

# Bringing the c

*Sharon Verghis braves the stench of formalin to join a drawing class that practises on disembodied limbs.*

On the far side of the room, the old man smiles, both sides of his face splayed neatly like a butterfly's wings. A disembodied leg is frozen in an arc, skin peeled like a banana. On a table nearby, there's an eggplant, a rope, a clove of garlic, a seashell, a coin. The room temperature mimics a Sydney's winter day, kept at a constant 17 degrees Celsius.

Dr Brian Freeman circles the room, pointing out a graceful tibia, a fragile femur. The five students, clad in lab coats, are immersed in their sketches, easels poised around the long rows of steel tables. It's a Dali-like scene – dissected thoraxes instead of melting clocks – and there's a faint stench of formalin in the air. Every hour, Freeman, a senior anatomy lecturer at the University of NSW, sprays the specimens with water to keep them moist.

It is the first day of the university's *Step into Leonardo's Shoes* drawing workshop, a two-day session where students are given the opportunity to draw from human anatomical specimens in the tradition of the Renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci. Art and science meet in a workshop on anatomy and drawing techniques, Freeman says, one which will cure "most Archibald symptoms – concave faces, jointless sausage limbs, eyes that emerge from noses, and sixth-finger thumbs".

At the workshop, the third since October, figurative artist Susan Dorothea White is working with the quiet group. These are artists, not medical students, and most have things under control, she says. But there's still a subtle tension in the room, a collective uneasiness.

Freeman bounds around the room, pointing out ellipses and curves, the grey coral of the brain, the mushroom pleats of the trapezoid muscle. He is most animated, it seems, when he's with the dead. Disconcertingly, as he talks to the students – a painter, a sculptor, an art student, a cartoonist and a jeweller – he pounces on the audience to illus-

trate a point. "You've got lovely sternocleidomastoids," he says to me, pointing to the rope of muscle running down the neck.

Freeman, a senior anatomy lecturer for almost three decades, is in thrall with the human body. In this room, it is stripped back to essentials, broken down into a jigsaw of cartilage, sinew, tendon and ligament. For a culture dedicated to the living, it's a frightening sight, he says. "But in essence, it's nothing like you'd expect in a butcher's window."

Students are mostly art professionals, there to finetune technical skills and "map" the body. Others come to confront death, or make sense of it. Here, on the second floor of the university's Wallace Wurth medical faculty, it is unavoidable.

"It's a confronting experience, a challenging one," Freeman says. "But it's a rare opportunity, I believe, to truly know what lies under the skin."

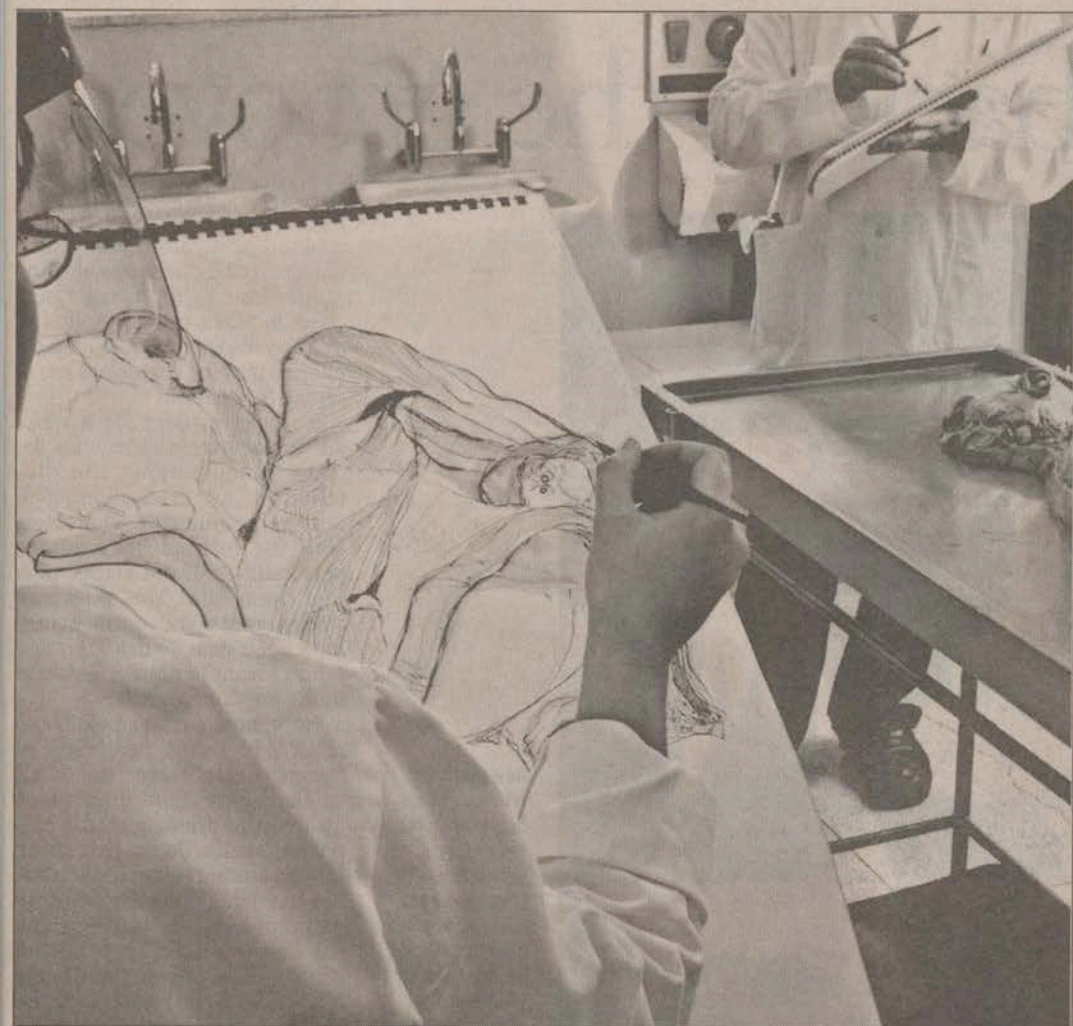
The workshops, introduced by the university's School of Anatomy last year, are attracting a kind of cult following among artists. Past students have included a cosmetic surgeon, a short-story writer, a Riverina winemaker, a physicist and a mathematician programming computer software to recognise facial expressions.

