

In October of 1999 I had just moved to Colorado after a lifetime on the east coast. I left behind the places and geography that were familiar to me. Above all, I left behind all the things I had chosen to photograph. It was an unfathomable landscape. In some sense, I felt unable to see.

In the midst of these adjustments, I read the following headline in the local newspaper: “Hundreds of Skeletons Found at State Hospital.” I began to experience a feeling I often have in the presence of a possible new subject. I call it lust because I can’t think of another word to describe the mixture of desire, anticipation, and fear that the possibility of a photograph inspires.

According to the newspaper article, a graveyard had been unearthed on the grounds of the Colorado Mental Health Institute. It was the second time this had occurred. In 1992, the first graveyard was discovered during an excavation conducted by prison inmates, under the supervision of county and state officials. They were breaking ground for an addition to the hospital for the criminally insane. A century ago, the facility was called the Colorado Insane Asylum, and the people who were buried on these grounds were those whose bodies had gone unclaimed and their burials unrecorded. They were likely buried there to save money because the city charged for burial in its cemetery. As I read the article, I became increasingly preoccupied with who these people were. Michael Hoffman, a forensic anthropologist at Colorado College, who is studying the remains, offered the beginning of an answer. They were mostly males, and many of them had suffered from syphilis, a disease whose complications can include dementia and paralysis. It made sense they would have ended up at the asylum or gone unclaimed after their deaths as a result of anonymity or family shame. To the anthropologist, however, the bones told much more, about lives that were difficult, dangerous, and full of pain. I imagined their lives in that unfathomable landscape, imagined them as cowboys and prospectors; imagined their labor, and their whorehouse pleasures. In my mind, they were very far from home. I wanted to see them.

I was taken to a locked room, lined with long cardboard boxes, each filled with the meticulously cleaned and catalogued remains of a single human being. Within each box lay a smaller box containing the skull of the person. Some of the skulls were nearly intact. Many, however, had been damaged during excavation. A few had been taped or glued back together by Professor Hoffman and his students. I found this very poignant. With some of the other specimens, it was possible to look inside. These objects, with their dark hollows, seemed to me to be reliquaries, memorial vessels.

Professor Hoffman allowed me to spend the better part of a year in his laboratory. I worked with my 8 x 10 camera and available light, from a row of windows and overhead fluorescent fixtures. It seemed right to me that the skulls should be set on their boxes, that they should not be removed from the context in which I had encountered them and that ordinary cardboard should form their pedestals. It took me a long time to grasp fully what was in front of me. I grew up in a Catholic culture in which viewing and being in the presence of the dead at wakes was expected, and I had spent considerable time looking at skeletal remains in the catacombs of Rome and Palermo. This was familiar territory. And yet most of the early pictures I made in Dr. Hoffman’s lab were disappointing, pictures a tourist might take. The more time I spent with these objects, however, the more their individuality began to assert itself. Paradoxically, the skulls became more human, more moving as my photographs became more formal, more precise. Or perhaps it was the other way around.

Andrea Modica
Manitou Springs, Colorado
Spring, 2001

Human Being

Photographs by Andrea Modica

Anthropological Descriptions by J. Michael Hoffman, MD, PhD

March 5 – May 23, 2015

Opening Reception

Thursday, March 5 from 4:00 - 7:00 PM.

“Unearthed: The Photograph as Evidence and Elegy”

A conversation with Exhibition Curator, Simon Zalkind and Eric Paddock, Curator of Photography, Denver Art Museum
6:00 – 6:45 PM

The Art Gallery

Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities
University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus
13080 East 19th Avenue, Aurora, Colorado 80045
303.724.3994
Map and directions at: www.coloradobioethics.org

Gallery Hours

9:00am - 5:00pm, Monday - Friday, free and open to the public

University of Colorado
Center for Bioethics and Humanities, B137
13080 East 19th Avenue
Aurora, Colorado 80045



#20 Male, 61 Years Old

Lateral view of right side of cranium resting on its base. This is one of two examples of individuals who had been autopsied. The top of the skull has been very carefully and neatly sawed off to allow removal of the brain. The interior of the brain case showed no abnormalities.

Andrea Modica, *Human Being: #20 Male, 61 years*, 2000
platinum/palladium print
Denver Art Museum: A. E. Manley Photography Collection, 2014.230
Photograph Courtesy of the Denver Art Museum; © Andrea Modica

Introduction and Acknowledgements

"Ye hasten to the dead! What seek ye there..." – Percy Bysshe Shelley

In 1993 prison inmates breaking ground for a new hospital wing on the grounds of the Colorado Mental Health Institute discovered the skeletons of 100 people buried there in a mass grave at least a century before. In her essay that accompanies this exhibition, Andrea Modica recounts the story of these human remains – how she came to know of them and their mute history – the ignominious and irretrievable erasure of their lives, the pathos and degradation of the conditions under which they lived, the poignant anonymity of their death and burial. Modica also describes the startling individuality – the human being - that she experienced in her encounter with these skulls and her photographs function as an elegiac lament for each of them. Although one might see them as a series of uninflected images of objects arranged in an arbitrary sequence and devoid of personal commentary, the contemplative imagination that Modica brings to these bones, her probing of the multiplicity of the “texts” inscribed on their surface provides us with a sense of the mystery and inexpressible depth of the human psyche. These are not “remains” – they are portraits.

