Throughout history, mankind has had a fascination with the mechanics of anatomy. The first time I saw Magnus Wallin’s work, I thought of one of my favorite museums, La Specola, in Florence, which houses a collection of dissected bodies cast in wax. In these dimly lit galleries, one can stare unabashedly at the wax-cast innards of people from the 1700s and be transported back to an era when magic and science were companion studies. Wallin’s animations evoke a similar blend of curiosity, history, and uneasiness.

Wallin cites Andreas Vesalius’s De humani corporis fabrica from 1543 as the inspiration for the figures in his work. The medical chart-type labels that provide an aura for the character in Exercise Parade, 2001, make it seem as if he has leapt right from the pages of the vivid woodcuts in this compendium. Both Wallin’s and Vesalius’s humanoids have counterparts in the international commercial exhibitions Bodies and Body Worlds. Flayed creatures inhabit these popular spectacles. The language used to promote Bodies, which is part side show-speak and part science—Real Human Bodies, preserved through an innovative process and respectfully presented. Experience the human body like never before—could also describe Wallin’s digitally developed figures. His work conveys the sense that viewers cannot help but be transfixed by perfect physical specimens, but also questions this allure. Like the recent Vanity Fair cover featuring Brad Pitt, Wallin’s films suggest that “perfection” is not without a suspicious clinical, dehumanizing chill.

Another source for Wallin’s explorations are the body studies of Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904), the pioneering photographer who used grids as a backdrop to analyze the component gestures of bodies in motion. Wallin creates, in addition to his short films, series of photographs in which computer-generated, supermuscled figures are configured in athletic poses set against Muybridge-style grids. They are subjects for analysis. This aesthetic of lab-like experiment carries over into Anatomic Flop, 2003, as the runners are being watched, measured, timed, and observed. In Exercise Parade, again the viewers peer into a clinical situation. A skeleton and a Vesalius Man leap frog through a corridor that is initially an institutional space, sterile with eerie florescent lighting. Sci-fi fans may read the orb that barrels through the tunnel as a reference to the cult 1960s television show The Prisoner, but when it reaches the brink of the screen, a child suspended in the center of it is briefly visible. The source for this image, Wallin says, is the photo documentation of human experiments conducted by Nazi doctors. The artist offsets the troubling nature of human testing by reclaiming the victim here, momentarily memorializing the anonymous subject. For Wallin, both hope and admonition are involved in our fascination with the pursuit, depiction, and glorification of physical perfection.

Wallin has said that his scenarios emerge from his own dreams and nightmares. The animations are vivid, thought-provoking, and slightly ungraspable, like myths and ancient stories. They play out in a continuum—like the story of Sisyphus, who is condemned by the gods to push a rock up a hill for eternity—a perpetual repetition of concerted effort without the reward of progress. There is also an airlessness here, reminiscent of the surrealistic estrangements in waking life as depicted by De Chirico, described by Kafka, and enjoyed by avid video gamers. In this territory of isolation, the artist’s figures are stalked by fates and forces beyond their control. Despite their physical prowess, their strength is no match for the “Wings of Time” or the “Serpent from Paradise.” His scenes invoke science and magic in ways that make these cartoons raise cosmic questions: Is perfection fate or folly, detinay or downfall? And are we all just part of a larger, unknowable experiment, performing in a maze like lab mice destined to get nowhere?

Magnus Wallin was born in 1965 in Malmö, Sweden, where he lives and works today.

Kelly Gordon, Associate Curator

To respond to Wallin’s films or the questions and ideas explored here, please visit www.hirshhorn.si.edu/