

PATRICK MIKHAIL GALLERY

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Cindy Stelmackowich

ARTIST STATEMENTS

Cindy Stelmackowich is an Ottawa-based artist, curator, and teacher. Born in Saskatchewan, Stelmackowich moved to Ottawa to pursue an M.A. after completing a B.A. and B.F.A. at the University of Saskatchewan. While completing a Ph.D. and teaching at Carleton University, her artwork and academic research has focused on themes related to medical science. In this work, she has questioned the methods and meanings of science; how science gets performed on the body; and how the languages of medical science operate. Stelmackowich's work often brings together diverse medical-related materials and found objects, most recently through digitally combining photographic images. Stelmackowich has exhibited across Canada in solo and group exhibitions, and has received numerous grants from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the City of Ottawa.

■ ***BLINDED BY SCIENCE series***

In her latest photography-based series, ***Blinded by Science***, figures from 19th-century anatomical atlases—displaying highly detailed renderings of the body's organs, muscles, and minute tissues—are magnified and contained. In these large chromogenic images printed on lustre photographic paper, colourful glass vessels, which also refer to the world of beauty, magnification, transparency, and fragility, both

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morph and contain these dissected cadavers. An odd kind of realism is the result, as is an odd kind of beauty.

The size of these images is in direct relation to the size of the human body. The inspiration for this size was generated from the fact that the 19th-century anatomical atlases were produced in a “life-sized” format so that the student of dissection could study the interior of the body according to the “real” proportions that they would actually see in the dissection theatre.

In each of these works, the Classical medical figure is represented as neither dead nor alive. Hovering between life and death, their dissected bodies are carved and opened-up for us, the viewer, to look as long or as intensely as we would like. It is this aesthetic and viewing/reading inter-relationship between the worlds of wonder of looking at the interior space of the body, and the world related to fictitious realisms that this series of works enters into.

■ ***SURGICAL INSTRUMENTS series***

Stelmackowich’s works have often utilized the tools and instruments integral to the practices of medical science. In one of these investigations, she has transformed surgical instruments into the unexpected, a chandelier. In this work, glass chandelier pieces along with strange and shiny stainless steel surgical instruments—scalpels, clamps, forceps, etc.—are strung individually from a steel armature from the ceiling to form a bulbous glass nest approximately 4-feet in diameter. The paradoxical relationship between the danger/fear/repulsion of the surgical instrument and the beauty/sparkle/decadence of the chandelier glass chards creates an enchanting, yet disturbing surreal result.

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Inside of a heart-shaped Pyrex vessel rests a piece of red wild grapevine that is metaphoric of bodily tissue.

Other works that have incorporated surgical instruments are individual glassworks that are suspended on the wall with dissection pins. In another work, a long stainless dissection table displays the full symbolic weight of these tools of the trade.

■ ***MEDICAL BOOKWORKS series***

A number of Stelmackowich's works have utilized new and old medical diagrams and scientific reference books. In this ongoing bookwork series, the artist has critiqued medicine's bodies of knowledge and the "authority" of medical science. Implying irony, humour, and discipline, selected medical books found in second-hand stores have become objects of scrutiny and critical attention. In *Diseases of the Eye*, congealed varnish appears to freeze the dated medical text into a kidney-shaped stainless medical basin. In *Lippincottes Quick Reference Book - Medicine and Surgery*, a large number of long, dissecting pins and/or glass pipettes are stuck into the thick medical dictionary, suggesting the methods of surgery that get performed on the body. The focus becomes the excesses that flow out and over its bindings. Its insides, the topic of the book, are literally expelled outside of itself.

Transparencies found inside of medical texts are also used. In, *SLICED*, the internal layers of male and female anatomical mannequins are positioned in a disjointed and mis-aligned pattern behind a light box. In *Froggie Boy*, the transparencies from the

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dissected frog and human body are combined to produce a hybrid creature that is amusing, startling, and foreboding all at the same time.

In the installation, *Suspending the Laws of Medical Practice*, Stelmackowich has experimented with combining the language of sculpture with the language of science. Pinned into the gallery wall are individual vintage test tubes, each containing the dictionary definition of a specific body part. These suspended, yet sinking, definitions of the body act as preserved scientific specimens that cast shadows similar to strands of DNA. In the companion work to this installation, entitled *Submerged*, one can peer through the large circular hole cut-out of a medical dictionary and into a large water-filled glass vessel that serves as the underbelly/underworld to the authoritative "truths" located in the dictionary. In this space below, viewers are presented with medical definitions not in their authoritative place, but rather, as suspended, floating fragments of text.

■ ***RETREAT FROM REASON series***

Retreat from Reason, utilizes a variety of Pyrex scientific devices and glasswares; graduated cylinders; an apothecary jar, etc. Placed inside of these apparatuses are living water plants that are known to be invasive. Kept alive with grow lights in the gallery, the viewer can examine the complexity and fragility of this sprouting and rhizomatic green life. These works, resting on a glass-tiled plinth or hanging from the wall, question the nature of scientific objectification. With their roots exposed, the relationship between science and nature is brought into strong parallel, even contradiction in the setting of a gallery. As these works are usually displayed in contrast to the

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objectified bodies on display in the scientific texts and diagrammed illustrations, this living set of plants is very different—it requires care, empathy, and a step-back from too much "rational" reasoning.

A current series in production that extends Stelmackowich's interest in living rhizomatic life as it related to scientific discourse involves working with mushroom substrates and compounds prepared with fungus material.