

## Looking in the Mirror: Images of Abnormally Developed Infants<sup>1</sup>

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*Observational drawing provides a means of focusing on anomalous infant bodies. Time required by drawing connects the artist to the humanity of the subjects rather than to the deformities that make them, initially, frightening.*

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### LOOKING AT HUMANS WITH PHYSICAL DEFORMITIES

The Society for Disability Studies convened its annual meeting in a fashionable Washington hotel several years ago. When the morning's sessions were over, many of us left from the windowless sub-basement meeting rooms for the lobby's sunny atrium lunchroom. With that ascent, approximately fifty of us came to light for the hotel's other guests and lunch patrons. This scene, in which a large group with conspicuous physical differences mingled with others apparently unimpaired, had special interest for me as a visual artist. The question of what one sees—what one does see and what one is able to see—in encounters with the visually extraordinary reflects both the comfort and the anxiety of considering oneself "normal."

The SDS crowd did not go unnoticed, of course. Some of our faces were irregular because of blindness or muscular or neurological conditions; we advanced by many means, and as a group, we exhibited some unusual statures and anatomical features. We were, however, all American and European adults whose grooming,

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hair fashions and clothing were within the current range of good taste. In social terms, our manners, conversation and interest in the menu were not exceptional, unless it was a tendency towards the upper end of the customary. Nevertheless, many SDS conferees either provoked open stares or obvious flinching and even a few withdrawals by other lunching individuals. So whether or not we were seen, we were noticed.

I wish not to comment on the morality or manners of the physically regular persons present that day. Rather, I wish to comment on the difficulty of not reacting in an encounter with unusual bodies. Staring and recoiling are both utterly common. Reaction is primary; it is followed by good manners and questions of should or ought. Manners are learned social behaviors asserted only when we notice and wish to modify our reactions, when we can consider where to turn our eyes.

The question of how people direct or limit their vision is important to me. How I can use the strategies of art to direct a gaze toward an image or insight is more important still. This essay considers how I can induce viewers to look at and remain in contact with subjects they consider intolerable or frightening—in this case, unusual or deformed human bodies. How do I create images of “extraordinary bodies” that will induce viewers not only to look but also to linger in recognition of a fellow human? How can I create images of “disturbing” subjects that might induce a viewer to observe, discover and connect with the original—to move beyond fear, disapproval, or distaste?

### **BABIES IN BOTTLES**

During the past six years, I have drawn abnormally developed infants and fetuses preserved in medical settings, museums and anatomy laboratories. I take pen or pencil to paper in the presence of my subject and work to render accurately what I see. I am a fine artist rather than a medical illustrator. My work is not didactic, so I am not trying to point out X or Y to a learner: I do not use leader lines. Moreover, I do not have professional knowledge of either anatomy or embryology.

My subjects are found in medical settings, to which access has sometimes been difficult for a person who is not an M.D. That bodies normal and unusual are studied in medical contexts does not, however, make them exclusively—or even primarily—medical events. Bodies of any aspect are personal. So when I draw preserved bodies, I work in the traditions of life drawing (drawing the nude model) and portraiture. Within these genres, the capturing of likeness is often central. Equally important is revelation of the relationship between sitter and artist as demonstrated in such things as the use of materials,



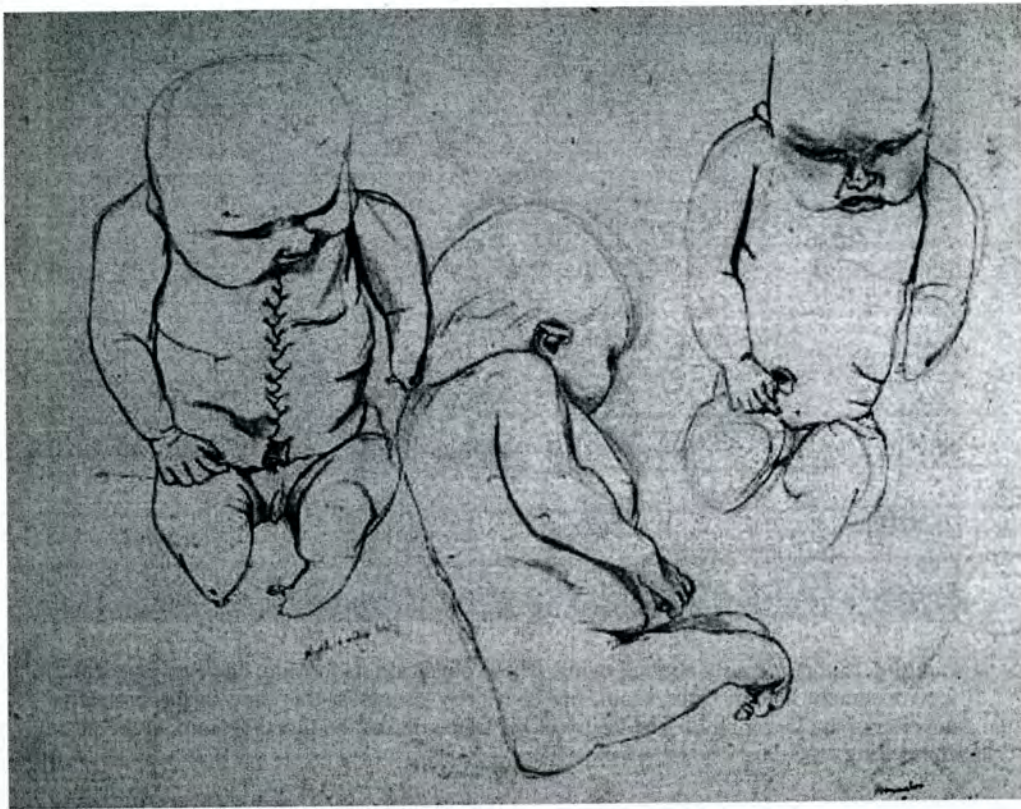
**Image 1.** The malformations are extreme, but the tense position and the intense expression engaged me; they bespeak a latent power. It takes imagination to believe he is NOT alive.

