

Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

THE SCIENCE OF ART AND VICE VERSA

An Interview with Bioartist Laura Splan

BORKO AMULIC

A recent conference at the New York Academy of Sciences (NYAS) entitled *Biology and Art: Two Worlds or One?* brought together respected artists and scientists to explore the emerging discipline of bioart in a series of presentations and discussions, followed by an exhibition. After the conference, *Natural Selections* met with artist Laura Splan in her Greenpoint studio to discuss her work and the strange, thrilling, and often controversial incursion of artists into the world of science.

NS: In recent years, many artists have started using biological specimens or biomedical imagery in their work. What is it that attracts artists to these fields?

SPLAN (S): Artists, like everyone else in our culture, have been exposed more and more to biomedical imagery in their everyday lives. It has become part of our mainstream visual landscape. As artists mine the rest of their culture for inspiration, this imagery is just another part of what they find. There have been more recent shifts in our access and exposure to biomedical imagery that have influenced the increase in artists referencing the imagery prominently in their work. Some of those shifts have been influenced by biotechnological advances [such as] cloning of Dolly, stem cell research, bioterrorism (anthrax in the mail), FDA legalization of TV drug ads in 1997, emergence of antimicrobial household products, and development of Internet databases of biomedical imaging and information.

It should also be noted that historically artists have drawn inspiration from nature in anything from landscape painting to playing with the physics of light. Many contemporary artists' interest in biomedical imagery is actually quite formal and traditional in their approach to the material while others are

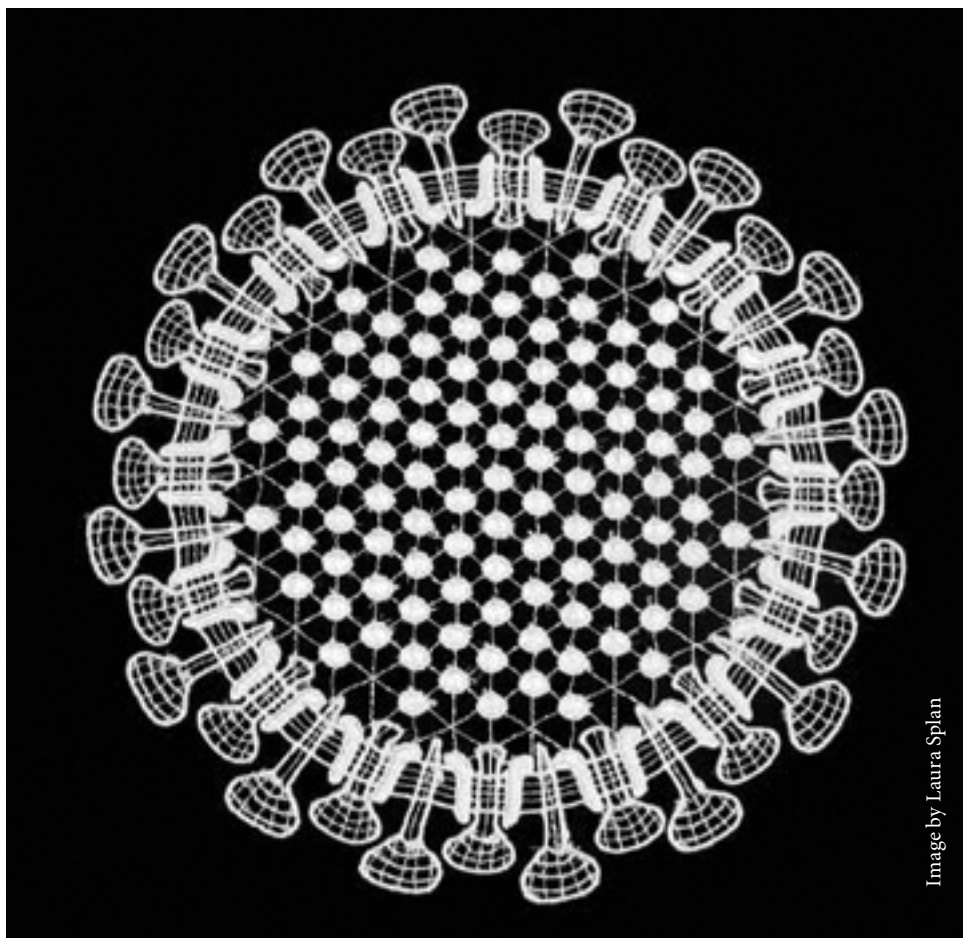


Image by Laura Splan

more concerned with metaphor and concept in their use of the imagery.

NS: You started out studying biology in college. How did you decide that you did not want to pursue a career in science, but turned to art instead?

