

LAURA FERGUSON: The Visible Skeleton Series



A traveling exhibition

Original installation presented by the
National Museum of Health and Medicine, AFIP, Washington, DC

May 2004 - August 2005



LAURA FERGUSON: The Visible Skeleton Series

Traveling exhibition

Laura Ferguson, an artist with scoliosis, explores the connections between art and medicine through the imagery of her own unusual body. The multi-layered works on paper of *The Visible Skeleton Series* are based on medical images of her own anatomy, including x-rays and a 3D spiral CT scan. Working from inside out and outside in, Ferguson conveys the feeling of inhabiting inner space – kinesthetic, visceral, and emotional – and the way that personal identity and even consciousness are rooted in the experiences of the body. This unique visual autobiography finds beauty in an unusual anatomy, and demonstrates the healing power of art.

The exhibit premiered at the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington, DC; with the help of museum staff it was then adapted for a traveling exhibit format. Subsequent venues have included the National Institutes of Health and Smith Farm Center for Healing and the Arts.

In addition to original artworks from the series, the installation includes explanatory panels and a DVD/video documentary, that invite viewers to share in the artmaking process.

A smaller version of the exhibit, well-suited for university or medical center libraries or smaller galleries, is also available for traveling. It features limited edition prints in lieu of original artworks.

More about *The Visible Skeleton Series*
and the work of Laura Ferguson:
www.lauraferguson.net

The Visible Skeleton Series exhibition at
the National Museum of Health
and Medicine:
[www.nmhm.washingtondc.museum/
exhibits/skeleton/index.html](http://www.nmhm.washingtondc.museum/exhibits/skeleton/index.html)

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participation, please contact:

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What the installation includes

The installation parallels the learning-through-drawing process by which the artworks were made, telling the story of Laura Ferguson's journey and how she transformed her body's experiences into art.

There are two versions available for traveling, one with original artworks, and one with prints. Both versions include explanatory process panels and DVD documentary.



Artworks from The Visible Skeleton Series

Originals version:

36 original paintings and 4 digital inkjet prints.

Media for all original works: oils, bronze powder; charcoal, pastel pencil, and oil crayon on paper

or;

Prints version:

20 digital inkjet prints in lieu of original paintings.

- The prints are from limited editions, printed under the artist's supervision, on archival printmaking paper, and are extremely faithful to the originals in color, texture, and size.



All artworks (originals and prints) are framed and wired for wall hanging. Frame dimensions are 24" x 20" or 20" x 16" each. Frames are lightweight (thin, ivory metal with off-white mats) and protected by plexiglass.

Process panels [with both versions]

- 1 • The Visible Skeleton Series – introductory text panel with exhibit overview
- 2 • The floating colors process – the artistic technique includes the "floating colors" underlayers and the building up of the figurative image
- 3 • Visualizing the normal skeleton – anatomical source materials include historic medical illustrations (Albinus)
- 4 • Drawing from x-rays and A more dynamic view: the 3D scan – the artist's actual medical images are used as the basis for drawings
- 5 • Visualizing scoliosis – spine specimens from the museum's anatomical collection

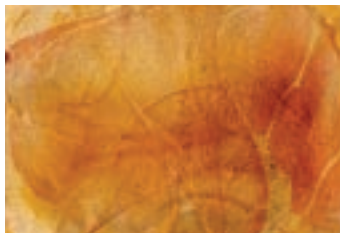


Views of the original installation of The Visible Skeleton Series at the National Museum of Health and Medicine

Documentary DVD [with both versions]

- a 15-minute documentary that takes a behind-the-scenes look at the artist and the making of The Visible Skeleton Series. It includes an animation of the 3D CT scan.

[View all artworks and process panels at www.lauraferguson.net, click on Traveling exhibit]



Ferguson uses the floating colors process (described on next page) to create the underlayers of a painting; bottom image shows a paper made with the process

Installation specifications

- Framed artworks are wired and ready for hanging
- Process panels are laminated large-format digital prints that can be easily mounted on walls or portable dividers
- Documentary can be provided in video or DVD format. Can be set up to run in continuous loop. Video or DVD player and monitor, or laptop computer, to be provided by venue.
- Wall labels for framed artworks can be provided either on disk in PDF format, or printed on card stock.
- Complete checklist of work

Linear feet required

- Originals version, 40 paintings: 160'
- Prints version, 20 prints: 80'
- Both versions, 5 process panels: 20' (each panel approximately 3'H x 4'W) (Venue may choose to not hang all artworks or panels, in case of space limitations.)

