NEW MEXICO

Frances Whitehead

Lisa Sette Gallery
4142 N. Marshall Way
Scottsdale, 85251
480/990-7342

Frances Whitehead's installation "A Selection from Arguably Alive (the virus taxonomy)" consists of 28 large, greenish canopic lidded jars, the ritual funerary vessel of ancient Egyptians. Resonant with complex, metaphorical meanings encompassing science, death, and millennial fears of the unknown, the work demands examination of the images themselves, the materials from which they are constructed, and the emotionally loaded subject matter. The material Whitehead uses is as indeterminate an entity as viruses themselves: Egyptian paste, an ancient, outmoded substance that is neither clay nor glaze and is extremely difficult to handle. Viruses are neither alive nor dead, organisms that can grow uncontrollably destructive.

The ancient Egyptians believed that the voyage to eternity could only be accomplished if all organs were removed from the body. Disembodiment was essential to the process of re-embodiment in the afterlife. The organs were placed in canopic jars next to the mummified body; the lid of each jar bore a representation of the tutelary god of each organ. The lids of Whitehead's jars each bear an exact scale model of a virus. The installation represents a work in progress; Whitehead's ultimate goal is to make 80 jars that bear the entire taxonomy of viruses; all known family orders. Her selection of the present 28 is based on range of complexity and the basic viral-shape morphology: bricks, spikes, filaments. She has made one representation of the smallest known virus and one of the largest.

The presentation was dramatic: the jars were individually spotlit in a darkened gallery. The windows of the gallery were covered with heavily tinted plastic on which the full scientific name and taxon number of each virus is individually printed; these were visible from both inside and outside the gallery. Each jar was raised above the floor on identical welded steel pedestals laid out in an interrupted grid pattern. The viruses were at eye level, placed so they stare back at the viewer. Whitehead has given much thought to the way subject/object relationships are altered by proximity. Her psychological positioning creates an arena in which these objects become totemic rather than merely clinical. The overall impression is dramatic and funereal; reminiscent of museum presentations of grave goods, Chinese tomb figures, and the ever-growing obsession with all things Egyptian.

The back wall bore a series of drawings of individual viruses; a blend of scientific illustration and illuminated manuscript. These address the fluid definition of truth in the sciences, which seem to present fixed answers but in actuality remain vague and theoretical. Whitehead's interest in the canopic jars becomes a metaphor for the ambiguous relationship between specialized knowledge and cultural awareness, the disembodiment of knowledge from experience and the lack of a unifying holistic understanding of the micro- and macro-cosmic.

Both arcane and theatrical, Whitehead's work underscores one of the most striking aspects of this century's end: the demise of categories. The existence of the virus throws all other taxonomies into question; how is one now to classify distinctions between living and dead, sentient and non-sentient? The development of "Arguably Alive" entails Whitehead recasting herself, Leonardo Da Vinci-like, in the ancient role of artist as scientist/observer. The installation emphasizes the stage at which objects are comprehended and develop meaning, bearing images through the intervening process of interpretation. Whitehead has developed a context in which to perform the reconciliation of scientific description and sensation. Perhaps this will be the most crucial task for the visual arts in the coming millennium.

Kathleen Whitney is a sculptor and critic living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, who teaches in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of New Mexico.

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"A Selection from Arguably Alive (the virus taxonomy)" (detail), 1999. Egyptian paste and stainless steel, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Lisa Sette Gallery.