

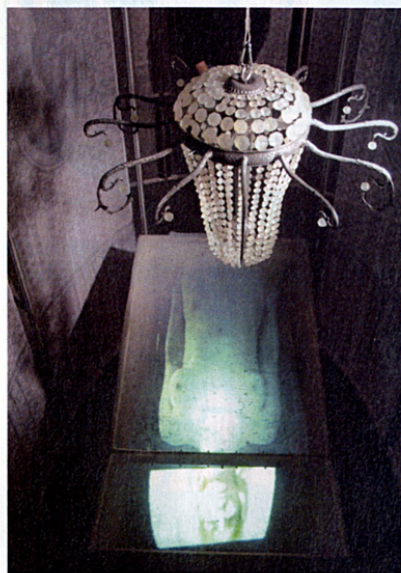
ART & DESIGN

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Smooth operator

An artist peers down on life under the knife at the International Museum of Surgical Science

By Kathryn Hixson



Cristin Millett, interior of *Teatro Anatomico*, 2005.

Health and drug issues are often debated in the courts, both legal and athletic, but we rarely pause to consider the larger arc of the evolution of medicine. Chicago has a little-known resource that will gladly reveal the extremely specialized historical sequences that are precursors to those operating-room procedures

sculptures of surgery's heroes. The science of medicine is closely linked to the changing attitude toward the human body, and can be traced in its evolving representation. The institute boasts an extraordinary range of these images, from prehistoric Cycladic fertility figures, to copies of Renaissance and early medical illustrations,

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we squeamishly watch on *ER* and *Grey's Anatomy*.

Hiding in plain sight is the International Museum of Surgical Science, nestled in the tree-lined Inner Drive between Burton Place and North Avenue. The grand old landmarked mansion's rooms are teeming with Field Museum

up through the discovery of the X-ray, with new exhibits planned for the MRIs and CT scans of today.

Perhaps because contemporary art has been similarly preoccupied with the image of the body, the institute started a quarterly contemporary-art program in 1998, with curated work that relates to medi-

cine and surgery shown in two of its rooms on the fourth floor.

Cristin Millett's installation work fits in perfectly within this context, somewhere between the Civil War amputation saws and Japanese sonograms. In her exhibition titled "Medicine and the Body," Millett adds to the long tradition of extreme art about the body, which stretches from Chris Burden's having himself shot (literally) in the 1970s to Mona Hatoum's showing of her own insides using endoscopy—each fighting the self-alienation brought about by the steely eyes of medicine and the law.

Specifically interested in medicine's attitude toward the female body, Millett researched 16th-century surgical theaters, operating rooms fitted out with quickly ascending stepped concentric balconies, originally conceived to make the most out of the rare autopsy.

In her installation *Teatro Anatomico*, Millett re-creates the power relationships that automatically occurred due to the architectural plan of these theaters, where the body was positioned vulnerably on its back and the medical students peered from above. Millett's theater is made of skinlike chiffon fabric, printed with images culled from historical medical illustrations.

As you enter the installation, you will look down at the patient lying on the table, an operation in progress in the form of a video projection—an abdominal hysterectomy. Mysteriously, you will find that your own face appears in the position of the patient's head, effectively turning the tables. The viewer/voyeur, whose visage is captured by a hidden camera, suddenly becomes the subject of the objectifying gaze of medicine.

Throughout the museum's collection, there does seem to be an inordinate number of pictures of naked women being cut open and Millett's interactive installations put a fresh spin on the musty historical

exhibitions surrounding it, reminding visitors of just what we have had to sacrifice to the Gods of Surgery.

"Cristin Millett: Medicine and the Body" runs through October 21 at the International Museum of Surgical Science. See Museums & Institutions.