Publicity/educational materials

- Sample press release, brochure, postcard and poster
- Artist bio, statement, and photos
- Press clippings from previous venues
- Jpegs of all artworks and exhibit components
- Website, which includes above materials plus supplementary information

Materials available for purchase:

- Customized postcards and posters
- Booklet reprint of "The Visible Skeleton Series: The Art of Laura Ferguson" from the Spring 2004 issue of *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* (Johns Hopkins University Press)

Shipping and insurance:

Original version: Venue is responsible for cost of transportation, via professional art shipper. Reusable crates will be provided. Venue must provide insurance coverage.

Prints version: Shipping via Fedex Ground; cost is included in participation fee. Reusable crates will be provided.

Both versions: Venue must provide adequate security.

Participation fee:

There is a modest fee to cover administrative costs. Please inquire – we have some flexibility and will try to accommodate your budget.

About Laura Ferguson and The Visible Skeleton Series

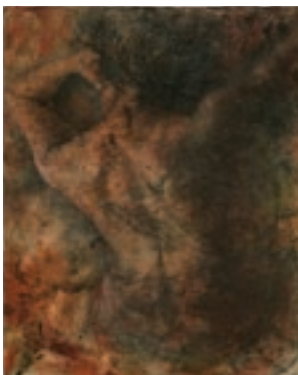
Laura Ferguson is a New York artist whose drawings, paintings, and artist's books have been exhibited widely and are part of numerous public and private collections. For the past fifteen years she has explored the connections between art and medicine in her unique visual autobiography, *The Visible Skeleton Series*.

Ferguson became interested in anatomy because of her own scoliosis, a curvature of the spine. Diagnosed in childhood, she had surgery and spent a year in a plaster body cast at age 13, then went on with life, thinking the experience was behind her. But eventually, degenerative changes began to cause pain and disability. Needing to be able to visualize what was happening inside her body, she began to make drawings from x-rays and the human skeleton, and found the imagery beautiful and visually compelling. Taking a scientifically rigorous approach to the depiction of anatomical structures, she developed collaborative relationships with orthopedists and radiologists, who helped her to have medical images made specifically for the purpose of making art. She studied anatomy from a dance perspective, with the focus on the biomechanics of the body in motion.

Using an original process, Ferguson begins to make her work by floating oil paints, mixed with bronze powders, on water. The drops of color spread out on the surface as if magnified under a microscope lens, forming patterns that echo the forms of nature. Then the floating image is transferred to paper, and the process repeated 10, 20, or 30 times, building up translucent layers of color and texture. This paper becomes the foundation on which the figurative image is drawn, with charcoal, pastel pencil, pastel, and oil crayon. The transparent layers suggest or reveal those aspects of life that lie beneath the surface.

The word most often used to describe Laura Ferguson's work is "beautiful." Yet, as medical ethicist/historian Alice Dreger has written, "Ferguson's self-portraits are exquisitely subversive." The body she portrays is softly voluptuous in the style of Titian or Degas, yet deformed by scoliosis: a flawed but perhaps more interesting kind of beauty. "Transparent Laura is revealed as a composite of sensitive, sensuous softness conflicted and molded by hard, implacably deforming bone," observes noted pathologist Dr. J. Bruce Beckwith. "She is able to express the inherently dichotomous nature of disease as something both lovely and horrific."

The unusual configurations of her inner space have challenged Ferguson to create visual balance and harmony out of asymmetry and physical differentness. In creating the portrait of one individual's inner body, she reminds us that we are all as unique on the inside as we are outside – and that each body has the potential for grace and beauty.



