



Exhibition: **Dennis Ashbaugh. The Esthetics of Biology**

IVAM. Institut Valencia d'Art Modern

24th September – 18th November 2007

Organized by: IVAM, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern

Curator: Barbara Rose



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The IVAM presents the exhibition *The Esthetics of Biology*, dealing with Dennis Ashbaugh's works and including 47 pieces, seven of which have been made on occasion of the show. Through these works, the artist reflects on the spectacular advance on Genetics and Biotechnology and focusses on DNA research. The museum opens so the Art and Science line to be continued with the following show devoted to Eduardo Kac.

Painter Dennis Ashbaugh is known for inspiring his artistic works in Genetics and Biotechnology, areas in which he is deeply interested for their undoubtedly influence in our future and for having contributed to modify our present life conditions. Since middle 80's, Ashbaugh has devoted himself to explore DNA imagery in his work. His large paintings, a kind of "genetic portraits", combine abstract art tradition with leading scientific technology. The catalogue published on occasion of the exhibition *The Esthetics of Biology* contains the works exhibited and includes texts by Barbara Rose, Tom Mathews, J.D. Talasek, the own artist, and Consuelo Císcar, director of the IVAM.

Born in Red Oak, Iowa, in 1946 and educated in South California, Ashbaugh began his artistic career in the earlies 70's experimenting with specialized techniques to make surfboards more beautiful, basically manipulating glass fiber. Nevertheless, and differently to the *Plastic Fantastic* artist group, composed by Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, John McCracken, Ron Davis, and Craig Kauffman, Ashbaugh did not aim at geometric perfection. Subsequently, in the

lates 70's, Constructivist geometry from Russia soaked his work, which evolved as years passed.

Since travelling to Peru to see the geoglyphs and lines of the Nazca Valley, which impressed him strongly, the artist developed a series of new paintings that named Woofers. These paintings were immense and heavy cutouts whose motifs moved between the geometric and the anthropomorphic and constituted the basis of his research during the Guggenheim grant.

Ashbaugh's initial relation to scientific processes was expressed in a series of paintings based in the hybridization principle, in which images of different painters were grafted —such as, for instance, Mondrian or Pollock— in order to create a mutant scion. His reflection on the very significant Genetics and Biotechnology advance starts from the lates 80's and is focussed on DNA research.

In 1990, Ashbaugh began to use DNA sequence documented through digital image as a starting point to develop colossal paintings with layer blots moving in an ambiguous atmosphere. A sophisticated recongition of tradition is what makes Ashbaugh's "genetic portraits" different from current trend towards digital prints with DNA material.

Almost at the same time, Ashbaugh started a series of works based on computer virus that led him to collaborate with the science fiction writer William Gibson, who coined the word cyberspace. The result is the book tilted *Agrippa, A Book of the Dead* (1992), whose pages can be deleted forever as if being computer data. Devoured pages of *Agrippa* establish a parallelism with the series of works painted in the middle 90's inspired by "black holes" and suggesting an apocalyptical fusion through their cracked surfaces. The technique making possible their production implied several technical experiments, including the insertion of iron filings in the matter to induce its fluorescent pigments to crack and allow so the underlying crust to emerge like a geological phenomenon exploding through the earth's crust.

In Ashbaugh's more recent paintings, sea forms intertwine referring not only to tropical fish camouflage but also to the ubiquitous patterned fabrics of the battledresses. The consideration of Biology and Genetics as iconographic resources allows those serious creators having realized that pop culture is no more a significant device, to access to an imagery echoed by a large audience.