

ATRIUM

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The Report of the Northwestern Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program

Bringing Out the Dead

"We shouldn't look at them? If we don't look, we'll never see what they offer us, especially the opportunities to promote and cope with the pain of empathy that arises across great, apparent dissimilarity."

—Ann Starr





*Hydrocephalus
congenital
August 2007*



About the artist:

Ann Starr has exhibited her work about anatomy, teratology, and mental illness and lectured on her drawings at venues including the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the National Portrait Gallery (London), the Yale Medical School and the University of Chicago Medical School. She has been an Artist in Residence at the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Medicine, and has taught workshops for the office of the chaplain at Rush Hospital.

As an Artist in Residence at Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine, Starr has taught for several years in the MH&B Program's winter humanities seminars. In this series, first- and second-year medical students select a small ten-hour class from a wide array of interactive humanities and arts options. Starr has taught "Alternative Anatomy," a class in which students explore the emotional and metaphorical aspects of the human body through drawing, and "Assuming Authority," a class that encourages students to assert their own authority within medical discourse by creating their own medical books. While teaching at Northwestern during 2000 and 2001, Starr became interested in the anatomy lab's collection of anomalous fetuses.

Starr objects to the idea that burying these fetuses is the "respectful" thing to do, because "it implies that the only function these persons/bodies have is to be gawked at." Instead, she argues forcefully for their preservation. "As I hope my drawings show, they can be treated as people worthy of portraits. We shouldn't look at them? If we don't look, we'll never see what they offer us, especially the opportunities to promote and cope with the pain of empathy that arises across great, apparent dissimilarity. I hope they will be returned to teaching—just like the other dead people in the anatomy lab. It is not undignified to employ them as models for embryology and cases for the ethical implications of the practice of selecting out 'flawed' genes and raising only 'designer' children. We have so much to learn from them. But we have to look at them to learn it."

Northwestern has purchased two of Starr's drawings to hang with the collection they reflect. "It gives me profound satisfaction to have these brief lives and their beauties recognized in this way," Starr said.

The Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program

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