

Exhibition Review

“Case Study”: *Geraldine Ondrizek*



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APEX Gallery, Portland Art Museum, Oregon, February 12–May 15, 2011

Three sets of the twenty-four double-layer synthetic silk and linen scrolls hang quietly from the ceiling, swaying slightly, printed with delicate rows of horizontal bands in shades of blue and gray (Figure 1). These rhythmic rows of shaded bands make visible the genetic markers on each of the twenty-four chromosomes that mark the bearer for various characteristics, good and bad. Printed in gray on the rear linen scroll, one finds the words “Hodgkin’s Disease” printed near one set of markers, and “Hemophilia B” and “Night blindness, congenital stationary, 1” labeling others. A part of Portland-based artist Geraldine Ondrizek’s eponymous solo exhibition at the Portland Art Museum as part of the APEX series, this work “Case Study, 22 Chromosomes X & Y” (2011), confronts genetic determinism with a serene elegance (Figure 2).

Ondrizek mimics the game of genetic chance by randomly

embroidering in blue or gray a handful of the markers printed on the sheer front panel of each scroll set. But at the same time, her stitching battles the determinism writ in these marks, as if by highlighting other markers she could rewrite the genetic code of this individual. The rest of the scrolls are in a case nearby, rolled up to hide their contents, as the contents of our own genes has until very recently, been beyond our vision, beyond our knowledge, beyond even our conception (Figure 3). There is something very right in the material choices, the contrast between soft and hard, the steel and the silk, the industrial and the handmade, that mirror the clinical and very human origins of the work. The twenty-four scrolls of “Case Study” make for the true heraldic banner, but of the most individual nature; the family’s history written mark-by-mark results in a banner that is one-of-a-kind (Figure 4).

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Textile, Volume 10, Issue 3, pp. 328–335
DOI: 10.2752/175183512X13505526963868
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Figure 1

APEX: *Geraldine Ondrizek*, Portland Art Museum, 2011. Installation view.

**Figure 2**

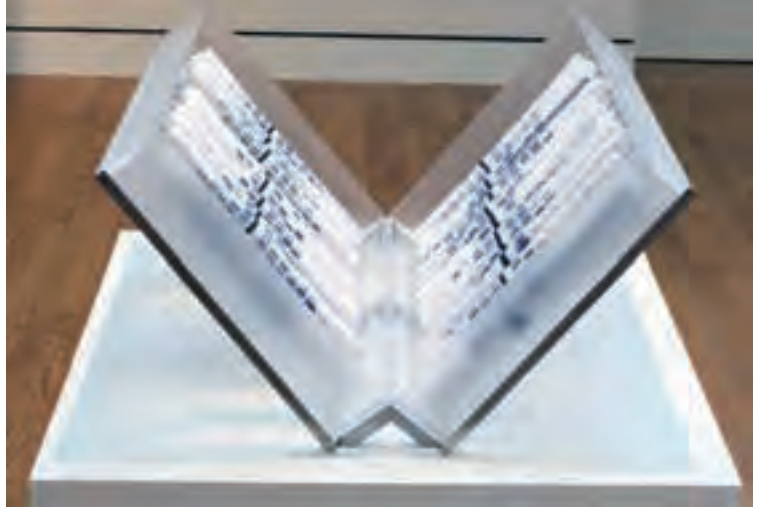
Geraldine Ondrizek, "Case Study, 22 Chromosomes X & Y," 2011. Detail.



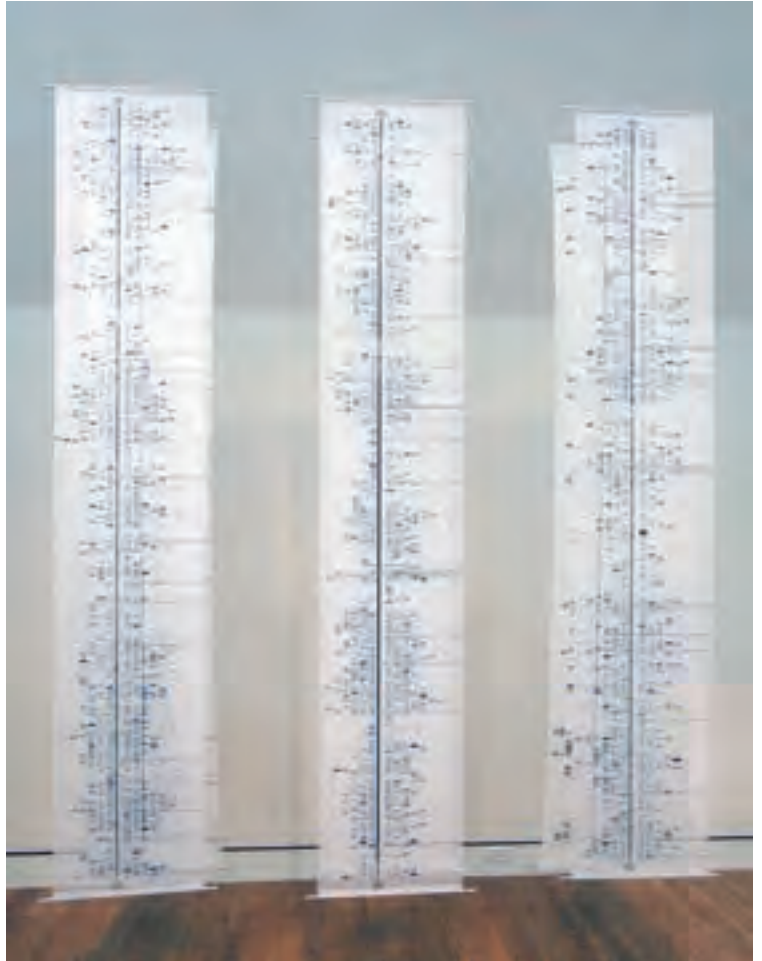
Gustave Flaubert predicted that "The more art develops, the more scientific it must be, just as science will become aesthetic" (Noble 2009: 134). The editors' note in a 1959 issue of the *Bulletin of The Atomic Scientists* on science and art (which stemmed from an exhibition at the University of Chicago in which products of the laboratory results exhibited as art) suggests that this convergence on an overlapping ground may well stem from similarities in the practice of the two disciplines: "[I]n art as in science it is discovery all along the way, making decisions, retaining what seems right, and discarding what seems wrong. The artist does create new ways of feeling, and the scientist creates new ways of knowing, but they