colors, shapes, composition of the space and story implied by the whole.

Why choose “dead babies” as a subject? I wish to study with impunity bodies that deviate from the norm. On the simplest level, I can look at these bodies without giving offense. My scrutiny neither does nor can hurt them. I can study their bodies and physical attitudes with freedom. By drawing preserved infants on medical school shelves, I can observe and record a great number of individuals. My interest and intentions do not give pause to the sitter, and I can pursue my interest without the apologies that distort and diminish one’s work. I might never find more than a few people who would feel comfortable sitting for me; the exploitation of the extraordinarily-housed human by image-makers is so well-established that I cannot foresee seeking opportunities without invitations that are not at this point forthcoming.



**Image 2.** The "paper baby" is so named, apparently, for its complete dessication. The seeming horror on the face moved me to particularize the surface detail, since my imagination of the pain in this very tiny body explained the expression. I placed him as I did—small on the large sheet of paper—because his picture strikes me as an emblem for massive rage against any kind of suffering that reduces a person, or uses us up.



**Image 3.** The shape of the head and the soft, rounded body made me want to hold this baby. Body memory of holding my own babies entered into my response to this child and probably accounts for the need to present him three times, from different points of view. The desire to keep drawing was a form of adoration. The genesis of the limbs was secondary by far to the beauties of this baby.

### RECORDING WITH PENCIL OR CAMERA

In many modern contexts, observational drawing has been forsaken for the documentary power of the camera. To the extent that a draftsman working from life is thought to produce an objective delineation of something, the camera can catch in a flash what a person with pencil must concentrate on for hours to record. It is this time that the draftsman requires, however, that makes drawing a particularly potent means for both figuring and exploring the visually abnormal.

The virtue of pencil on paper—the slow process of measurement, correction and revision—is that one cannot decide in advance what the product will be. The starting conception for a drawing and the final product are always different. The artist's first reaction is mediated over and over by new information garnered during the course of adjustment and by the eye's concentrated movement across and around the subject. It is impossible to draw the whole in the manner that a camera's viewfinder encompasses it, everything at once. In photography, the



**Image 4.** Spontaneously aborted twins, whose physical relationship, however accidental, feels extremely tender. Once again, my own body responds, this time to the protective position of the larger child. The frailty of his frame makes the literal gesture all the more compelling.

image is often determined before it is made. This is impossible in drawing, even for those who think simple transferral of image a reasonable and possible goal. Drawing is both a process and inherently about process.

Thus, whatever my initial thoughts about or emotional reactions to a subject I am drawing in an observational mode, they melt, pool and are reshaped like warm wax as I work. The changes in me as I work are intellectual and emotional. I learn, and I deepen under the process of connecting what I see to any other information or emotion stored in me. The image takes place in time, which is a crucible. Situations, persons, acts that are fleeting in life are distilled in representational art. Images—manually made as well as photographic—give viewers time to look and see, to react, to notice and then to consider the reactions. Particularly in the cases of subjects we find difficult to encounter in the physical world, images invite us to pause and to return, even if our first reaction is to flee. As such they can be powerful in the development of responses beyond reaction: they can be civilizing.

### CONTEXTS FOR THE FIGURE

When one draws, one decides actively what to put on the page. Drawing abnormally developed babies, I focus on the figure, nearly always to the point of excluding all other information. I wish the viewer to see the person in the body, not the body in the milieu where others have placed it. In working this way, I eliminate



**Image 5.** It was (it is still) difficult for me to believe this girl was human. I thought she was an animal. I made myself draw her in order to force myself to look. This image fills me with sorrow and dread. I don't know what to say about her except that I cannot think why I should determine some criterion that forces the exclusion of anyone as too horrible to look at. Drawing her dignifies her, and dignified me as well.

what always appears of necessity in photographic presentations of the same bodies. That is, my drawings depict no bottles more or less full of formalin preservative, no gray of preserved flesh, no antique medical trappings or copperplate labels in Latin from the 19th century. My drawings, then, are free from the romantic, historicizing quality that dominates photographic work in which these subjects appear. They are free of the sentimental or pathetic tone that comes of revealing the indignity of "captivity" to that of deformity. In drawings, the persons are always present now.

