

BY MAGNUS WALLIN — GALERIE NORDENHAK

Magnus Wallin's animations at the Hirshhorn, including "Anatomic Flop," look high-tech but are inspired by historical examinations of the body.

Wallin: Projecting Our Own Fears

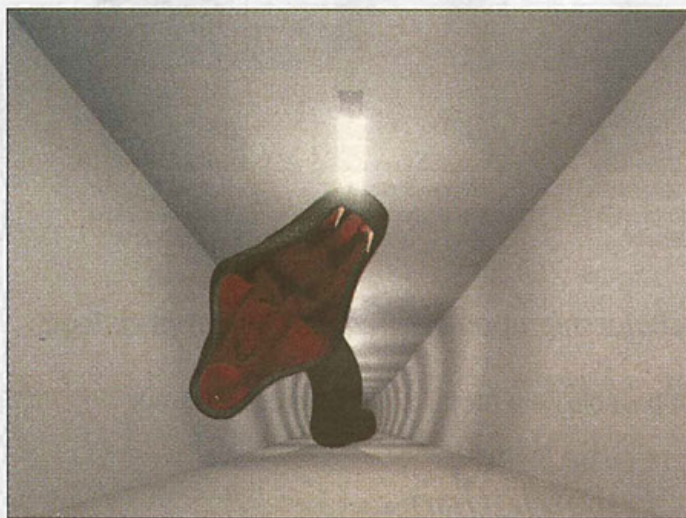
By MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN
Washington Post Staff Writer

What do artists dream of when they sleep? If Magnus Wallin is any indication, the answer is pretty much the same as the rest of us: claustrophobic tunnels, giant snakes and running in place without getting anywhere.

Reportedly inspired by his own dreams, two short computer animations by the contemporary Swedish artist are on continuous view in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's Black Box Theater. As the parents of a young child concluded upon wandering into the space, the videos might be a tad scary for some audiences. Truth be told, they are a little disturbing even for grown-ups.

"Anatomic Flop" (2003) depicts an idealized running track floating against the backdrop of a stormy sky. Again and again, eight droidlike athletes — they resemble the metallic-skinned machines in "I, Robot" — sprint toward the viewer like mice in a maze, only to be repeatedly blasted backward by some unseen force. This is eventually revealed to be a giant winged creature, part bird (or dark angel?), part hourglass, whose flapping blows the runners violently back to the starting block every time, where they begin again the same ritual with stoic resignation.

"Exercise Parade" (2001) presents a similar



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A serpent appears in Wallin's "Exercise Parade" in the Black Box Theater.

scenario of actors reluctantly engaged in a physical contest. This time, it's a game of leapfrog down a long, fluorescent-lighted hallway, involving, on the one hand, a human skeleton and, on the other, its corresponding musculature. It's as if the participants stepped off the pages of an anatomy chart; the "muscle man" even comes with his own med-school labels and arrows sticking out of his skinless flesh like acupuncture needles. Every so often, a large silvery boulder rolls down the corridor, causing our bony friend, who whimpers in terror, to flatten himself against the wall, along with his meathead partner. As soon as

the danger has passed, the two resume their sport. At some point, a massive serpent comes slithering down the passageway.

Although he gives his work the high-tech sheen of a video game, Wallin traces the roots of his imagery to such historical examinations of the human body as photographer Eadweard Muybridge's 19th-century motion studies and Andreas Vesalius's 1543 anatomy textbook "De Humani Corporis Fabrica." Wallin's subject matter, however, appears to be not the mechanics of life, but its core meaning. Why do we go on, when it seems we never get anywhere and death lurks around every corner?

"Exercise Parade" is a two-channel video installation that is normally projected onto opposite walls of a room. This gives the effect that its flesh-and-bones protagonists are leapfrogging right over viewers' heads as they proceed from one end of the corridor to the other. At the Hirshhorn, the two screens are side by side, yet our identification with the characters is inescapable. Wallin succeeds in making his point, that his nightmares are ours.

BLACK BOX: MAGNUS WALLIN Through May 20 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW (Metro: L'Enfant Plaza). 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-357-1729). www.hirshhorn.si.edu. Open daily 10 to 5:30. Free.