Linda Duval: Resonating Images

[Exhibition essay: *Linda Duvall: Bred in the Bone*. Rosemont Art Gallery, Regina, 2004.]

A big part of the artist's job is to make beautiful things, or to find in familiar things something charming, strange or otherwise worthy of contemplation and share it with others. When an artist drags a fragment of the world into an empty room and calls it *art*, she is asking us to see the object not only as it is, but also as it might be. Meditating on such transformed things can transform us. The experience awakens our imagination and enlarges our Being-with-the-world.

In her exhibition, "Bred in the Bone," Linda Duvall conflates two ways of picturing ourselves: conventional portrait photography and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). This pairing demonstrates the possibilities and limitations for each technology and highlights our desire to know ourselves through images.

Vertical rectangular scrolls that glow green-grey ring the gallery. The just larger than life-sized sheets hang from the ceiling and about a foot from the walls. A pair of florescent tubes lights each from behind. The feeling is at once clinical and spectral. The translucent plastic scrolls show abstract yet somewhat familiar images: a cross-sectioned leg or arm bone in several, and a skull. An ear? Perhaps a satellite view of alpine lakes filled with phosphorescent algae. Or are we looking at microscopic views? Bacteria? Or representations that have passed through so many optical mediums—night vision goggles, X-rays, solarization, digital distortions—that they are no longer pictures, more process than image?

Like a shower of stars, an interference pattern of thousands of luminous dots dance over the surface of the MRIs and constellate into people. Duvall spent hundreds of hours pricking the scrolls with a pin to create pixel-like arrangements that coalesce into portraits. The representations are a little hard see. There is just enough information to make out groupings of people and a few individual portraits. Derived from a family album, the men, women and children are dressed in fashions from 50 to more than 100 years ago. The people in the older images are stiff and formal, while those in the more recent pictures are more relaxed. The pinhole portraits are faint, fugitive like memories, but there are enough details, like checkered cloth and large hands, to suggest that some of the figures might be rural working people. There is also a solider, perhaps from the First World War.

You cannot see both images at once; your vision oscillates from looking at the MRIs to the portraits. This back-and-forth reading begs a connection which is cemented by the title, "Bred in the Bone." It's from an ancient Hindu fable attributed to Bidpai, "The Two Fishermen." The full phrase is "What's bred in the bone will never come out of the flesh." The suggestion is that our genetic inheritance cannot be suppressed. The phrase is commonly used to further assert that these qualities not only bear on our bodies but also our behaviours, even fates. The dark side of this theory is the related claim that not only are 'family traits' inherited, but so are ethnic and

racial traits. The title and the MRI images appear to support a biological determinist reading, however, a competing theory is signaled by the intervening family photographs, which may suggest that social factors are just as responsible for the development of individual identities as biological factors. Duvall is initiating a debate rather than issuing a conclusion.

"Bred in the Bone" is an exhibition of self-portraits. The MRI scans are of Linda Duvall. Because the pictures were not taken as part of a diagnostic procedure, and because the artist directed the process, she is the author of these (self) portraits. Similarly, the images that perforate the MRI scans are based on photographs of Duvall's relatives. Her body is derived from theirs'; she can see her face in their faces. Few artists have been so naked before the camera. Duvall shares her family and exposes her deepest, inner self. But what do we see? Do we really see anything of her?

The exhibition has us wonder about how much of who we are is determined by biology or by environment. It also asks us to consider which are the best ways to know ourselves and tell our story. And are these means of representation as full of meaning as we think? Even though MRI scans can show us what our insides look like, does this information reveal anything about who and how we are? They may narrate our bodies but not our Selves. Similarly, in photographs of our recent ancestors we can recognize resemblances and feel a sense of belonging. But the further back in time we look, the more alien the familial faces. We are more likely to have feelings of difference than kinship, and even wonder about the reality of our connection to these relative strangers.

Preceded by autopsies and X-rays, MRI scans are the latest optical invasions of the body. They offer literal (yet virtual) *slices of life* without harming their subjects. For the most part, this gaze is neutral and mechanical. That is, if the process is securely in the circuit of medical practice, MRI scans are diagnostic. They offer a medicalized view of the body. The images are produced by and circulated among technicians and doctors. You can see MRI images of unnamed bodies (on the web and in textbooks) but are prevented from looking at scans of your own body, and you certainly cannot take them home. As a result, MRIs are only permitted to have medical meanings. But it does not have to be this way. When a radiologist reads MRI scans they are displayed against a light box. When Duvall saw this, she made the connection to artist's photographic light boxes. She then endeavored to break these images out of their medical discourse to see what they could mean for a larger public.

MRI images are difficult to understand—if you read instrumentally. In Duvall's scans, the cross-sectioned skull and leg or arm bones are familiar enough. But some of the others are nearly impossible to recognize because they are not part of our visual vocabulary and were taken from novel angles (a cross section of fingers!). The more access we have to these images the better we would read them. However, even then, we may recognize a shape as a leg bone but not know it as a femur. Or, more significantly, we could see in the green-gray tones a shape like a liver but be completely blind to the patch that indicates a hepatocellular carcinoma. This is the domain and expertise of a medical gaze.

