

Catherine Wagner

Jan. 16 - Feb. 26, 1997

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Definitely Not Sterile

I received a rather cranky letter a few months ago in response to a review I wrote of Catherine Wagner's show *Art and Science: Investigating Matter*. What the writer had to say was that my observations about Wagner's photographs and, indeed, the pictures themselves, were just so much baloney.

When you get something like that in the mail, the reaction is to murmur "Philistine" and to arc the letter into the wastebasket. But the letter writer was a retired chemist. He said what he saw in Wagner's work was neither compelling nor beautiful. Rather, he said, it was no more than dirty glassware.

I pitched the letter. Who needs that kind of abuse? But when I thought about what he said, it struck me that I was, am and have been similarly contemptuous of scientists and scientific inquiry.

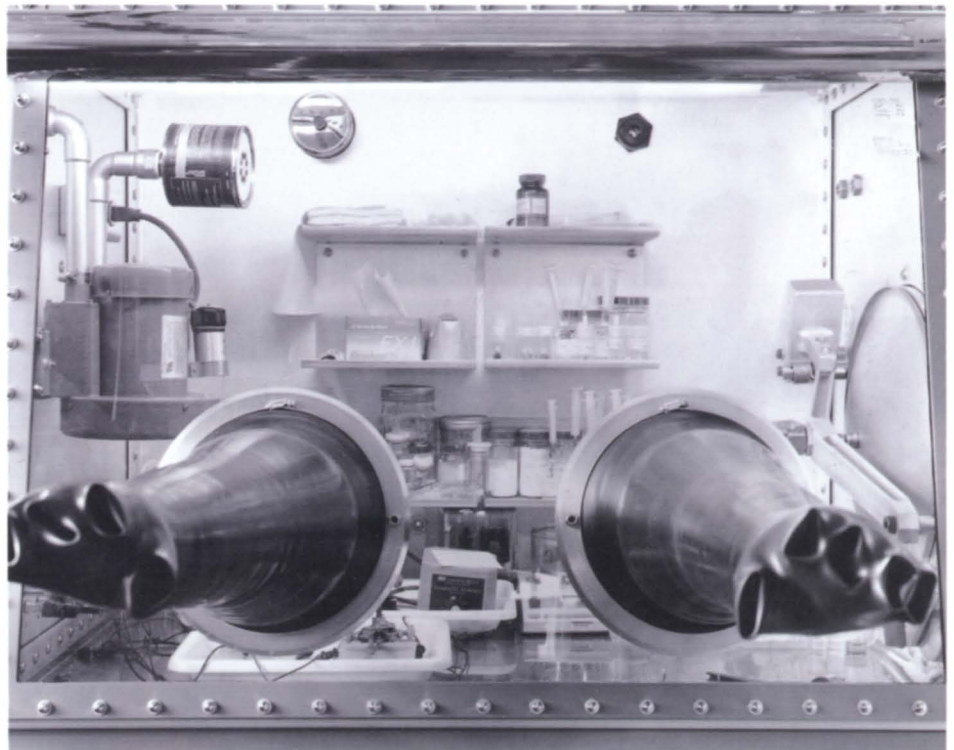
I think that many intellectuals of my generation have reacted to scientists' unwillingness to "get it" about modern art by doubting not the value of scientific research (we're not stupid; we understand that "science" produces "results," and who can argue with penicillin?) but by resenting science for its ability to steal the intellectual spotlight and to dominate the attention of the universities that accommodate and nurture the humanities.

What we saw in those big shiny laboratories was dirty glassware that cost billions of dollars, and we resented the fact that our endeavors were looked on by society as frills or ornaments or irrelevancies.

The scientists at Los Alamos – the defining laboratory of my generation – were not the products of departments of English or art history. And the human tendency to see the world in black and white condemned them as monsters. Salvation, truth, integrity, beauty, survival in the midst of calamity and a way to bring order to a world of chaos – those qualities frolicked and taunted us in the waves of paint administered to canvases by Jackson Pollock and insinuated themselves into our spirits in the serene, subtly skewed geometry of Agnes Martin's painting and erupted in the frank and honest architecture of Frank Gehry. We found in post-war European art – in the work and example of artists such as Joseph Beuys – a world that revolved in counterfashion or opposition to the orderliness and absoluteness of what our side sneered at as science.

But were the two so absolutely different?

Pop Art, art that spoke a language that



Glove Box, 1993, gelatin silver print, 30" x 40", collection Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis

anyone could read, erupted as the abstract expressionists became old masters. Beuys spawned radical notions, and in his wake came artists such as Gerhard Richter, whose ironies permanently affected the course of 20th century art.

