

## AROUND THE GALLERIES

## Bodies as history's landscape

By SHARON MIZOTA  
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Bizarre, haunting and beautiful, **Cindy Stelmackowich's** exhibition of digital collages at Kristi Engle combines detailed 19th century anatomical illustrations with vintage disaster scenes or intensely colored art glass vessels. The results are richly layered, visually intricate images rife with historical and philosophical associations.

"Great Fire at Montreal — July 9, 1852" features a black-and-white illustration of the head and torso of a tranquil young man. With eyes closed and arms crossed beneath exquisitely rendered folds of cloth, he appears to be asleep. But this peaceful demeanor belies the gaping hole in his chest and the red-tinted image of a burning building overlaid on his exposed organs. Billowing smoke and shooting flames echo and merge with clumps and sheets of flesh; the body becomes a window onto history.

The images connect medical science with 19th century technologies that led to industrialization as well as modern warfare and other unprecedented disasters. By combining images of anatomical dissection with the dark side of industrial and imperial expansion, the Canadian artist reveals their shared roots in the arrogance of unchecked progress. In an election year when healthcare and war are hot-button issues, these works are a particularly apt reminder that technologies that heal may also harm.

To be sure, some of the pairings feel forced, and the images' poster-size scale and dramatic coloring are at times a bit too jewel-like and precious. But Stelmackowich is at her best when her collages reveal the unexpected sexual subtext of both medical and technological development.



Kristi Engle Gallery

**CINDY STELMACKOWICH:** "Cyan" (2007) is a sort of medical illustration, merged with a vibrant glass vessel.

One stunning example is "The Wreck of the Underley Off the Isle of Wight, England — 1866," in which the bow of a careening ship slices into the body of a whale. This tableau is embedded in the abdomen of a female torso whose flayed skin frames the scene like petals or skeins of spun candy. It's an image of penetration on at least three levels: the ship's collision with the whale, the dissection itself and the suggestive placement of the phallic ship inside a woman's body.

This sexual charge is already evident in the illustrations themselves (which would be fascinating on their own). In another collage, vagina-shaped incisions in a woman's neck and shoulders (pierced with rods, clamps and a finger, no less) are accompanied by a seemingly gratuitous nipple peeking out from a cloth draped across the woman's torso. The image must have

been striking even before Stelmackowich added the scene from the battle of Waterloo that appears tattooed across the woman's chest.

The show's other set of prints, which combine medical illustrations with vibrantly hued glass vessels, are less obviously historical but no less rich. The press release says they "evoke the notion of a missing life/soul from the empty human vessel on display," but their effect is actually more visceral.

Stelmackowich has chosen the vases wisely, echoing and complementing the shapes found in the drawings. Rather than point out what's missing, they amplify the aesthetic appeal of the dissected bodies. The male figure in "Cyan," for example, appears to emerge from a pale blue vase that looks like a block of ice. His ribs are severed and his lungs exposed, but his arms are bound atop



'DESERTSHORE': A detail repurposed as a Jan Tumlir and

his head in a pose that suggests erotic abandon. The image is not unlike Michelangelo's "Dying Slave" snaking up from its raw marble pedestal with intimations of bondage, sex and death.

With their emotional appeal, the vintage illustrations reflect the ambivalence of their era toward the dehumanizing effects of science. Their serene, classically posed figures, complete with hair and other identifying features, rest peacefully despite their state of disassembly. This respect for the humanity of the dead, even as they are turned into objects of study, is a far cry from today's equivalent: the flayed, anonymous, hyperactive figures of "Body Worlds." In their poetic approach to the underpinnings of our scientific worldview, Stelmackowich's works remind us that it wasn't always so.

**Kristi Engle Gallery**, 5002 York Blvd., Highland Park, (323) 472-6237, through Sept. 27. Closed Sundays through Wednesdays. [www.kristienglegallery.com](http://www.kristienglegallery.com).

## Desert oases of California

From "The Twilight Zone" to "Star Wars," the California desert has often provided a backdrop for sci-fi imaginations, both apocalyptic and