The classes also fill a crucial gap in art education, he says, offering a more brutally honest insight than students would get in a traditional life drawing class.

In a typical workshop, he and White work in tandem, dividing the day into drawing classes, a slide show on art history, anatomy lectures and frequent breaks, scheduled because of the formalin fumes.

There is a certain etiquette to revealing the specimens, Freeman says, so that students are given time to settle in. The human leg is shown first, mainly because it is perhaps the most impersonal part of the body. Then the class moves on to the upper limbs, the torso and finally the head, sketched usually only on the second day.

# dead back to life – on paper



Life-like ... learning the secrets of the human body at the University of NSW drawing class. Photo: Lukas Matysek

For many, there is an element of "psychic shock" when confronting the face, Freeman says. "It's because it's so human. It's difficult to depersonalise."

Today, there's a crash course in anatomy before White introduces basic art principles – perspective, the golden mean, vanishing points. There's a liberal use of food metaphors so the body is made familiar, she says, pointing to the eggplant and fruit on the nearby table. "The deltoid muscle is like a clove of garlic, the navel like a dimple in an apple."

The mystique of the body is stripped away, parts named. The trapezius muscle is the "monk's hood", the latissimus dorsi is "the bottom scratcher", the levator scapulae "the muscle of indifference". The students listen

intently, laugh. For Victorian cartoonist Alistair Osborne, 30, humour is the saving grace.

He jokes about the teapot-shaped head he's been sketching all morning, the moment when Freeman tried to squeeze a brain into a cranial cavity and it stuck. "The immediate benefits for me is a greater understanding of anatomy – it's great as a cartoonist because you realise there are five fingers on a human hand, not four. But it's amazing because until this afternoon, I'd never seen a dead body. You get butterflies in your stomach, but then you become used to it; they become parts."

At the art history lecture, White introduces the class to images of the body in art, the ways it has been represented in differ-

ent cultures. There's Rodin's Thinker, a graceful Degas, a Fernand Leger abstract, dancer Robert Helpmann – "a real artist of movement", White says – figurines from China and Angkor Wat, a delicate sculpture of a hand from Camille Claudel, works by Albert Durer, Michelangelo, Hokusai and finally, of course, da Vinci.

Paul Freeman, a jeweller, is prosaic. "There's just a beauty there. You learn from looking."

For those wanting to hone their art skills, there's plenty of material to work with. The university receives about 25 bodies a year, usually elderly males who have donated their bodies for study. Personal details are kept confidential under the Anatomy Act, which regulates the dissec-



Inspired by genius: a da Vinci drawing.

tion and storage of bodies and requires parts be cremated after about six years of use.

Ultimately, White says, it's not the body itself but what it represents that lies at the centre of attraction.

"We had one young student who really loved the human heart, its form and function; she drew it endlessly. I also remember this young student who became attached to the head of an elderly woman; she talked to her, drew her a lot, and in the paintings she always looked alive."

For 19-year-old art student Nikolas Orr, it's fear that has to be overcome. Orr's mother died when he was very young. Since then, he's had an almost visceral aversion to death, he says. "But while I was scared to do this class, I'm glad I did. It's given me a greater acceptance of death, a little more understanding."