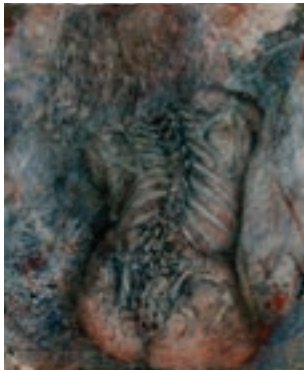
from top to bottom:
Crouching figure with visible skeleton
Skeleton study, profile view
Stretching/kneeling figure with visible skeleton
Back, viewed from above
Media for all works: oil paints, bronze powder, charcoal, pastel pencil, and oil



The audience for The Visible Skeleton Series

Ferguson's paintings resonate with dancers, movement practitioners, physical therapists, doctors, patients, and anyone for whom dealing with injury or illness has stimulated a heightened awareness of the body. For those with disabilities or unusual anatomies, they offer an occasion to see the less-than-perfect body represented in art; and for others, a chance to empathize and to gain a deeper understanding of how it feels to inhabit an unusual body.

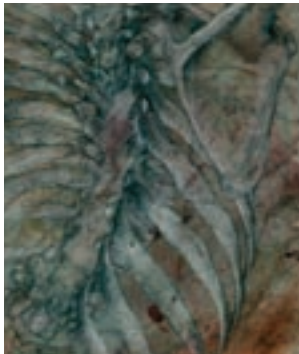
Doctors have embraced Ferguson's work for the insights it provides them into the feelings of their patients. Her work is recognized by those in the growing movement toward restoring the humanities to medical training, to counter medicine's clinical detachment and foster patient-doctor dialogue.



The response to The Visible Skeleton Series

These arresting and beautiful drawings of a woman's body through which the interior skeleton is visible represent the art and body of Laura Ferguson, a visual artist who has severe scoliosis. . . . Her striking figures, in motion or in other positions of daily life, emphasize how natural and human is the body and encourage greater appreciation of the variety and uniqueness of individual bodies.

- Felice Aull, Ph.D., M.A., Art Annotation in the "Literature, Arts and Medicine Database" (New York University School of Medicine)



Ferguson's self-portraits are exquisitely subversive – executed in a style of drawing similar to that found in many eighteenth-century anatomy texts while explicitly being authored by the 'patient' herself and containing a clear element of eroticism. People who see Ferguson's work are obviously drawn to it but also provoked by it. [It] raises a radical question: can a scoliotic skeleton be physically painful and gorgeous at the same time?

- Alice Domurat Dreger, Ph.D., historian of medicine and patient advocate, in *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal* (Harvard University Press)

Over the centuries, the link between anatomy and art has been a close and essential symbiosis, enhancing both art and medicine. But few artists have succeeded as well as Ferguson in depicting in a single image both the anatomy of the lesion and its impact upon the patient. Her marvelous figures bring life and emotion into the traditionally cold science of clinical anatomy.

- J. Bruce Beckwith, M.D., in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* (Johns Hopkins University Press)

from top to bottom:
3D spiral CT scan image of
Ferguson's skeleton
Balancing figure with visible skeleton
Ribs, slightly turned view

continues on next page . . .



A sampling of viewers' comments ...

from the exhibit guestbook:

From seeing the very first piece, I knew I was in the presence of something extraordinary. And your words about what you do are complex, unusual, yet unpretentious and absolutely to the point: like the art!

Absolutely fascinating. You have such imagination and skill. The exhibit showing your process and the video and actual skeletons are great.

Stunning work; self-revealing, artistic and medical/scientific all at once!

I am almost speechless in the presence of beauty and 'prahna' (life breath).

Your insights about the relationship between the body, beauty and pain are illuminating, both mentally and physically.

Thank you for sharing your powerful healing work – it is empowering and exquisite.

I'm amazed by your work. I've never seen anything remotely like it and it moves me and makes me feel quiet.

from people with disabilities or unusual anatomies:

Your pictures have helped me see how a body with scoliosis can be beautiful, and to become more accepting of my body ... I could never grasp how beauty could be intertwined with deformity, until I saw your paintings.

– A.B., Boulder, CO

Your work has made me aware of so many new feelings, although paralyzed and not an art connoisseur ... you have helped me have a better perception of my own body.

– M.C., Owings Mills, MD

I have to tell you how deeply exciting and beautiful I find your work ... My right arm and leg were amputated two years ago, and I'm just now developing a friendly relationship with my body. You have helped me feel beautiful. Thank you!

