



Cindy Stelmackowich's anatomical art makes viewers shiver – with delight. 'Why does political art have to be ugly?' she asks

More than skin deep

CINDY STELMACKOWICH

AGE: 39
LIVES: Byward Market

'Even in high school, I took biology classes and art classes at the same time. It was natural to combine these two.'

BY PAUL GESSELL

Cindy Stelmackowich's studio in the Enriched Bread Artists collective is a little shop of horrors. Body parts are everywhere. Veins and muscles are exposed. Glass beakers become vases containing bouquets of hypodermic needles and strange medical devices with frightful intent.

And yet, Stelmackowich's art is enchanting.

Nineteenth-century illustrations of dissected bodies become poetic life-figure drawings, especially when blended with images of cut-glass bowls and other sparkly gems. Rubber gloves, tweezers and more mysterious implements appear to ooze out of medical texts the way toothpaste squirts from the tube. Trails of tiny, ruby-red beads become shimmering lines of blood flowing from illustrated body

parts seamlessly secured to hand-made marbled paper.

Beauty, we soon learn, can be found in the most unlikely places. And the human body, even when the skin is peeled back, can dazzle the eye, despite the shivers you feel, as if a dead man just caressed your cheek.

Get used to Stelmackowich's spectacular, somewhat creepy art. She is putting the finishing touches to her PhD in art history at Carleton University — her focus being anatomical drawings from 19th-century medical texts — and will now, for the first time in years, be able to devote herself more fully to an art practice that has made her one of Ottawa's most imaginative artists during the past decade.

This year, expect to see Stelmackowich's work at Patrick Mikhail Gallery in Ottawa in a group show Jan. 10 to 31 called *The New* and again in a solo show in the fall. Stelmackowich will also be part of a nationally touring group exhibition opening in Toronto called *Book + Art*. In that show, books will be part of the medium and the message of the art. As well, she will be part of a five-year-long group exhibition, *Science in Art*, including such Canadian heavyweights as Edward Burtynsky, Catherine Richards and the three artists known as General Idea, being assembled by the gallery at the Université de Québec à Montréal for the federal Heritage Department's online Virtual Museum.

As a curator, Stelmackowich is planning to assemble a touring exhibition next year tentatively called *SKINS*. (Locations will likely include, among others, Halifax and

Ottawa). All the participating artists being lined up work with actual, imagined and representations of skins. "The exhibition will address the anxieties, pleasures and political histories related to the cultural objectification, adornment and fascination with skin," says Stelmackowich. "It will include multiple mediums, including animal pelts, digital prints, drawings and knit-works."

As well, Stelmackowich will be teaching an art history course at Carleton and lecturing elsewhere at such venues as New York's Museum of Modern Art. Scholarly journals such as the *University Art Association of Canada Journal* will also be publishing some of the results of Stelmackowich's aesthetic journeys into illustrated cadavers.

Clearly, Stelmackowich has little spare time between artistic autopsies.

"I don't watch television," she says.

Stelmackowich inevitably finds herself compared to Canada's most famous ghoulemeister David Cronenberg, the creator of such films as *Rabid*, *Crash*, *Shivers* and other gore-filled movies. But there is a big difference: Cronenberg attempts to creep you out whereas Stelmackowich's art is an amazingly gentle experience, although it's obvious she can appreciate the more sinister things in life.

The Art Gallery of Ontario staged an Andy Warhol exhibition this summer in Toronto, curated by Cronenberg. Stelmackowich visited the show.

"I liked best Warhol's car crashes and the electric chair," she says.

Since adolescence in the eastern Saskatchewan farming community of Melville, Stelmackowich has been interested in juxtaposing art and science, especially medical science. "Even in high school, I took biology classes and art classes at the same time. It was natural to combine these two."

Later at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, where she pursued fine arts, Stelmackowich dove into science, including biochemistry and anatomy, for her electives.

While doing her undergraduate work, she discovered the Mendel Art Gallery along the banks of the South Saskatchewan River in Saskatoon. She became a docent, volunteering many hours a week so she could be surrounded by everything from the Group of Seven to the edgy, feminist art that, many years later, is still informing her work. Disembodied limbs, encased in grotesquely stretched pantyhose, adorn the walls of her studio.

Stelmackowich sees her artistic forays into the world of medicine and science as "political art" but political art that is an esthetically pleasing experience. "Why does political art have to be ugly?" she asks.

Stelmackowich wants us to look at the human body and medical interventions in new ways and to ponder why we shudder at the thought of innards and operations.

Why are we so conditioned to squirm at the sight of a beating heart? How do the mores of 19th-century medicine still influence are own attitudes?

When asking such questions, the little shop of horrors suddenly becomes a salon for discussion about the juxtaposition of art, science, medicine and philosophy. The sounds of car crashes from Warhol and Cronenberg disappear. Violin music would be more appropriate in Stelmackowich's studio. And so would the scent of roses — funeral roses, that is.

More on our website: See more of Stelmackowich's art online. Go to ottawacitizen.com and follow the '10 to Watch' links in the Editor's Picks area.

