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Insides out: Chantal Gervais' fascinating body of work



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Chantal Gervais, the 2014 winner of the of Karsh Prize for Photography, with her work *Vitruvian Me*, at Karsh-Masson Gallery in Ottawa city hall. (Julie Oliver / Ottawa Citizen)

What: Chantal Gervais, Karsh Award exhibition

When & where: to Oct. 19 at Karsh-Masson Gallery, in Ottawa city hall. Opening reception 5:30 to 7:30 Friday, Sept. 12.

Five hundred years ago, Leonarda da Vinci merged art and science to create *Vitruvian Man*, his drawing of a male with limbs outstretched in a demonstration of the ideal proportions of the human body.

More recently, Chantal Gervais merged art and technology to create *Vitruvian Me*, with a different goal. She was thinking about the calculations that can be made from da Vinci's proportions and measurements, and that led her to the idea of using an ordinary flatbed scanner to scan her own naked body — one four-inch section at a time, in approximately 50 separate scans — and then reassembling her parts into a life-sized and unique self-portrait.

“I am sort of a slave to the machine, of the technology,” Gervais says. “I have to make sure that everything is perfect and exact, just like the drawing. So if I did my arm here and my arm there” — she's pointing at different sections of the composite photograph — “and they don't match, I have to do it all over again, and again, and again, until it matches as close as possible to the drawing. It was an interesting way for me to reflect about the body and technology, because my works became like a performance in the studio, where I had to comply or follow to the final result what the technology wants.”

We're standing in Karsh-Masson Gallery in Ottawa city hall, where a new exhibition of her work celebrates her as the 2014 winner of the city's Karsh Award for photography. The photographs and videos leave no doubt that Gervais has an enduring fascination with the human body, both as vessel and vehicle.



Chantal Gervais, inside her new exhibition at the Karsh-Masson Gallery in Ottawa city hall, is the 2014 winner of the Karsh Award for Photography. (Julie Oliver / Ottawa Citizen)

“I’m really interested in our condition of being and what we’re going through, physically and emotionally,” says Gervais, who teaches photography part-time at both the University of Ottawa and the Ottawa School of Art. “It’s a fascinating thing because we’re all different, yet at the same time we’re all the same. You’re right beside me and you have different thoughts and you’re feeling different things, but I don’t know anything about it, but you’re right there. I guess it’s kind of a quest to know what it is to exist, to have a body and go through this life in that vehicle, somehow.”

She sees the body not as a single thing but as the assemblage of parts that it is. In her work she consistently breaks the body into those parts, or looks inside — literally — at the parts we’re all made of. She had herself scanned on a magnetic resonance imaging machine (an MRI)

at a private clinic. She knew the machine was seeing everything inside her body, yet she felt nothing. She was fascinated by that sensation, or lack thereof.

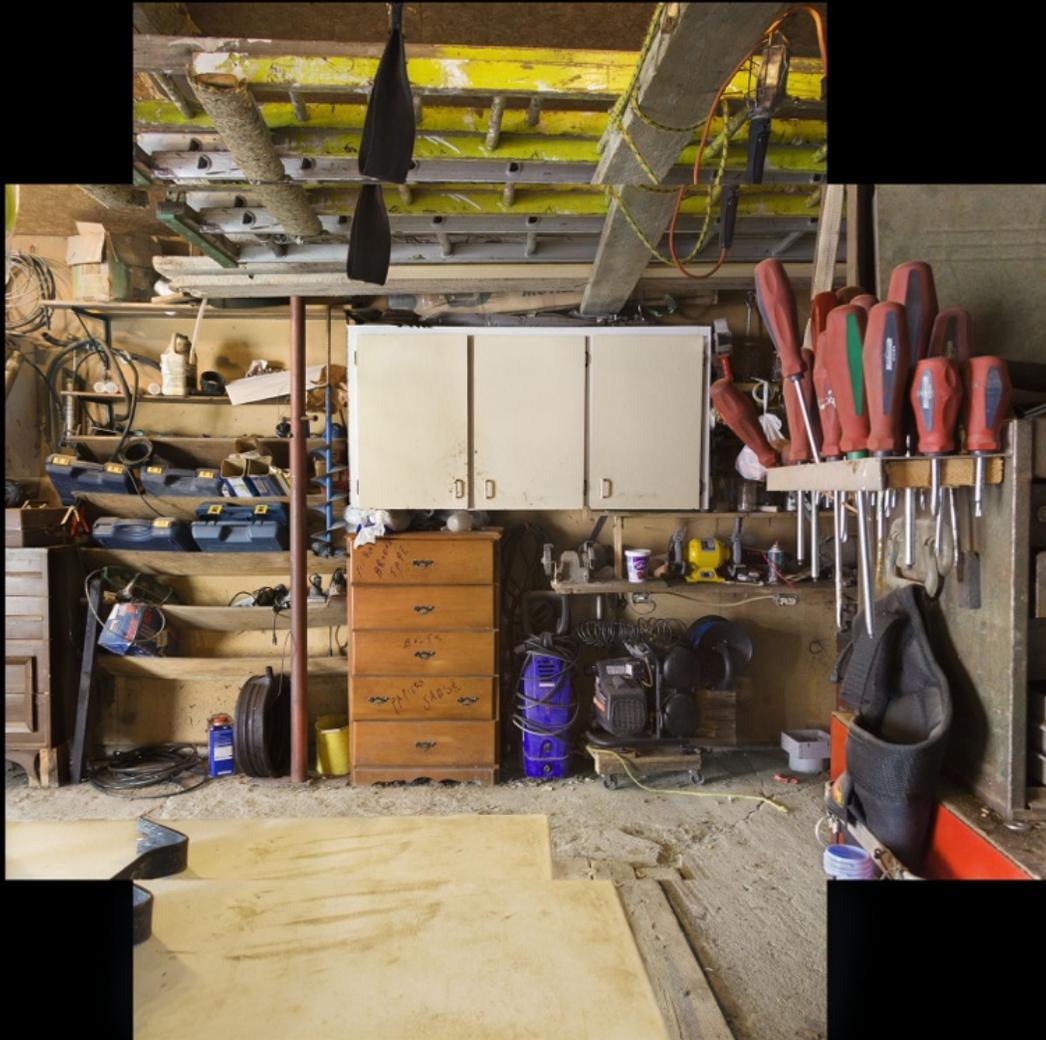
Then she shot more than 50 videos of her body parts — again four-by-four inch chunks, an echo of her *Vitruvian Me* — and reassembled them as a life-sized video. I stand before the video and soon I hear the whirring motor of the MRI machine. A dark line scrolls down Gervais' body and reveals the scan of the bones, the organs, the viscera that is us.

