

Function vs. dysfunction: Artist's installation creates a total environment for considering human existence on many levels

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It takes a perceptive mind to tie microscopic cellular families to volatile interactions of human families. But New York painter, sculptor and installation artist A.M. Hoch (pronounced Hotch) did it.

In "Mitosis: Formation of Daughter Cells," at UC Irvine's Beall Center for Art and Technology, Hoch orchestrates an installation chock full of visual, audio, scientific, and literary happenings, that form a multidimensional portrait of human existence.

Installation is a modern theatrical and cinematic art form. Unlike painting or sculpture, where the viewer has one object to gaze upon, with installation, the artist conceives of a total environment.

"Mitosis" engulfs the spacious gallery, filled with symbolic and metaphoric objects — a tilted Queen Anne bed with a deliberately trimmed and painted cell division emblem on the mattress, a rusty chair that cannot be sat on, debris of a radiator and metal hose, a sewing machine asleep on a pile of clothes that need mending, a three-section glass partition with a quasi-scientific diagram of a nude female with her breasts and reproductive organs circled, a mattress and pillow on the floor, covered in a red clay-colored sheet and pillowcase on which an overhead light writes repetitively in script, a poem by the 13th century Sufi poet Rumi.

The most massive and central feature is three configurations covered in transparent lycra, stuffed with common household objects, exposed through circular openings that resemble rounded cellular structures. In the center section are three isolated drawers that randomly open and close. Everything is augmented by an array of technical devices that light, speak, amplify, and gyrate.

Putting the scope of the project and its technical sophistication aside for now, the real issue is taking a fresh look at the human family (father, mother and daughter), paralleled by microscopic cells, dividing and multiplying into a family unit of parent and daughters (from one becoming three).

Let us begin with mitosis, an intelligent cellular system that ensures biological inheritance from one generation to the next. Through a complex process, an original cell (the parent) divides, in an orderly fashion, into what are called daughter cells, from parent to daughter to daughter to daughter. To bring this point home, on three sides of the

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The UCI Beall Center for Art's new installation, "Mitosis: Formation of Daughter Cells." Scattered throughout the room are pieces from a bedroom in which a family drama is unfolding.

gallery edge is a cinematic projection, like a decorative border of dark circles in white rectangles, of the mitosis process — dividing, multiplying, dividing and multiplying again and again. Although always active, Mrs. Mitosis and daughters never have family squabbles and never complain. Interdependent, they just do what they are programmed to do, continuously reproducing.

But here is where Hoch makes her point — function versus dysfunction. The human family, which evolves once two people become a unit and breed a third member, is diametrically opposite to its microscopic counterparts. Within the human cocoon, individuality of each member tugs in a power struggle to be heard, espouse beliefs, fulfill desires, dominate, or acquiesce. Much like a radio play, there is script for five voices. Each voice plays a distinct role. One voice systematically describes mitosis. Then there is the human father, mother, and daughter, and a reader of Rumi's poetry.

At times, the voices may speak alone, together, or in random sequence, based on programming and proximity sensors. Like a chorus, the scientific and poetic voices are predictable, like the mitosis process. The three human characters, however, take over; their voices come out of drawers mysteriously opening and closing when they talk or exit.

The family speaks from three scripts – parents dominate daughter, daughter dominates parents, or the three argue equally. Cacophony of voices start and stop when one scenario speaks dialogue from another scenario, shifting back and forth, changing roles, in no particular direction — a collage of words — people talking at each other, to each other, and in soliloquy.

Most noticeable is how family talk is so petty. The disharmonious sounds of whiney, arrogant, resigned, timid and monotonous voices are counterpoint to the scientifically precise and mystically poetic narration.

In the large gallery, Hoch further expands the space by planting in many random objects a small round video playing a close-up of the human face. Here the artist adds another dimension to the minute and mega duality; the video, resembling a microscope, enables us to study our own species, much like scientists viewing the minuscule act of mitosis.

Hoch creates a “habitable cinema of the mind,” a full-dimensional conglomeration of bare bones and gadgetry to reveal an aspect of human nature, the inevitability of tension, friction, and conflict. Even the reliable mitosis process has its share of conflict — condensation and dissolution of membranes in order to replicate chromosomes into two identical groups.

Dysfunctionality then is relative, and in some respects a necessary component to growth, at all levels. Without its rough edges, we might glide through life never questioning or improving on what we could become.

To realize her project, Hoch collaborated with several well-known professionals —

Wally Shawn of “My Dinner with Andre” fame played the father. He and Deborah Eisenberg, who played the mother, wrote the script. **[Erratum: script written by A. M. Hoch, adapted from R.D. Laing's *Sanity, Madness and the Family*; excerpts from 13th-century Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi; and excerpts from an unknown biology textbook]**, Peabody award winning digital media architects Mark Shepard and Carlos Tejada provided the fabulous technical know-how.

Hoch also brings to life Rumi’s 800-year-old phrase “See the soul (the human) all the atoms in the air (microscopic level) and find both contrast and agreement in the two” — the human being and its life process. Rumi, whose name means love, strove for a state of existence that microbes and dysfunctional families do not yet know — a higher spiritual state where humans search for bliss in the holiness of life.

What: “Mitosis: Formation of Daughter Cells” installation by artist A. M. Hoch.

Where: Beall Center for Art and Technology at UC Irvine.

When: Continues through Feb. 15 with gallery hours from noon to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday with extended hours to 8 p.m. on Fridays.

Cost: Free.

Information: (949) 824-4339.

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