



THE OBSERVER

REVIEW

Decaying miracles in a prison of time

A leaking machine, an inner landscape,
a coiled spring: *Peter Conrad* marvels at
the **BODY**'s moving freeze-frames

When the hero of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* sees his x-rayed hand, he recognises this phosphorescent skeleton as the harbinger of his death. Ewing's book concludes, less scarily, with a photocopied hand-print by Gary Schneider, clarifying the landscape of squashy mounds and irrigating rivulets beneath the skin, and most of the internal evidence he assembles excites amazement, not terror – an electron micrograph of a

streaky spermatozoon as it fertilises the purple planet of an egg, or an endoscopic portrait of a foetus at three months, the curled microcosm of a potential person; a scintigram of the central nervous system, which resembles a canvas itchy flecked with pigment by Jackson Pollock, or a scan of the thigh bone, its layered plates like a pile of open books. Can we really be lugging around with us this garden of metaphoric wonders?

We are confronted today with prophecies of the body's obsolescence. Freud said that technology made man a prosthetic god, but it's the prostheses which are divine, not the human parts they replace. Now Michael Jackson, like a science-fiction replicant, can redesign his nose and his skin-

pigmentation, while in medical schools messy human corpses are being phased out in favour of 'industry-standard digital cadavers', which can be dissected without spilling blood.

To my surprise, I'm not sure that the prospect of cybernetic disembodiment pleases me. Ewing's book – with its simple, touching studies of the hands and feet we use as servants, and its surreal inventory of our innards – convinces me that the human body is not such a bad place to live after all. I think, for the time being, I'll stay put.