Frances Whitehead
Northern Illinois University Gallery

Frances Whitehead's newest body of work draws us in at so many levels of discourse and condenses so much information that apprehending it puts one on an unsteady, circuitous path. Her sculpture has long been informed by language, which means that besides being metaphoric, it is visually coded according to systems of identification and forms of speech. An early fascination with Platonic solids (polyhedrons, which Plato believed to be the building blocks of the universe) and optics led to a conception of her work as a reification of scientific theory and myth. Elaborate time-consuming projects, such as the binding and shaping of gourds, stemmed from a unique hybridization of science and folk traditions. A fondness for formal gardens engendered the controlled cultivation (topiary) of plants and provided her with an ideal antique procedure to invigorate late-modern sculptural theater. For the last decade, botany, microbiology, and linguistics have provided the deepest reservoirs for her work.

Occasionally it seems that Whitehead is consumed with an isolated fragment of anthropological evidence or a rather obscure morphology, but the results of her investigations have the bearing of reason and causality. She buoys her projects with myth and metaphysics, launches them with paradox, and then reins them in with custom and agency. In *Arguably Alive*, she uses the familiar Egyptian canopic urn to place her subject squarely at the feet of Western civilization's obsession with death and its conflicted feelings about spirituality. Canopic urns originally were used to contain the internal organs of the mummified dead and were believed to be instrumental in insuring that the Egyptian burial process would ultimately result in the return of life.

Whitehead's urns are empty, and instead of protective deities gracing the lids, there are scaled-up versions of virus particles from each of the known virus families. Gallery illumination is dimmed to focus attention on 81 ersatz reliquaries, perched high on as many antiseptic stainless steel tables. Regular distribution throughout the gallery with large wall texts detailing the name, family, and order of each virus, enhances the museological impression of the installation. Each specimen is also labeled with taxonomic code and fabrication number. All are press-molded of Egyptian paste (faience), the oldest vitrified ceramic, which the Egyptians felt had mystical properties because of its unusually reflective surface. The virus-laden urns are an extraordinary sight. Many of the viruses are presented in cutaway versions so we can peer deep into the interiors of their utterly alien configurations. Despite scientific veracity, these phantoms of gothic fiction, clinging to their glowing Orientalist vessels, are exquisite as well as grotesque. One becomes acutely aware of the unreality of unveiling their mysteries.

The artist chose to concentrate on virology, because, like the human genome project, it involves an intensive hunt and speculation about nature, fueled by a desire to circumvent the inevitable. Ancient Egyptian belief, which stipulated that a properly preserved corpse would ensure an afterlife for its host, is conflated here with the current conviction that codifying all micro-organisms will somehow effectively do the same for our progeny. *Arguably Alive* summons a portion of the psychological, intellectual, and emotional turmoil surrounding the cataloguing and removal of all obstacles that stand in the way of perpetual life.

Whitehead's type of conceptualism, layered with narrative, is also steeped in pleasure of materials, knowledge of ornamentation, and devotion to processes of construction. The artist's fabrication of viral bodies that have no iconic tradition, whose entities are still being discovered and described, is daunting even for an artist so committed to craftsmanship. Her knack is really being able to invent a text made up of objects, tools, odors, and taxonomies, which hover hypothetically between contemporary art and archaeological remnants. Much of her work has been produced with an attention to the relationship of fiction to reality and the dilemmas of detaching nature from culture. Her environments are filled with references to scientific research and epistemology through which hard data and faint impressions must be patiently sifted and examined. While microbiology, remote sensing, and nano-technology are certain to have irreversible effects on the quality and meaning of our lives, it is critical that their accounts be mediated by artists such as Whitehead who ask us to contemplate the cultural construction of destiny.

—Paul Krainak

Below and detail: Frances Whitehead, *Arguably Alive*, 2000. 81 faience urns, installation view.