Art by Numbers

RECONSTRUCTED BODY (2002) BY DAVE KEMP

The art of pinhole photography — photography without lenses — is older than photography itself. Even that Renaissance polymath, Leonardo da Vinci, went on about it in his *Codex Atlanticus*.

But Dave Kemp, a 29-year-old Toronto photographer, has given it the technological polish of advanced digital work for his show "Reconstructed Bodies" at Luft Gallery (1192 Queen St. W.) to Sept. 1.

In this show, a low-tech process has a high-tech finish.

At a quick first glance, Kemp's 10 nearly life-size images (1.6 metres high, 50 centimetres wide) might seem to be clinical studies.

Alternating frontal views of male and female nudes on the gallery walls, "Reconstructed Bodies" could represent the kind of imaging taken in a hospital.

In each case, the features of the face are blurred or all but erased, in another reminder of medical photographic practise where identity is masked to protect a patient's confidentiality.

Yet the nature of pinhole photography is to produce a softer image than is caught by the lens, so there's a shadowy glow to Kemp's figures that in some ways remind you of brass rubbings of medieval figures.

The dual nature of these images — the scientifically graphic quality softened by an autumnal tonality found in some Victorian photography — reflects the duality of Kemp's own background.

A 1997 graduate in mechanical engineering at Queen's University, Kemp graduated from Ryerson University last year after studies in still photography.

A $5,200 grant from the du Maurier Arts Council, one of 16 grants awarded last fall, allowed him to finish his "Reconstructed Bodies" project.

Using his own circular pinhole camera, Kemp would shoot each figure five times from various positions ranging from bottom to top, he explained.

These images would next be matched to create a single figure. The reconstructed body is both real and a virtual representation. In a sense, it belongs equally to the model and to the photographer.

Why pinhole photography? "In engineering, I was working with high-tech imaging where you produce a single image from many different angles. It's more like a model, a compiled image made up of many different fragments. Pinhole photography is a good way to do this. I wanted to get a consistent result for all 10 images, so I had to set up a big rig" to control the process.

1. Facelessness. "I was trying to reference standard medical photography, like MRI or CT scans, where they show the body facing you straight on but they will blur the face. For me, the facelessness was also done so that you can concentrate on the body. In looking at a face you focus on identity. My work is more about the body than about any individual personality. The bodies *do* have their own characters. There are distinctions between the bodies. But I wanted to concentrate on how we look at the body. The body is a big subject throughout art history."

2. Soft lighting. "The lighting setup was pretty simple really, pretty much homemade. It had a little bit of extra warmth to it because I didn't want clinical images. I didn't want them to look dead."

3. Distinctions between male and female. "The female nude is something that's common throughout art history. But people react a bit differently when they see a male nude where genitalia is being shown."

4. The strip of tech information running up both sides of each image. "I wanted to have something there that was evidence of the process involved, like some text and the sprocket holes."

— Peter Goddard

- from *The Toronto Star*, Saturday, August 24, 2002