S: While I had great interest and respect for the biology program at UC Irvine, I was blown away by the elective art classes I was taking. The art program was highly conceptual and political. I was learning about a lot of things relating to feminism and identity politics for the first time, and ultimately felt more engaged with political art at the time. The concepts of art and artist were really opened up for me, and art became a venue to explore all of my diverse inter-

ests which eventually came back to biology in a very roundabout way.

My choice was also a failure to recognize the different directions that a career in bioscience could mean. With the emergence of so much bioart, I now see that biologist can be as malleable a term as artist.

I also knew that I was absolutely not interested in participating in animal testing and experimentation, which I foresaw as being problematic for me in the future with a lot of biological sciences course work.

NS: As scientists, we are trained to develop hypotheses about a particular problem and then test them through ra-

continued on page 2

tional experimental design. The whole process is very structured, but at the same time there is creativity in the way experiments are designed. Can you give us some insight into your creative process? Do you think that there are any similarities in the way artists and scientists approach a problem?

S: Scientific experimentation and problem solving can be highly creative, and art-making can be extremely robotic and methodical. If I had to differentiate the two, I would say that science's creativity is based on technical and scientific information, while art's scientific experiments and methods are based on creativity.

My creative process has, of late, been very materials-driven with a consistent theme of ambivalence towards the human body and its biological function. First, I decide I want to use a particular material (blood, cosmetic facial peel, lace, or doilies). I try to do something with the material that is new and often relating to domesticity, femininity, or craft. I then examine the historical and contemporary significance of that material. I may allude to these meanings and ideas in the imagery of the work. My artistic practice involves a lot of experimentation and trial and error in order to figure out what works both technically and conceptually in the final piece.

NS: At the NYAS conference, I was constantly aware of a fundamental differ-

ence in the way people were thinking and talking about art. On one hand, many of the scientists kept bringing up aesthetics—the idea of beautiful images taken by the Hubble telescope, etc.; on the other hand, there was the purely conceptual

“My priority is to evoke thought and ideas, not pleasure. However...aesthetics serve a role in conceptual practice.”

rhetoric of Jens Hauser, whose presentation focused on projects such as *Designer Hymens* by vivoLabs where artists use tissue culture to explore sexuality. These are two very different approaches! Where does your work lie on this continuum?

S: That's a wonderful and true observation! It ultimately begs the questions, “is something art because it's beautiful?” and likewise, “is something still art if it has no beauty?” I feel, and actually hope, that my work lies in the conceptual territory rather than the aesthetic. My priority is to evoke thought and ideas, not pleasure. However, what I've found over the years is that aesthetics serve a role in conceptual practice. The more beautiful or seductive the image, the more someone will look at it. The more someone looks at it, the more they will peel back the underlying layers of meaning.

NS: When first encountering your work, a person is lured in by the intricate patterns and interesting imagery and it is not immediately evident that the work has a more shocking, aversive aspect to it, whether it is pictures of furniture assembled from found x-ray images or doilies modeled after deadly viruses. Is shock intended to play a role in the way people experience your art? What do you want them to take away from the experience?