Figure 3

Geraldine Ondrizek, "Case Study, 22 Chromosomes X & Y," 2011. Detail.

**Figure 4**

Geraldine Ondrizek, "Case Study, 22 Chromosomes X & Y," 2011. Detail.



are not mutually exclusive.” As work on the front lines of genetic science create new ways of knowing, Ondrizek in “Case Study” and other works, gives us space to reflect on how this new knowing feels. Is it comforting to have answers to whether and why, or is life better lived in not knowing

This intersection of art and science is ground that has been well-trodden by artists, some more productively than others. One thinks of the transformative collaborative research in and around an anechoic chamber undertaken by artists Robert Irwin and James Turrell with Dr Ed Wortz, leading Irwin in particular to unparalleled installation works whose subject is perception itself. By contrast, Eduardo Kac’s genetically altered fluorescent rabbit, “GFP Bunny” (2000) is a blunt and somewhat sensationalist approach to generating conversation about genetic modification.

Ondrizek has since 2001 been making work that reports back from the front lines of genetic science, work that is as aesthetically rich as it is thoughtful. Formal beauty aside, what is so good about Ondrizek’s work is that she succeeds in doing what art does best: creating universal meaning from the very personal. Just as scientists dig to get at essential truths about how we humans work and why we are the way we are, why we suffer from the various conditions suggested by these genetic markers, Ondrizek is digging for her own answers, her own truths. Her interest in genetics stems from the personal

experience of losing a child. In asking the inevitable why, she delved into the research laboratories of cutting-edge geneticists, and has created a number of works—book, installation, photo, and sound—from what she has found there. It is somehow appropriate that recent works are fiber-based, “Case Study” especially reading as referring to the way the three Greek Moirai or Fates weave the fabric of mortals’ lives.

Fibers of another sort play into Ondrizek’s handmade abaca “Sound of Cells Dividing” (Figure 5) (2008–9). Semi-circular, it marks out a viewing space for her film “Cellular” (2009) while emitting a soundtrack of deep thrum, metallic wind, and static-y glitch. These amplified sounds of cells dividing reflect research showing that cancerous cells sound differently than healthy cells. “Cellular” depicts what appear variously to be vibrating barnacles, bubbling yeast, golden-hued oil on water, all seen through a thick round lens, but it in fact documents cellular division via stereomicroscope. This installation is accompanied by thirty-two “Cellular Film Stills.” “Cellular” is rhythmic and mesmerizing, and not just because it’s the story of your life and mine documented at the moment it begins (Figure 6).

In 1866, in reference to a new realism in the visual arts, and as noted in *Themes in Modern European History 1830–90*, Emile Zola wrote, “The wind blows in the direction of science. Despite ourselves, we are pushed toward the exact study of facts and things” (Waller 2002). He is speaking

Figure 5

Geraldine Ondrizek, "Sounds of Cells Dividing," 2008–9. Installation view.

**Figure 6**

Geraldine Ondrizek, "Sounds of Cells Dividing," 2008–9 and "Cellular," 2009. Installation view.



metaphorically, of course, the science was more social science than biological as the undepicted classes began to be the subjects of exquisite oil paintings. But even as metaphor it is worth considering whether this was a new project in 1866. Because the cadaver sketches by Leonardo da Vinci indicate that biological science has long been an informer of art practice. So why does science as subject rear its head in literature and art at various times? It is worth returning to the title of that journal that in 1959 devoted an issue to art and science. The anxiety provoked by the atomic bomb might find a low-grade counterpart in that provoked by contemporary genetic science, which, as Kac's bunny points out, seeks not only to discover but to alter living things. What Ondrizek's work does in this exhibition is to offer the viewer an invitation with space and time to reflect on all of the feelings that this genetic

knowledge and its uses might generate. As the editors of *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* note (1959), "the artist's abstractions are more nearly 'whole' than the cells and skeletons of the scientist," allowing as they do for reflection and inquiry of a more expansive nature (encompassing philosophy, emotion, spirit, and ethics) than that leading to verifiable, replicable outcomes in the lab.

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