, I guess I'm morbid." Then at a certain point I thought, well, what does that mean? What is morbid? And if death is going to happen to each person, and everyone who has ever lived has died, and we will all die, barring some scientific miracle, why on earth should it be morbid to think about it or talk about it? There seems to be something so morbid about that, and very pathological I think... like a very wish fulfillment kind of thing. Like if we just don't think about it it'll go away, but really it won't, and we know this.

So, I think the reason it has hit a chord with people is that it needed to. The pendulum has to start swinging back. There's a big white elephant that's not being dealt with in any way. I think people want a place to talk about it and think about it and look at it, and look at different ways that other people have looked at it in the past and kind of learn from it to some degree.

I was thinking that this museum was the perfect confluence of science and some element of grossness that we aren't allowed to view in day to day life.

I think you're right. I've been thinking a lot lately about the idea of embodiment and how we really don't deal with our bodies at all. It's not just death, it's also just like we're not really in our bodies. We spend all of our time in our heads and I think there's a discomfort about bodily things. When you say the word "gross" in relation to this stuff, it's really telling. Why is it gross? I don't believe 200 years ago people would've thought it was gross to see a dead body in the same way we think so now. So there's something interesting about that idea.

Nowadays some people go their whole lives and never see a dead body.

Yeah! And that was impossible until, like, the 1930s. This way that we live is unprecedented in the annals of human history. We used to butcher our own animals. In the 19th century three out of five kids died before reaching adulthood. People usually died at home... that was the way to do it. Now, it all happens quietly off stage, you know? It's a very peculiar, very disembodied, way of being in the world.

Now people are talking about "post humanism"—this idea of transferring intelligence into a machine. I wouldn't even want to live if that was the case. To live as a disembodied brain? How is there any pleasure in that at all? Nothing physical—no sight, no touch, no taste? I'm sure there's a sci-fi novel written about it. Hundreds of them, probably.

One of the things that was most striking about *The Anatomical Venus* and the images it contains is the balance of functionality—a depiction of how the body works, where the organs are located—and this very beautiful, almost sensual, setting. It's a wax figure of this flayed-open body, but the face appears almost in ecstasy.

The question that I wanted to ask with this book was, "Why do we think it is so strange?" When I first saw the Venus it was when I did that tour of medical museums in 2007, and I was also struck by that. There's a lot of crazy stuff you see in medical museums... but then you see the Venus. You walk into this museum in Florence, Italy. She's life-sized. The photos are beautiful but it's hard to express the impact that you get when you see this thing in person. It's made of wax which looks real—no matter what your brain is telling you—there's something you're responding to as if it is real. It's life-sized. It has real human hair. Her hands are stretched in a certain way, she's almost raising herself up off the bed. And then you can dissect her into however many parts you'd like. It's one of the strangest things I've ever seen. It was that same question, I was like, "What is this? And what did people think about this at the time it was created?"



So as I began to research for this book, I began to see that, almost universally, people who came to the museum to see it in 1780 thought it was the best thing ever. Nobody was like, "What the fuck is this?" That was not a response at that time. People had different responses, certainly, but mostly it seemed to me that it was like, "This is the best way to teach anatomy I've ever seen, can we get one for our museum?" Or just like "the Italians have it all figured out," or like, "this is the future of anatomy... a way to solve the dissection problem."

So then the question I wanted to ask is why does everyone who looks at it today and say, "What is that?" I see it in here too. We have two pictures of the Venus in the library at *Morbid Anatomy* and when I used to docent in here I would watch people just look at it and whisper, "What is that?" It evokes these deep questions right away. Then I went to Italy for a couple years in a row and my goal was to try to look at the other things going on in Florence to try and understand the context. That's when I began to go to churches and see these wax—well, not always wax, but often wax or plaster—saints with very similar facial expressions. Their heads turn back in this sensual, almost erotic, way.

The more I began to go into churches in Italy and Spain and other really Catholic countries I began to see that same expression, most famously in Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, which I talk about at length in the book. I believe that ecstatic expression had a different connotation in the 18th century. It was indicative of a mystical experience, and there might've been a sensual aspect to that mystical experience as well. Today, in a world in which the soul has left the machine, there's no way we could get that.