S: Not so much shock as repulsion, discomfort, and horror in

Mary Abraham

Rudy Bellani

Fabienne Brilot-Turville

Manuel Castellano-Muñoz

Jiabin Chen

Revathy U. Chottekalapanda

Ileana Cristea

Jeff DeGrasse

Barbara Juncosa

Bluma Lesch

Anna Magracheva

Aileen Marshall

Engin Ozertugrul

Georgia Patikoglou

Prerana Shrestha

Sriram

Tari Suprpto

selections.rockefeller.edu
naturalselections@rockefeller.edu

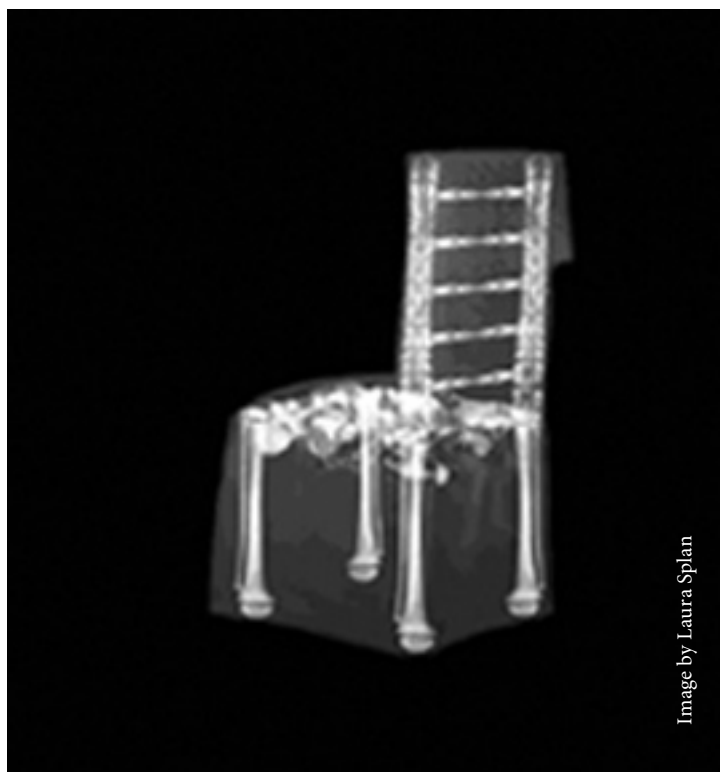


Image by Laura Splan

relation to the human body. I often try to create an experience that begins here and then unfolds into something comfortable or beautiful. I approach imagery from the other side, in which I use the beautiful and comfortable imagery to mask something more disturbing. The trick is negotiating the mask into one that can be controlled by the viewer. They can go back and forth between the two and develop an awareness of the malleability of this experience and their own perceptions.

A lot of social construction is about masking and denying basic biological functions. I'm interested ... in creating an experience in which the viewer is left with some sort of control of what they perceive, so that if they choose to see a doily that can be all they see. But they can also choose to really look at the structure and think about how that is a virus and think about how that makes them feel and what their relationship is to that fear of the microbial world in domestic space. ☉

Laura Splan has just had a solo show at The International Museum of Surgical Science in Chicago. To see more of her work visit www.laurasplan.com.

An Ancient Scene in a Modern City

JIABIN CHEN

When a general, established in numerous battles and acclaimed as a hero by many, suddenly finds himself at a dead end with no backup coming, what does he do? Hannibal committed suicide. So did Xiang Yu, a historical figure who lived more than two thousand years ago in China. Unlike Hannibal, who was probably alone when he poisoned himself, Xiang Yu was with his beloved beauty. The lady, Yu, who had been on his side for more than a decade, killed herself because she didn't want to be his burden. Xiang Yu actually had a slim chance of escaping to his hometown and coming back with a new army. But he refused to go back to beg for more soldiers, and he took his own life. His poem—recited at the moment when he realized that his doom had come—together with his tragic end and Yu's dramatic death has become a legend in history; and the legend a classic of Beijing Opera (*Jingju*), a style of traditional Chinese operas.

The classic was reenacted in Lincoln Center on July 10 and 11 by the Contemporary Legend Theatre from Taiwan. The theater, founded by Wu Hsing-Kuo, a Beijing Opera actor, is famous for adapting Shakespeare tragedies to traditional Chinese operas. This year, the Lincoln Center Festival invited him to present his one-man show, *King Lear*. Before this extraordinary, truly contemporary solo, he gave the audience two nights of traditional performances, together with Wei Hai-Min, Taiwan's leading actress of Beijing Opera. On these same nights Ms. Wei also played a tipsy royal consort, a character that is equally as famous as the general and the beauty are in Beijing Opera. This is why many people love New York. In this modern city where the most bizarre is easily encountered, one can still find traditional scenes from a distant culture in a pure form.

Beijing Opera, as well as hundreds of other traditional Chinese ones which are similar art forms based on different regional cultures and dialects, are not really operas. It's much more than an opera. The vocal techniques are strictly executed yet the styles highly personalized. There is no classification such as tenor, soprano, mezzo, etc. although the singing is equally demanding as those. The acrobatic movements are unique. Both Mr. Wu and Ms. Wei had difficult choreography on that night. Mr. Wu had several fighting scenes with performances resembling martial arts. Ms. Wei, to portray the tipsy royal consort, had to hold her body on one leg in a T-shape and then descend



Wei Hai-Min as Lady Yu.

to the ground gradually while bending over backwards to ultimately form a beautiful figure like a crawling fish. This is one of the famous movements that present the role of the consort in Beijing Opera. Such graceful moves take many years of training, and one has to start as a small child to achieve this level of flexibility.

It was an absolutely stunning night. Both Mr. Wu and Ms. Wei gave their best performances. Mr. Wu was wearing characteristic face paint, perhaps the only aspect of Beijing Opera known internationally. The face paint, along with martial arts on stage and an orchestra of drums and strings, would at first appear festive. Yet it's not. For one thing, the story is about the tragic end of a hero. In addition, traditional Chinese operas are highly codified. A traditional stage has only one table and two chairs. Everything else, be it a battle, a party, a garden, is left to the actors' performances and the audience's imagination. This

echoes the artistic ideas imbedded in traditional Chinese paintings. This is also why the acrobatic movements, the steps, and every detailed body and facial expression are as important as the singing. The horse, for example, is represented by a whip on traditional Chinese stages. When Mr. Wu played opposite an imaginary horse at the end of his act, he might have seemed weird to a naïve audience because he was just manipulating a whip. Indeed, I heard laughter at the time, although it was actually a heartbreaking moment when the hero tried to say goodbye to his fellow horse prior to death.

