

Fresh Eyes and Nuclei

BY RANDY GARBER

Imagine being a landscape painter who, for some reason, has never been outside to glimpse clouds or earth. Your images come from postcards, photographs and magazine reproductions of paintings of exterior places. These mediated views reveal forms, colors and patterns that others found in the outside world. And though they stimulate your visions, you have no direct sense—visual or visceral—of what being in nature is like. And then, one day, you step outside.

This scenario captures the development of my own work. I had long searched for a visual language to express my emotional and perceptual experience of being hearing impaired. My paintings and prints are of interior, cellular landscapes that evoke a sense of order as well as orderly growth gone awry. I want to give viewers the sensation of looking at something that is—simultaneously—very large and seen from a distance and something that is infinitesimally tiny, seen only at a nearly impossible close range.

Until recently, I had relied on secondary sources—medical illustrations, photo micrographs, computer-generated images—to begin my own process of representation and invention. But when I finally had the opportunity to look down the eyepiece of a microscope, I saw a world, in exquisite, but indiscernible fullness, the way I hear it without hearing aids. This alluring landscape had no clearly recognizable patterns or syntax. Since the intent of my work is to invite viewers to consider how we decipher meaning from unfamiliar contexts, I felt I had arrived at an authentic parallel experience.

I got this first “hit” one afternoon at an oncology lab at Millennium Pharmaceuticals in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I had courted (my euphemism for “harassing”) contacts for three years, hoping to find a place where I could pursue my obsession to have a direct experience with a microscope. At Millennium, my biologist “tour guide” showed me instruments that whirled, pulsated, froze, sliced and stored cell tissue. Together, Natalie and I looked down a scope attached to a computer that could enlarge and print sections of slides. I had assumed that what I would see under the microscope would look much like the photographs in the magnificent *Atlas of Histology* lent to me many years earlier. But, even though the cell formations appeared somewhat familiar, I was surprised and overwhelmed by what I found.



Cell Bodies, 2000. 12 × 12, oil on panel.

Here, under the microscope, was a visual analogue of my auditory experience. I had to focus closely, attend to nuance and have information repeated to begin to comprehend it. And that is precisely what I need to do to make sense of what I hear. Thus, the unfamiliarity of the cell material and my effort to discern it gave me the experience of disorientation that I hope my viewers have when they look at my work.

Natalie and I discussed our observations, translating our different paradigms for each other, and I learned that she was as captivated by my perceptions as I was by hers. Where she saw a poorly-stained slide, I saw beautiful edges. Where she saw cells in early stages of metastatic growth, I found an abstraction of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. This exchange was immensely gratifying, but it also confronted me with the very dilemma that was at the heart of my quest.

How do I obtain, and retain, visual material that is fresh, unnamed and potent to me and, at the same time, use it to translate a sensory experience for others?

I was now convinced that I needed to transfer the site of my work from my studio to the lab to better understand the problem I had defined. Eventually, I found a place conducive to

my “field research.” Several months ago, a friend put me in touch with his colleague, Dr. Huizenga, head of pathology at Emerson Hospital in Concord, Massachusetts. Without queries or any need to know what I intended to do with what I found, Dr. Huizenga generously set me up with a microscope in his lab. I had the sense from his absence of questions that he knew I had come to marvel and that was reason enough.

My workstation is sandwiched between two highly-trained cytologists wearing white lab jackets. Lined up, with heads bent over our scopes, we all look at slides of similar cell material. Sometimes, one of my cell-mates, Leon or Sue, will pass me one of their slides.

When they look through the scope, they see the characteristic order of each type of tissue. They hunt down the rogue cells—the exceptions to the pattern. They analyze and then record their observations and diagnoses on a computer. They look at these sliced and stained tissues and are the judges of malignancy or health.

I, conversely, recognize nothing. Everything, shape, color, line or speck is unclaimed, unnamed territory. This is a visual field with no easily-discernible structure—not unlike my experience of hearing without seeing the speaker and receiving visual clues. I sketch and take notes in a journal. The material on the slide, freshly dead, is generative for me: this infinitesimal world is infinitely large.

My first time alone with the microscope, I grew nauseated and dizzy. The shifting sizes of images coming in and out of focus completely upended my equilibrium. Overzealous and too heavy-handed, I hadn’t yet learned how responsive the scope’s dials are to even subtle movements. The next time, I was prepared with water and Advil®. By the third visit, my eyes had learned how to adjust from seeing a wide expanse to a panorama that is no larger than three millimeters. I could now lower and raise the magnification, fine tune the focus, brighten the light, move the staging from side to side, up and down to navigate my way around the slide’s treasures.

The quality of the light is unlike anything I’d seen before. It is satiny smooth; illuminating from underneath, it shines evenly through the slide material and allows me to see the thinnest layers of colors and how they magically mix. Ironically, sometimes when the colors intensify and coalesce and are at their most heightened and beautiful state, danger is signaled. Saturated colors can point to the aggressive sites; the most seductive shapes with their complex layering and density of activity are often the places of impending destruction, of imminent chaos.

I have the sensation of flying over this world and looking down upon topographies embroidered with the finest of filaments. These forms and their relationships spawn narratives: Stories that involve traveling across and into distances, landing on unknown territories, bumping into unexpected blobs, floating into infinite numbers of “harbors” formed by the ever irregular edges of each mass. So many places to hide. My sense of time is confused. I have to control my hand to a maddeningly slow pace to sketch what I see.

Like Gulliver, I had visited lands where scale and size—hence, meanings—shift unpredictably.

Yet, I realize, the state of fresh mind so quickly fades. I’m struck by how, at the end of the second or third hour of my microscopic journeys, I become accustomed to the information I’m seeing and begin to inadvertently categorize and systematize it. This new ease then directs, or overdetermines, my looking. This is the danger zone, where habit can take over, when assumptions about what is seen (or heard) can trump what is actually being presented.

I aim to remember—in spite of my tendency to rush to find metaphor and meanings within the slimmest slice of tissue—that my challenge as an artist is to keep my eyes fresh: to see all the cells as rogue, each unique and ripe for discovery. I need to consciously resist the temptation to see the patterns as sites of order and completion, but rather view them as places to pose questions and sift for nuance.

This is a collaboration of sorts, between the scientist and artist. By entering the microscopic world of the scientist, I’ve magnified not only the detail of the thing itself, but also the utter and difficult necessity of examining *how* we see and interpret. In my quest to recode systems from one sensory mode (audio) to another (visual), I have put myself in the position of the naïve observer of these magnificent and tiny pieces of a human. I am reminded that my struggle to decipher the smothered sounds I hear has given me a way to connect to unknown and weird places of beauty. And then, with the hope of keeping the experience fresh, I can begin to translate that into my artwork. ■

Editor’s note: Randy’s wonderful story describes the paradoxical place we strive for when we make and look at art: the state between fluency and mystification. We are, in a way, trying to maintain our imbalance.

—WENDY RICHMOND