

Steve Duval.

Create a monster you cant control

In recent years the scientific community has been subject to continued vilification and suspicion. Whether its Gm crops or cloning, trust appears to have dissipated, as each successive revelation of scientific folly hits the front pages.

Partly this is just a further articulation of the widespread sense that science and planning have failed to deliver on their promises of engineering a brighter future. If you accepted that modern life was locked onto an ever upwards escalator of emancipation from poverty and inequality, the grubby reality of poor housing, dangerously contaminated food and a growing gap between the richest and poorest hits hard. Fears over the consequences of meddling with the natural order is also of course a by-product of a drastically increased level of popular consciousness regarding the interconnectivity of global life.

One of the problems coursing through the maelstrom of distrust and skepticism that swirls around science is the availability of knowledge, or as Steve Duval sees it the distinct lack of information. While its common to frame discussion of current scientific practice along polarised fault lines, for Duval the real issue isnt necessarily making a black or white decision on, say the ethics of gm crops. The real issue is that there simply isnt enough adequate information available to make such decision.

A central aspect of this is the self-imposed secrecy the scientific community frequently works under. Here the whiff of sly corporate collusion taints the public faith. Meanwhile within the mainstream media more concerned with entertainment than explanation, forming an opinion on the ethics of GM farming has become increasingly fraught. The media scaremongering, and predominately under researched presentation of issues, has lead to a lumpen demonisation of the scientific community.

Attempting to unravel the distinct strands at work in issues such as genetically modified research, Steve Duval has set up his own research company, Romantech. As someone who shares popular concerns over the ethics and direction of current scientific research, Duval is a non-specialist in science who is aiming to act as an unofficial referee in the current standoff between science and the broader community. The Romantech project is consequently designed to act as a facilitator for the gallery going public, offering them a range of information, which may have previously been off limits to them. As Romantechs opening statement remarks "the art gallery is a forum for discussion and a place where a much wider debate can happen than in a strictly scientific context. "

If Duvals project was only conceived of as mere a library of information it would perhaps have limited appeal as art. However Duvals project is also designed to simultaneously act as space for considering the relationship between art and science. Cultural representations of science, have after all, played a significant role in shaping our collective consciousness with regards to the position of science in the natural order of things. Perhaps the most famous instance is Mary Shelleys Frankenstein, which occupies a powerful position in our culture as a mythic embodiment of what happens when science meddles in gods divine realm. While weve now lost much sense of the specific, historical fears that gave birth to such a monster, the continued popular power of Frankenstein, is shorthand for antagonism to the men in white suits. Duvals use of a Casper David Friedrich painting (man and nature in apparent harmonious unity) and his invocation of the romantic movement in the companies name "Romantech", is instructive. How the historical images and ideas of Romanticism, idealised as they so frequently are, underpin contemporary notions of mans relationship to nature may be as much of a problem as the inadequate coverage of the issues in the mass media.

In many respects Duvals project is itself a mutant hybrid. The offspring of the cross-pollination of science and art. Possessed with the ability to stare simultaneously at art and science, Romantech is capable of offering fresh insight into the interplay of the two spheres.

Perhaps not all mutation is bad.