

Galleries

A haunted, poetic vision of genetics

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Our thirsty pursuit of knowledge is a risky venture. When we finally get our hands on the prize, it may turn out to be a Pandora's box.

Boston printmaker Deborah Cornell considers the consequences of scientific query, particularly the study of genetics, in her installation at the Nesto Gallery in Milton. We humans have had pretty much the same map of chromosomes guiding us since we first walked upright. We cannot begin to dream what might happen if somebody changed just a small portion of that map.

Cornell's installation begins with a boat-shaped vessel in the middle of the gallery, filled with white pebbles and plaster casts of hands, feet, cornucobs, snakes, and shells. It recalls Noah's ark, trapped on a sandbar and discovered years later, filled with skeletons and fossils. An orange plexiglass sheet, scored with a grid, hangs just above the boat; a microscope sits upon it, in front of a black sketch of a double helix. The shadow of the double helix falls over the back of a white hand below.

Prints hang on the walls surrounding the boat, each pinned down by a piece of plexiglass tattooed with cautionary text, like this from W. B. Yeats: "All changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born."

Compared with the crisp lines and colors of the boat and its contents, the prints have more the quality of rising from some primordial murk. They are dark, shafted with light, showing X-ray images of hands and scurrying, amoeboid chromosomes: a lexicon of creation. A sound element created by the artist's husband, Richard Cornell, suffuses



Detail of Anne Neely's "Maelstrom."

DEBORAH CORNELL: THE SLEEP OF REASON: A CAUTIONARY TALE

At: Nesto Gallery at Milton Academy, 170 Centre St., Milton, through Feb. 10

ANNE NEELY: SEVEN LANDSCAPES FOR THE MILLENNIUM

At: Lillian Immig Gallery at Emmanuel College, 100 The Fenway, through Feb. 17

RANDAL THURSTON: SILHOUETTES

At: New England School of Art and Design at Suffolk University, 81 Arlington St., through Feb. 16

the gallery with the soft hisses and chirps of crickets and tree frogs.

All the elements of the installation work together to create a sense of urgency about preserving the precious things that we have, and a warning that mystery will always win out over science, no matter how much we know.

Cornell also shows her "Arrhythmia" series of woodblock prints, featuring a large heart made up of images from nature. The brawny, beating things resemble the back of a hawk, and the wind combing through

a marshy patch of weeds. In the center of each image, a small photographic insert sits like an open window into the heart. "Script" shows us hieroglyphs carved into stone; "Homunculus" has a scrunched-up, sculpted little head. The series portrays the heart as progenitor of word, deed, and idea as well as pas-

sion.

Anne Neely touches on similar themes in a show of prints at the Lillian Immig Gallery. "Seven Landscapes for the Millennium," a drypoint print portfolio, throws itself into the maelstrom of passing time, albeit with hope. These are long, narrow pieces, described in feathery lines and blurry dits and dashes, like Morse code set to dance.

One of these prints, "Regeneration," has a dense, floating spiral on the right, like bees buzzing around the hive. To the left, delicate lines describe leaves and buds as darker spots hover around — perhaps more bees awaiting pollination.

The "Seven Landscapes," light and airy, have the sense of hurtling forward and forever. Another series of prints, the "Prayer Hand" series, stops and stills the viewer. The hand acts as a symbol of prayer, of beckoning and welcoming whatever may come.

What comes isn't always good. In "Broken," a single, large hand, drawn with agitated lines, fills the

left side of the monoprint. It is taken up with smaller imprints, hands, clutching and empty after "Broken," there's "Ill-tion," in which two open hands form a small universe, blue-black and pale yellow bubbles. Neely says that what we cannot grasp, we may be able to hold.

Randal Thurston has a series of black silhouettes, tacked to the walls and suspended from their brightly colored backside, creating shadows far more brilliant than their blank, dark fronts.

The advantage of the black silhouettes is that they provide the artist's imagination with a blank canvas and what better canvas to project than this symbol for the soul? The insects (700 of them) are defined from each other, yet not based on actual species. Thurston has scrawled names in graphite across the backs of some of them, creating his chosen community of beauty.

The butterflies inebriated in the room, floating to the ceiling, champagne bubbles. Other silhouettes — there are six on one wall — the "Palindrome" series — into the flow of the installation. To the "Palindrome" cutouts are a series of their own installation. They are complex, often but not always symmetrical, full of beasts and plants that, like the butterflies, have a dark import in Thurston's myth. These silhouettes read like Greek fairy tales, full of astonishment, threat, and celebration.