They were certainly allowed to laugh since the show was maybe just another exotic cultural event in New York. However, to bring something exotic to a distant city like New York usually means it is blooming at home. In China, unfortunately, all traditional operas have experienced serious decline. It may not be a unique Chinese problem since many things classical and/or traditional, such as ballet, are faced with the threat of modernization around the world; but in Asia, modernization is almost equal to Westernization. Can something as Chinese as Beijing Opera still be the same when wearing a suit? The answer may vary. Nevertheless, it is a matter of life or death for traditional Chinese operas. Luckily, there has been a revival of traditional cultural values in China in recent years. Many people, including myself, are hoping that the trend will help make the old-fashioned things live on and perhaps bloom again. ☉

Top-Down Enforcements Impair Animal Research

ENGİN ÖZERTUGRUL

Can you be a good scientist and at the same time include ethical issues in your work without risking pure science? Which is more likely to generate good science: spending more money for technical development, or more for education? When offered at an earlier age, this type of questioning may open young minds to the complexity of relationships in the continuous evolution of living things and enables them to envision holistic approaches and to comprehend the profound structures of science and philosophy.

If you are not directly involved with animal research protocol writing, you may not know what IACUC stands for. In 1985, Congress passed the Improved Standards for Laboratory Animal Welfare Act, which took effect on January 1, 1987, requiring research facilities to establish Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees (IACUC) to monitor animal care and inspect facilities. There are undeniable problems with this legislation both on philosophical and practical grounds.

Philosophically speaking, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the enforcing agency of Animal Welfare Regulations, bases its legislative assumption on common sense. For example, if a procedure is expected to cause pain or distress in a human subject, a pain-relieving drug must be used on animals subjected to the same or similar procedures.¹ What's the problem? USDA stipulations clearly imply that we, as a community, agreed to use animals as surrogates for human subjects in research where pain, distress, illness, or other harm may occur. Surrogacy increases the moral status of the research animal on the level where moral and ethical issues can no longer be avoided. By education, "scientists are guided with a mainstay view that science ought to make no assumptions, postulate no entities, and countenance no terms which cannot be cashed empirically."¹ In this view, USDA enforcements reflect a metaphysical stance, not an empirical one, thus posing a clear contradiction to orthodox science education.

Legislation becomes even more problematic when put into practice. The USDA's top-down enforcements put the IACUC members in a very difficult position. Many scientists see IACUC as an illegitimate intrusion by non-experts into their freedom of inquiry, rather than a legitimate moral stance.¹ This is particularly problematic as, by law, IACUC protocol review must include non scientists and/or non-affiliated members.

It is unreasonable to expect a healthy and stable research environment when disagreements are deep and persistent among the policy-makers, IACUC, and researchers. Animal regulations/ethics cannot be coerced by policy, not until a definitive ethical consensus is established.

In response to an article in *ILAR News* (Prentice et al. 34 (1-2): 15, 1992), Dr. Jonathan Black from Clemson University argued that in research involving animals the ethical "buck" begins and stops with the principal investigator, regardless of the advice of IACUC. In response to that, Dr. Ernest D. Prentice reminded Dr. Black that Congress has the power to make whatever laws are consistent with the constitution, and it is Congress that has decided that animal research must be regulated and monitored by the Public Health Service (PHS) and the USDA. It is these organizations that have decided that IACUC must serve that role at the institutional level.² The argument is not unfamiliar to those who serve on Animal Care Committees and to those scientists who must do their research through animal work.

At the core, this and similar arguments represent problems stemming from the lack of coherent consensus ethics on animals and a lack of appropriate education accordingly. As a result, IACUCs are a bit like jurors being asked to adjudicate without being given the law¹ and the researchers are like drivers being asked to drive without traffic signals. It is unreasonable to expect researchers to grant animal regulations/ethics when scientific doctrine continuously instructs them to do pure science.

For prospective animal researchers, bioethics and animal welfare courses must be included in science education curriculums; they will provide the vision that steers future scientists toward appropriate action and will enable researchers to act as catalysts on both animal welfare and ethics. Top-down enforcements are a failing approach and IACUC's regulatory obligation mostly falls on formalities merely to assuage legislators.



