

ONE OF US

conjoined
twins
and the
future
of
normal

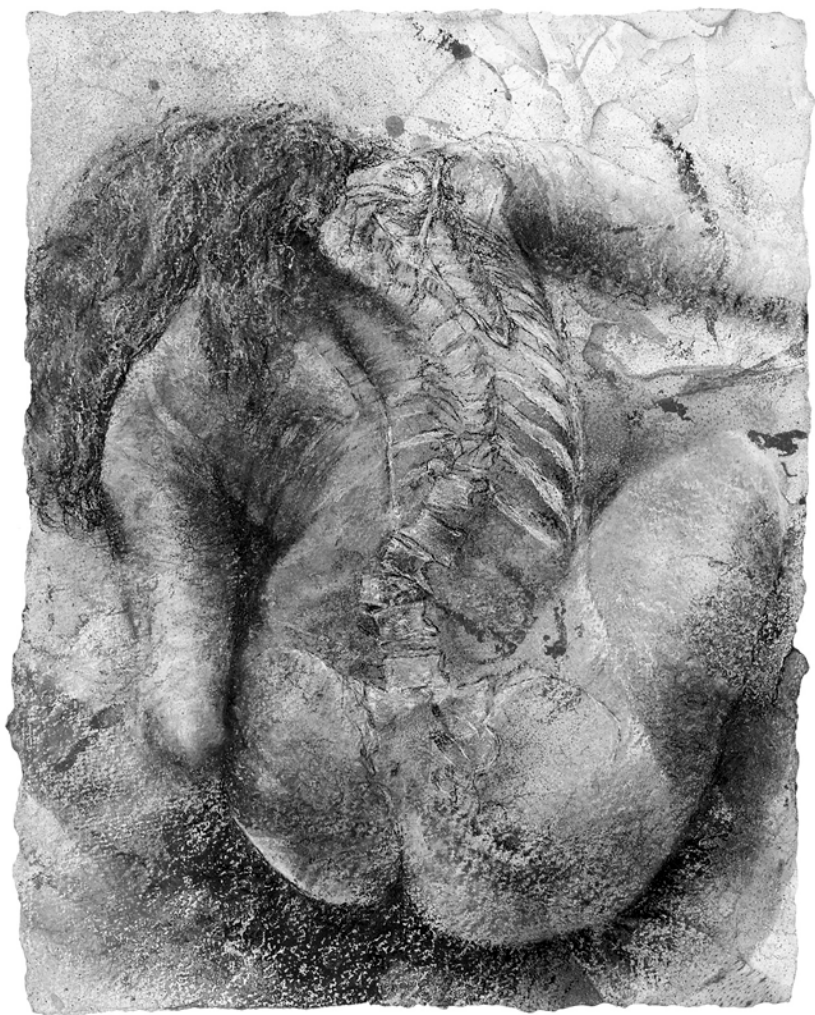


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ations are supporting autobiographical works by artists with unusual anatomies. For example, the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons has actively promoted the drawings of Laura Ferguson, an artist with scoliosis. Ferguson's self-portraits are exquisitely subversive—executed in a style similar to that found in many eighteenth-century anatomy texts, while explicitly authored by the patient herself and containing a clear element of eroticism (see Figure 12). People who see Ferguson's work are drawn to it but also provoked by it. Her autobiographical "Visible Skeleton" series poses a radical question: Can a scoliotic skeleton be physically painful and gorgeous at the same time? A challenging question like this has the power to help patients with scoliosis and other conditions begin to reject the social stigma assigned their bodies—begin to sort out various kinds of pain and the options for addressing them.³³

A new breed of documentary is likewise indicating progress. These films follow the day-to-day lives of people with unusual anatomies, yet dispense with the medicalized rhetoric. A superb example is Ellen Weissbrod's film *Face to Face: The Story of the Schappell Twins*,³⁴ which has aired many times on the Arts and Entertainment channel. It portrays the thirty-seven-year-old Lori and Reba at home, at play, at work, and on visit to New York City, while avoiding "the clichéd trope of triumph over adversity—all too common in narratives of disability."³⁵ The film does not give the impression that the twins are brave heroes or freaks of nature. If anything, it makes their lives seem remarkably unremarkable. After observing them in their ordinary activities, one realizes that they're typical in every way but the obvious. As G. Thomas Couser notes, *Face to Face* treats Lori and Reba's conjoinment "less as a physical impairment than as a condition that constitutes their lives and serves as tightly, permanently, and complexly intertwined. Their constant, prolonged exposure itself has a normalizing effect." By the end of the film, it is obvious that they are sisters "who seem to get along supremely well and to enjoy each other, who do not pity themselves and who do not regard themselves as freaks or in any way unattractive."³⁶

Instead of distancing the viewer from the twins, Weissbrod draws



12. *Crouching Figure with Visible Skeleton*, by Laura Ferguson. A self-portrait in oils, bronze powder, charcoal, colored pencil, pastel, and oil crayon on paper, 12.75 in. x 10 in., dated 2000.