In this country (perhaps as a reaction to the excesses of Pop and in response to many intellectuals' suspicion that Pop's commercial components were in conflict with its vernacular artistic content), minimalism cleaned the slate the way the blackboard monitor cleaned those messy,



Drosophila Morgue, 1994, gelatin silver print, 24" x 20", collection Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis

chalky, indistinct vertical tablets of learning that confronted all of us in our classrooms, everywhere. In came the wet sponge or the wet rag in the afternoon, and for a moment anyway: a clean, wet, black void, as dark and tidy and serene as the darkest recesses of infinity.

Minimalism, with its rigorous, relentless concentration, examined the world, and ideas, and visual phenomena as a microbiologist might examine and analyze viruses or bacteria. To carry this metaphor further, what the minimalists discovered has its parallel in science. As minimalism looked at art and reduced the objective world to a line or even (in the case of John Cage) to a void, so science has restlessly pursued the essence of life.

The result – in a world that longs for meaning – is not particularly comforting. Biology is a complex configuration of organic chemistry; organic chemistry is a subspecialty of chemistry, and chemistry is a complex application of physics. And everything – *everything* – boils down to physics.

Except.

Apparently – for all to see with unassisted eyes – there is a world that grows on the corpus of physics, a world of flowers and parasites, a world in a constant state of explosion with complicated and maddening irrationalities and rhythms and noises – and dirty glassware and chalky blackboards. All this draws us in, promising pleasures and ecstasies,

exposing us to exquisite pain and to the narcotic of joy that exalts the spirit and transports the mind into territories never explored before.

Part of this world is that unpredictable, exasperating, enriching business we call art. And the art we have in mind at the moment is Catherine Wagner's, by which I have been both mesmerized and transfigured.

I wish that I had had the courage to look up the retired chemist and take him to see *Art and Science: Investigating Matter*. There is always the possibility that he would have been a complete yahoo, but equally possible was a conversation about the properties of our seemingly separate worlds of art and science.

The retired chemist's letter, although certainly contemptuous and dismissive, also betrayed a rather keen interest in the exhibition, a curiosity about why artists would be mucking around in equipment that was part of his intellectual system. I imagine that when he regarded the example of dirty glassware or the interiors of freezers in pathology laboratories that Wagner observes, when he countered the juxtaposition of physical evidence of vanished lives in fossils with the biochemical evidences of genetic material, I imagine that he would have been, ironically, fascinated as I was by this singularly obvious but nevertheless stunning revelation: that art and science are in often separate, occasionally intersecting, sometimes inimical but usually parallel pursuit of that plastic, impossible-to-isolate-and-define, quick-silver business we call The Truth. This exhibition brings forth two bodies of work that illustrate Wagner's pursuit of it. One group is from a series of images called *The American Classroom*. The other is from *Art and Science: Investigating Matter*.

As all things relate to everything else in science and in life and in art, the images drawn from the larger *American Classroom* series appear in retrospect to be a preparation for the *Art and Science* exhibition.

For those of us who spent the early years of our lives in American classrooms, these photographs pack a breathtaking punch. The images are cool, clinical. They present what the artist saw before her. There is, of course, subjectivity in the selection of the places and in their framing and the flatness of the light that illuminates these spaces. Nevertheless, straightforward is the initial description one is directed to deliver.

But (again, if you grew up in American classrooms) only the most flaccid soul or



-86 Degree Freezers (12 panel typology detail), 1995, gelatin silver prints, 24" x 20" each, 8' x 5' installation, collection Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis

witless intellect could fail to respond to these images as more than documents of places in time. In: the writings on blackboards; the exhibits of taxidermied ducks and geese; the sawn cross sections of tree trunks; the broken and unbroken skins of apples participating in, one guesses, an experiment on the general subject of decay; the airless sterility of a military classroom, which silently echoes the dulling down of human emotions; the deadpan poignancy of a bulletin board in a deaf school, where the alphabet is presented in letters and sign language; a beautiful, tender abstraction that is the camera's communication of a trayful of dead frogs; in all of these photographs we see and begin to understand not only what filled our American classrooms but who we are as a result of our having been there with these objects. These images picture the ways the search for the truth,

on the most elementary level, is codified and institutionalized, for good and for ill.

The frogs, properly called *Alfred University Science Classroom, Alfred, New York*, is, I believe, an excellent transition into the works of art that make up the more recent assembly of photographs that comprise *Art and Science*.

The frog photograph has an abstract intricacy and beauty so strong that it can be appreciated primarily for its formal qualities. One needn't know, to appreciate it, that the amphibians are destined for examination in the individual students' trays in freshman biology class. However, knowing the context of the frogs, knowing that they are not only shapely and beautiful but also are tools of inquiry and learning doubles or even redoubles the consequence of the picture.

