

The Cell Wall: Atrium Art



The Cell Wall atrium art

purpose

The atrium space at the Institute for Bioengineering and Bioscience reaches three stories high with a central spiral staircase. The artist wanted to create a vibrant focal point that would draw attention into the high-tech atrium, around and through the suspended metal staircase and enliven the space.



Atrium opposite The Cell Wall

scale

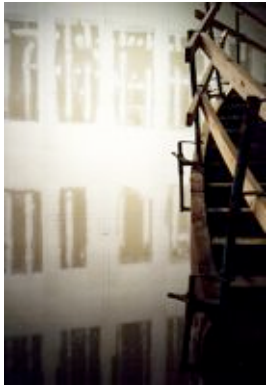
The nine painted panels occupy 12 feet by 24 feet and float four inches in front of a charcoal gray textured background adding a dimensional quality to the wall. It is impossible to view the image in its entirety from many areas of the atrium so the artist chose to build in some interruptions of her own. By separating the panels from one another, each panel can be seen as an independent design creating a sense of discovery when the whole picture emerges. The viewer's discovery is similar to that of a researcher at the moment when pieces of a scientific puzzle merge to form the big picture. The cell, which is normally microscopic, is magnified greatly suggesting that new perspectives may be required to solve problems in the future.



Atrium stairway under construction

symbols

The nine panels symbolize the nine neighborhoods housed in the building, each separate yet in close proximity. The outstretched hand reaches toward an egg cell, a sign of future life, floating just beyond the picture boundaries. The cells painted outside of the body come together to form a person. Actual cell types composing the human body are represented, including blood cells, egg cells, ciliated epithelial cells, liver cells, and nerve cells. The figure has a strong classical look suggesting a solid foundation in past scientific tradition, yet it could be interpreted as male or female, reflecting the present inclusive nature of science.



about the artist

KAREN STOUTSENBERGER KU was a botanical illustrator for Harvard University and medical artist at the University of Chicago and at Emory University in the 1970's and 1980's. These positions fused her passionate interests in art and science and taught her the synergistic effect of interdisciplinary activities. Therefore, the artist was both challenged and excited by the commission of a piece of art to represent the purpose and promise of this Institute: to combine biology, engineering, and science in a cooperative environment.



Panels in progress on site



Panel in progress at artist's studio

Karen Stoutsenberger KU

materials and methods...

The panels took the artist 13 months to complete, from the initial design phase until the installation in October 1999. All of the non-figure areas have been painted with transparent washes of modern acrylic, reminiscent of microscope slides of stained cells. Acrylic polymer is a newer medium to artists as bio-polymer is to tissue engineers. Numerous layers of color have been applied to provide texture and depth. Graphite shading emphasizes a classical foundation based on traditional medical illustration technique.

It was the artist's desire to use a wooden surface, and to leave the figure unpainted, allowing the random imperfections in the grain to be visible on the human form, as a reminder to accept human failings while striving for inspired greatness.




Completed stairway



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