

Art Meets Science! Get over it . . .

By Stephen Nowlin

The news headline, when such projects garner attention, usually goes like this – *Art Meets Science!* Or perhaps *Art Merges with Science!* or maybe they *combine*, or art *collides* with science, or they *fuse*, *join*, *bond*, or *unite*. And “art” in the phrase usually precedes “science,” perhaps because their integration is more typically initiated from the art side of the equation. But whatever the order of the two terms, and whatever verb is used to link them, the tenor of the declaration is typically the same – this is a story worth reporting on, it announces, because the notion of bringing these two disparate domains together is peculiar, unexpected and unconventional. The heart of the story, it says, is about strange bedfellows, about opposite ends of a spectrum touching despite their distance. Its interest factor is like that of a freak weather storm, or an illicit affair. The proclamation is that an established boundary has been breached – and thus *Art Meets Science!* becomes newsworthy. The headlines give it away -- it’s an atypical pairing and that’s why the story is worth telling. In short, its primary attraction is its novelty.

Let’s get over it. First of all, there’s plenty of history around to show the coupling of art and science to be, particularly before the last century, much more the status quo and not at all aptly described as novelty – and second, whether it is novel or not hardly counts. What counts, as with all art, is how sensations are modulated by viewing a subject through a certain lens, understanding it a certain way, and how those sensations resonate with, define, and inspire a unique critique and a culture of thoughtful reflection. So don’t perseverate over the sudden shockwave that art and science can be on speaking terms. More importantly, ask why it matters.

Among other things, five centuries of epic tension leading to the divergent worldviews of religion and science is an unavoidable indication of why the art/science union matters. The differences between the so-called supernatural and natural approaches to existence cannot be escaped and should not be ignored by a movement that proposes the engagement of science, the supernatural’s persistent adversary, with art, the supernatural’s persistent image-maker. Art cannot join with science in a profound way without eventually probing the nature of the latter’s debate partner: religion, and the stunningly widespread belief that a supernatural reality accompanies the natural one.

For millennia our planet’s human populations have engaged magical and supernatural beliefs of one sort or another -- beliefs about big life questions, beliefs that bubble up through consciousness to affect how people think and behave on the ground, what they embrace, what their high-low good-bad right-wrong attitudes are, who they vote for, go to war with, what they are willing to sacrifice for, what they’ll aspire to, find poetic, or settle for. Scientific methodology is, by definition, either agnostic and/or atheistic – and the supernatural is dogmatically theistic. Art,

if it is going to engage the science side of the equation with any sincerity, will need to have something to say about the science-theism dichotomy that drives so much of what humans think and say and do. How art accomplishes this is another matter -- whether it directly echoes scientific agnosticism or challenges religious supernaturalism, whether it distorts science into pseudo-science, or romanticizes it, imbues transcendence, conceptualizes, rhapsodizes, critiques, or simply formalizes its inherent aesthetic qualities, art/science and the artists, curators, writers, and headline-authors who engage their union should seek to excavate and approach critically that particular vein of profound content found beneath the titillation and surface novelty of *Art Meets Science*.

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