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Stripped to the core

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Richard Ehrlich reveals the profound beauty and complexity of the human body, stripped to its most basic neurological essence, through his artistically manipulated MRI and CT scan imagery.

By Melonie Magruder / Special to The Malibu Times

As evidenced by his new exhibition at the Craig Krull Gallery in Bergamot Station, "Anatomia Digitale," Malibu photographer Richard Ehrlich's thriving urology practice at UCLA provides him with endless opportunity to marvel at the profound beauty and complexity of the human body, stripped to its most basic neurological essence.

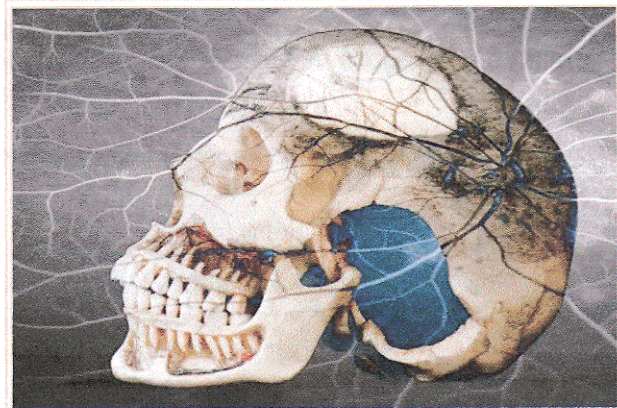
The images presented in the exhibit are inkjet-printed on large sheets of white paper and mounted with thumbtacks on the gallery walls, as if a brain surgeon had hurriedly clamped an X-ray onto a light box, anxious to diagnose a patient's source of particularly troublesome pathology.

Ehrlich manipulates imaging from medical MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) and CT (computed tomography) scans to highlight colors, shapes and textures, revealing a disquieting beauty in the road maps of modern medicine's most intimate information-gathering technology.

In an introduction to the show, Ehrlich wrote, "The images herein do not attempt to display anatomic idealization or pathology, but rather utilize modern digital photographic radiological and imaging technique as a springboard for artistic rendering. As such, they represent permutations... providing a constant source of intrigue and wonderment."

Consequently, a skull is not just a skull, but a pixilated deconstruction of man at his core. A chest X-ray reveals a golden muscle swimming in a sea of bright blue lung tissue, banded by blood-red ribs, like steel girders. A huge, red heart is a different sort of Valentine's Day card.

The endless miles of nerves, veins and arteries in a backbone form a shattered glass context in mapping the human condition. The retina of an eye looks like a nebula in space. A spinal X-ray reveals an impossibly long neck, rendered in pointillism. And a nude woman lying on her side in darkness is lit from within, like a ghost.



Malibu resident and photographer Richard Ehrlich's new exhibition, "Anatomia Digitale," artistically explores the human anatomy through his manipulated MRI and CT scans. The exhibition is on display at the Craig Krull Gallery at the Bergamot Station in Santa Monica. Pictured above: "Master Skull"

Ehrlich's photographs are unnerving, particularly an MRI image of the top of someone's head with two egg-shaped objects balanced above-eyeballs staring into an abyss. A bit disturbing-but, then again, mysteriously beautiful.

One project collaboration (with Nikita Leverov, Curt Apanovich and R. Mac Holbert) involves a video clip set to classical music showing swirling, colorful imagery that peels away the elements of physical humanity from skin to arterial systems to skeletal form to floating synapses in a cerebral cortex. We look much more complex from the inside than from the outside.

Ehrlich is not the first artist to attempt to distill the human form down to its most essential. Irish painter Francis Bacon's various heads have some of the same grotesquely fascinating appeal. But Ehrlich is perhaps the first to use dry, modern medical technology for such unscientific purpose. As one gallery visitor was overheard to say, "Maybe UCLA Medical is opening an art wing."

Ehrlich's "Anatomia Digitale" runs through Oct. 10 at the Craig Krull Gallery. But if you want to see a completely different side to his photography, his exhibit titled "The Presence of Absence" is running at the Laband Art Gallery at Loyola Marymount University Sept. 19 - Nov. 22.

As suggested by the show's title, this collection of photographs has as much impact in what it doesn't show as what it does.

Selected images include abandoned diamond mines in Namibia with decaying houses full of drifting sand dunes; graffiti-covered walls from the now-demolished Belmont Park in Los Angeles looking like a hallucinogenic Alice's wonderland; a deserted Cook County Hospital whose silhouetted bedsteads against a wall of blistering paint are particularly creepy and sad; a defunct sugar mill in Hawaii.

Also included are images from Ehrlich's exhibit last year of German archival documents as mute, mundane witness to the inhumane atrocities of the Holocaust. In the people-less images he shoots, Ehrlich finds the empty and futile beauty of human lives.

"Anatomia Digitale" is on exhibit at the Craig Krull Gallery through Oct. 10, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Avenue, Building B3, Santa Monica. More information can be obtained by calling 310.828.6410 or online at www.craigkrullgallery.com.

"The Presence of Absence" at the Laband Gallery is on exhibit Sept. 19 - Nov. 22. Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, Los Angeles. More information can be obtained by calling 310.338.2880 or online at cfa.lmu.edu/laband