Installation view: *From Forces to Forms*, 2021, Pratt Manhattan Gallery, Pratt Institute, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella Photography.

There is a sense that we have reached a point in our societal discourse where no amount of explaining will convince someone who doesn't believe in science that the end-times —environmentally speaking—are nigh. The inclusive umbrella that arches over the artists in *From Forces to Forms* is a desire to explain these forces of nature and scientific principles (ones we have upset or chosen to toy with) in intuitive and lyrical ways which aim at a visceral understanding. The artists do this through play, love, intrigue, and ecstasy rather than didacticism. Ellen K. Levy's incisive curation probes how one can aestheticize and personalize scientific concepts so that they are relatable, if not completely comprehensible:

ON VIEW
Pratt Manhattan Gallery
From Forces to Forms
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New York

for example, in the video *Anti-Marta* (2018), artists Marta de Menezes and Luis Graça surgically trade swatches of flesh and then use the inevitable tissue rejection as a comment on independence within a relationship. Conversely, Levy also addresses how far one can push pure aesthetics toward an intersection with scientific concepts: Haresh Lalvani's *GR FLORA 24 100 2* and *GR FLORA 64 60 102* (both 2012) express monumental forces of pressure via incised plates of stainless steel that deform along the patterns created by the artist, while Tauba Auerbach's C-Prints *Heat Current I-VI* (2020) are infrared photographs of the temperature differentials in liquids and gases. Throughout the exhibition we enjoy this dichotomy of things either referencing scientific principles, not necessarily specifically but with a superficial resemblance or a seductively abstract similarity, or the opposite: creatively and directly illustrating a concept of which we should or need to be aware. The most charming evocations of this latter principle appear in Victoria Vesna's and Christy Rupp's contributions. Both visualize the issue of microplastics and plastic debris in the oceans—playing with the somewhat adorable and fascinating nature of unicellular and small organisms. Vesna's *Noise Aquarium* (2017-2021) creates a VR world of unicellular organisms which spin and wiggle both on one's iPhone and in a dual channel immersive projection, while Rupp has generated a marvelous menagerie of toy plankton and shrimpy creatures out of plastic refuse—*Moby Debris* (2019)—a double-entendre meant to imply the contents of a whale's stomach, both nutritive and toxic.

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Levy has divided the show into three categories: “Laws of Nature,” “Morphogenesis and Self-Organization,” and “Repairing Nature,” a sort of taxonomy of the ways in which science and art interact. Central to her argument is D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson, a naturalist who is perhaps best remembered by artists, architects, and designers who have found his aestheticizing interpretation of biological morphology inspiring: it certainly fulfills the aesthetic notion of “form following function.” This inclination to relate species in visually cohesive networks seems particularly appealing to the more drawing-centered artists, like Gemma Anderson’s enchanting etching *Nematode knot* (2011), in which fern buds seem to unwind into worm-like nematodes, and Oliver Laric’s video *Betweenness* (2018), where we watch simple angles and

curves transmogrify into galloping ibexes and dinosaurs, as well as a variety of graphic manipulations that seem to grow out of similarities between species. Interconnectedness is a big part of the show's messaging, but messaging itself is also important, as in, how does this relate to we city dwellers. Lillian Ball's *Go Sweeting's Pond* (2021) represents the interactivity of the fragile pond ecosystem as a motion-sensor-triggered game of Go, and Ursula Endlicher's *Input Field reversal (and Custom HTML Plant Tags)* (2021) is also interactive and a computer-generated farming platform using real-time data to advise viewers on their queries about what to plant, where, and when. Along similar lines, Adam Brown and Robert Root-Bernstein seek to explain the Nobel-Prize-winning, origin of life, Miller-Urey experiment (1953) with *ReBioGeneSys 2.0* (2021), Meredith Tromble intersects dance and animation in order to represent photosynthesis in *Eating Light* (2021), and Marta de Menezes and María Antonia Gonzáles Valerio investigate genetic manipulation as it relates to the history of the staple maíz in their wall drawing The *Origin of Species – Post Evolution-Maiz*(2018).

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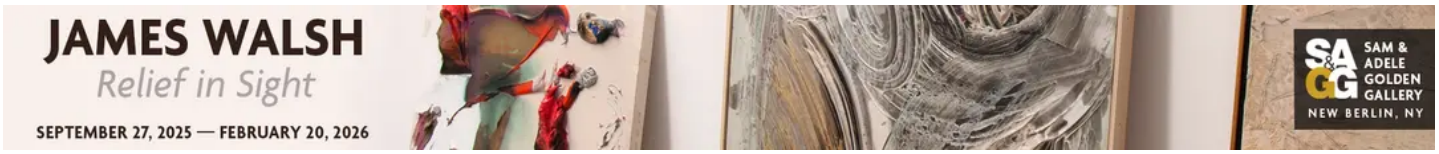

There are works of art which elude categorization, and some of these are the most enigmatic or inscrutable. Todd Siler's *The Neuropsychology of Envisioning the NanoWorld (1 to 100nm)* (2013) and Paul Thomas's *Quantum Chaos Series No. 14, No. 7-10* (2020) are paintings billed as "visualizations" of deeper concepts, though they just as easily seem like a stain painting and a series of geometric abstractions, respectively. Janet Echelman's sizeable maquette for the humongous public sculpture *She Changes* (2005) in Portugal, on the other hand, deftly captures an impossible gorgeous mirroring between the fluid motion of medusozoa and the nets of fishermen.

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Ricci Albenda's *Open Universe (Ha-Yoon)* (2012) has a creepy, Hans Bellmer bulbousness which initially seems a kind of mystical free-form, but as the viewer walks around the floating piece, the representation of perspectival space as a series of blossoming hypercube volumes is entrancing and injects pure math into the exhibition. María Elena González finds a morphological connection between birchbark and the punchcard score of a player piano, allowing her to generate sound from the tree. Like *Open Universe,* this falls somewhere between illuminating the forces of nature and exciting the eye and/or ear but sees no need to explain itself. William Lamson's *Untitled (After Badwater)* (2021), placed in the window, serves as a mascot for the show and presents the "mad scientist" vision of the calculated academic pursuit gone haywire. While

Lamson's piece is simply a recreation of the forces and materials that interact in Death Valley's Badwater Basin, the effect is one of mysterious tinctures and powders bubbling into stalactites dripping from throbbing neon tubes. What we have come to fear most in science is usually just a reflection of what's already there in nature: these artists are mostly representing the peculiar way in which evolution moves forward in the human animal, scintillating reformulations of trial and error, or not-so-natural selection.

William Corwin is a sculptor and writer based in New York. Besides the *Rail*, he writes regularly for *Art & Antiques* and *Art Papers*. He is an avid opera fan.

PREVIOUS
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