– M.H., email

from artists:

The works themselves are exquisitely beautiful. The original information they contain has opened up new ways of thinking about the human body to artists, doctors, physical therapists, and anyone else lucky enough to have seen them.

– Carol Rose Brown, Sante Fe, NM

You instilled my faith in the power of provocative and beautiful imagery.

– Carol McLellan, New York, NY

from doctors:

For us orthopaedic surgeons dealing with spinal deformities, your drawings and paintings go deep to our hearts. Thanks to you, our specialty becomes recognized as an art and not only as pure mechanics.

– Vincent Arlet, M.D.

Associate Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery, Division of Spine Surgery, University of Virginia Health Systems

It is accurate, precise, and compelling. ... There is skin on what I see as an x-ray, added surfaces that depict beauty, normal activity, normal motion.

This moves me beyond the technical spinal analysis and to the analysis of the person.

– David W. Polly, M.D.

Chief of Spine Service, Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, University of Minnesota, in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*



Public programs

These two programs were held at the National Museum of Health and Medicine. They are examples of programs that could be organized at future venues in connection with the traveling exhibit.

“Images of the Less-Than-Perfect Body”

co-sponsored by the National Coalition Against Censorship and in conjunction with VSA arts

In a culture that pressures people with unusual anatomies to hide or feel ashamed of their bodies, art is one of the few arenas in which the less-than-perfect body can be portrayed with its own beauty, grace, sensuality, or originality. This program, via a slide show, panel discussion, and audience forum, considers images of the less-than-perfect body in medical history and current artistic practice, as well as some recent instances of censorship.

Presenters:

- Laura Ferguson, artist
- Alice Domurat Dreger, Ph.D., medical historian/ethicist and author of *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and Future of Normal*
- Svetlana Mintcheva, Ph.D., Arts Advocacy Director for the National Coalition Against Censorship

“Body image and spinal deformity: a patient/doctor dialogue”

co-sponsored by the National Scoliosis Foundation

Body image is a major issue for people with spinal deformities – often a subtext in the decision on surgery, yet rarely discussed openly. With the growing acceptance of cosmetic surgery in our society, are patients under pressure to have surgery to look more “normal”? If so, how should the medical profession respond? How do visual images influence patients' self-perceptions? Could better images or visualization methods help?

Presenters:

- Laura Ferguson, artist
- Joseph P. O'Brien, National Scoliosis Foundation President and CEO, patient advocate and educator
- David W. Polly, Jr., M.D., primary author of the Spinal Appearance Questionnaire, currently Chief of Spine Service at the University of Minnesota

More program suggestions:

“Art and Healing”

A panel of artists and art therapists talks about the powerful impact of making art out of life experience, as a strategy for dealing with illness or disability

“The Floating Colors Process”

Hands-on artmaking activity

Artist presentation

The artist is available to give a presentation about her healing journey, her art-medicine collaborations and the process of making her work

“Curvatures”

Performance of a dance piece inspired by, and featuring projected images from, *The Visible Skeleton Series*, choreographed by Nusha Martynuk of Oberlin University



Laura Ferguson: brief resume

Selected exhibitions

National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD
Smith Farm Center for the Healing Arts
Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL
National Museum of Health and Medicine, Washington, DC
Museum of Science, Boston, MA
Noho Gallery, New York, NY
Woodward Gallery, NYC
Cornell University Medical Library, NYC
Edward Hopper House, Nyack, NY
Gallery 100, Saratoga Springs, NY
Ellipse Arts Center, Arlington, VA
Penn State University, Hershey, PA
Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI
Dance Theater Workshop Gallery, NYC
Center for Book Arts, NYC
Snug Harbor Cultural Center, NYC
The United Nations, NYC
Lincoln Center Cork Gallery, NYC
Nexus Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
Brunnier Art Museum, Ames, IA

Public and corporate collections

National Library of Medicine
National Museum of Health and Medicine
American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
New York University Medical Center
Medtronic Sofamor Danek
Zimmer, Inc.
VSA arts

Selected public presentations

Chicago Cultural Center
National Museum of Health and Medicine
Michigan State University
Penn State University
The Cooper Union
College Art Association
Society for Disability Studies
National Scoliosis Foundation
Hibbs Society

