

Artist Evokes Mysteries of Nature

Professor Patricia Olynyk explores the wonders of life—the body, mind, and spirit—in her acclaimed and innovative art installations.

BY CANDACE O'CONNOR



Patricia Olynyk

At the venerable National Academy of Sciences (NAS) building in Washington, D.C., the 2006 installation, *Sensing Terrains*, showed as a breathtaking surprise. Along one corridor floated 10-foot-high prints: billowing taste buds that looked like blooming cacti; shrunken tree roots resembling the human vascular system. Suspended from the dome in the rotunda hung giant prints on Chinese silk, gathered into the shape of an undulating sea anemone. In the background, a throbbing soundscape of garden sounds, peeling Shinto bells, and Buddhist chants evoked the pulsing rhythm of blood coursing through the body.

Patricia Olynyk created this mix of sensory stimuli—gleaned from Japanese gardens and microscopic views of human and animal tissue. Olynyk, named the inaugural Florence and Frank Bush Professor of Art in 2007, intends her work to be challenging, provocative. In her installations, she often works at the intersection of art, culture, and life sciences, nudging viewers to consider relationships in the world, while immersing themselves in its mystery.

“In the NAS series, I wanted viewers to think about what it means to focus on our bodies and environment in this digitally mediated world,” says Olynyk, who is director of the Graduate

School of Art. “I hope they also will remember the fragility and complexity of nature. With my use of light and shadow, these pieces have a kind of drama, perhaps a macabre quality. I’ve always had a fascination with mysteries—the larger mysteries of life.”

Her installations, described by some critics as “sublime,” have appeared around the world in such venues as the Brooklyn Museum, the Museo del Corso in Rome, the Saitama Modern Art Museum in Japan, and the American University in Cairo. Her talent has garnered prestigious fellowships and research grants, including the 2005–06 Wood Fellowship from the Francis C. Wood Institute for the History of Medicine at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia and residencies at the Banff Center for the Arts in Alberta, Canada.

Carmon Colangelo, dean of the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, eagerly recruited Olynyk, who was previously on the art faculty at the University of Michigan and the first non-scientist appointed to the research faculty of its Life Sciences Institute. In part, he wanted her talents as an administrator to lead his School’s growing graduate program, building collaborative ties with other academic disciplines.

He also was charmed by her art, he says, which is “adventurous and ambitious in scale and concept. Trained as a printmaker, she uses medical

Orb I (above) appeared in Sensing Terrains, the 2006 installation Professor Patricia Olynyk created for the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. In the artwork, Olynyk juxtaposed scanning electron micrographs (SEMs) of sensory organs with photographs of Japanese gardens. At right, Olynyk appears with some of the installation’s featured 10-foot-high prints.



Joe Angilletta



As director of the Graduate School of Art, Patricia Olynyk manages a dynamic, interdisciplinary program and advises students, such as Christopher Ottinger (far left), a first-year MFA student and Danforth Scholar. (Below) Olynyk's interest in biology translates into a large-scale public work, a labyrinth garden for the University of Michigan (construction pending).

her passionate interest in art, arranged for her to take private lessons from age 9. As an undergraduate, she studied art at the Alberta College of Art and Design.

But the dark side of life always existed on the edge of her

consciousness. At home, her mother began reading Gothic fiction to her, including Edgar Allen Poe stories when she was 6; a favorite, she says, is still the haunting narrative poem *The Raven*. And she always had the nagging sense that, in the nearby mountains, nature could swallow her up.

"Curious stories emerged of ski parties going missing, in one case because of a whiteout blizzard, which caused 14 people to freeze to death within a quarter mile of the Banff Springs Hotel," she says. "I think that, for artists who have grown up in cold, remote places, this sense of remoteness gives rise to a certain kind of psychological profile in the way our work develops."

After college, she moved to sunnier California for a master's degree at the California College of the Arts, where she focused on printmaking and sculpture. In that Pacific-rim area, she came under the spell of Asian art and won two prestigious scholarships—the Monbusho, through the Japanese Embassy in Canada, and a Tokyu Foundation grant—that allowed her to spend four years in Japan as a visiting scholar.

That experience powerfully influenced her art and her life, she says. During her stay, she staged five solo art shows in two years and taught studio art courses at a university in Kyoto. She also became proficient at *kendo*, or Japanese fencing, taught by the head of the security force for the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, and earned a second-degree black belt. Her instructors wanted her to open her own *kendo* school after she returned to the United States.

