

Scales' weighs body, mind, spirit/ Boston Center for the Arts

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Ann Messner's grainy black-and-white image thumps to the pulse of a beating heart, as captured by an MRI machine. Skid marks on the side of the road form a record of a driver's accidental journey in Nancy Manter's "Road Art" series of prints. Hanging scrolls by Randy Garber display a larger-than-life-size woman's silhouette, inscribed with contour lines that give it the appearance of a mapped landscape. Nancy Bowen's bulbous sculptures and Audrey Goldstein's bed wired with electrodes suggest additional perspectives for investigating the self. For all its philosophical and spiritual complexities, being human is also a physical reality - a fact that long has served as an inspiration for artists' explorations.

At the Mills Gallery of the Boston Center for the Arts through Aug. 1, "Somatic Scales" examines how the body relates to both the outer and inner worlds of the human individual. Through installations, photographs, prints, sculptures and video, the five women selected for this show raise questions that begin with physical facts and expand to the very nature of existence. Although influenced by such contemporary technologies as MRIs and electronic circuitry, they create artworks that at times recall the handprints and pictographs of cultures long vanished.

If "Man is the measure of all things," as the ancient mathematician Pythagoras believed, then what is the measure of man? Somatic scales - that is, scales relating to the body - offer a place to start. Goldstein's "Somnia" makes that place quite vivid. A mattress sheathed in silver mesh rests atop a gurneylike metal framework with glass walls. A rainbow of wires weaves across the top of the bed and down the sides into the region beneath, where a billowing white fabric is attached with black electrodes to receptors on the glass. Even without an occupant, this installation eloquently tells of the life of a person, about how much can be discerned by charting the body's systems - and how much remains beyond the reach of scientific evaluation.

Messner's projected DVDs of MRI images similarly seem to tell much. But the most detailed scan of internal organs is little more than an abstract image to all but the most medically informed.

Memories of individuals permeate the most abstract pieces in the show, which, ironically, are based on photographs of actual roads. Manter revisited sites in rural Maine where teenagers died in car crashes and took pictures of the skid marks. By overlaying these marks with skids of her own, the artist began a process that resulted in stark prints on acetate floating against charcoal-drawn patches of gallery wall. Here the need to find and to leave an imprint becomes as central to the work as the actual shape left behind.

There is no mistaking the central image in Garber's quintet of monoprints for anything other than a woman. Whether interrupted by birds or player-piano music, hands signing letters of the alphabet, arrows or other symbols, these totemic forms have a timeless quality. The women become repositories of communications, past and present, intelligible and mysterious. A rich assortment of media - including intaglio, chine colle and oil drawing - echoes the depth of meaning contained within the 8-foot-high images themselves.

Bowen, too, utilizes unusual combinations in her two- and three-dimensional works. This is least effective in the collage series, "Heaven Is a Place," with its silver-threaded knots lacing together mythological figures in a variety of positions. More engaging is "Cerebral Flora," in which a shimmering sci-fi sort of growth has emerged from a lumpy glass vessel. Part plant, part creature, the red-dotted protrusion hints at whole universes of creations just waiting to be hatched by the human mind.