

# A RARE VIEW INSIDE THE HUMAN BODY

STORY BY MELISSA JOSUE

**T**here is a pitcher ready to throw a slider. A messenger mounting his bike. A man hanging his “clothes” to dry. Their eyes appear to stare into the distance. With their lips relaxed and eyebrows at rest, they look like expressionless mannequins frozen in familiar, everyday moments. But the peculiar thing is, they’re all inside out.

The cardiovascular system clings to dry, white-washed bones. The frontalis muscle stretches vertically across their foreheads. Stiff, sinewy triceps surae appear to flare from the joints of the athlete. A vertical cut section reveals the human nervous system against the musculoskeletal frame, all in three dimensional, living colors.

“The Universe Within: The Human Body Revealed” at the Nob Hill Masonic Center is an exhibit presented by the Chinese Society for Anatomical Sciences and supported by the Department of Anatomy of Beijing Medical University. The exhibit features 21 full bodies and 150 preserved human organs indefinitely preserved through the relatively new process of plastination. From the crown to the tips of the toes, every vein and artery to the tiny web of capillaries is exposed.

For scientists and doctors, it has been a constant search for better preservation techniques because natural decomposition after death makes the human anatomy difficult to study. Then in 1977, German doctor Gunther von Hagens developed a technique that left specimens dry, odorless and identical to their pre-preservation state down to the microscopic level. Plastination, in effect, permanently halts the decomposition process by removing water and fats from the tissue and replacing these with polymers, depriving the putrefaction bacteria and microorganisms of what

they need to survive. The result is a pliable and lightweight specimen with only their cells saturated with plastic.

Part gross anatomy lab, part traveling freak show, “The Universe Within” offers locals the opportunity to explore the human body. With the low lighting and faint classical music, people stroll into a velvet-draped hall, speaking in whispers as they wander through what feels like both a wake and a modern museum. But this isn’t Ripley’s or traveling cadavers: the bodies are up close, and except for the glass eyeballs, 100 percent real flesh and bone.

A young woman, walking alone and clad in a camel-colored coat and a short gray business suit, leans closer and peers at the fibrous muscles of a skeleton that slowly revolves on a pedestal. She does not gasp or grimace. But even the old man next to her, and the younger couple beside them holding hands, fall quiet when they approach the first body. Some raise their eyebrows. Some stand with their lips barely agape. But for a moment, all stare silently, holding their breath.

The exhibit is open until 9 p.m. on Thursday nights, allow the after-work groups, and those daring enough to take a date, a couple extra hours to view the exhibit if they prefer a quiet, non-crowded experience with few or no kids.

Peter Schmitz, a San Francisco resident visiting the exhibit, says it is a very rare experience that makes him wonder about the people who made the exhibit. He expresses intrigue but not surprise at viewing the human body at that level of detail. Schmitz wants to know personal aspects about the people whose bodies were displayed. “It is a very intimate thing that people are seeing,” he says.

Others leave the exhibit more conscious



of their body’s health. Katherine Wagner and Helenjean Bowie both say that they are going to go home and be better to their bodies.

Seeing the skin-stripped muscles and unguarded flesh and bones, Wagner is reminded of the beginning of man. “I can see where we came from,” she says. Beautiful and prehistoric are the adjectives she uses to describe her experience. Perhaps it was less about visual aesthetics than it is about the notions of humanity that the exhibit bring to mind. The bodies reveal, in an all too candid way, that beneath our skin we really are all the same

“I thought I was going to be sickened by it, but I was fascinated,” Bowie says. Then she adds with a bit of a smile, “I think the human body might taste good.”

Contact Josue at [meljosue@sfsu.edu](mailto:meljosue@sfsu.edu)