'Julia Barello: Swirl' Exhibition Catalog

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Julia Barello: Swirl
by Kate Bonansinga

Artist Julia Barello deconstructs exposed X-ray and MRI film to create abstractions of flowers, birds and leaves, which she then compiles into mural-sized expressions. This tension between a body-focused material and beyond-the-body subject matter synopsizes the artist’s two primary intentions, which are diametric. The first is to remind us of our physical beings and, consequently, our frailties and mortality. The second is to involve us in our surroundings to the point that we extend beyond the corporeal.

Vascular Studies

Barello trained as a jeweler and metal smith and has been using X-ray film as a material since she was a graduate student in the early 1990s. For each of the five works in Vascular Studies, 1996, a light box hangs on the wall and illuminates an X-ray of a human chest: one is the artist’s and the other four belong to acquaintances of the artist, two women and two men. Mounted to each X-ray is a sterling silver brooch that conveys imagery of the vascular system rendered in the X-ray beneath it.

Because the brooches act as mapping devices for an individualized body, and convey information about a specific locale, they connect the imaged body to the land and to nature. They are didactic objects that provide information about the unstable territory beneath the skin, a possible metaphor for the secrets that each of us hold inside. They are also free from the gender-specificity of most adornment for the chest, such as military badges for men or jeweled pins for women. Though the sex of the X-rayed individual is clear upon close inspection, when removed from this context the brooch alone does not convey the gender of the wearer.

Swirl as installed in the Project Space at the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts.
In the late-1990s Barello began contacting hospitals in and around her hometown of Las Cruces, NM in pursuit of X-rays and MRIs, and one agreed to provide her with medical images that were destined for the trash due to errors in processing. But there was one condition: the artist was required to delete the patient’s name from the top of the 11 x 17 inch sheet of film in order to comply with HIPAA laws protecting patient privacy (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996). This left Barello with what she felt was a compromised image, one that was less-than-whole. Instead of framing the X-ray as she had done in Vascular Studies, where she conserved and immortalized the body’s frailty, she went the opposite direction and irreverently cut the film, isolating areas of imagery that she found particularly compelling. This was the first time that Barello had interacted with medical images of strangers, which may have factored into her willingness to deconstruct them.

This act of dissecting X-rayed information freed Barello to treat it as a material rather than a subject. For Penannular Dresses, 2002, she die cut X-ray film into multiple, iconic shapes: flowers, swallows, leaves, and snowflakes. She used the existing palette of films in cool shades of blue and black, connected the like-types with monofilament, and suspended the resulting form from a sterling silver hanger. The form adopts the three-dimensional likeness to a woman’s dress, but is defined by traits antithetical to wearability, including negative space and delicacy. Some of the X-rays carry traces of information about the anonymous, imaged individual. Thus, Barello employed a material associated with medical care, and consequently mortality, to create surrogates for the absent body. Each dress may be interpreted as a reference to a season (flowers/spring, swallow/summer, leaves/autumn, snowflakes/winter), so Barello once again joins the human body with nature.
Swirl

With Swirl, Barello systematized the preparation of medical imaging film for art making. Now when she retrieves discarded and purged files from the local hospital, she divides and boxes them according to hue: MRIs consist of multiple images and are relatively consistent in tone, whereas X-rays are single images and range from blue to black. Plus, X-ray film can be dyed, but MRI film is resistant to coloration. The artist cut the leaves in Bluster and the birds in Swoop from MRI film in varying sizes and shapes, and then mounted each to a steel pin, up to 10 inches long, that connects to the wall. The shades of grey and black highlight the traces of information about the scanned individual. In Swoop, birds come together in swirls of activity and create multiple vortices that energetically respond and react to one another, referencing the dynamism and mystery of nature and of group behavior. It celebrates individuality while also acknowledging intra-species similarities, and the inevitable loss of self.

In the floral forms that comprise works such as Swale, Tree and Genome III, this information is more opaque, in part because each pin holds a stack of shapes, rather than a single one. First, the artist uses a divider to cut individual sheets of X-ray film into circles, which she then dyed. The level of saturation of the color depends upon the density of imagery in the individual X-ray. The artist has recently honed her dyeing technique to achieve a larger spectrum of color and subtlety. With Swale, Barello’s most recent piece, she closely captures the myriad hues of multiple species of flowers. In the words of the artist, “I seek colors that are vibrant, exuberant, expressive, and representative of the excessive variety to be found in the natural world.” Once the circles of film are dyed, the artist slices them into precise quadrants and then eights, either by hand with a surgical scalpel, or, more recently, with an industrial laser cutter, which achieves forms unattainable by hand. X-rays were first developed as a tool for viewing the body’s interior in Germany in the late nineteenth century and later perfected by famed female physicist Marie Curie. Prior to that time it was only through surgical procedures that our insides could be methodically exposed. Thus, it is an ironic twist that Barello dissects X-rays with a surgical scalpel.

