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Wellesley's 'Body' also has a brain

By CHRISTINE TEMIN. 1994

Review of *The Body As Measure*, The Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, Sep 23 – Dec 18, 1994. Refers to O'Grady's first exhibition of *Miscegenated Family Album* as "the most extraordinary work in the show."

WELLESLEY — "Not another show about the body!" will doubtless be some people's reaction to "The Body as Measure," which opens today at Wellesley College's Davis Museum. Theme shows about the human body have sprouted up nearly everywhere in recent seasons; in the Boston area, the Museum of Fine Arts' "Figuring the Body" and MIT's "Corporal Politics" come to mind. So Wellesley's show, when it was announced, seemed superfluous.

It's not. that's partly because curator Judith Hoos Fox has taken an original tack. Unlike other "body" shows, hers doesn't deal with functions and fluids; there's no blood or urine. It's not a messy exhibition. Nor is it aggressive or angry: The politics here are subtler. Finally, the show succeeds because of the talent of its curator. "The Body as Measure" is, in fact, a perfect example of curatorial intelligence. Fox has pulled together nine artists from the United States, Canada and Germany: They weren't an obvious, easy-to-identify group. She's selected pieces that date from 1963 to 1993, editing superbly to create a gallery where works connect visually and philosophically.

You hear one work before you see it — before you even enter the gallery, in fact. The sound of the artist's shoes walking endlessly back and forth are part of Denise Marika's travels between two bathroom medicine chests, her blurry form

appearing inside them, on a wax shape that looks like a sink. Her body is measuring both time and space; she's a human clock.

The first work you actually see is Canadian artist Micah Lexier's "Book Sculptures: Three Generations (Female)." which is also about measuring [see photo]. Lexier makes stacks of fake "books" out of wood (which is of course the raw material of books), and on the stacked spines he prints photographs of three generations of women standing back-to-back as if to see who is taller. The lines between the books divide the stack into even units of measurement; the curving spines make the books look as if they've been printed on Venetian blinds.

The theme of family relationships is also addressed by Elizabeth Cohen and Lorraine O'Grady. Cohen's "Flashpoint" is a humming horizontal installation whose main elements are a row of hundreds of toe tags — the kind used in a morgue — and a row of repeating, alternating photographs of a beauty salon chair and a doctor's examining table. On some of the tags is text (the written word is another important theme in the show) about an adolescent brother and sister. He is sick; she is well. He is linked to the doctor's office; she to the beauty shop. But as the text progresses, the siblings exchange identities. She starts to

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sound like a hypochondriac; he begins to like having his hair done. Cohen has thought through details that reinforce the eeriness of "Flashpoint," from the fact that the examining table and the chair are unoccupied to the color of the frames — the awful aqua common to both beauty shops and hospitals.

O'Grady's "Miscegenated Family Album" is the most extraordinary work in the show, a series of photographs of Egyptian sculpture juxtaposed with old photos of O'Grady's own

family [see photo]. Her sister, Devonia, a beautiful African-American woman who died young, is twinned with Nefertiti. Devonia's daughter Candace is paired with Nefertiti's daughter Ankhesenpaaten, Devonia's husband with Nefertiti's, and so on. The parallels extend to poses and facial expressions: When Devonia is in a celebratory mood, so is Nefertiti. That all of these correspondences are coincidental is astonishing. Spanning many centuries, "Family Album" makes Nefertiti's family seem oddly contemporary, and O'Grady's seem something like a period piece. It's a startling and haunting work.

Renee Green also links two women of African origins from different eras: the celebrated performer Josephine Baker and Saartjie Baartman, an early-19th-century South African servant whose master sent her to London to be displayed as a curiosity in Piccadilly Circus. Green makes chilling points about black women being treated as objects, even spectacles. For extra punch, she includes toy jungle animals in her installation, and period texts that are horrifying. ("The dance of the Negresses is incredibly indecent," begins one.)

Robert Morris and the German artist Franz Erhard Walther both address the absent body. In this show, they let other people participate in their art. Morris collaborated with a blind woman, who wishes to be known only as A.A., on lithographs called "Blind Time III." A.A.'s inked hands moved over the surface, resulting in abstractions that seem to have poured directly from her inner being.

Walther's corner of the gallery features a giant wooden shelf structure holding folded canvas. The fabric is inert, but its potential is indicated in photos showing people activating the cloth in odd rituals. In one photo, people are sandwiched between two huge fabric rectangles, lying on a lawn. In another, two people stretch a huge band of cloth between them, looping it over their heads: They look like a human tennis net.

Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler add humor to the show, in their delightful "The Wellesley Method," which the college commissioned in 1990. The artists made up a zany set of rules and then followed them as rigorously as research scientists. First.

they collected eyeglasses from residents of the town, giving them gift certificates for new ones. They hung the glasses at the eye level of the erstwhile wearers, and arranged them according to where the donors lived, whether Wellesley Hills or nearer to Natick. On the lenses of the glasses are words that describe some aspect of the donor: "seed" and "sower" for a gardener, for instance. The words are all taken from a list of 365, compiled by the artists using the letters in the words "The Wellesley Method" (which is the college's system to teach art). Ericson and Ziegler have created a portrait of the community, and also a visually stunning piece. All those eyeglasses facing you look like an advancing army, albeit a friendly one.

The strengths of this show don't end with the contents of the gallery. The ancillary programming is a model that every other museum in the area should look at closely. Wellesley professors from several departments have written essays about aspects of the show, available as handouts. They bring perspectives other than straight art history: Carol Dougherty, for example, from the department of Greek and Latin, starts her essay on O'Grady with Thucydides. Through November, there will be lectures and films related to "The Body as Measure" (call 283-2051 for information). And the show comes with a fine catalog whose pages are held together with ordinary staples, a touch of whimsy intended to reflect the element of metallic precision and repetition in the show.