

REVIEW OF THE WEEK

The art of medical science

Trinity College Dublin allowed artists to work with researchers throughout the medical school.

Desmond O'Neill enjoyed an exhibition of the work

Apertures and Anxieties

Until 21 December 2011 at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin 2, Ireland
www.royalhibernianacademy.ie

Rating: ★★★★★

The best art always involves risk taking—as does the practice of good medicine. Bringing both together can amplify the potential gains or hazards of taking these risks. At worst, the experiment may satisfy neither constituency, and the outcomes turn out to be wayward, extreme, or just plain worthy. It was with trepidation, therefore, that I set out to view a “big bang” fusion of art and medicine—the engagement of 11 major Irish artists with the School of Medicine of Trinity College Dublin to celebrate its tercentenary.

The setting, the Royal Hibernian Academy, was an encouraging start. Memorably described by Oliver St John Gogarty (poet; novelist; Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses*; and ear, nose and throat surgeon) as “a triple contradiction in terms,” the academy is at the heart of artistic life in Dublin. Its modern galleries have smart clean lines that are welcoming yet unobtrusive.

As with the “end-of-the-bed-ogram” taught to us in medical school—observation of the patient’s attitude, demeanour, and posture before even the first words are spoken—the first impression on entering the galleries was promising. Curated with craft and skill, my eye roved from a red branching wall sculpture to what appeared to be modern versions of the cabinets of a Victorian museum, to large paintings where re-imaginings of brain scans flashed across the retina, and I was drawn in further.

Closer inspection was even more rewarding. The artists had worked with a range of departments—predominantly in the neurosciences but also anatomy, ethics, and, intriguingly, public health. Particularly notable was the way grace, beauty, and high levels of craftsmanship shone through in works that were often highly experimental.

Just as German Romantics such as Hoffmann and Schiller were entranced by magnetic mesmerism, or early radiography gave a particular charge to the paintings of Kokoschka, so too the techniques of magnetic resonance

imaging and electron microscopy were strong influences in this show—from paintings based on brain slices to an installation of a torso, the head replaced by a stack of books and the eye drawn to look through the thoracic inlet at rapidly cycling images of brain slices.

An affecting embroidery of the Hippocratic Oath on a hospital blanket, and scenes from an anatomy department showed that the wider picture was not forgotten. I was particularly touched by beautifully crafted books by Andrew Folan that explored memory and dementia, and my perspective was lifted out of its Eurocentric frame of reference by Maria McKinney’s strikingly rendered art based on maps of global disease.

The artists may also uncover unexpected interpretations: my first impression on looking at the striking wall sculpture of dendrites was that it was a vibrant re-imagining of the circle of Willis, clearly exposing me as more plumber than electrician in my professional (if not domestic) leanings.

On reflection, I should not have been surprised that the collaboration worked so well. In more than a decade of work in arts and health—including helping to develop a course for artists to work in healthcare settings (*Medical Humanities* 2009;35:101-5), and hosting a chamber orchestra residency in our hospital (*Irish Medical Journal* 2007;100:634-6)—I have been continually fascinated by the professionalism

of artists in novel and often challenging settings.

From a societal perspective, the mutual fascination between medicine and art should also be expected. Carol Duncan, a commentator on the role of art galleries in society, points out that both function as important instruments of state and society, not only preserving heritage but revealing past and current achievements and values. The title of this exhibition—“Apertures and Anxieties”—reflects the current rapid pace of research combined with our growing uncertainties, as well as the increasing proportion of national budget that health and neurological disease occupy.

I enjoyed this exhibition, and I emerged energised and challenged in equal parts. It can be recommended without reservation to lay and professional audiences. There is an accompanying catalogue that is illuminating and compact. This is as notable for the artists who choose not to provide a commentary as for those who do, in its own way an emphasis on the primacy of the art and a reminder of Nietzsche’s dictum that when we say it in words it is already dead in the heart.

Desmond O'Neill is associate professor, Department of Medical Gerontology, Adelaide and Meath Hospital, Dublin 24, and chairman of the National Centre for Arts and Health, Dublin
doneill@tcd.ie

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2011;343:d7940

bmj.com/blogs

● Blogs by Des O'Neill at <http://bit.ly/sG5Plt>



Deep in the Marrow, Instrument II, by Aideen Barry



Facies Hippocratica, by Garrett Phelan