Those who believe that inclusion of ethical and animal welfare issues in mainstream science education will impair scientific enterprise must be reminded that this addition is about more than whether ethics has a place in science. The public, which overwhelmingly supports valuable animal research that is humanely conducted, demands accountability. Since the NIH (National Institute of Health), a major funding agency in the US, demands this accountability through ethical cost benefit, the question becomes more obvious. Is it far better for science to police itself than have some external agency or internal committee perform this function? If the answer is yes, then we may all have new responsibilities to assume.

IACUC may begin with shifting from an internal police to institutional facilitators of continuing education toward the combination of study and action that will foster the scientific vision of the researchers and by joining them in constructing a healthier and more stable research environment. ☉

References:

1. Rollin, Bernard (1998), *The Unheeded Cry*. Iowa State University Press.
2. Letters to the Editor, *ILAR News*, Volume 35, Number 1, Winter 1993.



*This month, Natural Selections features Sreekanth Chalasani, Postdoctoral Fellow in the Bargmann Laboratory
Country of Origin: India*

New York State of Mind

- 1. How long have you been living in New York?** About three years.
- 2. Where do you live?** Faculty House.
- 3. Which is your favorite neighborhood?** Upper East Side. The park at one end and the river at the other with a number of great restaurants in each block makes it perfect for me.
- 4. What do you think is the most overrated thing in the city? And underrated?** I have always been told that New York is the big bad city. I guess its reputation as overwhelming is overrated. New York has some world-famous tourist sites (Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building, Times Square, etc.), but, it also has a number of great locations, which are not as popular, like a walk across the Brooklyn Bridge or an evening ride on the Staten Island ferry. This other side of New York is highly underrated.
- 5. What do you miss most when you are out of town?** My friends. Unfortunately, I can't take them with me every time I leave town.
- 6. If you could change one thing about NYC, what would that be?** Reduce the traffic.
- 7. Describe a perfect weekend in NYC.** Hmm. So many wonderful ways. I love playing host on Saturday to my friends (some of whom are from out of town). I enjoy showing them the various sights and sounds of the city. Even now, I seem to be discovering new things every time I go out. I like a lazy Sunday (big brunch and a nap after that).
- 8. What is the most memorable experience you have had in NYC?** This has to be a dinner at Brighton Beach from a couple of years ago. We (two of my friends and I) visited this restaurant in the hope of sampling great Georgian fare. After spending a couple of minutes trying to communicate with the waiter (he could not speak English and none of us could speak any Russian), my friends ordered steak. The waiter then went into the back room and talked to someone on the telephone. About fifteen minutes later a car pulled up and some-



one in the car handed the waiter a brown bag. He then walked into the kitchen with the bag that was dripping some liquid. Our food arrived less than 5 minutes after that. The steak was cold and very rare. None of us ate anything that night. Times Square New Year's Eve in 1998 is a close second.

9. If you could live anywhere else, where would that be? Probably San Francisco (in the US). Anywhere in the world, probably London or Secunderabad, India.

10. Do you think of yourself as a New Yorker? Why? Sure. I feel that if you are having fun living here, then you are a New Yorker. ☺

Life on a Roll



Summer Sky Slices, by Daniel Andor



Summer in the Park with Georgia, by Daniel Andor

"Life on a Roll" is a photography feature that will appear regularly in Natural Selections.

Going Home to Tanoreen

LEE KIANG

Going to Tanoreen for dinner is like sitting down to eat in Rawia Bishara's home kitchen. In the restaurant, the cozy dining room is separated from the open kitchen only by a long glass case filled with heaping platters of colorful salads and spreads. If you sit facing the kitchen, you can see pairs of hands deftly preparing dishes, sprinkling parsley, drizzling tahini, or sautéing at the heavy stove. Constantly moving from one place to the next is Rawia, demonstrating to her staff the proper amount of sauce for a certain dish, or the right turn of the wrist to perfectly brown the sauté. Once in a while she circulates around the twelve tables of her dining room, glancing at guests' plates as if to check that they've finished their dandelion greens, and exchanging banter with regulars, her bright eyes flashing as she laughs heartily. To be a guest at Tanoreen is to be at once a guest in Rawia's home, a child in Rawia's family, a subject in Rawia's kingdom.

Rawia left her native Nazareth, in the north of Israel, 35 years ago. Ten years ago she opened Tanoreen to serve her traditional home cooking in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. As my understanding of Arab cuisine extended little beyond *hummus*, I brought a native Nazarene as my guide. The expert ordered dishes typical of traditional home cooking which were unfamiliar to me, as well as some standards I recognized.