Commissions

American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
Scoliosis Research Society

Selected bibliography

Alice Domurat Dreger, Ph.D., *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal* (Harvard University Press, 2004)
Bettyann Holtzmann Kevles, *Naked to the Bone: Medical Imaging in the Twentieth Century* (Rutger's University Press, 1997)
Alice Domurat Dreger, Ph.D., ed., "The Visible Skeleton Series: The Art of Laura Ferguson," a special section in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, Spring 2004 (Johns Hopkins University Press)
Felice Aull, Ph.D., M.A., Art Annotation, "Literature, Arts & Medicine Database" (New York University School of Medicine)
The New York Times, The Washington Post, Yale Medicine, Washington City Paper, US Art, The Lancet, Rheumawire, Conscience, Arthritis Today

Education, study, and medical collaborations

Anatomy study, medical research, and collaborative work with medical imaging, 1992-present: Weill Medical College of Cornell University, New York University Medical Center, and Irene Dowd Studio, in New York, NY; the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology and Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in Washington, DC
Graphic design, 1975-78: Parsons School of Design and the School of Visual Arts, New York, NY
B.A., 1969: Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
1965-67: Brown University, Providence, RI



March 2005

Dear Colleague:

Even when displayed amid the most exceptional anatomy collection in the world, **Laura Ferguson: The Visible Skeleton Series** stands out as arresting, engaging, and inspiring. Heralded fine artist Laura Ferguson worked with the staff of the National Museum of Health and Medicine to assemble and present the show, which you will see described in this package. Due to popular demand, we've decided to hold it over through the summer of 2005. The physical body of work itself is uniquely powerful and the menu of associated public programs such as lectures, performances, and other participatory events is broadly popular. We have been delighted to receive visitors from many communities: some are drawn to the show due to the media attention it received regarding its artistic virtues; some are compelled to visit because the topic of skeletal form touches them in a personal way; still others bring with them the perspectives of clinicians, researchers, patients and their families, and patient advocates. And groups of art, science, or medical students from all ages and levels have responded not only with appreciation, but with the promise to return, with colleagues, for future visits to the show and to our permanent exhibitions.

The National Museum of Health and Medicine is proud and pleased to have worked with Laura Ferguson to realize this physical expression of her visual autobiography. We are equally proud to be able to share this show with other venues which will, of course, place a special stamp on any installation they host. And we are just as confident that the enduring advantages we have enjoyed in having the show here will be shared and multiplied wherever it travels.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adrienne Noe".

Adrienne Noe, Ph.D.
Director,
National Museum of Health and Medicine, AFIP



Corporate sponsors

The Visible Skeleton Series exhibition at the National Museum of Health and Medicine has been supported by:

Siemens Medical Solutions USA, Inc.,
maker of the 3D medical imaging system used for Laura Ferguson's scan

Medtronic Sofamor Danek,
maker of medical devices used in spinal fusion surgery

About the National Museum of Health and Medicine

The National Museum of Health and Medicine was established in 1862 when U.S. Army Brig. Gen. William Hammond, the U.S. Army Surgeon General, issued orders that directed all Union Army medical officers "to collect, and to forward to the office of the Surgeon General all specimens of morbid anatomy, surgical or medical, which may be regarded as valuable; together with projectiles and foreign bodies removed, and such other matters as may prove of interest in the study of military medicine or surgery." Today, the museum is an element of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, a tri-service Army, Navy, and Air Force agency of the Department of Defense with a threefold mission of consultation, education, and research. The museum inspires interest in personal and public health and promotes understanding of medicine, past, present, and future, with a special emphasis on American military medicine. As the nation's museum of health and medicine since 1862, it aggressively identifies, collects, and preserves important resources to achieve a broad agenda of innovative exhibitions, educational programs, and scientific, historical and medical research.

The museum's more than 24 million specimens and artifacts were the first in the country to be registered by the U.S. Department of the Interior as a National Historic Landmark because of its "exceptional value in commemorating and illustrating the history of the United States."

National Museum of Health and Medicine, AFIP

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Quotes from Dr. Alice Dreger; Dr. J. Bruce Beckwith, and Dr. David W. Polly are from the Spring 2004 issue of *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press, used with permission.

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