

A Pictorial Guide to Sanitary Defects

Plumbing and bodies have been associated with each other since the first bum sat on the first toilet. This is only natural. They have been symbolically intertwined at least since the advent of modern toilets, plumbing and bodies readily used as shorthand for each other. Hence the litany of plumbing parts with names like female coupling, male coupling, cocks, heads, nipples, elbows and the like, and conversely, the easy euphemisms of daily speech, such as when discussing personal health as in, “There’s something wrong with my plumbing.” Plumbing articulates bodies, and bodies, plumbing.

It is a truism that, of all the developed nations, and especially those nations that experienced the first wave of modernity, the United States is the most evidently obsessed with bodily hygiene and sanitation: John Wesley’s adage that *Cleanliness is next to Godliness* runs deep in American culture. Indeed, in the twentieth ‘American century’, hygiene was the religion and the toilet its ambiguous icon. Both revered and abhorred, the toilet, and its attendant plumbing and bathroom settings, have been a dominant part of the symbolic order of American culture. Leaking, seeping, bleeding – the insidious insides of buildings and bodies recur with surprising regularity in the annals of art history, in popular film, and in the social history of vernacular architecture. Plumbing circulates as a sign of bodily anxiety, of the abject stuff of quotidian subjectivity, and of a profound modern discomfort with the conflicted state of being both an individual and an individual connected to all those other individuals encountered in the public sphere.¹ Of course my viewer may notice that this bodily anxiety is often manifested as gynophobia, as we witness women in film whose life-blood repeatedly gurgles down drains and whose open screaming mouths are intercut with the open mouths of the waste pipes, to cite just two common motifs.

A Pictorial Guide to Sanitary Defects appropriates images that circulate in art, film and life which instance twentieth century bodily anxiety, and juxtaposes them with images from the preceding century’s often failed plumbed experiments. *The Guide* serves to point to a persistent obsession with and ambivalence toward bodily hygiene and to suggest some of that anxiety’s nineteenth century root causes. Indeed all of the motifs in *A Pictorial Guide to Sanitary Defects* begin as tracings of found material; even the title of the exhibition itself is a quote from a late nineteenth century book. That these fragments are rendered in my own bodily fluids, I hope my viewer will find beautiful rather than repulsive.

– Margaret Morgan, September, 2002

¹ See my forthcoming, *The Plumbing of Modern Life*, *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, September 2002