I've seen naked bodies, and I've seen MRI scans, yet to see our insides revealed in this way is a sobering dose of perspective — perhaps, as the character David St. Hubbins said in the movie *This is Spinal Tap*, “too much f—cking perspective.” It's unsettling, yet unavoidable.

About half the exhibition is filled with large photographs of the garage built by Gervais' father, who died suddenly in 2011. He was retired, and had spent countless hours in the garage building things, fixing things. Here Gervais cannot show the body because the body is gone, so she shows us the skeleton of her father's life, his boot print on the concrete floor, the dresser that was once in Gervais' bedroom and then redeployed to hold parts, pieces. His handwriting on the front of drawers that are full of bric-a-brac. Endless Mason jars full of nails, clamps.

This is the empty space that is left behind, the space to which memories rush in to fill the vacuum, after the body is gone.

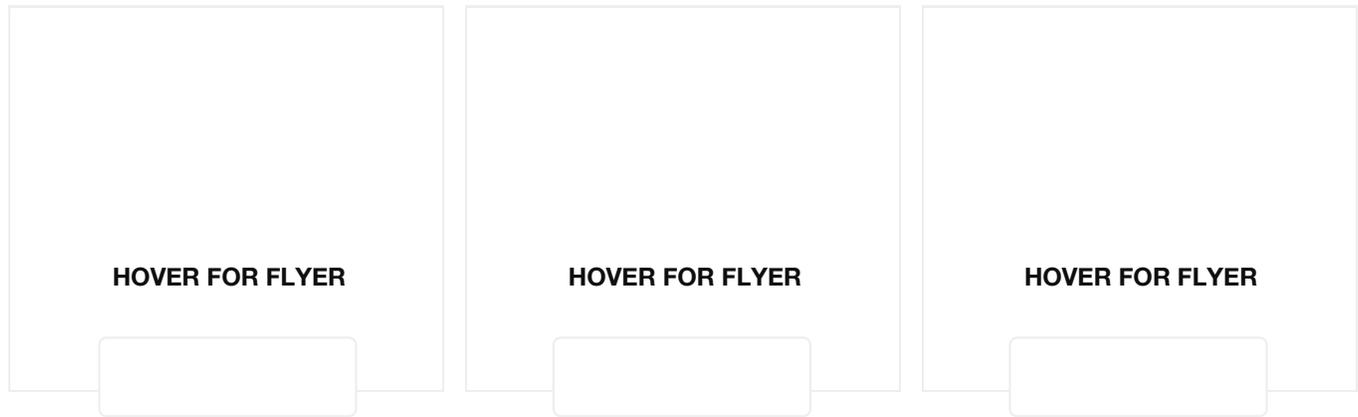
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Chantal Gervais' Portrait of My Father Paul (3), in her exhibition at Karsh-Masson Gallery.

Chantal Gervais' Self-Portrait No. 6, created from an MRI scan, demonstrates her fascination with the body.

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