

# Bounded in a Nutshell

Dennis Gould's show contains infinities

**A**rt and science aren't enemies. Indeed, Dennis Gould, who studied science in college and continued his interest after he decided to commit to a career in the art world, creates gorgeously allusive work that melds subtle biological referents with balanced, surreal compositions and saturated color.

Craig Spilman, curator of the Gould retrospective up at the Jacobs Gallery, says that Gould's work leads him to ponder the carbon structures of human life or Teilhard de Chardin's discussion of megamolecules, things that change from environments of high pressure to environments where they become the cellular soup of life. Spilman laughs wryly, affection in his voice, when he says, "Dennis makes me think of that stuff; he always has."

Spilman — former LCC art instructor and a local printmaker and drawer in his own right — means it when he says "always." He remembers seeing Gould's MFA show at the UO some 40 years ago. That was the show, he remembers, that contained a piece called 6702. 6702 is a pencil drawing derived from a walnut shell — a walnut shell that altered the course of Gould's career. According to Spilman's text, Gould decided after finding and drawing the walnut shell to "let forms suggested by nature determine both the subject and

appearance of his work."

The radiant show at the Jacobs shows 40 years of that work to excellent advantage, given the low ceilings and space constraints of the smallish gallery and given Gould's ambitious, large-scale oils (not to mention the no less fascinating smaller prints and drawings). That was Spilman's intent, he says: "I wanted people to have a chance to see a body of the more museum-scale work."

Certainly, works like 8711 — featured in the marketing for the show — pop on the white walls, hung as sparsely as Spilman could manage while still giving a fair perspective on how Gould's work has evolved. 8711, the painting some would consider the show's masterpiece, showcases many of the themes and recurring imagery in Gould's body of work. Looking at this piece, a viewer deals first with the eye-catching color, a Venetian drenching of carnival tones that balances saturated teals and pinks, yellows and purples. Then comes the realization of background. It looks dreamily realistic, Escher-like without the intent of optical illusion: The tiled floor, the steps, a mosaic-filled wall, maybe a window off to the left. Then the forms: a rain stick? Streamers? Catfish whiskers grown wild and luxurious as vines? And what of these larger, creased forms, smoothly mounded and folded in on themselves: Do they resemble organs, arms,



human bits draped about the festively tinted background? Indeed they do, so much so that one reviewer a few years ago felt the need to describe a "chilling mystery" at the heart of Gould's work.

But there's no mystery, really. Gould, though his paintings veer from abstract to surreal and back again, says that he bases all of his work on things he has seen in life (though perhaps, he slyly adds, what *he* sees may not be what *others* see). "One of the things that always intrigued me about Dennis' work, it's like looking through an electron microscope," Spilman says. Three huge works smartly grouped on the south wall of the gallery give the impression of biologically based content most vividly: 9602 from 1996, which contains tenderly touching almost-blood vessels in curves and tentacles along with a menacing shadow-vessel in dark purple and black; 9404 from 1994, which hints at exploding platelets, a strong current and perhaps water near the biomorphic structure; and the eerie, affecting 9603, also from 1996, in

which cells or alveoli-like structures float above ghostly hands reaching toward them from the lower third of the painting.

In other sizeable oils, Gould returns again and again to pattern, color, and a mix of hard forms and soft cellular blobs, all set in some sort of framed space — like the recent 0704's close-to-proscenium-curtains or the mountains and Renaissance perspective-lined desert floors of 8713. Like dreamscapes, Gould's expanses scratch at the memory, the perception, nudging into that frustrating but liminal space between recognizing bits of a language and understanding the language without conscious thought.

As viewers relax into Gould's language of perception, they will also notice his technical skill. Spilman says that he heard about a discussion in the gallery in which people discussed that after being "so into the content for a while, it dawned on them how beautifully done the work is." Indeed, the precision of the hard-edged pyramids and straight-edged rectangles floating, patterned, among softer, rounded backgrounds, or the skill with which Gould chooses his celebratory palette show off his abilities and his abiding interest in the craft as well as the art of producing oils, drawings and prints. "He's a master draftsman, a wonderful colorist," Spilman says. "This is a very mature body of work."

*"Dennis Gould: Paintings, Drawing, Prints" runs through Aug. 23 at the Jacobs Gallery under the Hult Center. The Gallery's hours are limited: noon to 4 pm Tuesday-Friday, 11 am-3 pm Saturday and during all Hult performances (of which there are, luckily, many during OFAM).*

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