MANDEVILLE GALLERY





Inquiring minds at Union's Mandeville Gallery

Exhibit juxtaposes old scientific instruments and works made by science-interested artists

William Jaeger | Jan. 19, 2018 | Updated: Jan. 19, 2018 2:53 p.m.



4 of 12

· • • • •

Jessie Henson, Little Sister, 2012, stainless steel, silver, marbles, photo by Wm Jaeger

When science looks for patterns in nature, for causes and effects of all kinds, for underlying order and logic in the universe, it finds beauty. Often. Maybe always. So the visible trappings of the work of scientists — the

graphs, diagrams and models, the computer simulations and chalkboard explanations — often have the feel of fine art.

The Mandeville Gallery's well-integrated show, "Probability & Uncertainty," makes direct connections along these lines, pulling inspiration from the instruments of science by borrowing over 30 — mostly 19th-century mechanical and optical specimens — from Union College's collection. Six artists whose work is embedded in the nature of nature and its visible manifestations are added to this mix under the Nott Memorial dome.

Among the prisms and tubes and alongside a wonderful planetary orrery — a model of the solar system — the science pieces that steal the show are the Olivier models. These eccentric wood and brass objects, designed by Theodore Olivier in the early 1800s in France, are a clear symbiosis. The whole point of these circles and rods of metal holding parallel lines of fine string in adjustable arrays is to show relationships of geometry in tangible ways. Exquisitely made of classic materials, they carry the aura of pure art.

From here it is a single conceptual step to the objects of artist Audrey Wilson. These fictional, nonsense constructions take the essence of basic science experiments and turn them into magical displays. Her "Poison Atomizer Mist Gun" is a blown glass tube in the shape of a ray gun inside a box, a shimmering beam of luminous gas inside bringing it to life. "Small Hadron Collider" is a parody of the much larger collider in Europe. Rusty metal rings, glowing blue glass orbs, and a row of electron tubes emitting emerald-tinged photons are aligned in a tall box on the wall, apparently detecting something mysterious—subatomic collisions?

Wilson's work is part sci-fi set design and part assemblage craft. She takes imperfect and often recycled materials and gives them a feeling of formal elegance. Some of the instruments nearby also combine beautiful materials and a little uncertainty. See especially the weirdly beautiful and yet crude "Geissler Rotator, Motor, and Tube" from the mid-19th century with its twisted glass and rudimentary electrical coils. It now looks suspiciously like a ready-made.

Another clear crossover between models for science and pure sculpture is seen in the looping steel rods and brightly colored balls arranged in airy efflorescences by Jessie Henson. Protruding from the wall, sometimes overhead, they overtly mimic models of the solar system or atomic structures. But these are crazier scenarios, with spheres and lines of silvery metal coiling and whirling madly. And beautifully. We know they are aesthetic inventions, but they make you imagine pushing on the known rules of gravity and particle attraction.

The paintings by Carter Hodgkin make a more straightforward though attractive response to ideas of movement, with saturated lines dropping down in pretty cascades like traces of particle behavior. Her computer-driven video version unfolds and builds slowly on a black screen, with implied natural forces giving the work its needed depth.

The remaining artists push the boundaries of pattern, order, and form in work that is less directly about science and more about formal qualities and repeating geometrics. The most curious is by Nettrice Gaskins, a proponent of a growing if amorphous movement called Afrofuturism. A projector from above shoots flashing geometric images onto and through a triangular plexiglas construction hanging by strings at about eye level. The images hit the floor or are reflected in fragments. Headphones let you hear progressive contemporary music. While I stood there awkwardly listening, only partly absorbed, it became clear the piece could have more impact in a different setting. But she also had the most inventive and bold work in the show. Before leaving, look up at the Nott dome and note the sparkles of primary colors coming from over 700 "illuminators" embedded there. These represent the entire Newtonian spectrum, and are a final appropriate capping of an exhibition that mixes beauty, wonder, observation, and investigation.

When science looks for patterns in nature, for causes and effects of all kinds, for underlying order and logic in the universe, it finds Beauty. Often. Maybe always. So the visible trappings of the work of scientists—the graphs, diagrams and models, the computer simulations and chalkboard explanations—often have the feel of fine art.

The Mandeville Gallery's well integrated show, "Probability & Uncertainty," makes direct connections along these lines, pulling inspiration from the instruments of science by borrowing over thirty mechanical, mostly 19th Century mechanical and optical specimens from the Union College Permanent Collection. Six artists whose work is embedded in the nature of nature and its visible manifestations are added to this mix under the Nott Memorial dome.

Among the prisms and tubes, and alongside a wonderful planetary orrery, the science pieces that steal the show are the "Olivier Models." These eccentric wood and brass objects, designed by Théodore Olivier in the early 1800s in France, are a clear symbiosis. The whole point of these circles and rods of metal holding parallel lines of fine string in adjustable arrays is to show relationships of geometry in tangible ways. Exquisitely made of classic materials, they carry the aura of pure art.

From here it is a single conceptual step to the objects of artist Audrey Wilson. These fictional, nonsense constructions take the essence of basic science experiments and turn them into magical displays. Her "Poison Atomizer Mist Gun" is a blown glass tube in the shape of a ray gun inside a box, a shimmering beam of luminous gas inside bringing it to life. "Small Hadron Collider" is a parody of the much larger collider in Europe. Rusty metal rings, glowing blue glass orbs, and a row of electron tubes emitting emerald tinged photos are aligned in a tall box on the wall, apparently noticing something mysterious—subatomic collisions?

Wilson's work is part sci-fi set design and part assemblage craft. She takes imperfect and often recycled materials and gives them a feeling of formal elegance. Some of the instruments nearby also combine beautiful materials and a little uncertainty. See especially the weirdly beautiful and yet crude "Geissler Rotator, Motor, and Tube" from the mid-19th century with its twisted glass and rudimentary electrical coils. It now looks suspiciously like a readymade.

Another clear crossover between models for science and pure sculpture is seen in the looping steel rods and brightly colored balls arranged in airy efflorescences by Jessie Henson. Protruding from the wall, sometimes overhead, they overtly mimic models of the solar system or atomic structures. But these are crazier scenarios, with spheres and lines of silvery metal coiling and whirling madly. And beautifully. We know they are aesthetic inventions, but they make you imagine pushing on the known rules of gravity and particle attraction.

The paintings by Carter Hodgkin make a more straightforward though attractive response to ideas of movement, with saturated lines dropping down in pretty cascades like traces of particle behavior. Her computer driven video version unfolds and builds slowly on a black screen, with implied natural forces giving the work its needed depth.