

David Cotterrell: Guardian G2 : Where science and art are encouraged to meet

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On the wall of the Wellcome Collection in London is a colour pencil drawing of a mans crotch that makes me wince. It is a self-portrait, featuring a dangling penis, curly thigh hairs and a post-operative scar indicating that the subject has had a testicle removed. It is by Michael Landy, the British artist perhaps best known for his 2001 artwork Breakdown, a performance piece in which he destroyed everything he owned at the old C&A store on Oxford Street.

But its the title that leaves me open-mouthed. Left-Side Orchidectomy. Beauty and surgical procedure combined in a single discombobulating word. Later, I find myself surfing the Cancer Research UK website to get a sense of what orchidectomies are which is probably a good thing: men like me dont know where their prostate is, still less that an operation to reduce prostate cancers impact has such a lovely/hideous name. Anything that helps reduce ignorance is good, isnt it?

The Wellcome Collection is aimed at fulfilling pharmaceutical magnate Sir Henry Wellcomes vision of a place where people could learn more about the development of medicine through the ages and across cultures (which sounds off-puttingly worthy), and where you can consider what it means to be human (which at least to me doesnt).

Since its new galleries opened last year, the temporary shows have made the Wellcome Collection one of Londons more exciting galleries. Its first show was about the human heart. The dull thump of a heartbeat pursued visitors as they explored an exhibition that included Leonardos dissection drawings, a heart-lung machine and live heart surgery beamed in from Cambridge. It has since put on shows called Sleep and Dreaming, and another called Skeletons: Londons Buried Bodies, in which 26 skeletons of Londoners were exhibited, each accompanied by a recent photograph by artist Thomas Adank of the burial site where they were discovered.

Art, then, works with science at the Wellcome Collection, sometimes more or less as its handmaiden. In 1959, the British scientist and novelist CP Snow argued that there had been a communication breakdown between the two cultures of modern society the sciences and the humanities. The Wellcome Collection wants to be a place where that cross-cultural communication can be defibrillated, where artists and scientists might do more than eye each other suspiciously. The central idea is that medicine and health are too big to be left to scientists, says Ken Arnold, Wellcomes head of public programmes

The Collection is part of the Wellcome Trust, which was established on Sir Henrys death in 1936 as an independent charity funding research to improve human and animal health. It has an endowment of 15bn, making it the UKs largest non-governmental source of funds for biomedical research and some of that endowment is used to house Wellcomes collection of medicine-related artefacts and to stage temporary exhibitions, talks, musical evenings. It is even developing a sideline in book publishing.

But what is its USP? Surely artists were considering the human body long before Wellcome? Absolutely, says Arnold. There are so many interesting, engaged artists who would be doing what interests us anyway. We either commission them to extend their research or just show what they have been up to.

It was this springs exhibition, Life Before Death, that put the Wellcome Collection on the map. It was a big thematic show, consisting of portraits of 24 terminally ill people before and after

death, all photographed by Walter Schels, an artist terrified of death. Art critics found themselves blindsided by the emotive power of an exhibition that unflinchingly examined our mortality. We kept finding hard-boiled critics and members of the public crying in the galleries, said curator James Peto.

Gunther von Hagens, whose Body Worlds exhibition is more likely to make visitors faint than cry, has said his aim was edutainment, an ugly word that beautifully captured what he is up to. I want to bring the life back to anatomy, he said. The living could handle a dead mans lungs and resolve, perhaps, not to smoke. The Wellcome Collection doesnt work that way. We dont have to make shows for the lowest common denominator, says Arnold. But we do accept the charge that we are about helping people to learn something.

Much of the art in the Wellcomes permanent show Medicine Now is disturbingly educative. But the collection can sometimes find beauty in the most unexpected places. Earlier this year, it put on an exhibition called From Atoms to Patterns, tracing the postwar British tradition of using x-ray photographs of crystalline materials to supply beautiful textile designs.

Despite such delights, the collection has faced several critical brickbats. When its new 30m exhibition spaces opened last year, some critics hated them. They especially disliked Medicine Man, the permanent exhibition showcasing part of Henry Wellcomes collection. It seems, wrote veteran cassandra Brian Sewell, a haphazard agglomeration of worthless objects accumulated by a magpie mind that from time to time remembered that its prime interest was medicine.

Arnold says this verdict is unfair. Wellcome was the last great collector. He didnt collect as a connoisseur but as a research project. Thats why he seems incomprehensible to some critics. He had an understanding that humankind has a dominant interest in preserving our health and also in finding out whats inside us.

But surely Sewell has a point? Wellcome collected anything even vaguely related to medicine and some feted items are merely dubious secular relics: Napoleons toothbrush, Nelsons razor, Florence Nightingales moccasins and a lock of George III's hair. And some critics have been equally dubious about the Wellcomes temporary shows. For all the popularity of the Sleeping and Dreaming show, Jonathan Jones weighed in with a two-star demolition job in the Guardian that concluded: I love the idea that art and science can become one, but this exhibition makes me wonder if they are compatible at all.

Now the Collection has launched its most ambitious show. Called War and Medicine, it aims to trace the history of this odd couple since the Crimean war. Apart from anything else, says Peto, it will ask what is the politics of medicine when it is involved in keeping a war effort going? The biggest problem of warfare is that it keeps away what it is to be humanising how, you might ask, can medicine be part of that?

A typically bravura show, put together with the Deutsches Hygiene Museum in Dresden, it dares to tackle big ideas and to answer troubling, topical questions. It does this through the analysis of medical interventions including the wartime dramas of Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole, the birth of psychiatry as a response to shellshock in the first world war, and through David Cotterrells installation, recording how surgical teams operate behind the lines in Afghanistan.

What seems especially striking about the relationship between art and medicine is that, as armies have developed increasingly sophisticated ways of harming their enemies, medicine has had to respond virtuosically to the changes in types of wounded casualties and increases in their number. I didnt really know much about this issue and certainly havent thought enough about what kind of sick society would organise itself that way. Thanks to the Wellcome Collection, I am once more in serious danger of learning something.

