

THE ANATOMICAL VENUS TAKES US BACK TO A BIZARRE ERA WHEN DISSECTIBLE ANATOMICAL WAX MODELS OF WOMEN MADE REALISTIC GORE BOTH POPULAR AND GORGEOUS

# SLASHED BEAUTIES

BY APRIL SNELLINGS

**O**UR LOVE AFFAIR WITH BEAUTIFUL WOMEN HAS NEVER REQUIRED US TO KEEP THEM INTACT.

Horror movies catch the brunt of criticism for their preoccupation with dismembered women, but it's a morbid fascination that stretches beyond the borders of art and popular entertainment – after all, aspiring actress Elizabeth Short, a.k.a. the Black Dahlia, never garnered much attention until her bisected corpse was discovered in a vacant Los Angeles lot; now she's an indelible part of dark American history. From fairy tales to film, our collective dreams run red with the blood of lovely women.

But that strange enchantment hasn't always come with such grisly associations. A new book by Morbid Anatomy Museum co-founder Joanna Ebenstein explores a tradition that used lifelike wax effigies of carefully mutilated women to teach anatomy to the general public. In *The Anatomical Venus: Wax, God, Death & the Ecstatic* (out now from Distributed Art Publishers), Ebenstein traces the history of the uncanny wax women whose reign once stretched from the medical museum to the fairground.

"Anatomical Venus" is essentially a catchall term used to describe a certain type of incredibly detailed, anatomized wax model that rose to popularity in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Sometimes known as Slashed Beauties or Dissected Graces, these astonishing waxworks

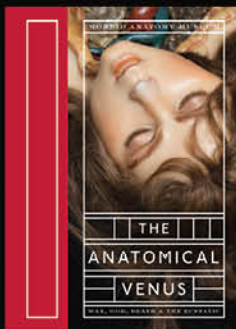
have two defining characteristics: they're modelled in the shape of beautiful, alluringly posed young women, and their bodies open to show viewers what their insides looked like. Some are dissectible, with realistic organs that can be removed, examined and reinstalled. Other, static models are forever in the throes of deconstruction, entrails spilling from their torsos.

Whatever their state of anatomization, they usually appear to be enjoying it. Today it seems like a shocking juxtaposition of death and eroticism; to their original audience, though, they had a very different reception.

"What interests me about [the Anatomical Venus], among many other things, is how, when people look at it now, it looks utterly bizarre to us," Ebenstein says. "But a little over 200 years ago, that's not what people thought at all. They thought, 'This is amazing. It's the best way to teach anatomy I've ever seen and I want to order some for my museum.' I think there's something really interesting in looking at that and kind of meditating on how much we've changed over the last 200-plus years to render this thing that was once

seen as just a beautiful, perfect teaching object, completely bizarre to the contemporary eye."

Ebenstein has long been captivated by the Venus and her sisters, but her research



began in earnest in 2007. She was working on a university exhibition spotlighting artifacts found in medical museums, and her work took her to the famed La Specola, or the Museum for Physics and Natural History, in Florence, Italy. The 226-year-old museum houses one of the largest and best-known wax anatomical collections in the world, and it was there that Ebenstein encountered sculptor Clemente Susini's original Anatomical Venus – a stunning creation that dates back to sometime around 1780 and remains the most famous specimen of its kind.

"What you see when you walk into this room is a life-size wax woman who's kind of hyper-perfect and highly idealized," explains Ebenstein. "You can see a seam that goes along her side and her breastplate, and you can lift this breastplate off and dissect her into seven layers that are perfectly rendered. By perfect, I don't mean lifelike, although it *is* lifelike, but it's hyper-real in the sense that they're more beautiful than lifelike, more perfect. There's no blood. There's something deeply, deeply uncanny about these things. It's hard to express how powerful they are."

So began what Ebenstein has described as a "near-obsession" with these remarkable creations. She continued her visits to Europe's best-known medical museums, where she encountered wax-collection curators who enthusiastically recommended books, articles and other resources.

"As I was travelling I was ordering books on Amazon," Ebenstein says. "I came home to tons of boxes, and the curators were giving me articles I would then print out and read. That's when I became kind of immersed in this material. So I'd say since 2007 I've been studying it, in my way, pretty much full-time."

