

currents 72

SHANNON KENNEDY

THE SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

Shannon Kennedy's art is based on the idea that the universe, and all its matter, is in motion. From the millions of cells that make up the human anatomy, to the billions of bodies that compose the cosmos, life's forms are constantly moving in, around, with, and against us. Thanks to images beamed to earth by the Hubble Space Telescope, astronomers have confirmed that the galaxies are expanding; their multitudes of stars, and their swirling gases are moving outward and constantly evolving. Merging, colliding, and re-arranging themselves, the universe's parts are continually changing, shaping, and affecting each other.

In *Untitled*, 1997, Kennedy explores the similar types of movement that exist on a biological level: bodies move in relation to one another, connecting, disconnecting, and re-configuring on a minute scale. Focusing on three basic life forms—yeast, algae, and worms—Kennedy presents us with motions that range from slow flotation to contortionist twists. Yeast appears to explode like points of light, algae particles stream across the field like pearly bubbles, worms curl and elongate in a slow dance. Invisible to the naked eye, such minutia is presented through the technology of a fluorescence microscope, which serves as a window onto the world of cell study.

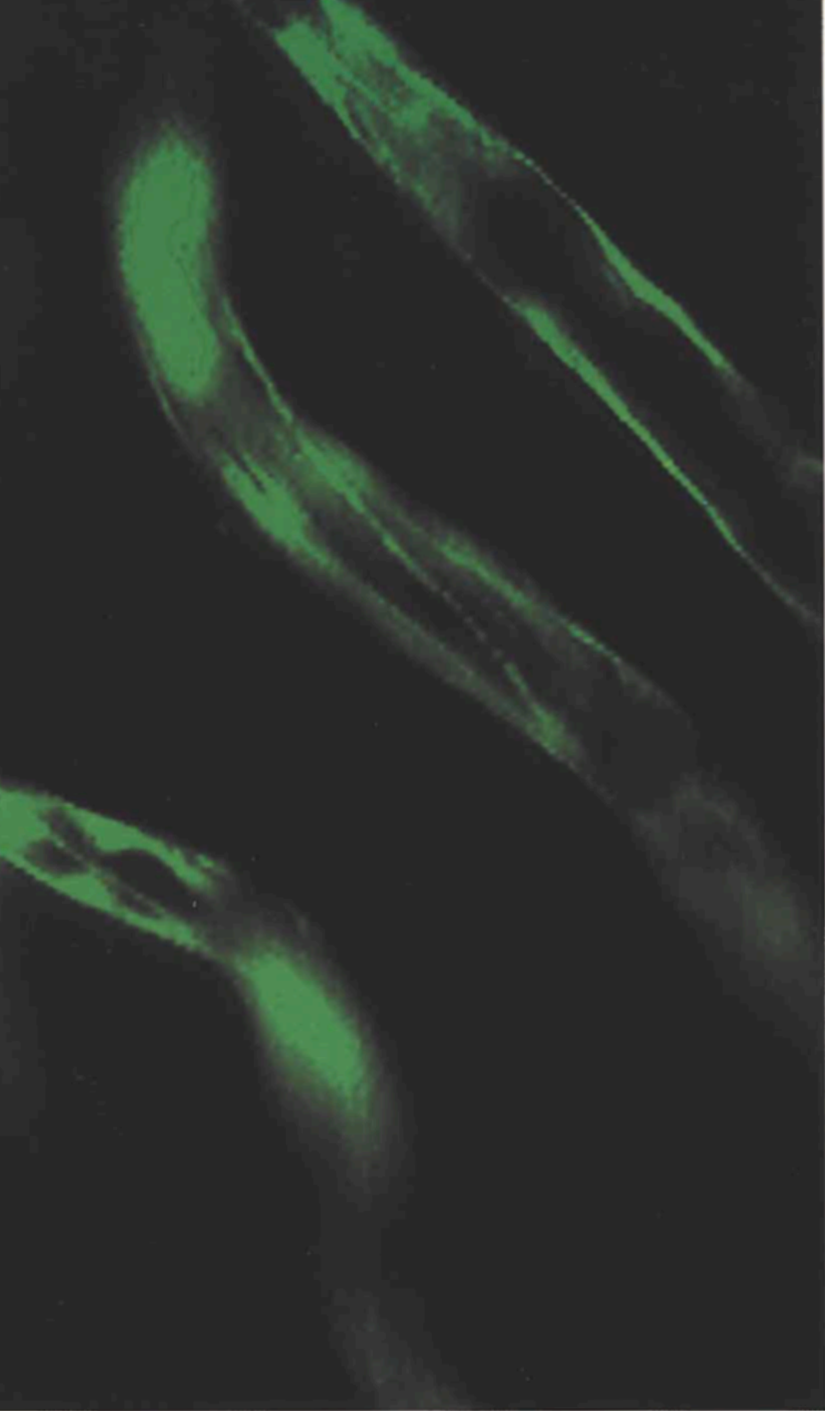
Connected to a computer and video equipment, the microscope enables Kennedy to view and record the movements of her specimen, which she examines through various filters and wavelengths of light. Laboratory investigation tied to aesthetic pursuits takes Kennedy into the arena of scientific imaging: working within the University of Minnesota's Imaging Center, housed in the College of Biological Sciences, she is simultaneously researcher and artist, highlighting both the wonder and the visual beauty of the natural sciences. But where biologists are concerned primarily with the objective accuracy of their data, Kennedy focuses on the subjective pleasure she finds in organic motion.

