



*Negative Ions I*, 1996, Dove Bradshaw

**a**n object is brought into view beneath the lens of a microscope, the focus knob is turned and the natural world is brought under close scrutiny. This episode draws our immediate attention to what is observed through the instrument, but what else in this scene might interest us? Is the observed sample unique or one among hundreds like it? Who is doing the observing? Why is the study being conducted? Asking these questions changes the depth of our focus; requires a wider lens. Now we are considering the context in which science is practiced and the role that it plays in our culture. The complex network of questions which emerges is explored by philosophers and social scientists and, of course, artists.

Artists observe the world and make us see it anew, transforming its ordinary nature into that which is worth examining. The artists in this exhibition draw into focus not only the discoveries of scientists but also the world of scientific inquiry. These artists scrutinize the wide range of fields within the discipline of science and they apply to the task a mix of their manifest talent, curiosity, skepticism, and respect. They acknowledge the important contributions made by the scientific community while suggesting that alternate readings or views may be possible.

Is science wholly objective? Should it be? Ann Lovett's chilling book *Sight Unseen* places side-by-side clinically titled photographs of eye afflictions and the story of a woman whose lover blinds her. This is not an indictment, but certainly underscores the cool detachment of medical science. British artist Louise K. Wilson goes further, challenging science conducted in a moral vacuum. Her multi-media piece *Oneironaut* is about the 1957 flight into space of the dog Laika as part of the Soviet space program. Laika's fate; death and disintegration in space, is slowly revealed.

Certainly, scientific method is sometimes twisted to justify unsupportable claims. Michael Oatman's installation documents the practice of eugenics in Vermont only a few years before Hitler's horrifying application of this belief in racial superiority. The installation includes a video re-enactment of inflammatory remarks made by a eugenicist, presented in the measured tones of scientific authority but thoroughly offensive in their blatant racism.

Eve Andrée Laramée also disputes the claims of objectivity in science and insists that emotional states are equal partners with science's empirical findings. She constructs tableaux from scientific apparatus and no object escapes her powers of transformation. Lab apparatus undergoes another metamorphosis in the work of Catherine Wagner whose photographs are dignified portraits of tubes, glassware and bench stands,

the noble veterans of scientific adventure. Their human collaborators go unnoticed and un-remarked on.

Scientists may speculate on origins and measure effects and debate significance and potential, but the processes of nature carry on with no heed of our efforts. The pre-eminence of natural processes is underscored by Dove Bradshaw's lyric works. A relentless drip of water carved canyons, we are told, and this magic is demonstrated before us. Agnes Denes also allies herself with nature. Her work has combined scientific study and visual expression for three decades. In the elegance of math and physics, in the patterns of sunflowers and bird migration, she finds models for utopian social systems.

The last group of works in the exhibition examine representations of scientific findings. The appearance of Robert Chambers' *Hair Gel Ball* at first suggests that a serious effort has been undertaken to model a biological object, but the title and list of materials reveal a playful turn. The DNA molecule transmits genetic information from one generation to the next. Distinctions in the structure of the molecule create a "language" with a code unique to each individual. Suzanne Anker creates intricate prints of a genetic "text." Surprisingly similar in appearance are the tiny human figures she inserts, illustrations from exercise manuals, and the calligraphic marks, examples of Leonardo da Vinci's secret code writing, used to record ideas in his notebooks. The combination of these images suggests the facets of a person's identity: their genetic make-up, their physical body and the product of their intellect.

Illustration and diagrams are used to record, clarify, and communicate scientific observations. Ross Martin mangles text and collage images from the scientific canon to produce a parody of a science book. Daniel Zeller produces meticulously rendered drawings that seem to record the appearance of body organs, but these fictional parts would never appear in an autopsy. René Descartes was a 17th century philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. How better to observe the contributions of the founder of analytic geometry than to construct a die-cut pop-up book? Descartes' philosophy had little use for intuition, yet this work by François Deschamps and Judith Mohs is clearly the product of invention, which must be in equal parts rational and intuitive.

**into focus** explores some of the ways science is received outside of the scientific community. There is a growing interest in the potential for mutual benefit when the worlds of art and science meet like this. It is a crossroads worth encountering.

-Adrienne Klein, August 1998

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Adrienne Klein is an art curator. She curated the *Graphic Alert*, an *interview of AIDS graphics*, shown at the Brooklyn 1997-98. She received a grant from the New York Council on the Arts to intersection of art and

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