A meal at Tanoreen began with thin and delicate pita, served both fresh and also toasted to a paper-thin crispness and coated with *za'atar*, an herb with the flavor of thyme and a citrusy tang, sesame seeds, and salt. Next came *musakhan*, homemade flatbread smothered with a purplish mix of the spice sumac (from the same genus as poison ivy), chicken, and caramelized onions. Tasting a wedge, I was struck by the intense mellow richness of the purple sumac, like a good Barolo wine; and its tartness, like aged balsamic vinegar melded with the sweet aroma of onions. Toasted pine nuts on top and the crisp perimeter of the bread gave a crunchy contrast of texture. Lentil pilaf, a dish typical of home cooking, sounded boring on the menu but was revelatory. Whole lentils had been simmered until their insides were tender and nutty, then mixed with rice and crisp caramelized onions which provided a crunchy counterpart to the softly bursting lentils.

A few more familiar dishes were lackluster. Though the *hummus* had been raved

over in reviews, I found it lighter than average but otherwise unremarkable. The Turkish salad (spicy red pepper spread) and *makdous* (stuffed and pickled baby eggplant) both suffered from one-dimensionality. The former was a brilliant red in color but tasted disturbingly like pickle relish; in the latter, the acidity of the eggplant so overwhelmed the stuffing that I had to check the menu to determine its contents. My expert companion agreed that these two dishes were not to his taste, but emphasized that each home cook's blend of spices is like a signature and matter of personal preference.

Cinnamon, cloves, and allspice are seasonings that make me think of pumpkin pie or Christmas, but in the Arabic kitchen they are seasonings for meat, and in our meal, *kibbie*. To make *kibbie*, wheat germ is mixed with lamb and spices and baked to a crisp sheet, scored in a grid pattern. A tender mixture of lamb is sandwiched between two sheets, and the cinnamon-clove-allspice mixture brings out a sweetness in the slightly gamey lamb. *Kibbie* was accompanied by a salad of diced tomatoes, cucumber, parsley, and the pungent green and nutty taste of good olive oil. Lamb is also featured in another main dish, stuffed in baby squash. Here, a yogurt mint sauce provided a counterpart to the lamb. Alongside the squash came another surprisingly delicious pilaf, this one of rice, short vermicelli noodles, and slivered almonds.

Dessert was a house specialty, *knafeh*, brought to the table while hot. A crisp shell of shredded filo [sic] dough had been drizzled with rose syrup and sprinkled with crumbled pistachios. The waiter ceremoniously sliced the shell in half with a pizza cutter and molten sweet cheese oozed out of the center. With each sublime bite, the filo shell crunched in contrast with the warm soft cheese,

and I tasted the perfume of rosewater. Cardamom-scented Arabic coffee and Arabic mint tea were the perfect pairings to cut the richness of the dessert and finish the meal.

To me, the best of Tanoreen's dishes succeeds in the mix of flavors and textures. Richness and oil are balanced with freshness and acid; dryness and crunch contrast with moisture and tenderness. Spice tames game and enhances sweetness. Sweetness is countered by salt, or met with creaminess. Creaminess is lightened by flowers and herbs. In most cases, Tanoreen gets the mix right, and the interplay balances each element and enhances it.

For familiar Middle Eastern dishes, one need look no further than First Avenue. Ride the subway to the end of the R line in Brooklyn to experience Tanoreen's unique and superb traditional home cooking. For tastes you would only find in an Arabic home kitchen, you'll discover it's worth the trip. ☉

Tanoreen

7704 Third Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11209

(718) 748-5600

Tanoreen has no liquor license; BYOB (Bring Your Own Beer)

Recommended dishes: *musakhan*, \$10; lentil pilaf, \$5; *kibbie*, \$14; *knafeh*, \$8.

ACADEMIA NUTS

cartoon by Sean Taverna



Professor Morton slowly comes to realize that the integrity of his motion-activated hidden camera studies may be compromised...

Policy Roundup: "Hill watch" muzzled

JEFF DEGRASSE

Seizing on its majority, Congressional Democrats have held a series of oversight hearings on Capitol Hill. Testimonies stemming from these hearings have exposed the astonishing amount of political interference into the policies of government agencies, such as the EPA and NASA. Such interference threatens the integrity of government science and its ability to make informed policy decisions based on impartial research. Witnesses revealed that when science or science policy is contrary to political agendas, the scientific voice is often silenced.

A hearing last week centered on America's doctor—the Surgeon General. Tasked with guiding the healthy lives of Americans with the latest medical research, we'd hope the advice of the Surgeon General is based solely on clinical trials, and not politics. Three Surgeons General from as far back as the Reagan administration appeared before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on July 9, 2007. Former Surgeons General, Dr. C. Everett Koop and Dr. David Satcher told the panel that, on at least one occasion, the Executive Branch weakened or suppressed the Surgeon General's reports or

activities to advance a political agenda. For example, Dr. Satcher, Surgeon General under the Clinton administration, revealed that administration officials discouraged him from issuing a report about the health benefits of needle-exchange programs. Despite the pressure, Dr. Satcher released the report.

