Science or art?

Princeton exhibit combines both, blurs lines

By Janice T. Paine 

Wednesday, June 13, 2007

Science is Boring. Art is Stupid. Prove Us Wrong.

Princeton University was issued this challenge about two and a half years ago. An art professor, two computer scientists and a literature grad student realized that campus scientists and tech whizzes were producing remarkable images in the course of their research. But the inadvertent creations were largely unnoticed.

So they sent out a flyer asking for photographic submissions based on scientific and technical research. The call drew more than 200 entries from 100 individuals among 15 academic departments.

That effort bore the first Princeton “Art of Science” exhibit, unveiled on the Ivy League campus in the spring of 2005. A second show was mounted in 2006 and remains on display at the university. Organizers hope a third show will materialize in the future, according to computer scientist J. Alex Halderman.

“We didn’t do a new exhibition this spring due to scheduling constraints, but we’re working on plans for next year,” Halderman said in an e-mail.

Fortunately for Southwest Florida art fans, a selection of images from the first two exhibits is currently circulating as a touring show. Fifty colorful photographic prints, captioned with sometimes puzzling and sometimes illuminating explanations, can be seen in the Art League of Bonita Springs’ Tranovitch Gallery through July 28.

Joerg Schroeer’s photograph of human cells infected by a virus, stained with vivid fluorescent colors, is abstract and organically beautiful. It’s also important to remember that although the shapes are true, the colors were added by human choice.

“Dynamic Asset Allocation in Freight Transportation” is a computer graphic made by Warren B. Powell and Belgacem Bouzaiene-Ayari of the university’s Department of Operations Research and Financial Engineering. The digital print is a colorful, complex, superimposed circular pie chart. It recalls the cosmic disks painted by artists such as Kandinsky and Delaunay at the beginning of the 20th century.

Ecologist Stephen Pratt’s photograph of “Individually Marked Ants” won third prize in the 2005 competition.

Dotted with tiny drops of cheerful paint, Pratt’s bugs look like candy ants. His magnified image of the insects, briefly immobilized by carbon dioxide, is a picture that a contemporary artist would not scorn. Pratt, however, used the dots to identify individual ants for his studies of insect communication and colony behavior. “I didn’t think of them as art,” he told an interviewer in 2005, though he knew his photographs had appeal as something other than research data.

There’s almost an intellectual pingpong game between art and science. It may help viewers to surrender to the visual power of the images first, then decipher the captions — they can be daunting. Although written in English, some of the descriptions are unintelligible to those not versed in, say, calculus.

For example, the commentary attached to one computer-generated image, “Strange Crystal,” notes: “In understanding this shape, the arithmetic of the integers extended by the fifth roots of unity proves very helpful.”

Two other mathematically derived images were created by the same person, Darsh Ranjan, who graduated from Princeton in 2005. “Color Wheel” and “Unknown Species” both resulted from computer programs the young mathematician wrote while he was an undergraduate.

The exhibit also contains lush, lyrical photographs of the heavens, such as Douglas Finkbeiner’s “Cygnus Nebula” and “The Horsehead Nebula” by Robert Vanderbei, as well as aerial and landscape photos.

Some of the pictures feel like the visual equivalent of one-night stands or intellectual driftwood, the random results of scientific activity that become something special in the eye of the beholder.

Some types of visual wizardry can be stunning and conceptually staid at the same time. Microphotography, for instance, can generate amazing results with slight artistic input. Blow up just about anything — even a fleck of dust — and the resulting image can be fabulously riveting regardless of the photographer’s skill or intentions.

Maria Margarita Ramos’ photograph of a spider’s genitalia seen close up falls in this category. So does Qiangfei Xia’s charming “Easter Bonnet.” This image shows a particle of dust that landed atop an infinitesimal drop of melted metal on a silicon chip in the lab. Dramatically enlarged, these bits of matter look like a tiny hat.

Organizers had hoped to dispel the notion that scientific researchers are geeky automatons, lacking aesthetic sensibility. Ditto for the stereotype that artists are whimsical sorts without concern for rationality. Both need the ability to carefully observe what’s in front of them and then interpret it.

For Art League of Bonita Springs Executive Director Susan Bridges, the Princeton images are a refreshing change of pace: an odd, quirky exhibit that challenges artistic concepts.

“It’s important for us to look outside our own little arena,” said Bridges. “I don’t think we always take in the whole scope of what art is and what it does — the largeness of art in our lives.”

If you go

“The Princeton Art of Science Exhibition”

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mon.-Fri., noon-5 p.m. through July 28

Where: Art League of Bonita Springs, 26100 Old 41 Road, Bonita Springs

Admission: Free

Information: 239-495-8989 or www.artcenterbonita.org

Reader Comments