

Archaeological Hunter

Tough images, tougher truth in *Seeing Insanity*

by Silke Tudor

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Maria Eugenia P. peers out of the photograph, her brow and fingers knitting with worry, her cotton dress rumpled, her dark eyes seeming to implore whoever is standing left of the camera lens. In that single frame, physical lines of grief pull against the woman's childlike vulnerability; hope, fear, exhaustion, and a profound desire to please battle for sovereignty. Nearby hangs a picture of Clara C., a 23-year-old Uruguayan laborer who wears an ungainly necklace of metal objects, including an abundance of flatware, a set of keys, and a large bell. In contrast to Maria, Clara appears strong, defiant, even a little mischievous as she eyeballs someone at her left, but there is a common thread in the disheveled state of her hair and dress that is shared by all the subjects in the touring photo exhibit *Seeing Insanity*.

As photographs, these are fascinating portraits, even if you don't know that 28-year-old Maria died three months after her photo was taken or that both women were admitted as patients to the Manicomio Nacional, the National Madhouse in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1908—Maria for melancholia and Clara for "dementia precox."

Curator and owner Stanley B. Burns, MD, does not collect photographs for their artistic merit, though many examples in his personal collection of 800,000 are little masterpieces. Burns collects photographs because they reveal truth and, by consequence, the lapses of truth in history.

"I can follow current events in the news and appreciate them as stories or spectacle," Burns says with a smile that is never far from his face, "but it takes 100 years to know the truth. We try to show images that people have not seen, to give audience to those neglected pieces of history."

Throughout much of the 19th century, facial expressions, the physical contours of the skull, and anatomical configurations of the body were used to diagnose mental illnesses. Asylum patients were photographed upon admittance and discharge for utilitarian purposes; the artistry of the images was the result of happenstance or skill born of repetition.

"Art creates a different perspective and point of view," writes Burns in *Seeing Insanity*, a limited-edition book published by Burns Archive Press that complements the touring exhibit. "When medical photographs are presented to the public, the images are viewed and conceived in terms of personal mortality, human fragility, and the vagaries of life."

An early, important public art exhibition of medical photographs was culled by Marvin Heifmann from Burns's personal archive in 1984. A few years later, the archive, which is now recognized as the largest and most significant collection of its kind in America, inspired Joel-Peter Witkin to edit *Masterpieces of Medical Photography: Selections from the Burns Archive*.

"The thing that irks me about collectors," says Burns, "is that most of them are closet collectors. Once they buy something, it disappears from view."

Driven by a deep commitment to share his discoveries, Dr. Burns has published 20 books—everything from a comprehensive study of the beautiful and mostly forgotten painted tintype portraits to a photographic history of tumors—and he has contributed works to galleries and museums that include the Getty and the Met. His highly prized *Sleeping Beauty* books, which provided an impassioned view of American memorial photography and lost rituals of grief, have become the subject of numerous exhibitions, most notably at the

Musée d'Orsay in Paris. All of which makes *Seeing Insanity*, which opens this Wednesday at the National Arts Club on Gramercy Park South before going on to Vienna, Ghent, and London, seem like a sweet little neighborhood affair.

Born in Brooklyn to a working-class family—his father organized unions; his mother dipped confections—Burns now lives and works in a 19th-century townhouse on East 38th Street. Despite the affluence of the location, there is something old-fashioned and homey about his little red door, which reads "Eye Physician and Surgeon." Burns says, "I really live my life in another century."

The doctor still sees patients on the ground floor where, defying convention, he takes time to talk to them. "Dr. B," announces the voice of Elizabeth Burns, the daughter who is credited with designing nearly every one of her father's strange and beautiful collectible books. "There's an emergency call."

While Burns doctors, I peruse his own photography work—a capsized tank covered in graffiti during the Czech revolution; an early air-sea rescue operation for which he served as medic—alongside unusual photographs of World War II kamikaze pilots, the Kennedys, and Babe Ruth, which hang slightly askew, like family snapshots in any home.

J-Sun, Burns's son and sometimes research assistant, follows me up a narrow stairway lined with history books and dozens of images from battles, riots, satanic rituals, horse races, and surgical galleries. On the next floor, the archive begins in earnest. There are hundreds of photographs, from 1840 through 1920, each more strange and astonishing than the last—a gorgeous 17-year-old woman with elephantiasis of the legs, a baby's head being crushed by forceps, beautiful travel scenes from a vanished world, family portraits lovingly colored by hand, a crowd of German children demonstrating the effectiveness of gas masks by walking through a gas chamber. Affixed to towering bookcases are preliminary mock-ups for at least eight new books covering crime, executions, battles, burials, racism, and diseases in all their exotic permutations.

In the midst of it all sit Elizabeth Burns and research assistant Jennifer Dinsmore, RN, who chuckle indulgently at the interplay of Burns's fast-flying gallows humor and encyclopedic knowledge of history.

"History has a way of repeating itself," reminds Burns, "but it only takes two generations for people to forget."

He pulls open a closet, revealing towers of boxes, each carefully labeled: dogs, cattle, hair, construction, ethnic dress, transvestitism, hats—every vintage image a movie studio could ever hope for.

"We specialize in Nicole Kidman," chuckles Burns, who has contributed images to *The Others* as well as Kidman's upcoming film *Fur*. Between the museums, movies, books, patients, lectures, and papers which he contributes to (no fewer than seven medical journals every month), I wonder when the good doctor has time to sleep.

"He sleeps four hours a night at the most," explains Elizabeth. "It gives him an extra day every week, but he needs it."

After all, it takes time to continue amassing the most important privately held photo archive in the world.

"This is what I do," says Burns. "I am an archaeological hunter."