However, such a reading is limited. And this is what Duvall is drawing our attention to. A radiologist looks for something specific, patterns (is this normal? Like similar images I have

looked at, or are there anomalies that look like other anomalies I have seen, differences that might indicate danger?). A non-medical view may be more associative but no less profound. To read images non-instrumentally is to read them as art. That is, if you look at MRIs not as a means to another, defined, diagnostic, end but as ends in themselves, and open yourself up to the associative possibilities they generate, then you are making/doing art.

Medical imaging has a significant impact on how we imagine and develop our sense of Self. Not being able to look into their bodies permitted people to develop useful myths about, for example, the location of the soul. Many of these ideas persist in our everyday language. We speak of having a *heart ache* and mean not acute myocardial infarction but that the emotions of love have something to do with that blood pump. There are many who believe that the soul is resident as a physical entity in the body, and that upon death it is released as a vapour in an evacuation that can be registered as a weight loss in the corpse. MRI images offer such a thorough view of the living body that these myths tend to lose their purchase.

MRI images of the living body, one's own body, can have us think about more than structure and disease. They can stimulate thoughts that no other object will excite. X-rays and MRI scans have had a subtle impact on our collective imaginary similar to the publication of the pictures of the earth seen from space in the 1960s. Seeing the earth whole yet alone in space impacted our ability, for example, to imagine the earth as an eco-system. Some Buddhists meditate on images of desiccating corpses as a means of understanding the temporality of the body and endurance of the soul. Meditating on MRI scans of your own body could be a similar practice, just more personalized! It may lead to a deeper existentialism or metaphysical enlightenment. MRI technology makes it difficult to hold metaphysical myths about the body. But they can lead a richer form of thinking about the relationship between bodies and spiritual reality that does not require a physically manifested soul.

However, like photographs of ancestors, these MRI images are also likely to inspire feelings of difference rather than recognition. You might be able to trace evidence of previous injuries in scans of your bones, but more often than not the scenes will make you feel estranged. 'That body on the screen is difficult to identify as *me*'. Some time ago, I saw *my* MRIs. I was shown them because they were so odd. I didn't know but my internal organs are a mirror image of normal. This isn't a problem, but the information made me feel a little betrayed and distant from that aspect of my body. My mental picture of my insides from biology and anatomy classes assured me that my heart and stomach were to the left, liver to the right. The MRIs revealed that my internal body image, and even my supposed experience of my internal self, was mistaken. This is only mildly disturbing. But how does it feel, how does it alter your self-formation, to know, or suspect, as Duvall narrates in her artist statement, that you are heir to a genetic disorder? It is not that these new knowledges are bad, only that they introduce unforeseen complications to our sense of self.

MRI images are true pictures in that they are mechanical records of reality. However, like any record, they are selective and follow historical patterns and require interpretations, all which make their veracity a little fluid. For example, MIR images are *slices of life* and, like any narrative, there are billions of ways to *slice* that life. The well-trained MIR technician follows a set of standard patterns that are established to conform to previous expectations that, in turn,

produce images that are easier to recognize (they conform to previous knowledge sets). Because her imagination is not regulated by medical discourse, Duval uses the MRI equipment in a slightly novel way. She makes odd slices. Her gaze through the machine is looking for interesting aesthetic arrangements, not cancers. Therefore, she is making the machine see things differently. More such novel interventions by artists could even feedback to the medical community and lead to new discoveries and applications.

“Bred in the Bone” is economical. The two imaging languages (MRI and family portraits) are set upon each other. The viewer is encouraged to wonder about how much of their identity is formed by biology and how much by family. But as I have also been suggesting, there is an estrangement that proposes a third element, agency.

I have mostly been talking about what it is like to look at images of your own body and family photographs. There is a much greater distance when you look at images of bodies you do not know. While Duvall sees resemblance in her family photographs, that information is not as available to us. However, there is an act of will in this exhibition—an intervention of the body—here that asks us to travel with her empathetically. Duval has assumed an unusual agency by controlling the medical imaging and display of her body. She has made a subject out of an object. Similarly, she could have superimposed her family onto the MRI scans through any number of mechanical means: digital printing, silkscreen, etc. Her choice to render them by hand through labourious tiny pinpricks is a symbolic and meditative act—a means of penetrating the medical gaze with a contrary narrative. But this action also affirms her agency as the one who interprets and controls her self-imaging and self-imagining. Her actions demonstrate that neither the medicalized nor the social determinist theories are the only models of identity formation around—people can do other things with the biological and social reality that initiates them.

In “Bred in the Bone” Linda Duval smuggles Magnetic Resonance Imaging from the medical realm and rehabilitates it as a photographic medium. In her hands, it is a tool used in her earnest but playful exploration for beauty and mystery. She surveys her body and family album looking for both presence and absence. We are invited to look over her shoulder to see in her experience what might resonate with ours.

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