Far and away, the current Bush administration has exerted the most political control over the Office of the Surgeon General. Former Surgeon General Dr. Richard H. Carmona testified that the Bush administration refused to allow him to issue educational reports about stem cells, emergency contraception, sex education, or issues surrounding prison, mental, and global health. Top administration officials delayed a landmark report on secondhand smoke for years, and tried to "water down" the findings and conclusions of the report. In his testimony, Dr. Carmona stated, "Anything that doesn't fit into the political appointees' ideological, theological, or political agenda is ignored, marginalized, or simply buried."¹

On July 12, 2007, confirmation hearings began for Dr. James Holsinger, Bush's nominee for Surgeon General. It now seems clear

why Bush nominated Dr. Holsinger, whose dubious qualifications were discussed in July's *Roundup*. It is easier to politicize the Office of the Surgeon General if America's Doctor has an already established track record of placing ideology over science. Sensibly, at the confirmation hearing, Dr. Holsinger distanced himself from his pseudo-scientific and homophobic report written in 1991, but he stopped short of stating his current position on homosexuality. He faces an uphill battle in the Senate, and his confirmation is likely to fail.

Recognizing that "political interference is compromising the independence of the Office,"² Rep. Henry A. Waxman is planning to introduce a bill to insulate the Office of the Surgeon General from such political interference. Among other safeguards, an independent budget would afford the Surgeon General greater political insulation. ☉

References:

1. <http://oversight.house.gov/documents/20070710111054.pdf>
2. <http://oversight.house.gov/story.asp?ID=1409>

I Just Want a 0.05905-inch Tube

On the stupidity of multiple measure units

MANUEL CASTELLANO-MUÑOZ

Brian and I were in the machine shop, about to finish the plastic chamber we needed for our electrophysiological recordings. But in the last step... crack! The mill tool blew into the air, whizzed by us, and hit the wall. Fortunately, we were not in its way. We looked at each other in astonishment. What was that explosion? What had happened with the cutting tool? Was the mill broken?

Before coming to the United States I never had to deal with inches, feet, or ounces. Previously, my only similar experience had been the adaptation to the euro. Going to the movies for more than 500 pesetas was expensive. What if it suddenly cost 5 euros? My natural ability to instantly identify something as cheap or expensive came to an abrupt end. In any case, nothing special happened when the advertised monetary revolution was finally effective, after all.

I had always been used to the metric system, and that, at least, was not going to change. However, I had a unit-rocking experience at Rockefeller the day I needed to order a silicone tube to insert into the tiny auditory nerve of a frog. I had never seen a catalog like that. I did not understand a thing. What a terrible feeling not knowing how to even start to search! No metric system anymore.

The International System of Units (SI), the modern form of the metric system, is the world's most widely used system of units, both in everyday commerce and in science. The system is nearly universally employed, and most countries do not even maintain official definitions of any other units. A notable exception is the United States of America, which still uses many old units in addition to SI. In the United Kingdom, conversion to metric units was government policy,

but the transition has not yet been completed. "Victory for the campaign to save pounds and ounces," announced *The Times* on May 9, 2007.¹ Brussels had insisted previously that traditional British weights and measures should disappear from labels and shop counters

by 2009. However, the Industry Commissioner recently agreed that dual marking of goods in Great Britain in imperial and metric measures could continue indefinitely.

Good news for them: pounds, ounces, yards, miles, and inches have been all saved. The British will not have to reset their minds for new measurement units in the future. And in terms of my own life, milling machines will likewise keep the multiple units of measurement. So, I guess I will have to check the settings every time before I lose an eye breaking another mill! ☉

Reference:

1. http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/money/consumer_affairs/article1764093.ece

Tube No.	ID	OD	Wall
13.....	1/32"	0.157"	0.063" ...
15.....	3/16"	0.378"	0.094" ...
16.....	1/8"	0.25"	0.063" ...
18.....	5/16"	0.441"	0.063" ...
24.....	1/4"	0.441"	0.094" ...
25.....	3/16"	0.315"	0.063" ...
26.....	1/4"	0.504"	0.126" ...
73.....	3/8"	0.63"	0.126" ...
82.....	31/64"	0.74"	0.126" ...
88.....	1/2"	0.878"	0.189" ...
92.....	1"	1.378"	0.189" ...

Extract from an imperial silicone tubing catalog.

In Our Good Books

The reading suggestions have been kindly written by staff members of the downtown bookstore McNally Robinson.

