

CREATIVE LIFE

A new field of art is using genetic material and living tissue to question our place in the world.



A MALE FACE EMERGES from the petri dish. The tiny portrait, grown in a genetics lab, has been painted with a delicate brush dipped in *E. coli* bacteria and DNA.

As the bacteria bloom in the agar and the genetic material deteriorates, the features of the face take shape.

Dr Andre Brodyk, a COFA graduate and internationally recognised biotech artist, is fascinated by the chain of non-coding (junk) DNA found in the genes that cause Alzheimer's disease.

He creates his portraits then stores them at different temperatures to either slow down or quicken the natural deterioration of the genetic material. It's a process that mimics the frustrating nature of the disease.

"The work is a metaphorical representation of the way late-onset Alzheimer's may lie dormant inside a person for many years without giving a visual indication that it is present," says Brodyk.

"We cannot see it – we only notice its effects gradually as it begins to manifest itself in the decline of someone's identity and personality."

Biological art, or bioart, is an emerging genre where artists use live tissues, bacteria, living organisms and their own bodies to create provocative works.

Using living materials to grow your own art is the theme of *Multispecies Worlds*, an Environmental Humanities subject taught by Dr Eben Kirksey.

He's just come back from UNSW's microbiology laboratory, where one of his students has created a living artwork modelled on the human face.

Viveca McGhie pasted microbes from her own face on to the model made of agar gel. The surface bloomed into a pattern of orange, brown and green microbes.

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hothouse of genetic material," explains Kirksey. "Your body is a home for many other organisms. We're not really as separate as we think we are."

Kirksey recently curated the exhibition, *Intra-action: Multispecies Becomings in the Anthropocene*, with Madeleine Jean Boyd from the University of Sydney, which featured time-based, sculptural, installation and photographic interactions with the environment.

His upcoming book, *The Multispecies Salon: Gleanings from a Para-Site*, features Brodyk's art.

Kirksey says the artist's use of genetic fragments speaks to "broader dreams and nightmares" surrounding emergent forms of life.

"Amid speculation about future scientific breakthroughs, Brodyk's works show us that life forms exist at the very edge of the boundary between living and inanimate matter."

Kirksey also applauds the work of US ecological artist Deanna Pindell, who aims

to raise awareness about environmental degradation through sculpture and installations.

One of Pindell's recent campaigns involved using donated sweaters to create felt balls which then became homes for moss. The balls in turn helped germinate trees, creating an "ecosystem for mice, voles and other critters", says Kirksey.

"Pindell's work is asking us what might evolve, what might flourish, if we care for abandoned places, such as open-cut mines, felled forests or abandoned car parks."

Kirksey says the aim of bioart is the same as his *Multispecies Worlds* course: "Simply to encourage students to think and talk differently about ethical and environmental issues."

By Ali Gripper and Fran Strachan.