

# In good shape

Trevor Gett talks to William A Ewing, the museum director behind a major international photography exhibition focusing on the human form

Because it is so extensive, the ambitiously conceived exhibition, *The Century of the Body: Photoworks 1900-2000* has had to be shown in three parts at the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne. Part three, *'The Triumph of the Flesh'*, comprising works of the century's last two decades and some from this year, opens on 12 October. A few weeks later a book relating to the whole exhibition will be published here by Thames & Hudson

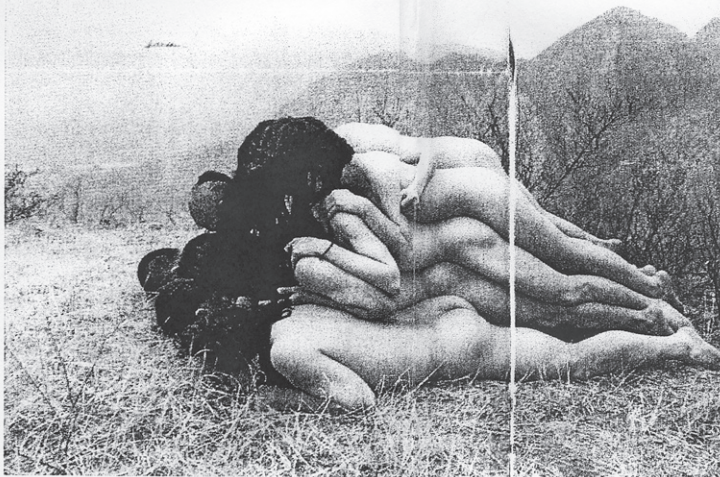
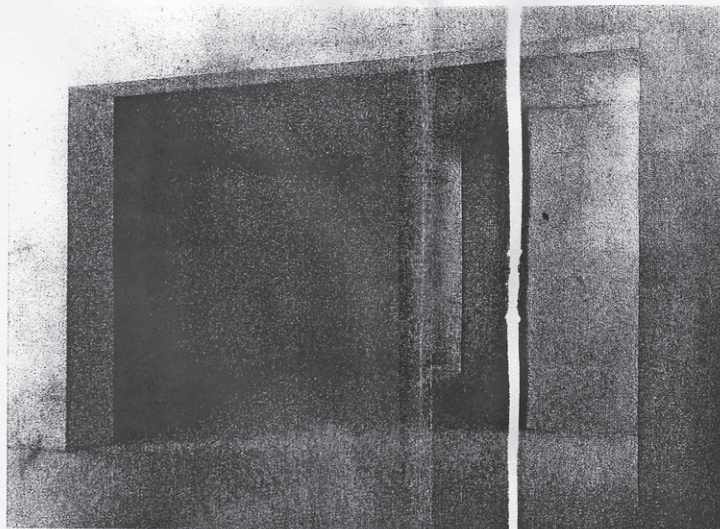
In curating the show and writing the book, William A Ewing, also the Lausanne museum's director, has focused on many ways, including some less obvious, that photographers have dealt with the naked body, whether erotically, impersonally, scientifically, artistically, obsessively, commercially or compassionately. Consequently, for *'The Century of the Body'* he brought together such seemingly disparate images as Helmut Newton's aggressive models walking towards the camera, first with and then without their clothes, Lee Miller's reportage of Buchenwald prisoners traumatised as they view charred bones of fellow victims, Horst's partly cosseted *Yogue* model, Lennart Nilsson's amaz-

ing life before birth picture in a womb, George Rodger's shots of the strength and beauty of Nuba tribespeople, some Harry Callahan and Emmet Gowin studies of their wives and Imogen Cunningham's partially clothed dancer Martha Graham performing as she never would in public

Ewing added lesser-known photographs, including a naked three-year-old standing beside the time-worn legs of his grandfather by Gerard Luhti, a woman who has died while asleep by Jeffrey Silverthorne and an amazing self-portrait where the agile Arno Rafael Minkinen has transformed himself into abstract sculpture

## ENORMOUS CHANGES

Taken 14 years ago on a Finnish lake, this photograph underlines the enormous changes that have occurred since the twentieth century began, since esteemed soft light, soft focus pictorialists like Edward Steichen and Robert Demachy self-consciously created 'painterly' nudes in line with fine art standards. 'They could never do that, never do a nude as well as a painter,' states Ewing. 'However, once photog-



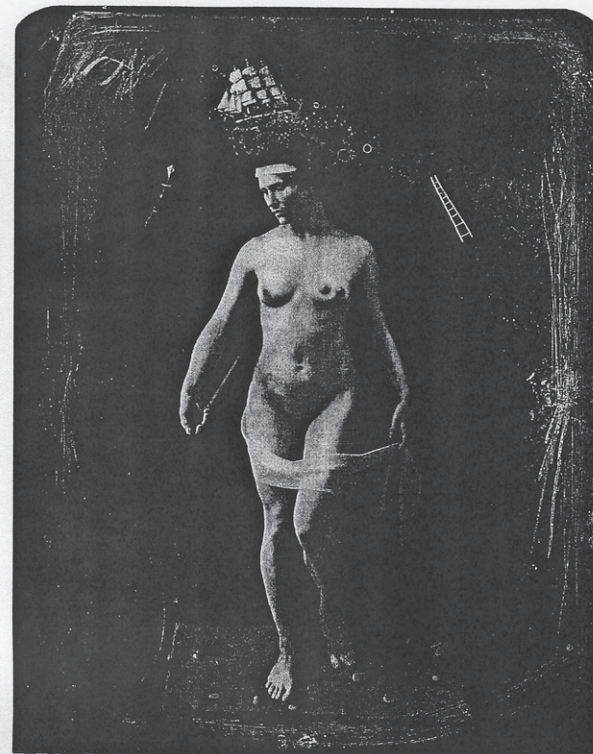
■ Top: *Interieur No 5* © Aziz + Cucher. Left: *Femme ballue* © Miguel Ribiero.

