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The dead get the living pondering

By Steve Friess, Special for USA TODAY

CHICAGO — These life-like naked corpses literally let it all hang out: the veins, the muscles, the bones, everything.



Kevin Kopack visits the Museum of Science and Industry's "Body Worlds" exhibit with his ninth-grade science class in February.

AP

One is leaping downward to grab a soccer ball, another is mounted on a bicycle, a third stands with his arms out sporting a big grin and a white hat as though at any moment he'll break out in song.

As ghoulish as that sounds, record crowds are lining up to see dead people — actual, preserved humans who in death have become rock stars of the natural-history museum world — at Body Worlds exhibits at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago and Great Lakes Science Center in Cleveland. Both remain until September.

They're so popular that the exhibits attracted 930,000 people over nine months to the California Science Center in Los Angeles, where they made their U.S. debut over the past year. Body Worlds also has been seen by more than 16 million people in more than a dozen nations.

Universe Within, a similar exhibit not connected with the company behind Body Worlds, opened to promising interest at the Nob Hill Masonic Center in San Francisco in late March.

Preserved in natural colors

What sets these corpses apart from other anatomy lessons is that they're preserved through a process known as "plastination" in which their bodies are dissected fully or partially and exposed to a reactive polymer that allows the body parts to be shown in their natural colors. It's a painstaking process invented in 1977 by Body Worlds creator Gunther von Hagens of Germany. The result is an opportunity to see the inside of the body as it really looks. More than 300 corpses have been entirely or partly plastinated by von Hagens at a factory in China. People arrange to have their bodies donated when they die.

"This is the best exhibit I've ever seen, and I've worked here for 20 years," says Diane Perlov, senior vice president for exhibits at the California Science Center. "I've never seen an exhibit where people were more actively engaged in learning. People are absolutely mesmerized by what they get to see."

Much to even von Hagens' surprise, Body Worlds faced virtually no protest or controversy in the USA. That wasn't the case in Germany and Great Britain, where some took offense to what they saw as an indecent display.

In Los Angeles, the biggest stir came last month when two women stole one of five plastinated fetuses. While the motive remains unclear, Detective Willem Erkelens of the Los Angeles Police Department says undisclosed evidence seems to indicate the crime wasn't an anti-abortion statement.

(The 15-week-old fetus was a stillborn, not the result of an abortion, Body Worlds officials say.)

Instead of a furor, the exhibits largely have been well received, earning plaudits from such celebrities as Nicole Kidman, Dustin Hoffman and Charlize Theron.

The only precaution von Hagens has urged is to place the reproductive system sections in a private area so visitors can decide whether to view them; the three U.S. museums have observed his request.

The Museum of Science and Industry also requires visitors under 13 to be escorted by an adult, the first such age restriction in museum history.

"You know, compared to Europe, we regard the U.S. as quite puritanical," says von Hagens, long a controversial medical figure who conducted Britain's first public autopsy in 170 years in 2002. "But, really, in America, there's been nothing. I think something has shifted in American society. They seem to enjoy that they can see everything."

He means everything. Aside from the fact that the corpses are completely naked, one shows blackened lungs from a lifetime of smoking and another shows an obese person's insides to explain how the heft puts stress on the rest of the body. There also are brain tumors, hip replacements and pacemakers.

Making the dead life-like

Mostly, the exhibits show the body in various common actions: running, sitting, standing. Typically, visitors look at their own body parts that correspond to those being described.

At a display case showing a blackened lung, Candy Tomasic of Chicago was forcing her 7-year-old daughter Madeleine, 6-year-old son Max and 5-year-old niece Andrea to pinky-swear never to smoke.

"Most of the time all you see is the skeleton, but here you see the actual visages, too," says Paul Tomasic, Candy's husband. "You get the sense here that it's not just a dead body but part of someone who was real."

Indeed. Whereas medical students typically are urged not to personalize the corpses they dissect in anatomy classes, von Hagens believes that making the dead more life-like is the best way to help the public make the connections between the exhibit and their own living bodies.

Body Worlds also is a huge attraction for art classes such as the one teacher Louise Grissinger brought from Geneva High School in suburban Chicago. The class recently had finished a unit on Leonardo da Vinci, famous for his anatomical drawings.


"You get a good sense of how the body is assembled," Grissinger says. "This is a great opportunity for the kids to learn about anatomy, science and culture."

Her students seemed to appreciate the field trip, despite their fearful expectations. "I wasn't really as grossed out by it as I thought I'd be," says senior Kristen Cella, 17. "It takes apart the body in many different ways. I thought it was interesting. We did have a few queasy ones, though."

Admission to the Cleveland exhibit ranges from \$13 to \$23. In Chicago, the range is \$11 to \$21.

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