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Rx at In Plain Sight: The perfect prescription

by Robyn Fadden – April 23, 2009 [Add comment →](#)



Chantal Gervais's *Autoportrait 3*, from series *Les Maux non dits*

The Rx exhibition at In Plain Sight shows us the guts and the glory of our messy, emotional, beautiful bodies

The walk up three flights of wide, old wooden stairs in the building that houses In Plain Sight Gallery felt a little like exploring an abandoned hospital – the late-afternoon light turned the walls an ailing shade of blue-green and muffled traffic sounds had no competition from any inside activity. Yet at the top of the stairs was something extremely human and alive.

The medically themed Rx exhibition joins the work of three artists – Chantal Gervais, Cindy Stelmackowich and Sarah Sudhoff – in an exploration of how our bodies and selves are represented in medical contexts. And while medicine has benefited so many, it is also a culturally constructed institution, where the patient too often loses agency.

Chantal Gervais, an Ottawa-based artist and University of Ottawa professor, turns that around: She went to a private clinic as an artist, not a patient, for MRI sonogram scans of her entire body (with great thanks to a supportive and knowledgeable technician). "Usually with MRIs, the doctors and technicians are looking for something specific and adjust the machine in accordance to that, usually only scanning parts of the body," says Gervais, who compiled her life-sized, large-format prints from five body-part scans, creating head-to-toe self-portraits.

"I wanted to humanize the body, so I extracted information from the images but didn't invent anything," says Gervais. "I took information out just as a technician or doctor would do to see what they wanted to see."

Doctors are trained to decode these images, but aesthetics can't be denied, nor can personal, non-expert ways of decoding. In these images, the inner body becomes a more personal space that we can travel through. "The inside of the body is very different from one individual to the other, just as the outside is," says Gervais.

Stelmackowich's work shows how anatomical illustrations of the 19th century created a standardized human body – she augments them with storms and disasters from newspapers, adding emotion to a passive state. Sudhoff's visceral photographs show

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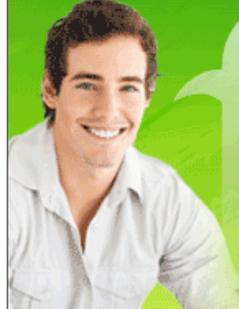
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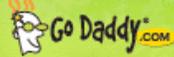
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the physical and emotional scars of illness and surgery, referencing her own experience of cervical cancer.

The exhibition both attracts and repels, fascinates and horrifies. Gervais suggests that this destabilization is what draws us in makes us question how we understand the images, the individual, bodies represented, and where our own bodies fit in.

Rx

At In Plain Sight (#410-916 Ontario E.), to May 23

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