Similarly, any one photograph in *Art and Science*, out of the context of the

exhibition, has strength, character, formal beauty or elegance or both, plus the resonance of gigantic gongs. For example, presented with a vessel that combines both male and female characteristics, filled with ambiguous material, certain associations can be made without serious demands on the imagination.

For the more literal minded – the retired chemist, for example – the photograph can be dismissed as dirty glassware, something that has done its job and needs emptying and washing.

But taken as part of the exhibition – which is, in fact, an artistic experiment and an aesthetic and existential inquiry – the dirty flask takes on meanings as complex and volatile as the universe itself.

The vessel, we learn, contains fruit fly carcasses – and from there the mind is drawn into the gyre of genetics, an ever-growing scientific and political whirlwind that has the power not only to explain us to ourselves – how we look, how we behave, how we fundamentally came to be as we are over the incalculable ages – but also, potentially, to change profoundly the human species and everything that, in our ancestor's system of truth, every single thing that revolves around us.

The photographs of *The American Classroom* and *Art and Science* operate, therefore, on a number of levels.

Taken individually, because they come from the hand of an exacting artist who brings a remarkable intelligence to bear on her work, these photographs have their own individual beauty or identity and integrity. They stand upright unassisted.

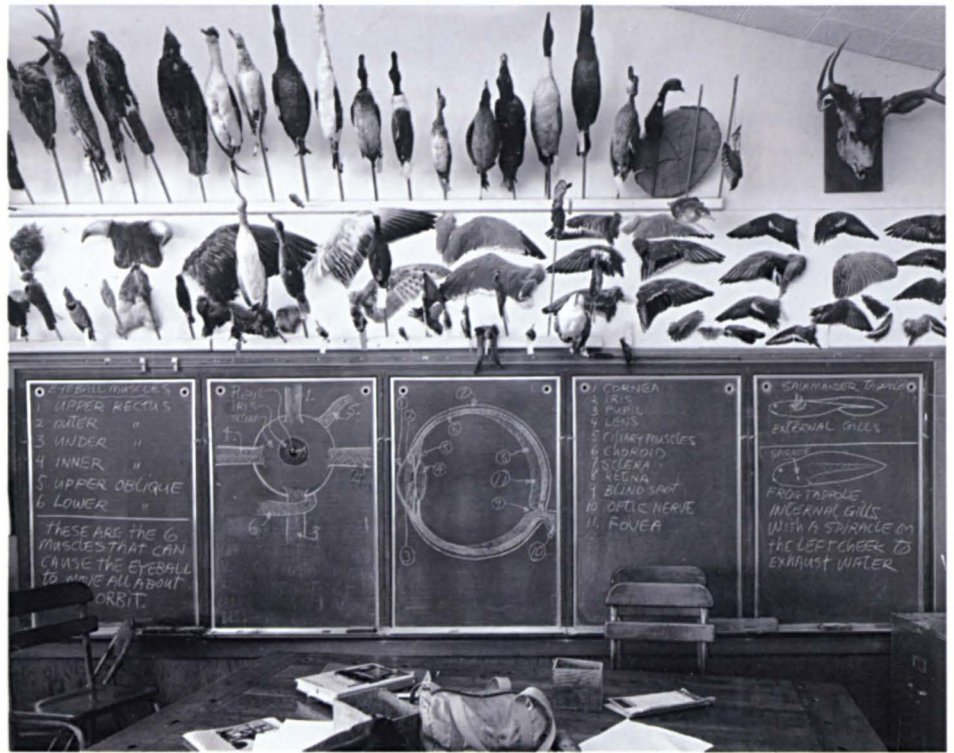
Together, they speak of the nature of inquiry and learning.

And, because they are of such substance they stand together with a power that quite exceeds the sum of their parts.

Thus it is that Catherine Wagner brings together not only the physical manifestations of science and art. It is as if – if only for an experiential, alchemical moment in the exhibition galleries – she brings Robert Oppenheimer and Enrico Fermi and Jackson Pollock and Agnes Martin together. And as she brings them and their worlds together, she reveals that they and their intentions and, in fact, the elements of what they produced, are not so different after all.

Robert W. Duffy, cultural news editor
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Cover: *Definitely Not Sterile*, 1995, gelatin silver print, 40" x 30", courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco



Moss Landing Elementary School, Seventh and Eighth Grade Science Room, Moss Landing, California, 1984, gelatin silver print, 20" x 24", courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco



Alfred University Science Classroom, Alfred, New York, 1987, gelatin silver print, 20" x 24", courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Acknowledgments

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