raphers realised they could get cameras in close to show just fragments of the body, they discovered their proper terrain and outstripped the painters who depicted the full figure.'

That happened at first in the 1920s when Edward Weston and Man Ray developed immediately recognisable styles. Subsequently, formal issues became priorities for photographers of the nude. But the emphasis markedly shifted towards the reality of the flesh in the 1980s and 90s, the period covered in *'The Triumph of the Flesh'*. Ewing enthuses about what some contemporary photographers have done

As their concern for the fragility of the body

■ Above: *Adding a metre to an unknown mountain* © Zhang Huan. Above right: *Beauty has three nipples* © Joel-Peter Witkins.



through suffering, illness and abuse is an ongoing theme, he was eager to display the work of Miguel Ribiero, a Portuguese doctor. 'Ribiero took hundreds of quite beautiful and astonishing pictures in the Eighties of Africans in a hospital where he was a skin specialist for 10 years. They're both intimate and distanced at the same time

'He is not a voyeur, someone who has come in from the outside. He set out to document patients who were being treated, in one instance a woman beaten by her husband or partner. Yet there's a kind of aesthetic to his pictures which allows you to look at them. A police photograph of that poor woman's back would probably be too horrible to bear. You'd just turn your eyes away.'

France's Valérie Belin came to Ewing's attention earlier this year and her compelling bodybuilding nudes of both sexes appealed to him more than other photographs in this genre. 'There's a rather ironic element in the way she shows bodies like machines. Naturalness never comes to mind. It is as if the tendency for her subjects is to break out of the limitations of being real human beings and become something else. This is by no means the classic Greek ideal. These are people working towards being superhuman and probably inspired by a combination of Superman and Arnold Schwarzenegger. The man in the photograph wants his muscles shown to maximum advantage and maybe that is why there's a somewhat pained expression, a grimace, on his face.'

By contrast, the woman in Joel Peter

Witkin's constructed image will never conform to any ideal of beauty. Says Ewing, 'Her third nipple, which is false, suggests that difference or otherness people have often been punished for. It's a picture with metaphorical overtones. Her body is powdered with white to make her seem more ethereal, more classically feminine and more like a statue. Witkin is one of the most interesting photographers working today.'

## COMPLETELY BIZARRE

In lighter vein from China there is Zhang Huan's 'Adding a metre to an unknown mountain', so-called since that's what the pile of naked men and women are supposedly doing. Ewing explains: 'This was not a formal choice, not about composition but about humour and it is completely bizarre. Zhang Huan is a conceptual artist not known as a photographer. He mocks the use of the body as a mere cog in the machine and there is another picture we have by him on how to raise the level of the water in a lake by putting people in it.'

Intrigued by the videotape Mona Hatoum made with an endoscopic camera within her own body, Ewing travelled to her London studio and chose a picture of Hatoum's husband with the hairs of his back suggesting Van Gogh's swirling brushstrokes. 'Seeing this pattern as he was having a bath, Hatoum took two photographs, the second with a big camera and what she felt was proper lighting. But disappointed with the result, she went back to the original which was done with a small camera she uses as a note-taking device. For me, this

# THE TRIUMPH OF THE F

## THE DECADE OF

William A Ewing's reseat of the human form has 1 past 10 years. It led first *Body*, which is organise fragments, flesh, scientific figures, and so on. A sin followed in *'The Century*, a second book was publ London for the Barbican retrospective, having ch written the monograph. and *Desire*' looked at the longing and adoration e bringing people togethe background, he was the mastermind *'The Centur* 1999 for a prestigious 3: centre in Lisbon. In Laus the *Flesh*' was preceded the *Fragment*' and *'The*

shows that intuition an paramount to photograp count for everything.'

Besides Mona Hatou er's from this country ir *Flesh*' including Gilbert Sinclair, Helen Chadwic

Nicholas Nixon also p and dearest but rather c Hatoum. Bebe Nixon an posed regularly for him group portraits in the ex the ageing process as tin tell all and that's why Nixon's pictures althoug clothed

Composed digitally i er's image of a body tra space may be a warning on a path programming Says Ewing, 'The sectio was photographed in th textures of the walls, the the room are computer in ble living skins. They're future and stand for the read about every day.'

Because 'we are p Lausanne', Ewing regret from *'Celestial Bodies*': tographer Pierre Radisic the 88 constellations th marks found on women: did show them here two'

*'There's a ra element in th shows bo machines. A never come This is by no classic Gre*