

## THE ARTS

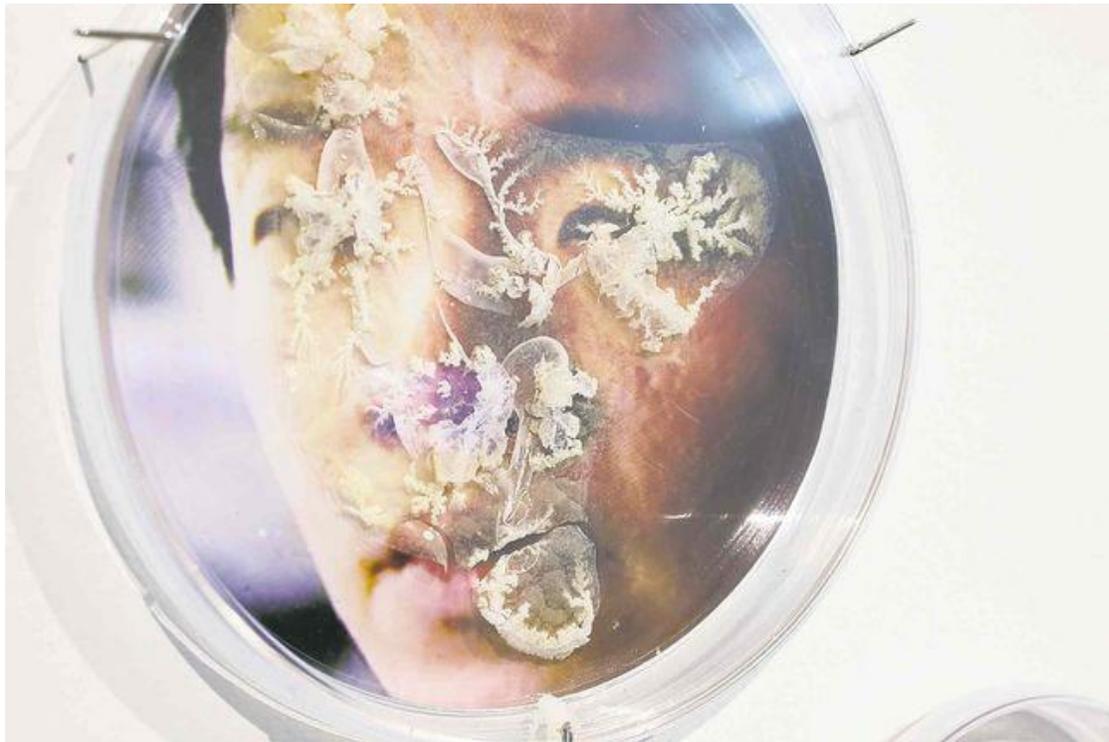
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# Weird science

International group of artists explores the frontier between avant-garde art and cutting-edge biotech

By: **Steven Leyden Cochrane**

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*I Caught it at the Movies (detail) by Elaine Whittaker.*

Artists and scientists have more in common than you might think. Both rely on experimentation and creative problem-solving, and the lines dividing the fields have only blurred in recent years. Artists have begun exploring concepts and technologies borrowed from the life sciences and biotech industries, while an increasing number of trained researchers are putting their expertise to artistic use.

**Toxicity**, which opened at Plug In ICA last month, brings together 12 international artists working in the emerging field of "biological media." Loosely organized around notions of "contamination," the work examines technologically mediated (and sometimes destructive) interactions between human beings and their environment, other organisms and one another.



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*Jennifer Willet's An INCUBATOR in Sheep's Clothing.*

Toxicity

Plug In ICA

460 Portage Ave.

Until Feb. 8

With projects reflecting a range of concerns and approaches, the exhibition has the feel of an artist-run science fair. Though too broadly focused to build towards any single thesis, many of its individual works suggest new directions for artists and researchers alike, offering thought-provoking critique and challenging perspectives.

Multiple works examine our place within the broader ecosystem. Amanda White questions our squeamishness around natural processes by growing tomato seeds salvaged from her own excrement, while Aganetha Dyck collects boards from wooden beehives, presenting the wax-smear panels as artifacts of human-insect collaboration. Alana Bartol photographs herself wearing a ghillie suit in unexpected locations: designed to offer camouflage in wooded environments, the shaggy green outfit has the opposite effect in the manicured suburban landscape, succinctly illustrating the impact we've had on our physical surroundings. Elsewhere, videos revisit exhibition co-curator Jennifer Willet's BioARTCAMP, an 11-day retreat that invited artists to formulate unorthodox experiments in the 6,475-square-kilometre "petri dish" of Banff National Park.

One of several artists contributing lab-grown creations, Tagny Duff injects donated human skin samples with a specially engineered virus that creates bruise-like "living tattoos." (Why not?) **Elaine Whittaker** skewers Hollywood fear-mongering, inciting microbes to build lacy structures over stills from global-pandemic movies, while Niki Sperou uses a common laboratory test to reveal microscopic power struggles between bacterial cultures and antibiotic agents.

Alluding to concerns around genetic modification of food crops, "biohacker" Andrew E. Pelling manages to grow (unmodified) human and animal cells within the flesh of an apple, while Joe Davis highlights efforts to encode the genome of the fruit's wild progenitor, *Malus sieversii*, with a compressed copy of Wikipedia.

Some works rely on human subjects, such as David Khang's video work comparing the expressiveness of two Shakespearian actors' faces before and after Botox treatments. Citing research suggesting that strong magnetic fields might disrupt brain function and even "suspend a person's moral judgment," Ted Hiebert engages in some delightful slapstick pseudoscience, experimenting to see how many magnets it takes to attract one another through his entire head.

Founded 27 years ago in Florida, Critical Art Ensemble gained notoriety in 2004 after founding member Steve Kurtz was arrested on charges -- eventually dismissed -- related to suspicions of bioterrorism. While *Toxicity* avoids much of the knee-jerk alarmism that topics like genetic engineering and biotechnology can provoke, CAE's (harmless) reproductions of germ-warfare exercises, corporate bioengineering and the effects of incendiary weapons on living cells offer stark reminders that powerful technologies--and the governments and private interests who wield them -- require vigilant oversight.

With so much to take in, ***Toxicity*** benefits from a sustained visit -- and a grasp of high school biology (or at least an Internet-capable smartphone) probably wouldn't hurt. While none of the artists sets out to make revolutionary new scientific discoveries, their work provides new and unexpected ways of engaging with the complex, overlapping natural and man-made systems that govern daily life.

**Steven Leyden Cochrane is a Winnipeg-based artist, writer and educator.**

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