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Under the guise of medical history, the Mori gets radical

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Don't be distracted by the big names showing at "Medicine and Art: Imagining a Future for Life and Love" — Da Vinci, Okyo, Damien Hirst — the jewels of the show lie in the obscure — timeworn or contemporary.

"Medicine and Art" at the Mori Art Museum is based around 150 items borrowed from the Wellcome Collection, the medical and anthropological acquisitions of American-born pharmaceutical entrepreneur Henry Wellcome (1853-1936), which is now managed by the Wellcome Trust in Britain, a major player in biomedical research. Visitors are invited to see these items for their artistic merit; yet, despite The Mori's best efforts, the objects unavoidably retain an educational intent: They show the history of how we came to understand our bodies.

Take the first works that greet visitors, Jacques-Fabien Gautier d'Agoty's two paintings of women in comforting classical poses, one nursing a child, the other pregnant. While their sketchlike quality is mediocre, what is striking about both women is that though portrayed as seemingly lively, their bodies have been dissected to show their wombs and muscular structure. The contrast is confusing but not off-putting, and this first room, in which D'Agoty's paintings are accompanied by an Andy Warhol silk screen of a heart and an original 19th-century X-ray table, sets the tone for the show perfectly by coaxing you into the world of historical and contemporary curiosities. Three groundbreaking anatomical explorations by Leonard Da Vinci come next — and then things get really weird.



Pushing artistic boundaries: "Life Before Death: Elmira Sang Bastian, 14th January 2004 / 23rd March 2004" © WALTER SCHELS

"This room contains graphic anatomical drawings and figures that some visitors may find distressing," reads a plaque outside the next side gallery. Inside are not only meticulously executed 18th-century illustrations of dissections, but a "Normal Sagittal Slice of the Human Body From Head to Base of the Spine" (2006-2007) prepared by Gunther von Hagens, who has preserved a 1 cm slice of flesh by replacing fat and water with plastics. But the sign could also apply to almost everything that follows — on the opening day of the exhibition, Mori director Fumio Nanjo said that there had been much debate among the museum staff about which exhibits people should be warned about.

Personally, I found the surgical saws and ocular tools implied a more real gruesomeness. But Walter Schels' works will make you forget whatever came before. Schels takes photos of people who are ill and pairs them with photographs of them just after they have died. Realizing



what you are seeing is one of the most contemplative moments of the show. As Schels said in an artists talk, "If you are making a date with someone who is about to die, you can't say, 'Lets meet later.' You never know if there is a tomorrow."

At this point, it becomes obvious that under the cover of a wealth of historical medical materials, the Mori has done something radical in gathering some of the most controversial pieces of contemporary art.

Philippino artist Alvin Zafara's "Argument from Nowhere" (2000) looks like a minimalist work done in white pigment, until you reach the video at one end and discover that it was created by the artist sanding down a human skull to nothing on the boards you are viewing. Young British Artists' member Mark Quinn creates appealing Greco-Roman-style sculptures that address modern illness and physical abnormality. Fuyuko Matsui takes her Western-art inspired *nihonga*

(Japanese-style) provocations to a new level with her spectral "Virgin Specimen" (2009).

But the artists that push the boundaries of the body, and our understanding of it, the furthest are Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, who together work as The Tissue Culture & Art Project, and performance artist Stelarc. The Tissue Culture & Art Project presents "Victimless Leather," a system of flasks and tubes that feed a combination of human and mouse cells in the form of living tissue that is being grown into the shape a miniature coat. Catts said that the title of the piece is ironic, as the projects he creates at his institute, SymbioticA (at the University of Western Australia) are meant to raise ethical questions about the conduct of laboratories around the world.

Stelarc has long used his body — which he refers to in the third person — for his art, suspending it with hooks and implanting sculptures in his stomach. In his latest work, he has been growing an ear on his arm. Really. I saw it. He intends to hook a wireless Internet-enabled microphone up to it, so people can listen remotely through this third ear.

"Medicine and Art" raises more questions than it answers. But its surreptitiously delivered provocations make it a masterful presentation of the human body, one that a science museum would be unlikely to equal in panache and range. Whether for the art or the education, it shouldn't be missed.

"Medicine and Art: Imagining a Future for Life and Love — Da Vinci, Okyo, Damien Hirst" shows at the Mori Art Museum till Feb. 28, 2010; admission ¥1,500; open; 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. (Tues. till 5 p.m.). For more information, call (03) 5777-8600 or visit www.mori.art.museum