As a photographer previously interested in mechanical reproduction, Kennedy's new work opens up a range of image-making possibilities. Here she is actively transforming the photographic process by using the microscope's lens to "frame" her subjects, the computer to "process" them, and the video recorder to "print" them onto videotape. Like a number of contemporary artists, Kennedy utilizes

video projection—one of the most rapidly developing visual formats, which affords artists the convenience and efficiency of video, and the spectacle of cinema. For Kennedy, video projection allows her to envelop viewers within a range of motions and colors, placing the bodies she studies in direct relation to our own bodies.

Seemingly technical, Kennedy's work is substantially handmade: she has personally selected these samples based on her fascination with their forms and movements, studied them at length in the laboratory, excited their motion, and used stains and light to highlight their unique physical configurations. She presents her moving subjects at a fraction slower than real time, accentuating their flow through the liquid buffers that contain them. Because she is working with living organisms, much of her footage is spontaneous, shifting in and out of focus as she attempts to capture images of active cultures. Like her previous projects, in which Kennedy painstakingly stitched and glued multiple static images together, *Untitled*, 1997 continues the literal presence of this artist's hand in her artistic endeavors.

While this is Kennedy's first video project, she has been working at the limits of photography since 1992, when she began using Polaroids and photocopies as her primary media. This shift from traditional dark-room photography developed out of sheer necessity: affected by environmental illness, a condition in which multiple chemicals affect the human body, Kennedy found herself unable to handle photographic chemicals. As a result, she has explored different vehicles for mechanical reproduction, as well as themes related to health, the body, and its relationship to the environment. Initially these alternative media were used to create haunting images of the human face: she combined series of images, shot at obtuse angles and obscured by shadows, into gridded compositions that convey a sense of human fragility and probing examination. In subsequent projects she continued to use Polaroid and photocopy technology to produce her images, but worked more abstractly. By conjoining repetitive images of eyes, ears, necks, and other body parts, Kennedy created patterns resembling enlarged tissue and stratified cells, which were combined into amorphous shapes and transformed into seemingly unclassifiable forms. Through shifts in scale, dramatic lighting, close cropping, and fast-paced repe-



Untitled (Caenorhabditis Elegans), 1997

tition, she transformed images of the human figure into objects evocative of biological mutation that are as engaging as they are grotesque.

This video project allows Kennedy to continue to reproduce and abstract physical matter, though her subjects have progressed from an investigation of the human body and its features to a presentation of multi-cellular bodies and micro-organisms that are typically unknown outside of science. With her enlarged images of *Caenorhabditis Elegans*—a type of worm that is a favorite subject of geneticists because of their simple cellular structure and rapid

life cycle—Kennedy creates both a seductive light show and a monstrous invasion that borders on science fiction. Invisible to the naked eye, thousands of *Elegans* are present in a single teaspoon of soil, putting them in direct and constant contact with the human body; like the micro-organisms that live in our homes and on our skin, these bodies in nature are beyond our control. Yet, in the lab the worms are both influenced and contained by scientific technologies. In order for researchers to study cell differentiation, their eggs are genetically altered, resulting in the elegant twists and turns of the worms' bodies. Kennedy, too, has affected the appearance of this sample: by using various wavelengths of light to view the worms, collagen bands and cellular striation appear, forming abstract patterns and streams of color. Upon close observation under the microscope and enlarged through projection, the worms provide Kennedy a means to define their bodies, while exposing their disturbingly alien yet mesmerizing beauty.

Viewed under the fluorescence microscope and transposed into massive scale, *Chlamydomonas* algae appear as fish eggs with individual beads bouncing off one another while moving through space. Seen with a red cast, the algae resemble "tails" of light in a meteor shower, vacillating between frantic oscillation and a serene, swirling flow. Though similar in appearance, fragments of yeast can be differentiated by their tendency to clump together, connecting in masses that roll and spin in three-dimensional space and resemble images of galaxies. By presenting these entities at different levels of magnification and at various ranges of focus, Kennedy's images are suggestive of both microscopic and macroscopic spheres which, without high-powered technology, are far removed from human experience or knowledge. And yet, as foreign as this imagery seems to be, all of the subjects are common parts of our environment. Derived from the most basic components of living matter, Kennedy's images reveal infinite beauty in the smallest components of our everyday world.

Rochelle Steiner
Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art

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