One really interesting thing is that when I went to Rome and saw Saint Teresa, they have her diary entry there translated in English. I don't know if you've ever read it, but it's excerpted in our book. It basically reads like an auto-orgasm. I could read it in no other way... it blew my mind, like I can't believe this is in a church. Why would they translate this in English? Why do you want to draw attention to how sexy this is? I went home and I emailed my friend who is a practicing Catholic. I sent her an image of it and I said, "Is there any way you can read this that isn't sexual?" And she was like, "Of course!" That's when I began to think, okay, there's something even now where Catholics see this differently than we do.

I began to get interested in this throughline of the ecstatic, from the religious experience to the sexual experience, and what all of those links are. I think it's complicated and I don't think I've figured it all out. It's endlessly fascinating though. You could go on and on and on. Bataille talks a lot about it in his book *Eroticism*. He talks about how religion before Judeo Catholicism incorporated sexuality. That it was sacred.

I still think that sexuality and desire are such mysteries. Going back to embodiment—sexuality links us to our bodies. It has a mystical element and there is a numinousness to it. I

don't know if you know that word, it's this kind of idea of this kinda sacred element. It's mysterious. Mysterious and numinous. There's no wonder that sexuality becomes imbued with all of this power today, you know? Even in a time when many people don't believe in spirituality or the soul, sexuality remains this crazy powerful thing that drives everything secretly. The older you get the more you see it, right?

Overtly or covertly.

Exactly. So while I don't think the expression on the Venus was to be read as erotic, I do think there's an element of the erotic in the mystical ecstatic experience. I think it's all entwined. But I don't think Italians at that time were uncomfortable with that the way we are today.

Here are five of the things that influenced me or that I recommend again and again.

Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums This is the book that sent me to Europe to take photos of medical museums, which led directly to Morbid Anatomy.

Man and His Symbols by Carl Jung This book changed how I look at the world in a very major way. I think Jung is oddly under appreciated today.

Edward Gorey, in general. Author, illustrator, book designer, idiosyncratic world-maker, beyond category. A hero and inspiration in every way.

Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, Cornwall, England Perhaps the biggest inspiration for the Morbid Anatomy Museum's style. You can feel a beating heart behind each exhibit and each bit of poorly Xeroxed text.

Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford Perhaps my favorite place on earth, almost certainly my favorite museum. And also an inspiration for the Morbid Anatomy Museum.

The curation that you do here in the Morbid Anatomy space—do you find that it satisfies you creatively in the same way that the other things, the writing and the photography, do?

I do. I collect objects, ideas, images, and then I arrange them into pleasing compositions. And of course I do also have my own thoughts about them, but those thoughts can be expressed—particularly in the case of the Venus—through words. I think that creative juxtaposition can tell a story just as much as writing can, and in a more intuitive way. I could never put into words why all these things fit together. People always ask me, "What is it? You're into Catholica? You're into taxidermy? Medical oddities?" These things just go together. In my mind it's a way of curation and playing with objects—moving things around, putting things in the closet and getting new things out, as a way of working through ideas in a more visual, symbolic, abstract way.

Working on the book, one thing that I thought was really interesting had to do with the fact that I really wanted to understand this thing. I read every single thing I could about it, every academic article, everything. And at the end I had read it all and I had all these facts in my head, but I still felt like, "Okay, well, that didn't answer my questions." That's when I started to go into exploring at a more symbolic, visual level. I think there are certain things that only imagery—and maybe a poetic use of language that I haven't mastered yet—can get at. To try to explain these things in a straightforward academic essay— I mean, if *The Anatomical Venus* was a book without pictures it would be a complete failure. It would not work.

I think there's something very interesting about these different kinds of knowledge and how they fit together. I always had these fantasies for the longest time about going back to graduate school and getting a degree in the history of medicine. But when I worked on this book and hit that wall I said, "No, I'm not interested in that." Academic learning gets you only so far. At heart I am not an academic.

Academic study often keeps you at a distance from the subject in some way. Even if you're studying mysticism, the study itself doesn't offer the experience of mysticism. Academia doesn't allow for subjectivity.

Yeah. It's true. I guess at heart I'm more interested in finding a way to express what I find interesting about something that isn't simply about telling the facts. I'm not interested in facts. I mean, you need them to do what you want to do, but I'm more interested in a more expressionistic self-expression where you are making your biases clear, where your personal subjectivity is a big part of it. I guess that's a really good way of thinking about it. I don't know exactly what you call that... but that's what I'm trying to do.

Name

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Vocation

Writer, Photographer, Curator

Fact

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Joanna Ebenstein in the Morbid Anatomy Library, taken by Amy K. Nelson for ANIMALNewYork