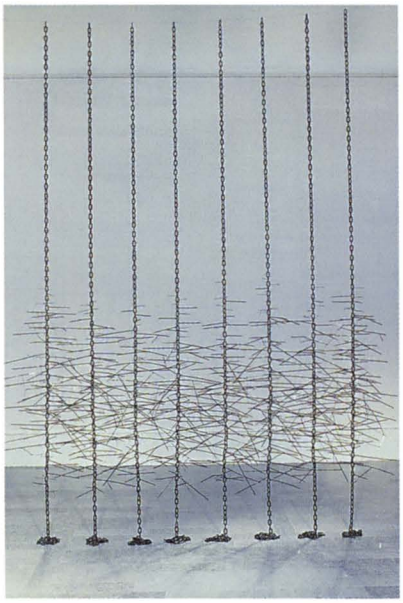
Lucky DeBellevue

Nov. 5 - Dec. 17, 2000

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Pioneers, 1996, aluminum foil, 36" x 90" x 96", courtesy private collection, NY



Untitled, 1997, plastic chains, twist ties, variable height x 120" x 24", courtesy Feature Inc., NY

My Little Brainspill, 1998, chenille stems, 19" x 110" x 60", courtesy Feature Inc., NY

Ebola, Epstein-Barr, chronic fatigue, HIV, dengue, tuberculosis ... the short list reads like the greatest hits of the Center for Disease Control — a millennial countdown of fashionable, if acutely morbid, plagues. The '90s were good for viruses, a boom time, if such a thing can be said about a decade that brought us the global spread of full-blown AIDS. As the body count steadily mounted, network news programs and national magazines picked up on the public's twisted fascination with all things cellular, featuring jump-cutting exposés and glossy color spreads of teeming platelets viewed from the butt end of the microscope. Suddenly, the "hot zone" wasn't miles away in central Africa but trapped within a petri dish and splashed across page 6. Only now, after years of tabloid headlines and Hollywood eco-thrillers, is the publishing industry catching up to provide the textual backstory, flooding the market with titles like *A Dancing Matrix: How Science Confronts Emerging Viruses* and *Virus X: Tracking the New Killer Plagues*, thus satisfying the public's insatiable desire for all things contagious. A virus, as it turns out, although invisible to the naked eye and possessed of a weak chin, is the first high-profile micro-organic celebrity, competing with Gwyneth and Tom for column inches and first-person interviews. We've peeled away its privacy, so to speak; now we want to get up close and personal.

And when we do, what we might find is a vibrating underworld percolating just beneath the skin. Tiny blobjects bump up against slippery ameboids. A filigree of cilia skirts the odd bulbous tube. Scattered particles drift like tiny plankton. All appear bathed in a shimmering translucent veil, lit from behind by an electron microscope's soft halogen glow. In fact, not since Racquel Welch donned a wet suit in 1966 as a member of the shrink-to-fit crew of intrepid scientists in *Fantastic Voyage* — piloting a spaceship the size of a proton through the forking veins and arteries of the human body — has the public been awash in so many tiny ecologies of form. Here, within the F/X theater of the human circulatory system, raw plasma — tapped, transfused and flowing like a perpetual IV-drip — is the metaphoric substrate through which we all got a refresher course in ninth-grade biology. Now, of course, we've got Kevin Bacon's digitally flayed body writhing on a gurney in *Hollow Man*, looking suspiciously like a child's clear Plexiglas anatomy model. And with the Internet boasting Web sites devoted to supermodel eggs and artificial insemination itself as common as a trip to the blood bank, nearly every major metropolitan paper has begun to run a weekly section devoted to soft-science, riffing on topics as various as the genome, double helix, cloning and, yes, viruses, like some dusty back issue of Omni or Scientific American stacked up in one's basement, bindings intact.

It's enough to make you nostalgic for German zoologist Ernst Haeckel's 1860 field guide, *Art Forms in Nature*, a collection of color lithographic plates depicting all of nature as various manifestations of a single overarching symmetrical crystal structure. Recently reissued, and a fount of inspiration for painters and sculptors alike, Haeckel's encyclopedia of organic shapes is part of the amateur lithographer's *General Morphology of Organisms*, a hallucinogenic evolutionary theory that turns complex speciation into nothing more than an old-school ink-blot test, a Rorschach revealing not psychological health but one man's cosmic vision of universal life. Or so it seems. After a cursory glance through Haeckel's book, it's unlikely that Darwin's legacy will be challenged by the eccentric scientist's psychedelic visions, since the latter viewed the entire realm of nature as the mutant offspring of these four prototypes: radiolarians, jellyfish, sea urchins and starfish. "Organic stereometry" is what Haeckel called his general principle, but if this is the stereo version, I'd hate to see mono.

