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The Sublime effect: anatomy and contemporary art

This lecture focuses on varied aspects of anatomical representations of the human body in contemporary art. I argue that the contemporary fascination with skeletons, skin, and the dissected body exemplified by such varied contemporary artists as John Isaacs, Andres Serrano, Marc Quinn, Bill Viola, Damien Hirst, Marina Abramovic, Orlan and others must be traced within a genealogy of artistic practice, beginning with Renaissance and 17th-18th c. *vanitas* art, *memento mori* painting and sculpture, anatomical drawings, wax anatomy models and medical paintings. In the domain of pictorial arts this is a rich tradition that draws from the intersection of art, science and technology to question our deeply ambiguous, often paradoxical, attitude towards mortality and death. As I attempt to show, the aesthetic concept most appropriate for examining the transformations of this tradition is the sublime as opposed to the beautiful. Early modern, modern and contemporary theories of the sublime will form the backdrop against which specific artworks and artists will be discussed.