

Gunther von Hagens'

BODY WORLDS

The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies

Physician adds art to science of anatomy

Dr. Angelina Whalley's designs on BODY WORLDS appeal to more than 20 million

In her formative years, Angelina Whalley—creative designer and conceptual planner of Gunther von Hagens' BODY WORLDS exhibitions—wanted to be a surgeon. “I knew very early in life that I wanted to help sick people, one person at a time, and that medicine was the sphere in which I would be able to do that,” she said.

In 1986, with her medical degree from the University of Heidelberg in hand and a promising surgical career ahead of her, Dr. Whalley signed up for an intensive course in dissection to hone her skills for the operating room. Fortuitously, the course was taught by anatomist, Gunther von Hagens, with whom she would forge a bond, both professional and personal (the couple were married in 1992), that has lasted for more than two decades.

During the early years of Dr. von Hagens' explorations in Plastination, Whalley expected to defer her career and her commitment to help the sick only temporarily. “I wanted to help his efforts which I felt were a monumental achievement in the field of anatomy, but I was certain that I did not wish to have my professional fate tied to the success or failure of his work,” she said.

In 1995, after she assumed her role in the BODY WORLDS exhibitions as its creative and conceptual designer, she strived to present the specimens, organs, and plastinates in ways that would engage visitors. “I wanted to further our mission of health education, by ennobling the post-mortal body and without sacrificing aesthetics. I try to present the body in a dramatic, memorable, beautiful way so that people can learn about anatomy, disease, and health,” Whalley said.

In an effort to go beyond literal health education, as conventional anatomy has elucidated since the Renaissance, and as the BODY WORLDS exhibitions were doing until 2004, Whalley introduced philosophy as an organizing ethos in the exhibit. The juxtaposition of the plastinates with ruminations about life and death by the likes of Goethe, Descartes, Seneca, and Kant helped create an atmosphere of awe and reverence in the exhibition halls, that many visitors liken to a spiritual awakening.

Whalley also introduced the principle of comparative anatomy to the exhibitions, where diseased

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organs were placed next to healthy organs to striking effect. "The body is so fragile and vulnerable, and yet so resilient and forgiving," she says. "It has a memory so that what we do to it matters, but it also has a dynamic consciousness so that giving up unhealthy lifestyles or taking up exercise, even small changes, can make a difference." The arresting sight of the blackened lung of a cigarette smoker next to a healthy lung has prompted countless visitors to swear off smoking, while the diseased shrunken liver next to its healthy counterpart has prompted many to surrender alcohol.

Now that more than 20 million visitors in 35 cities across Europe, Asia, and North America have seen the BODY WORLDS exhibitions, many of them inspired to change their lifestyles and make a commitment to health, Dr. Whalley rarely regrets abandoning her career as a surgeon. "It is profoundly moving for me to see women of child bearing age linger at the fetal development section and encounter pre-natal life for the first time, or see teenagers in leather jackets and blue jeans ditch their cigarette packs because some part of them finally acknowledged that smoking was no longer cool," she said. She has also embraced her unexpected career as an influential public health advocate. "I have been able to educate far more people about health than I ever would have if I had been a surgeon," she says.

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