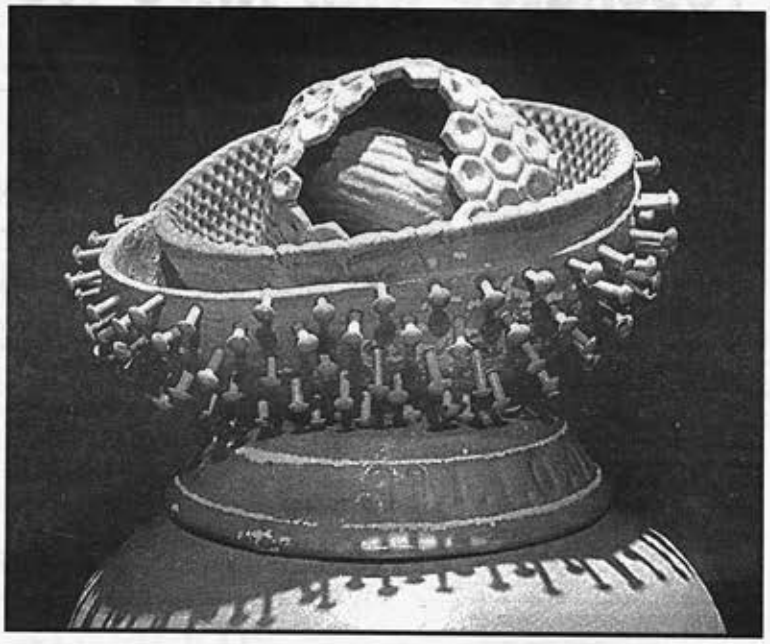

"Herpesviridae" is among the sculpture that depicts viruses in Frances Whitehead's exhibit "Arguably Alive" at the Northern Illinois University Art Gallery.

Whitehead's lively art of death

GALLERIES

By Margaret Hawkins

'Arguably Alive," Frances Whitehead's provocatively named new installation piece, overwhelms the viewer with information and sensation, yet leaves the mystery of its central subject intact.

More than most exhibits, this one has been stagecrafted to control how we experience it. The viewer enters a darkened gallery in which lights are dimmed and windows are shaded and is confronted by rows of ceramic jars sitting on stainless steel tables. The effect is tomblike. The jars, which resemble funerary urns, are fashioned from luminescent, greenish-yellow stoneware that glows eerily in the dark.

The arrangement of these jars, each of which is positioned under a low-beam spotlight, approximates the jagged rows of grave stones in a cemetery, and closer inspection reveals each urn to bear an oddly shaped top ornament. On the wall appears text that identifies these ornaments as hugely magnified representations of viruses, those strange half-living, half-dead organisms responsible for some of our most deadly diseases. Each jar bears a different virus, and the total number of jars in the show represents all the known categories identified by the International Center for Taxonomy of Viruses.

Frances Whitehead: 'Arguably Alive (the virus taxonomy)'

- Through June 3
- Northern Illinois University Art Gallery, 215 W. Superior, third floor
- (312) 642-6010

Whitehead has designed these funeral urns in the tradition of ancient Egyptian canopic jars. The Egyptians disemboweled their dead for burial, and kept the most prized organs in ceramic jars. The lids of these jars bore representations of the gods associated with the organs within.

Whitehead makes a leap here, equating the Egyptians' reverential treatment of life-sustaining human organs with these entities that are responsible for so much human misery. It seems possible that the stuff on top of the jars represents the viruses that killed the people whose remains are within them. If so, the work suggests a kind of spiritual position on death, a suggestion that we all contain our own deaths and must embrace this fact as the ultimate link to our own nature.

Whatever Whitehead's philosophic intentions, her sculptural treatment of the viruses reflects her delight in these forms, however grim their effects. The viruses are enlarged to the point where they begin to resemble non-threatening household items, like sponges and shock absorbers, or bits of the natural world such as wormy invertebrate animals, sea urchins, honeycombs.

Whitehead has long been fascinated with the natural world, in all its irrepressible and sometimes grotesque vigor. This interest has informed her sculpture for some time. A stunning show of hers a couple of years ago at Tough Gallery included live moths and light-starved plants. Always she seems to be investigating the outer reaches of natural science, combining the roles of artist and observer to discover beauty in the order of nature, however grotesque it may seem at first. So it is not surprising that here she is investigating the strange beauty of viruses that are responsible for countless deaths, yet cannot be killed themselves because they are not alive.

So much of the way we perceive a thing is influenced by the order in which we experience its parts, and Whitehead's presentation of this material is crucial to its effect. Her installations typically have a laboratory feel. She presents her work as evidence, as if she is out to prove something. Here, again, she has managed to approximate for the viewer a kind of natural discovery, as if her faux canopic jars are part of an archeological find, and this metaphor of an artistic journey standing in for a scientific one is not a coincidence.

Whitehead draws a connection between art and death by forcing us to adjust to and see it in a funerary light. By doing so she suggests that art, like the virus, does not lead an independent life yet enters into the human experience and feeds off it to create a metamorphosis. This connection is both macabre and fitting, suggesting how the beauties of nature, like the beauties of art, stand apart from their consequences. And like nature, in the form of those beautifully sculpted viruses, she holds art blameless for whatever havoc it wreaks.

This work has a richness of associations that satisfies beyond its first impression. The uneasy coexistence of death and beauty, the wonderful vigor of the natural world that results in disease and death, the linking of science and art through the common experience of discovery, and the equation of our modern scientific attention to the biological parts that make up the whole to the ancient Egyptians' view of the human body are some of the rich elements of this work.

Beyond all this, too, is a strangely worshipful quality that suggests a spiritual bias to Whitehead's scientific aesthetic. "Arguably Alive" is a temple to the astonishingly effective mechanism of disease, which is yet another way nature edits and improves itself. By embracing the paradox of death as a means to make way for more and better life forms, her virus taxonomy is really a way of honoring nature at its most microscopic.

Margaret Hawkins is a local free-lance writer.