

Lifelike poses exposing specially preserved corpses and body parts are used to educate and fascinate visitors at Body Worlds 3, the third installment of a popular global exhibit, visiting Portland for the first time, now until October 7.



Art, Anatomy and Controversy

Body Worlds visits OMSI

BY SARAH BLOUNT
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Take a moment to thank the dearly departed who were willing to donate their bodies to science. Their ultimate post-mortem sacrifice – combined with medical breakthroughs that actually allow scientists to preserve bodies with plastic – brings us the immensely popular traveling exhibition Body Worlds, a fascinating glimpse into the inner-workings of the human machine.

The folks at Body Worlds have brought the third installment of the exhibit to Portland for the first time, appearing at Oregon Museum of Science and Industry until Oct. 7. This has made the folks at OMSI

very happy, as museum president Nancy Stueber has worked for years to bring the high-profile exhibit to the Rose City.

Described as “a towering achievement in the field of anatomical science and an unprecedented gaze at humanity,” Body Worlds uses real bodies to reveal anatomical snapshots of everyday movements – walking, dancing and even skateboarding.

Much more than just formaldehyde, Body Worlds creator Dr. Gunther von Hagens invented “Plastination” in 1977 to halt the decomposition of the body and preserve it forever. First presented in Tokyo in 1995, von Hagens has taken his bodies on the road to promote his technique and teach the living about what’s really going on under our skin.

But you may also find Body Worlds 3...gross. The kind of gross you’ll find in those graphic anti-smoking ads. Displays of healthy organs and various body parts are compared side-by-side with those wrought

with tumors, tar and arthritis, and you may seriously regret that week of exercise you skipped or those doughnuts and cigarettes you recently indulged in.

But on the other hand, Body Worlds shows us just how beautiful and functional our bodies are. For example, “The Archer” features a woman with nearly every muscle flexed, having just released an arrow from her bow. She looks like the picture of health as she leans back with a determined look of concentration, except that she also has her brain sitting atop her head. Many of the bodies are manipulated in a way so visitors can see how muscles work but also get the most unencumbered view.

Body Worlds, to date, has attracted 22 million visitors worldwide, with another 400,000 expected at the Portland exhibit. But not everyone is as excited as these millions, or as happy to see the exhibit as Stueber of OMSI. Body Worlds critics run the gamut from religious groups who feel the displays denigrate human life, to ethics groups who

question whether donors are always generously willing to give their bodies to this form of science, education and entertainment, as von Hagens says they are.

At a press conference at the opening of the exhibit last week, von Hagens fielded questions of whether Body Worlds is sensational or disrespectful.

“Sensational? Yes!” he said, adding, “we are grasped by our senses, and this transforms into a deep interest in our bodies.”

As for claims of disrespect, von Hagens believes it would be highly disrespectful not to have these bodies on display.

“I’m doing this for an educational benefit,” he said repeatedly.

Whether Body Worlds 3 is appealing, artistic, educational or abhorrent is in the eye of the beholder. Take a visit and you may find it to be all of the above.

Body Worlds 3 will be featured at OMSI, 1945 S.E. Water Ave. through Oct. 7. For more information visit www.oms.org.