Photography, perhaps more than any other medium has the capacity to function simultaneously as art and as document – as “fact” and as its creative manipulation. Modica’s collaboration with forensic anthropologist Dr. Michael Hoffman provides a dramatic counterbalance to the work’s austere beauty and aesthetic formality. Dr. Hoffman reconstructs a physical and medical history for each of these “specimens” and his forensic descriptions inventory their lesions, abscesses, diseases and skeletal abnormalities. His participation in this project, while it may not enrich our aesthetic delectation does inform our encounter with this work as “evidence” and historical document. Oddly, it also enforces the moral and ethical dimension of Modica’s pictures – her sensitivity to what is broken, rejected, outcast. For me that has always been a central and unifying element of her work. Though it may sound old-fashioned, Modica is an artist for whom beauty and empathic responsiveness are inseparable.

The photographs that comprise *Human Being* have rich and varied art-historical associations. The remembrance of death as a recurring theme and motif in the *Vanitas* paintings which proliferate in 17th-18th century Europe and perhaps more immediately the *memento mori* (“remember death”) tradition that became especially widespread

as the advent of photography made pictures of the dead – peacefully composed on their death-bed or coffin – easily available to grieving families as a keepsake and memorial. Although the association is not an immediately obvious one, Modica’s skulls also recall desert and wilderness landscapes – traditional sites of vision and revelation, whose desolation evoke that which is both ancient and timeless and whose vast distances and severe minimalism suggest the essential solitude, interiority and mystery of human life. In the face to face proximity of Modica’s pictures we recognize our own finitude. Finally, in our death-averse culture Modica’s pictures assertively call our attention to life’s transience and to death’s inevitability. They make explicit human limitation while they hint at its transcendence.

When I initially contacted Andrea Modica I was hoping to secure an earlier series of photographs titled *Treadwell*. After I described the mission and purpose of the Fulginiti Center to her she strongly encouraged me to consider exhibiting *Human Being* instead. Andrea is a gracious and generous collaborator and getting to know her has been a terrific experience for me. We quickly discovered many places, people and experiences that we had in common – we’re both from Brooklyn! Fortunately, the portfolio was owned by a local collector – Alan

Manley – who graciously agreed to lend the works to us. However, in a further act of generosity, Mr. Manley gifted Modica’s *Human Being* to the Denver Art Museum – encouraging the Museum to honor his commitment to this exhibition. Eric Paddock, Curator of Photography at the Museum and a scholar/historian of tremendous insight and erudition was happy to do so and has been a staunch and indispensable ally in his support for this project as well as in his guidance through the Museum’s rigorous and demanding loan process. His Curatorial Assistant, Micah Messenheimer also provided prompt and invaluable assistance to me. I’m grateful to both of them. As always, I have the good fortune to work with Dr. Therese Jones, Associate Director of the Fulginiti Center for Bioethics and Humanities and Director of the Arts and Humanities in Healthcare Program. Whereas I am habitually predisposed to respond to any perceived obstacle or set-back with a groan of deflation, Dr. Jones remains cheerfully undaunted and her intelligence and humor always lead to the creative solutions that elude me.

Simon Zalkind, Curator

C18 Male, 36 Years Old

Lateral view of right side of cranium resting on its base. There is extensive damage to the brain case and facial skeleton around the eye orbit. Given the presence of both light and dark broken edges of bone, damage is probably both old (possible collapse of the wooden coffin over time) and recent (excavation). The dark edges are the same color as the surrounding bone, which indicates some amount of time passed after the damage for the soil staining to darken the edge.

Andrea Modica, *Human Being: C18 Male, 36 years*, 2000
platinum/palladium print
Denver Art Museum: A. E. Manley Photography Collection, 2014.230
Photograph Courtesy of the Denver Art Museum; © Andrea Modica

A14 Male, 56 Years Old

Vertical and slightly posterior view of cranium resting on its side. Note the large extra bones in the lamboid suture (running more or less vertically on the left side of the photograph). These large extra bones (ossicles) may indicate development disturbance (with accompanying mental retardation), or be nothing more than normal variants.

Andrea Modica, *Human Being: A14 Male, 56 years*, 2000
platinum/palladium print
Denver Art Museum: A. E. Manley Photography Collection, 2014.230
Photograph Courtesy of the Denver Art Museum; © Andrea Modica