

Diana Quinby: The Light of Hidden Spaces

“The thin red jellies within you or within me, the
bones and the marrow in the bones
--Walt Whitman (1855).

Deciphering the work of Diana Quinby requires an act of looking at the richest and most sensitive parts of the psyche. Horny and tumultuous, her bones twist and turn, descend and elevate, poke and penetrate into the furthest limits of the drawing surface. It is here that Quinby, with brisk intelligence and artistic mastery, captures the viewer through the scale and feeling of her portraits while quietly defining and redefining the bones on which her personal story and that of art history is written.

Using lithographic techniques to rework a series of images on a sequence of what she terms *matrices*, Quinby resurfaces her drawings with layers of intricate, sophisticated pastels to reveal a new and dynamic form. The outcomes are unpredictable, with each piece in the series revealing a new vitality and hidden dimensions as if Quinby unearths the meaning in the bones themselves. The significance of the subject matter in part derives from her childhood fascination with her mother’s medical textbooks, and her interest in the artistic possibilities of bone. Cracking open these carefully guarded books awakened a sensitivity and curiosity in Quinby, who found her own highly personalized way to reproduce the scientific diagrams she saw. Later, having injured her back in a fall from a horse (recalling in a small way Frida Kahlo’s own accident), the strength and underlying fragility of her bones were exposed, as were the intimate and often unseen ways in which body and text complement and contradict each other. The place of bone structure in art and in the study of the body is most widely known through Leonardo da Vinci’s sketches but was equally important during the Enlightenment for investigations into the unknown or hidden realms of the body.¹ In an age of highly advanced medical technology, Quinby reawakens the art of the hand through the space of the body and raises questions as to the limits of the unknown.

Born and raised in New York, her series of bone and pastel lithographs captures the rigors and the harshness of American natural and urban landscapes. She takes the sculptural quality of the bones, their surface, color and texture, and translates this onto grand format paper, rendering bone *as* landscape. Native American animism and ritual are suggested as well as the utilitarian importance of bone itself to the culture. Bones act as testimony to the rugged individualism of American westward expansion and the struggle to dominate the land, even the rocky, unforgiving coastline of Maine

¹ See Barbara Maria Stafford’s *Body Criticism: Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1991.

where Quinby spent some time. In this way, her work resembles that of Georgia O’Keeffe whose celebrated *America, Red, White and Blue* (1931) hangs at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. O’Keeffe’s famous statement regarding her work on flowers foreshadows Quinby’s depiction of bones: ‘So I thought I’ll make them [the flowers] big like the huge buildings going up [in New York]. People will be startled; they’ll have to look at them—and they did.’² However, compared with O’Keeffe, Quinby’s work is less painterly and more organic, the smooth and seductive blend of pastels literally melting into the paper while subtended by the frame of the lithographic pattern. Subtler, yet at times harsher in psychical intent, Quinby uses the texture of the bone, its crevices and caverns to create a barren interior landscape from which light emits in the most unexpected directions.³

Series *Untitled* 2002 suggests the form of buildings in Quinby’s native New York (her great-grandfather was actually one of the city’s early architects) with the bones’ construction suggesting ambition, thrust and upward physical momentum, while the pastels convey the fragility and brittleness of bone that echo the limitations of human desire, and the decadence and psychological complexity provoked by the size and strength of skyscrapers. Another series from the same year, *Untitled*, 2002, portrays open animal rib cages through which light and shadow mirror the inner workings of a gothic cathedral. The arched structure of the rib cages in these works is very similar to the diagonal ribs of the vaulted ceiling of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in her adoptive Paris. These arches and vaults create the silent spaces of the sacred in her work.

Hidden dimensions in Quinby’s work are further revealed through the dynamic movement of the bone in sinuous rhythms and unexpected postures that recall the classical nudes of Goya or Delacroix, or the three-dimensional volumes and voluptuous contortions and sexual thrusting of figures by Titian or Bernini (series *Sans titre*, 2004). The coloring evokes Renaissance masters (gold, ochre, umber) as well as post-painterly abstract expressionists such as the outstanding coloring work of Helen Frankenthaler in the shadows and background of her work. The white luminosity of the bones in series *Untitled* 2003 is nuanced by the hue that gives it flesh and substance (the oil pastel—*pastel gras* in French—suggests fat or a re-covering of the bones). The pastel surfaces evoke the vibrant dancers of Degas or the polished, jewel-like intricate surfaces of the experimental American Albert Pinkham-Ryder (whom Quinby cites as an influence), who reworked his canvases with various substances to find a material form to express an emotional experience.

Bones, fossils, archaic fragments represented within the works also resemble strands of DNA, sea creatures, or the primal origins of man. These bones reference not only the stillness and

² Interview with Georgia O’Keeffe.

³ In this respect, Quinby’s work echoes that of Ana Mendieta, whose literal use of light, body and earth are rendered figuratively by Quinby.

incompleteness of a zen *koan*, but also the void onto which she can inscribe her more formal attributes as an artist.⁴ A series of contrasts is immediately implied: light and shadow, animus and anima, ying and yang, male and female. Sexual union is suggested, as in *Untitled*, 2003, through the penetration and puncturing of the space of the bone, or the female pelvis, by the phallus, creating a certain dynamic tension.

Quinby's interest in bones and their relation to the inner psyche and the discovery of psychological fragments opens their latent content to analysis. Forgotten bones, or memories, and their intellectual origin and intrinsic sensuality enact Freud's account of Jensen's *Gradiva*, in which the narrator recounts archaic memories dug up from the "antiquity" of his past which are then analyzed.⁵ This digging into the past and the use of shape and structure to underlie fantasy and transformation has psychoanalytic content echoed in the construction of the work itself: the embedding and grinding of the lithographic stone and the long flowing gestures of the oil pastels. However, running alongside the delicate colors of the oil pastels is an element of aggression, threat, and protection. The bones, along with their tender growths or puncturing needles, suggest the pain of castration, representing the power of a dominant self over a weaker one, or a country's or government's political penetration of a passive one. Intricate and overlapping, the body becomes the site of investigation with an intellectual strength and a childish innocence. The works are unforgettable in their capacity to lodge in the psyche as archaic fragments or traces of a past reborn.

Standing apart from her peers, Quinby returns art to its formalist roots, with a less blatant political or feminist agenda than is found in the work of contemporary female artists such as Annette Messager, Sophie Calle, or Mary Kelly. This is not to say that Quinby is unfamiliar with such work (she has produced a doctoral thesis on the subject) but that she seeks to convey her meaning in more subtle, unexpected ways without sacrificing any of the immediate emotional impact. The strength of her work rests in its appeal to take the two-dimensional surface seriously.

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⁴ See for example, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (1957). Compiled by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, Boston: Shambala, 1994.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Jensen's *Gradiva*," from *Jensen's Gradiva and Other Works*, Vol. 9 (1906-1908), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1959.