



Kendall Buster, *Parabiosis* (detail), 2002, architectural model: steel, fasteners, paper with sizing, 16 by 17 feet (photo courtesy Fusebox).

WASHINGTON, DC

Systems of development are the operative metaphors for **JAMES HUCKENPAHLER** and **KENDALL BUSTER** at D.C.'s Fusebox (March 2—April 7, 2002; March 9—April 14, 2002, respectively). Huckenpähler "grows" pools of digital matter into bio-graphic specimens, while Buster "grows" bio-morphic structures into architectural spaces. Their work may be the by-products of elaborate systems, but the g-word is in quotes here because both shows ultimately make us question their connection with socio-biology and genetics, as the artists claim.

In calling his collection "Age of Loneliness," Huckenpähler refers to socio-biologist Edward O. Wilson's cautionary words about humankind's threat to global bio-diversity. How the series of large ink jet prints, mounted on the thinnest of archival board and Plexiglas sheets, relates to ecological disaster is an open question, but the works evoke loneliness by their invitation to the touch, conjuring up palm prints and intricate and irregularly patterned skin, when the invitation is purely gratuitous.

Gallery notes tell us that Huckenpähler identifies the images, based on permutations of rules he applies to a computer graphics program, as personalities embodying the ethical conflicts of bio-engineering. If we put aside the

conceptual framing, what we see are lush, compelling abstractions. Consider *Gustav Theodore Fechner*. The warmth of related colors—creamy orange fading into peach and the lightest of crimson—suggests warm blood throbbing through skin, but splotches of violet and purple could be bruising premonitions of pain. *Post-hominidae #10*, one of the works connoting a being beyond the human, reads like a contour map. The rasped surface flows along a fault of prickly jags into a deep delta of shadow aligned with a burst of lavender light, shocking against pale pea green.

Huckenpähler is giving us the digital equivalent of gene splicing, grafting a concept from the sciences into a visual form and hoping that the ploy is generative. There is an urgency to make art relevant by making it "real," not in the carbon-copy kind of mirror imaging, but on a conceptual level, in a like-minded way. The work is caught in a network of analogies: the production of simulated skin is like genetic engineering, the finished pieces are like human personalities, the works' beauty is like "genetically engineer[ed] spiritual transcendence" (to quote from the anonymous gallery notes again). We suspect a tragic element obscured by the beauty, but these stunning prints are completely without context.

Like "Age of Loneliness," Kendall Buster's "Parabiosis" gives us a terrific experience and then loads it down with sinister implications. This shouldn't be surprising, given Buster's penchant for spaces designed with the cunning of a spider's web. The title refers to "the artificial or natural joining of two individuals." Buster suggests that her interlocking modules are like discreet organisms merging in an aggressive, organic process, though given the way the domes absorb their "viewers," I thought she was referring to the way humans are incorporated into the external skin of a building.

Buster's tough minded, fragile skin structure is an imaginative landscape, neo-classical architecture turned into a video game world. In fact, the multi-chambered white domes conjure up allusions to mighty public spaces (the rotunda of the National Gallery of Art, and the Capitol building itself, come to mind), but miniaturized. A scale model of an as yet uncommissioned larger piece, Buster's structure demonstrates why she is one of more adventurous artists: she knows the history of this locale's architecture and social spaces, and she is engaged in the international dialogue between art and architecture.

Despite the weighty intentions, this room-sized installation is a lot of fun. It's fun to look across, to catch light reflecting off the thin white paper masking the skeletal steel half-domes, and it's fun to crawl through.

Buster also adds intrigue to the mix by staging self-conscious viewing opportunities. Hence, instead of windows looking out of contained spaces, small peepholes look onto the armature holding the structure together, and openings in the rotundas reveal the ceiling. And Buster suggests someone might be looking back. If some of the domes replicate public spaces, others suggest private spaces, like rows of balconies in a Lilliputian apartment tower. Curiously, Buster's photo-documentation identifies architectural features such as a cathedral and apartments, though these weren't identified as such in the show, which emphasized the biological. The notion of apartment dwellers renting space in a biological model suggests something unresolved in Buster's metaphors and, echoing the analogies of Huckenpähler, leaves the viewer stranded in a set of possibilities without necessity.

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