"One night, I was summoned to my teacher's house for dinner and saw adoption papers lying on the table, so that I could be adopted into the family and continue to raise my ranking," she says. "What prompted my return was the recognition that my commitment to the martial arts would eventually compete with my life as an artist."

imaging technologies, time-based media, and digital and photo processes to produce innovative works, often visualizing the senses of the body as a metaphor in her work."

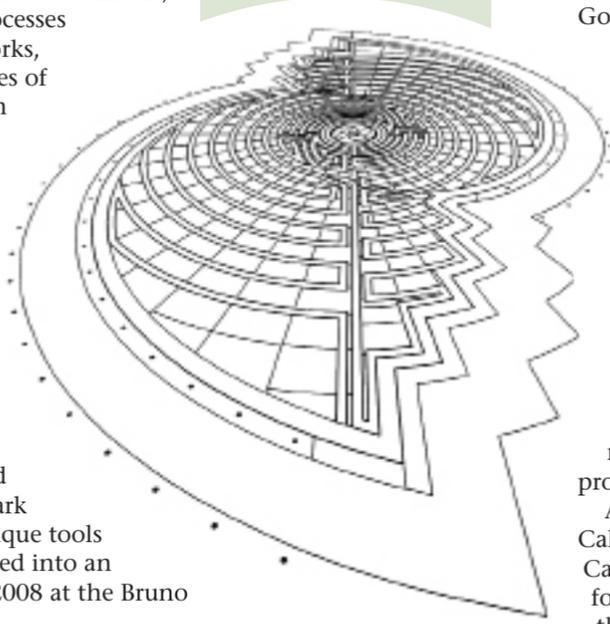
Mapping a path to art

During her Philadelphia fellowship, Olynyk spent some time at the Mütter Museum, which showcases medical anomalies, among them old instruments and prosthetic devices. Her stark photographs of these antique tools and prosthetic limbs turned into an exhibit, *Probe*, shown in 2008 at the Bruno David Gallery in St. Louis.

Among the curiosities at the museum was a collection of skulls, collected as part of a long-ago effort to see whether criminal anthropologists and physiognomists could predict criminal behavior on the basis of skull shape. In some cases, the skulls are matched with an identity, like the Viennese prostitute who died young of meningitis. But in other cases, they are marked simply with a postmortem tattoo, most often the chilling term "child murderer."

"It was disturbing because people's entire lives were reduced to those tattoos," says Olynyk, who photographed the skulls and had just begun work on a project to construct fictionalized biographies for these forgotten individuals, when she left Michigan. "This was also the beginning of eugenics—the plan to use skull shape to categorize and ultimately victimize people."

During her happy childhood in Calgary, where her father was an engineer and her mother a real estate agent, Olynyk knew little of the macabre. Her parents, noting



Stateside again, she returned to California and teaching, also serving for a time as a production manager collaborating with feminist performance artist Suzanne Lacy on projects that engaged social and situated practices. Then in 1999, the Michigan job came her way, and she stayed eight years, taking her art in new directions. Because of her interest in growth patterns in nature, the University of Michigan's Matthaei Botanical Gardens commissioned her to design a 6,500-square-foot labyrinth—which she did, in the shape of an angel-wing begonia leaf (see facing page).

Today, she believes that many forms of creative work exist and no material or strategy used by an artist is superior to any other, so long as it reflects the content well. "The point is that there has been a flattening of the hierarchies in the art world," she says. "Any medium goes."

Washington University and the future

During a residency at the Banff Center, Olynyk began a new art project, in consultation with particle physicists and cosmologists. She was fascinated by the notion of clusters that form in nature and in human society. Why are we drawn to likeness, biologically, socially, and culturally?

In fall 2009, she screened a portion of a new work, based on these questions and loosely inspired by Poe's prose poem *Eureka*. Set in the 50-foot-wide astronomy dome at the University of Notre Dame, the piece, *Because Nothing Was, Therefore All Things Are*, consisted of five projected video vignettes (see photo on table of contents). In one, a swirling black-and-white image gradually goes into motion, its smoky lines dissolving into pollen-like points that cluster fleetingly into a biohazard sign before fading away.

"The work suggests that nature exists as one substance or reality," says Olynyk, who plans to complete the piece next year, "and that complex patterns of formation and movement found in it reveal a multitude of hidden or embedded codes and implied narratives."

