

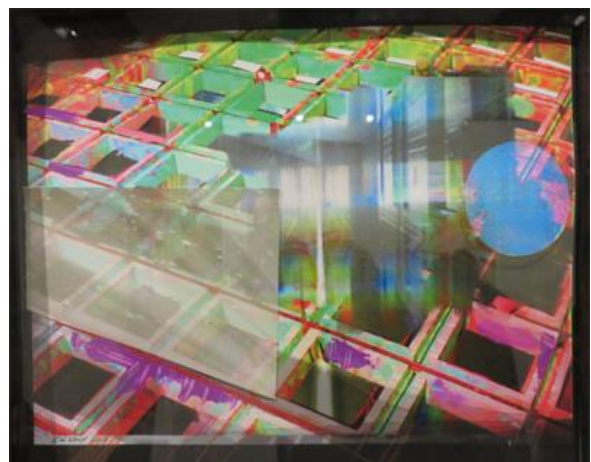
ARTE FUSE

Sumptuous Skeptics: Ellen K. Levy and Patricia Olynyk Stage Creative Inquisition



It was Voltaire who declared, “Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities,” and in the centuries following the Enlightenment, the philosopher could only have imagined what absurdities—and atrocities—would sully any rational sense of human progress.

In Some Provocations from Skeptical Inquirers,
on view at the Sidney Mishkin Gallery at Baruch



College till March 23, artists Ellen K. Levy and Patricia Olynyk plumb the depths of the murky ontological sea that is empirical belief. Based conceptually on four decades of the magazine [Skeptical Inquirer](#), the exhibition merges digital media, photography, painting, and archival research to expose the visual (il)logic of what art historian Charissa N. Terranova calls an “organismic praxis,” **the process of exploring the intricacies of interspecies coexistence through a biological lens.** In so doing, both artists engage the minute, the spectacular, the historically ostracized, the subtly abject, and the glaringly atrocious, as each relates to ostensive “evidence”.

What is scrutable of the known world? What is pixel vs. protozoa? In this show it’s not so clear. The fluorescent ebullience of Levy’s painted digital prints recalls the bouncy logic of Lisa Frank as much as the shape-shifting Frank Stella, the digital tectonics of our cellular world unveiled in topsy-turvily layered grids. Stamped with an opalescent insignia redolent of a security hologram, Levy’s small-scale prints in the *Adaptations* series remind viewers of ongoing controversies to patent and profit from genomic material. In her larger prints *LichenVentilation*, *JellyfishRods*, and *Brooklyn SlimeMold #1* and *#2*, familiar organic forms bleed into the iconography of freeway systems and nuclear reactors.



Olynyk's contribution is more conspicuously historical with Gothic flourishes, *The Mutable Archive* rendering the darker annals of the past loud and clear. In response to the Mütter Museum's extensive cache of osteological oddities, this series of photographs and videos confront the limits of narrative as a means of validation. Across from nineteen panels of photographed skulls once belonging to the Viennese anatomist Joseph Hyrtl, a video meditates on the possible lives that lead to the untimely death of each. Olynyk's most compelling piece—*The Conversation*—a triptych of plastic-veiled skeletons caught in medium close-up, invites viewers to imagine a dialogue between archived acquaintances intimate in proximity if nothing else. The finger bones of one figure poke out from the group's synthetic curtain as though beckoning us to join in their morbid colloquy.



In *Scenario Thinking*, a collaborative work based on the archives of *The Skeptical Inquirer*, a color key earmarks the spotty overlapping of everything from “Monsters & the Paranormal” to “Religion & Spirituality” to “Logic and Rationalism” to “Other,” spheres of knowledge orbiting our neurons like desultory planets.

Too often, artistic expression is divorced from cognitive function, but Levy and Olynyk boldly reverse the formula: inspiration itself can be borne of focused inquiry, the kind that leads to questions not answers. And that makes sense; after all, in its revisioning and reshaping of the natural world, isn't all art inherently skeptical of what is allegedly fixed?

The Mishkin Gallery is located at 135 E. 22nd Street in Manhattan. Gallery hours are Monday – Friday, noon to 5 pm; Thursday, noon to 7 pm. The gallery is free and open to the public. For questions about the gallery, call Sandra Kraskin at (646) 660-6652.

About the Author: [Eileen G'Sell](#)



Eileen G'Sell's cultural criticism and poetry have been featured in Salon, Belt Magazine, DIAGRAM, the Boston Review, and Conduit, among other publications. She is Film & Media editor at The Rumpus and she teaches writing, film, and poetry at Washington University in St. Louis.

