

FAU exhibits perplexing look at intelligent design

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To say that the latest exhibit at [Florida Atlantic University](#)'s Schmidt Gallery is overwhelming is the understatement of the year. To step into the gallery space is to enter a vortex full of theological-scientific collisions, perplexing non-sequiturs and arcane mixed-media fusions that employ 22 feet of wall space on four sides.

There is neither a clear starting point nor an obvious endpoint in the show's imposing roof-to-floor totality. Images from two artists -- New York-based Michael Zansky and D. Dominick Lombardi -- dominate the majority of the show, but other artists are sprinkled in using media as varied as photography, digital art, video and installation. With no explanation, lines connect disparate pieces, placing them around esoteric wall text like "Zaraththustra and the King Fish," "Flayed Alive by Sapos," "Playing Cards Invented" and "Their Fragile Truce." Even identifying the artwork takes a bit of effort.

"People tell me that it feels like a science fair," said FAU graduate AdrienneRose Gionta, who co-curated the show. "It attracts people who are not normally part of the art crowd. It's more interesting and inviting to other people."

This is at least partly because the show's subject matter reaches out to numerous fields. Titled "Designing Intelligence?: Continuing the Intelligent Design Project," the show explores the perennial debate between evolution, creationism and that most recent attempt to join the two, intelligent design.

Though an original incarnation of the show has already shown at four other American venues, Gionta made some bold and dramatic changes to the old layout, including the addition of several artists into the immense tapestry. These including Plantation resident and Palm Beach Community College professor Samantha Salzinger, whose contributions to the project include "Kilauea," a photograph of a hand-built miniature of an erupting volcano that seethes with doom-laden drama.

"I first created a series of landscapes," Salzinger said. "It was all a bout how man encroaches on land, a man versus nature kind of thing. With the disasters series, it was the opposite -- it was nature reclaiming itself. We can't control or predict the weather or natural disasters, and I'm interested in that unpredictability and the irony of my being able to hyper-control it."

She said her catastrophe pieces relate to the creationism/evolution debate, "because they're about creation as well as destruction. I think my work definitely deals with the idea of artists playing God. In that respect, it does relate, because artists create things out of nothing in general."

Organized as an independent curatorial study, "Designing Intelligence?" is the first exhibition Gionta curated, on a topic that has obsessed her for more than a year and a half. Raised Catholic, she never heard about evolution until college. It was then that she began to question her long-held beliefs in creationism. It wasn't until recently that she heard the phrase "intelligent design," which tries to reconcile the unanimity of evolutionary belief in the scientific community with the overriding hand of God.

Gionta spoke with professors in fields as varied as philosophy, anthropology and religious studies, combining her findings with the original basis for the "Designing Intelligence" show: a religious historical timechart compiled during the Victorian era that was rife with scientific impossibilities -- dinosaurs roaming the earth at the same Eve bit the apple, and so forth.

Thus, the incongruities at the exhibition's core speak to a long tradition of nonsense when both science and faith are interpreted as fact. Even so, the exhibition's defiantly scattershot structure doesn't make for a particularly fruitful educational experience. According to Gionta, what you take away from the show comes from within.

"I'm interested in opening the lines of communication and providing a visual experience for people to question themselves," she said. "We're just presenting people with possibilities. Students are starting to question, 'What is intelligent design? What is the debate?' It's like trying to solve a puzzle; it's up to you. Process it however you need to process it.

"It's more like life, where we have all these things thrown at us," she added, about the show's nonlinear nature. "It's up to us to figure out where we're going every minute of every day. This is indicative of human nature and our experiences."

"Designing Intelligence?" is worth seeing and formulating a response. Just don't be surprised if you get a little lost -- that may be the whole point.

"Designing Intelligence" is at the Schmidt Gallery at Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton, through April 4. Admission is free. Visit www.fau.edu/galleries and www.samanthasalzinger.com.

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