Today the Venuses – especially the dissectible, or "demountable," ones – seem like an elaborate game of *Operation* re-imagined for serial killers, but they were actually an attempt to remove the spectre of death from the study of anatomy. When the first Venuses were created in the late 18th century, studying or teaching anatomy meant procuring and dissecting human cadavers. There were legal and ethical concerns



**Mech And Monsters:** Up close with a Baron of Hell, and (top) an onslaught of Hell knights.

as well as practical ones; corpses for dissection were hard to come by, and they rotted quickly and dramatically.

The general public certainly had a morbid interest in the subject; public dissections, usually of executed criminals, were popular events at anatomical theatres and even at some pre-Lent festivities. The Venuses, however, marked a conscious effort to associate anatomical instruction with life rather than death. Many scholars, including Ebenstein, be-

lieve the Venus marked a turning point in how we depict human anatomy.

"All the things we take for granted now about the way we present anatomy – for instance, the fact that the person doesn't look dead – that was a debate," she explains. "That was something people discussed and made a decision about. Otherwise, how do you get people to deal with human anatomy, which is, of course, taught with dead bodies?"

It was an



overwhelmingly successful ploy, and the Venus became a popular attraction. Her appeal extended far beyond the realm of scientific study and medical training; Ebenstein says it's important to note that these models were created, not to train doctors, but to instruct the public about the human body.

"We think now about anatomical exhibitions as being for specialists and medical students, but this was for the general public. This was created to be a centrepiece for one of the first public science museums in the world. So this was to seduce and instruct men, women and children from all classes, and I think that's a really important thing to think about."

The creation of an Anatomical Venus was a lengthy, expensive and sometimes unpleasant process. Their original makers at La Specola hoped to create a wax "encyclopaedia" of the human body that would someday render actual dissection unnecessary. To that end, the Venuses were painstakingly crafted by a wax artist, or ceroplastician, working in tandem with an anatomist. Each component needed to be as accurate as possible, so the Venuses' organs and limbs were modelled from actual body parts procured from a nearby hospital. Sometimes the artists would make casts of the part; in other cases, he would sculpt the copy freehand. Since the body parts decayed quickly, fresh ones were constantly needed. In some instances, parts were harvested from more than 200 cadavers to produce one anatomical model. The process could have taken as long as two years to complete, but it was time well spent.

"They're still seen as anatomically accurate," Ebenstein points out. "They're still used in books on anatomy – the *Eyewitness* book on the body actually uses the Anatomical Venus to show the internal structure."

The Venuses and other anatomical models remained popular attractions at museums and fairgrounds well into the 19th century, when exploitation and prudishness finally conspired to banish them into the shadows of history. On the one hand, unscrupulous "doctors" began to open anatomical museums that were designed to frighten rather than instruct.

"They'd create this kind of medical chamber of horrors," Ebenstein explains. "A guy would go in there and see all of these [models of] syphilitic genitals, and this was a time when no one really knew how you got syphilis exactly, except that you get it from sex, and nobody knew how to cure it. ... So you'd go into this chamber of horrors and there'd be someone there to say, 'Oh, would you like to see the doctor? Are you worried about yourself?' And then this quack doctor would prescribe these usually mercury-based cures."

The final nails in the Venuses' rosewood-and-glass coffins were a pair of laws passed on two continents. The British Obscene Publications Act of 1857, along with its eventual American



*Mech And Monsters: Up close with a Baron of Hell, and (top) an onslaught of Hell knights.*

counterpart, the Comstock Law of 1873, ultimately closed many anatomical museums on the grounds that their contents were supposedly pornographic. It's an allegation that seems especially ironic when Ebenstein points out the secret that lies behind the Venuses' ecstatic expressions.

"I think that language that many people see as erotic could also be described as the ecstasy of the saint," Ebenstein explains. "Since the reception to her at the time did not interpret her as erotic, my feeling is that she was seen more as this language of sainthood and martyrdom."

Many of the Venuses are still on display in museums around the world, and their legacy lives on in pop culture. Ebenstein sees their shadows in unexpected places, whether it's the popularity

of the "sawing a woman in half" magic trick (which, incidentally, was developed at the height of the women's suffrage movement) or the obsession with Laura Palmer and her corpse that shaped the narrative of *Twin Peaks*. And while it's tempting to think of the Anatomical Venus in terms of gory horror imagery and our tendency to fetishize lovely dead women, Ebenstein warns that such readings are probably retroactive.

"I do think there's a direct relationship between the rise in women's power and the desire to dismember them," Ebenstein allows. "I don't think the Venus was seen that way. However, I think that, today, part of why she makes us uneasy is how she reads. Our culture has changed so much that that's one of the lenses through which we see her." 🍷