



Homo plastinatus



By John Ostrich, MD

ON THE SOUTH SIDE of Alta Arden Expressway, across the street from Macaroni Grill and just to the west of the Guitar Center, sits a building that used to be a CompUSA store. It is now home to an exhibit of "plastinated" human bodies and body parts created by a company called Bodies Revealed that is in turn managed by a company in Georgia called Premier Exhibitions, Inc.

I visited the exhibit on the afternoon of December 29, and had to park next door at the Guitar Center lot, as the old CompUSA lot was full. It warmed the cockles of my not-yet-plastinated heart to think that so many of my fellow citizens were so interested in human anatomy that they would forego what was a meteorologically glorious day to root around in an abandoned mildew-ridden warehouse filled with preserved human remains.

Plus they paid \$24 for the privilege of doing so (\$17 for juniors and \$22 for seniors like me) to boot. And the place was indeed full.

How it all began

The technology that made this exhibit possible was developed by German physician and anatomist Gunther von Hagens who began experimenting in the 1970s with what he has termed "plastination" of the human body. He created his first workable full body display around 1990, and estimated that it cost about \$50,000 and took him about 1,500 hours of work to make that first solitary model.

Since then, von Hagens has guided the creation of dozens of plastinated specimens and launched touring exhibitions called Body Worlds, which have been seen by tens of millions of people in cities around the world. (Body Worlds and Bodies Revealed are different exhibits by different companies.)

Controversy has swirled around von Hagens from the start and has come from both religious and secular individuals and groups. It has been sharper and more barbed since von Hagens opened what is essentially a factory for the mass production of plastinated human and animal specimens in Dalian, China.

In a New York Times article titled "China Turns Out Mummified Bodies for Display" published in August, 2006, reporter David Barboza, who was then based in China for the NYT, wrote: "About 260 workers in Dalian process about 30 bodies a year...[they] first dissect the bodies and remove skin and fat, then put the bodies into machines that replace human fluids with...chemical polymers.

"In a large workshop called the positioning room, about 50 medical school graduates (sic) work with the dead...placing them in seated or standing positions or forcing corpses to do lifelike things such as hold a guitar or assume a ballet position."

For a show in Hamburg, Germany, von Hagens created a unique plastinated male with an erect penis and it was reported that in Hamburg "prostitutes and cab drivers were admitted for free" to that particular exhibit. (Don't ask.) That particular model has not been

displayed outside Hamburg, and whether it is now gracing one of the windows in the city's famous red light district is unknown.

Another popular item in the Body Worlds catalog is that of a young woman with an 8-month-old fetus in situ. She is displayed leaning on her right elbow, her head is turned to the right and her left arm is raised to allow her left hand to cradle her occiput. She is flayed and skin free as are all the plastinated specimens and her anterior abdominal wall is removed exposing her own viscera and her gravid uterus, the anterior wall of which is also gone so that one can see the normal appearing fetus, head poised just above the birth canal.

The lady's pose, wrote Megan Stern in a 2003 essay titled "Shiny Happy People," is "taken straight from pornographic cliché"; Stern further complained that, in the show she saw, only two specimens were female and all the male plastinates "were displayed in heroic, 'manly' poses."

Perhaps the most famous of von Hagens' displays is called "Rearing Horse With Rider" which is a fully dissected and "exploded" man riding a partially dissected plastinated steed.

Another, somewhat more shocking, plastinate is "The Skin Man," a gracefully posed, as usual skinless man who is holding his former integument draped over his left arm as he might hold a cape that he is about to pass to the young lady in the cloakroom outside the theater.

The provenance of these corpses trouble a lot of critics. David Barboza reported that Premier Exhibitions invested \$25 million to "insure a steady supply of preserved bodies from China." He does not say, and perhaps he does not know, to whom that money was paid.

All the exhibits enter their various venues licensed as "artistic" or educational in nature and so avoid, in general, the need to provide death certificate and other germane information to local authorities. Dr. von Hagens describes what he brings to the public as "edutainment." He coined the term "plastinates" for his creations.

The Bodies Revealed Exhibit

At Bodies Revealed on Alta Arden, there are eight rooms, each one highlighting a particular organ system. In each room there is at least one plastinate, and there are some cases that contain more detailed and carefully labelled dissected upper and lower limbs and major joints, head and neck specimens and some spectacular injected casts of the cardiovascular system and the placental circulation.

In the room devoted to the CNS, a sign on the wall declares, "Girls' brains account for 2.5% of their body weight. Boys' brains account for 2%." As I stood there contemplating what that fact might indicate in the grand scheme of things, I overheard a fellow attendee say to his female companion, "Well, see, that saves us guys a little bit of blood so it can go to more important places." So then I knew.

One of the plastinates was posed kicking a soccer ball and another holding a golf club in follow-through position. The latter fellow looked to me to have a swing doomed to create a nasty slice, but what do those medical students in Dalian know about golf, after all?

One specimen had blotchy gray lungs and the label on the wall stated the lungs were discolored by cigarette smoke. A nearby sign stated, in large letters: "LEAVE YOUR CIGARETTES IN THE HALL AND STOP SMOKING NOW!"

All of the male plastinates are penis-free, but all have their testes hanging from their spermatic cords. The only complete female plastinate was a down-the-middle sagittally sliced lady whose remains were primarily designed to demonstrate internal genital

anatomy.

I rented an audio guide for \$6 more, but I did not think it offered much more than the information already attached to the specimens and displays themselves. But what the heck, I got in for 22 bucks just for being 65 years-old, so that's not a bad deal.

At the end of the tour there is a room with a large table littered with pens and papers where you are invited to write down comments on blank sheets of paper that can then be inserted into a loose leaf binder, or one can fill out a standard questionnaire. Beyond that, there is a modest gift store where the usual t-shirts and caps as well as some catalogs can be purchased.

I spent about an hour and a half, but can imagine that an interested layperson could spend longer, and one can double back to the beginning without having to pay again.

Afterward, I went over to the Ancil Hoffman Park golf practice range and hit a couple of buckets of balls into the setting sun. I kept thinking about my fellow golfer back there in the old CompUSA building. Who was he and how did he get there? Had he ever even seen a golf club before he was plastinated and sent to The Positioning Room?

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