Haeckel's prints are no doubt beautiful, offering in vibrant, broad strokes what appears to be a floating constellation of undersea life suspended like weird snowflakes in some kind of cryogenic deep freeze. With techno-futuristic titles like Astrophyton, Tympanidium and Polytrichum, Haeckel's whirling mandalas by way of a periscope view from Jules Verne's Nautilus, bear the faint whiff of some mystical kabbala retooled for the artist's own meditative, spiritual pleasure. But if drawing these twisting baroque tentacles and ribbon-like appendages kept the anxiety of the void at bay for Haeckel, the legacy for contemporary artists is more like a prefab Borgesian bestiary — a toolbox of imagined

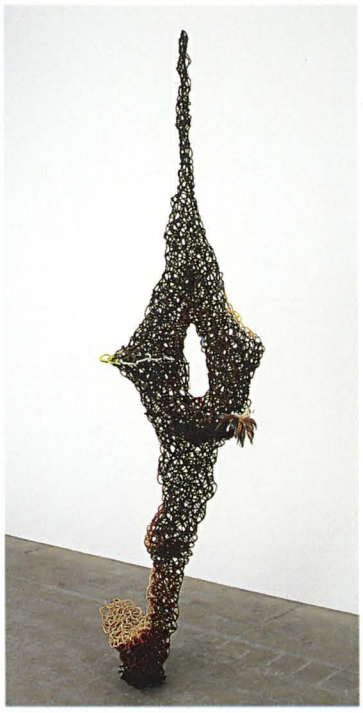
templates rendered in the manner of an 8-year-old's obsessive, spirographic doodles.

Feasting at this all-you-can-eat salad bar of design by natural decree are artists as diverse as Philip Taaffe (batik-inspired paintings with a backdrop of ferns), Jennifer Pastor (7-foot-high sunflowers in peak, radial bloom) and Keith Edmier, whose giant polyurethane lily pads would be right at home in one of Haeckel's surreal aquatic tide pools. What allows these artists to brush aside the hard-edged geometry of the grid (and with it every implication of Greenbergian flatness) and opt for the soft, willowy contours of flora and fauna creeping like ivy along the wrought-iron gates of their own subconscious is, click here, the added bonus of the Web. For, while cyberspace's nested browsers have been described as a Merzbau of superimposed planes, a fractal world of "liquid" or "trans" architectures, a set of Russian dolls, an infinite regress of mirrors, a flight simulator, and, no doubt, a slew of other metaphors and marketing doublespeak that I'm forgetting, it's still a web. A 3-D array of tiled lattices woven into a web-like matrix, or perhaps 4-, 5- and 6-D if we apply string theory and quantum mechanics, but a web nonetheless. While this notion of depthless space, imagineered into existence by virtue of its seemingly limitless chorus of voices, gets compromised every day by the breathless din of day traders and pornographers, Viagra hawkers and diploma vendors — it still retains the gossamer strands and fragile superstructure of anything spun by Charlotte, let alone the once postmodern, now postcardish series of films that sprang up in its wake: *The Net*, *The Cell*, *The Matrix*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, etc.

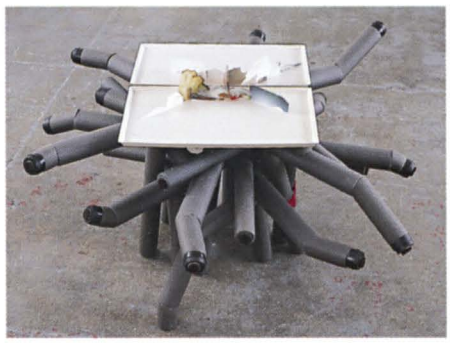
My long-winded point is that the Web's open-ended structure mirrors the dynamics of parallel, distributed, highly nonlinear systems that lie at the root of intelligence and consciousness, rather than the top-down set of commands — characteristic of processed strings of algorithmic code — wafting through the central microprocessor of a computer. The Web is like the tangled mind, unraveling it, or better still, tracing its neural synapses along their labyrinthine paths, is, quite simply, part of the fun. My guess is that this is part of the attraction for the New York-based artist Lucky DeBellevue when he sits down to braid and weave the endless multicolored pipe cleaners (or "chenille stems" if you live Uptown) that ultimately morph into his spindly, hive-like sculptures. Here, craft does not refer to the domestic, the historically feminine, but to the infinite permutations and weird non-Euclidean digressions of the restless brain. Sol LeWitt once said, "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art" and, while DeBellevue's sculptures have the same obsessive-compulsive all-overness, his lumpen biomasses — sometimes abjectly earthbound and deflated, sometimes statuesque and preening — are always the bipolar opposite of Lewitt's programmatically sterile wall drawings. Which is to say, accidents will happen when DeBellevue sits down to construct each piece; part of the pleasure in viewing his works derives from our ability to unmask their complex decision trees.