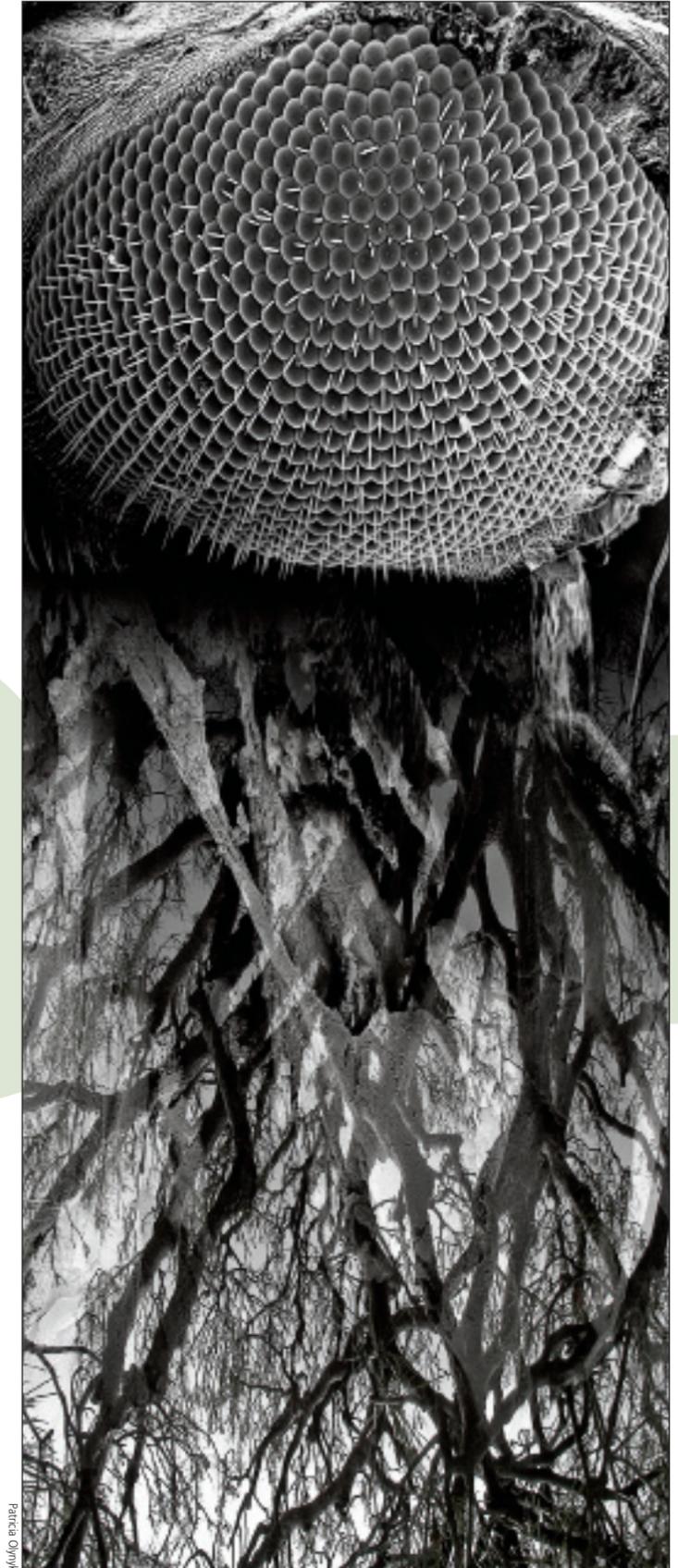
In her continuing work at Washington University, she plans to make use of its extraordinary scientific resources to enrich her art. She also is inspired by her partner, artist and philosopher Robert Gero, who teaches and advises in the graduate program. Together, they are transforming an 8,000-square-foot St. Louis church complex into a living space, complete with a studio and gallery, where they will play tag with their pet chinchilla.

"We are anything but conventional," Olynyk says. 

Candace O'Connor is a freelance writer based in St. Louis.

See online magazine for more of Olynyk's work, or visit her Web site: http://samfoxschool.wustl.edu/portfolios/faculty/patricia_olynyk.

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Cenesthesia: Sight (above) was among Olynyk's 10-foot-high prints in the *Sensing Terrains* installation at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C.