I decide in the course of a drawing whether or not to use color; what kinds of lines to use—broken, nervous, thick, tenuous, settled; what color and shape of paper to use; how much of the surface available within the paper's borders to use. These decisions, intuitive and conscious, are made in response to the subject before me and to what marks my hand is putting down on the paper.

### PROCESS AND LOVE

In order to approach an infant's body preserved in a bottle, I have to hold back a lot of emotion, much of which is the profound disturbance these subjects arouse in any human. I behave like a scientist in deciding consciously to restrain my emotions in order to make observations. As it undoubtedly must be for any clinical observer, this step of the work is difficult.

But I find that once I have assembled my tools and arranged my visual perspective on the subject, I enter a state of suspended emotion. As I draw, I am in a calm situation. My work literally absorbs me. In this, I think I reasonably compare myself to any kind of clinician, mechanic or operator who must move step by step, looking forward and backward in order to perform the immediate task correctly. To draw is no more essentially creative, I believe, than to perform the jobs I have listed. Or, rather, those tasks can be as creative as an artist's. The creativity for each is in the qualities the performance of the task releases and reveals. The whole—the "product"—is not achieved as a whole but as a series of motions connected by time into the whole. The whole both combines what was in the maker to begin with and what the subject induces the maker to become.

The act of drawing, then, produces the images. Neither the subject nor the artist alone does it. The drawing act is dynamic negotiation, a shuttle that moves back and forth between the subject's appearance and the artist's heart and mind as revealed by her marking.

For me, drawing infants with deformities provokes emotion I would be unable to bear were it not parsed out. The gradual revelation of the emotion through each mark made in sequence does not distort or disguise my emotion. Rather, it both reveals the experiences and thoughts that lie behind my reaction to the subject and allows richer, more refined emotion to develop. The subject becomes a new part of my experience and thought.



When I draw from observation, I am forced to deal with all the things I do not see first. In other words, I cannot simply draw "a deformity" although that is the single factor that identifies it to most of the persons who will view my art. The unusual aspects of body exist in a context of normal body and in the whole complex world of response that one human stirs in another. By the time I am done with a drawing—and I decide when the drawing is done—I have an image of a person who looks this way or that. Ultimately, there is no difference between drawing a malformed infant and drawing Queen Elizabeth. Any difference between them comes from the experience, thought and emotion I bring to the task. And I cannot know what all that is until I see that the job is done.

By the time I complete a drawing of an abnormally developed child, I love that child. She or he has required my time and attention; I have had to deal with him or her as an individual, not an example or specimen. It elicits in me not only responses to its horrors of body but to all the things children mean to me: my own recollections of the intense love between mother and newborn, the impossibility of not loving what emerges from my own body, the sensations in my breasts when I see a distressed infant, my instincts to soothe and caress. The child is my child, and I love her or him as few people have ever done because we have spent time together.

### THE VIEWER

Do my drawings communicate what I hope they do? This is not a question I can approach in the person of artist without considering it as a viewer of art myself.

No viewer of art profits without an investment of time. Without the time spent engaging in the work—asking why and how of the image and its maker's process—the viewer's gaze will only glance off the surface. I have had people look at the work under discussion only to turn away in horror, as if the subjects were "live." It occurs to me, of course, that in a couple of instances, the images may have exposed something so personal, so harrowing in an individual's experience as to be intolerable even on paper. One can hardly object. Art and experience have to be connected if art is to have meaning, and the artist is privileged to have her work witnessed by many persons with many kinds of life information and many levels of sensitivity. Yet some react as if it is a mistake of judgment even to represent such subjects. They do not see the image at all, merely what they conclude it represents. The nature of prejudice is the refusal to look. It is impossible for the prejudiced to see because they do not spend any time with the person, situation or category.

For this reason, I put my work forward. There are so few occasions for individuals to be in the presence of "extraordinary bodies," and on those occasions, the well-mannered will not stare. My drawings invite staring, shuddering and fear:

they must. But the invitation is durable and long lasting, so it not only sanctions these reactions, but also invites one to move beyond them to a place where one can consider privately a distant color on the spectrum of human experience. I make these drawings in the hope that they may inspire at the least civility, at most love. Civility and love are the result of process, and art provides the space and time in which such processes may be practiced and, with study, achieved.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the elegant phrases of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson ("extraordinary bodies") and Susan Squier ("babies in bottles").

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