DeBellevue's coiled creatures emerge out of whole cloth from an intuitive form of punctuated equilibria, or what the artist slyly refers to as the "hopeful monster" theory. That is to say, each precariously balanced abstraction begins as if it were a single nucleotide, then arbitrarily sparks and replicates into a luscious, if somewhat sinister, beast. An especially large spider could have made them, or an impervious strand of bacteria, but never a machine. Like Ballard's *Atrocity Exhibition*, DeBellevue's mossy protrusions resemble the body cavity turned inside out, a degree of grotesquerie kept in check by the anodynes of a beige or mustard, the heat-seeking warmth of an infrared red or orange.

DeBellevue's entire oeuvre is such an integral part of the general cultural discourse today that it effortlessly bends our tastes to accommodate it. E-journalists are fond of touting the Long Now, as if the current economic boom will last — has lasted — forever. But DeBellevue is the Immediate Now and has been since 1993 when he first began to construct what critic Bill Arning described as "little, soft fuzzy bombs." Artist's log 1993: the date for DeBellevue's Big Bang. Hmmm ... that both scoops and prophesies the coming of the Web, while neatly coinciding with the global dispersion of the Viral Meme as the It-calamity of the month, and spur to the public's sublimated dread/desire with their own bodily makeup. Not bad. But, backing up, I do want to take issue with Arning's almost too quaint spin on the work. For me, a piece titled *My Little Brainspill*, featuring a cluster of pipe cleaners in lavender, silver and white are like incandescent Roman candles pausing in mid-flight — a shower of



Untitled, 2000, chenille stems, feathers, 107" x 27" x 45", collection Eileen and Peter Norton, Santa Monica, Calif.



Untitled, 2000, foam insulation, wood, plastic trays, photographs, 20" x 33" x 37", courtesy Feature Inc., NY

Hedge, 1997, chenille stems, 85" x 93" x 9", collection Eileen and Michael Cohen, NY

Untitled, 1998, chenille stems, 96" x 28" x 28",
collection Nancy and Joel Portnoy, NY

sparks in time-lapse bloom, waiting to re-enter the earth's atmosphere like stray, pixilated comets. You see what I mean? DeBellevue's works practically force you to mix metaphors because they draw upon so many of their own. Spores, fungus, atomic particles, fission, fusion — take your pick; they've all been applied to the work, and quite rightly so.

But DeBellevue is equally at home in the planar world of architecture, away from the raw flux of scattered microbes, scaled for a waist-high plinth or gently fastened to a corner, caressing the wall. He can "go big," so to speak, and often he does, twisting the stems into more than just ornamental trelliswork or the precision-pruned facades of a topiary garden — the kind of decadent, art nouveau flourishes that appear as decorative home accents in the pages of, say, House Beautiful or Town & Country — to push his work toward the resolutely solid. Solid, as in bricks-and-mortar solid. The kind of hefty, impenetrable solid you can't imagine being finessed out of mere bendy wires coated in cheap furs. But it's there, nonetheless, beckoning viewers toward it like some sci-fi wormhole, a magical wardrobe hinting toward Narnia but revealing its sole, humble purpose with its unassuming name: *Hedge*. And hedge is what this piece does best, doubling down in the realms of architecture, design and sculpture to cover all its bets, operating as a temporary wrinkle in the space-time fabric of the gallery or, more simply, as a landscaped Alpine vista in shades of pine green, giving off the faintly soothing aura of a winding coastal drive. *Hedge*, for those of you who haven't figured it out, approximates an actual hedge about as much as Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* approximates a lesson in Cartesian space. Both take the platonic ideal of a well-known form and then dress it up further in their own uniquely twisted drag.

Whether you're gauging the end times with the NASDAQ or tarot cards, the Dow or tea leaves, DeBellevue's work possesses a quiet, sunny optimism, a vaguely future-present shudder of stop-you-in-your-tracks déjà vu. Blame it on the everyday parts. In fact, each material unit, including pipe cleaners, aluminum foil, cable ties, shower curtains and PVC tubing, is a ready-made in and of itself. Perhaps you thought you saw his terraced array of cafeteria trays fanning out like a Frank Lloyd Wright in some modernist coffee table book, or even in the buffet line at your office commissary, but look again. Four wintry plastic antennas, stark and defoliated as a spiked Sequoia, jut out from its floating risers to undermine your certainty. Is it a pint-sized model for an *Unprivate House* by Rem Koolhaas? A deep-sea oil rig straight out of *Breaking the Waves*? A ham radio picking up signals from the Pathfinder probe? Coat racks for Stuart Little? Skylab's remains? All of the above? None of the above? I joke, but levity is part of DeBellevue's program. The rules are: There are no rules. When in doubt, improvise. And get thee to a 99-cent store because we're way past Hirst's vitrines, McCracken's disco balls and Koons' stainless rabbits. You'll have to set aside Haeckel's book and leave your plastic bubble, but trust me when I tell you, the fresh air will do you good.

David Hunt, critic and curator, New York

Cover: *Untitled*, 2000, chenille stems, plastic chains, variable height x 68" x 68", collection Joe Barron, NY. Photo: Oren Slor, courtesy Feature Inc., NY
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