Aya, by Marguerite Abouet & Clement Oubrier

The African writer and French illustrator of this gorgeous new graphic novel bring the color and vibrancy of 1970s Ivory Coast to life once again. The title character, Aya, and her girlfriends are teenage girls dealing with boys, parents, and their futures as they party, study and figure themselves out. The soap opera drama is irresistibly compelling through even the very last, surprising panel. The story and the art recall both the serious comic nonfiction of Joe Sacco and Marjane Satrapi, and the bubbly hijinks of *Sex and the City*. It's a world both familiar and strange—a rollicking story as well as an illuminating glimpse into a forgotten golden moment in African history.

Drown, by Junot Diaz

This book will haunt you. You'll dream this book. You'll walk down the street, turn a corner, and this book will be there, waiting for you. You'll start making regular trips to Inwood and Washington Heights, just to be closer to this book. Rough, hungry, drowning as much in poetry and rhythm as he is in struggle and strife, Yunion, the main character in these linked short stories, will take you inside his life, inside his home, and he'll change you, mess with your head, let you know what's up. The best part? When you finish reading and you want more (you will, trust me), you won't have to wait, like I did, for ten years. Diaz's new novel is due out in September.

Poems from the Tibor de Nagy Editions 1952-1966, by Frank O'Hara

O'Hara, it seems, was a master of the modern love poem. These works are elegiac in small ways, full of complaint and allusion and plain speech made sharp. They are the romantic tailings of a careless honesty. This slim collection of three chapbooks is an excellent way to get a taste of O'Hara's amazing range and disarmingly casual voice, either as a companion to his *Lunch Poems* or alone.

The Possibility of an Island, by Michel Houellebecq

This is another novel by France's most infamous enfant terrible that will force you to re-think your understanding of humanity. This one posits the idea that we're so bad at being good to each other, so incapable of providing each other with the most fundamental forms of pleasure and happiness, that our right to reproduce should be taken away and replaced with cloning technology for a select group of people.

Callaloo Literary Journal: New Orleans Issue

For those who still have to put a human face on the naturally occurring, yet preventable disaster that struck New Orleans, Callaloo's New Orleans issue goes deep inside the cultures and inhabitants of the city to impart rich, stark first-hand accounts,

interviews, poetry and photojournalism. In the aftermath of industries' capitalization of the situation, this citizen is still amazed that little has been done to improve The Big Easy to this date.

Selected August Events:

Dominic Priore, Author of *Riot on Sunset Strip: Rock 'n' Roll's Last Stand in Hollywood* (Jawbone Press)

Thursday, Aug 16th, 7:00 p.m.

Music writer Dominic Priore has written the definitive history of the years 1965 to 1967 on L.A.'s Sunset Strip, when the likes of Sinatra had gone to Las Vegas and the Strip was home to a new kind of music. The Byrds, The Doors, Love, Buffalo Springfield, The Standells, The Mamas and The Papas, and many others played at clubs for crowds of teenage fans, until police crackdowns on drugs and race mixing destroyed the scene. Priore will host a symposium on the era this evening with two guests who were there. Gary Panter designed the sets for *Pee Wee's Playhouse*, and was influenced by the mid-'60s Pop culture that came out of the L.A. scene. Gary Kornfeld was involved in booking bands for Woodstock and was a major mover and shaker on both the East and West Coast during the period. Join us for a discussion about a brief but powerful moment in rock history.

Justin Allen, author of *Slaves of the Shinar: An Epic Fantasy of the Ancient World* (Overlook Press)

Wednesday, August 15, 7:00 p.m.

New York writer Justin Allen's fantastic novel *Slaves of the Shinar* features no wizardry, imagined technology, or supernatural quests.

Instead, it reimagines the ancient Middle East through the story of two men, a slave and a thief, seeking freedom in the midst of an all-consuming war and fear of the gods. An advance copy of this first novel was snatched up on eBay weeks after its release.

An Evening with the *New York Tyrant*

Featuring John Haskell, Michael Kimball, Brian Evenson, and Noy Holland

Thursday, August 23, 7:00 p.m.

The *New York Tyrant* is a fledgling literary magazine dedicated to fostering the art of the short story; now on its second issue, the magazine has already been getting a lot of press. McNally Robinson is pleased to host an evening with *New York Tyrant* authors, all of whom are rising stars in the New York literary world. The reading will be accompanied by wine and cheese. ☺

McNally Robinson independent bookstore is well worth a visit, they have a fantastic selection of books on their shelves. The store is located in NoLiTa at 52 Prince Street between Lafayette and Mulberry. Visit them on the Web at <http://www.mcnallyrobinsonnyc.com/>



Natural Selections is not an official publication of The Rockefeller University. University administration does not produce this newsletter. The views expressed by the contributors to this publication may not necessarily reflect views or policies of the University.