In Tree and Genome, the pins that anchor the stack of floral shapes to the wall are topped with silver disks or tubes, but in Swale the pin ends are plastic, signaling Barello’s complete departure from the use of precious metals. Paradoxically, stacked forms of cut X-rays predominate in her recent jewelry: the earrings look like elements from Swale but smaller and horizontal. So for the first time in her career, the artist’s jewelry and fine art production connect. And because many hospitals now digitize images, exposed medical film may become as precious as the materials usually associated with jewelry.

The Wall

The works in Swirl employ the wall as a canvas and, at first glance, have the patterned beauty of Victorian wallpaper but with a coolness and clarity that signals the future rather than the past. The artist pin each element directly to the wall, wrapping corners and loosely framing windows. Because the pins vary in length, the elements that they support produce shadows of differing intensities and sizes, some of which overlap neighboring elements, and each other. Consequently, the elements convey traces of information from the complete images that they once were, and their shadows are traces of what they have become, as they exist in the here and now. Because they extend from the wall but are mounted directly to it, they lend it optical dimension. The periphery of Genome III, rendered in cool colors, hugs its planar support, whereas its orange and red center reaches out into the room, making the wall seem convex.

One of Barello’s intentions is to encourage viewers to reflect upon the 21st century tendency to over examine our own and others’ physical bodies, in venues from night clubs, to health clubs to hospitals, we are probed, investigated, and observed. Bluster and Swoop are the most successful in triggering associations with contemporary Western medical experience, where our reduction to the

LEFT: Swale, detail, medical imaging film, sterling silver, 4’ high X 14’ wide X 7” deep overall, 2007.
RIGHT: Swoop as installed at the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts.
status of specimens is particularly acute, because their limited palette of black and dark grey makes evident the information from the original MRI. Swale and Genome suggest past impressions in a more general way. In these stacked pieces, the optical effect of shadows upon shadows (which are the color of the element that casts them), combined with X-rayed information layered over other X-rays, reference memories' complexity and opacity.

What is most commendable about Barello’s work is that she grounds us in personal, physical experience, and also transports us from it. She has created compilations of tangible objects that strive to be, in her words, “as beautiful and awe inspiring as natural wonders big and small”, from lichen on a rock to towering mountains. At their best, the works remove us from the everyday, moving us beyond our physical bodies towards a moment when the body metaphorically dissolves into its surroundings. The works in Vascular Studies reference the human body in image; Penannular Dresses suggest it in form; the five works in Swirl use the body only as a touchstone from which to levitate. Barello explains, “My work was originally about the body, now it’s about some body.” This “some body” is a collective “everybody” because the imagery of “some body’s” interior is taken apart and stacked with other images of other bodies to create something entirely new.

The Future

When asked which contemporary artists she most admires, Barello cites installation artists Ann Hamilton, Yayoi Kusama, Paul Henry Ramirez, Annette Messager, and Christian Boltanski. Rebecca Horn is another favorite; her sculptures from the 1970s harness the human body and extend it into the surrounding space. All of these artists create environments where the art and the architectural space become a singular statement, and/or there is no spatial separation between viewer and art. Instead, viewer is participant, art is milieu, object is content. Given these role models, it is logical to predict that Barello’s works will eventually extend further out into space, and along every possible surface, and truly transform the places in which they exist and, by extension, the inhabitants of those places.

Kate Bonansinga is Director of the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts.

Exhibition Checklist

All works courtesy of the artist

2. Swale, medical imaging film, sterling silver, 4’ high X 14’ wide X 7” deep, 2007.
5. Flusher, medical imaging film, colored silver, 5’ high X 6’ wide X 5” deep, 2005.
6. Trace, medical imaging film, colored silver, 5’ high X 3’ wide X 3” deep, 2005.

Julia Barello is associate professor of art at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, NM. She earned her M.F.A. at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee in 1997.
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Inside front cover and page 1: *Bluster*, as installed at the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts.