

30 - WHAT NEW IS

SEX AND BEAUTY, GENES AND CREATIVITY

ART

DAVID BYRNE AND
GEOFFREY MILLER ON
SEXUAL SELECTION,
CREATIVITY AND
“AH-HA” MOMENTS

+ SCIENCE

The acclaimed musician and artist and evolutionary psychologist team up for What New Is, bringing a new perspective on creativity and the art world on Wednesday, October 10 (see p. 15). Lizzi Ross, the ICA's Adult Programs Manager, asked Byrne and Miller about their interest in the connections between the seemingly disparate fields of art and science, posing the same three questions to each.

Lizzi Ross: *You're interested in the connections between things—scientific, personal, cultural, philosophical. What fascinates you about discovering or articulating these connections?*

David Byrne: Well, it seems that looking or listening to things in isolation—knowing a lot about a little—is fine, but the “ah-ha” moments come when one can draw an inference from a neighboring discipline, from one area of knowledge to another. The isolated or specialized knowledge then can be seen as a metaphor, an algorithm, or an analogy that can be applied to a seemingly completely unrelated area. It becomes a kind of poetry or storytelling, and the metaphors and characters can be exchanged with surprising results.

Geoffrey Miller: The biggest thrill for me is making connections between ideas that are very powerful, general, and abstract—but rather soulless and alienating—and human phenomena that are very fallible, specific, and absurd—but rather lovable and familiar. Game theory (an abstract branch of mathematical economics) can illuminate the social functions of romantic love or moral outrage. Fiercely unromantic sexual selection theory illuminates the origins of human beauty, morality, or conspicuous consumption. When you can see a human-scale mystery as a special case of more universal principles, it is at once intensely personal and wonderfully scientific. Better yet is when such insights have philosophical implications, suddenly giving reality's plot a shocking but satisfying new twist



LR: What does science bring to your experience of art?

DB: To start with, I don't think we're talking about art that incorporates scientific or techno stuff—that's OK, but kind of obvious. Doesn't it seem possible, for example, that the art adages and dogmas passed down from the Bauhaus—less is more, God is in the details, the sacred integrity of materials—were all skimmed from the world of science, math, and engineering? Now that we've entered the century of biology and to some extent left the era of machines, a new set of metaphors has come into play.

GM: My interests in sexual selection—how animals choose their mates based on appearance and behavior—taught me that we share aesthetic experience with thousands of other species. Darwin knew this already by 1859. He wrote of mammals, birds, reptiles, even fish and insects having the aesthetic taste to prefer some sexual partners over others. The result was the vast array of sexual ornaments we see across species: beetle carapaces, peacock tails, nightingale songs, baboon rumps. Even flowers evolved through aesthetic selection by bees and hummingbirds.

So, human art-making is a very natural extension of aesthetic tastes and ornaments that pervade the living world. Of course, humans are uniquely clever and creative, so human art is uniquely interesting—at least to other humans.

LR: What does art bring to your experience of science?

DB: Exactly the same things, but from the other side. The arts, besides being sort of our bowerbird nests [complex and highly decorated structures males use to attract females], are also a set of stories we tell about what is moving and important to us. Metaphorical stories—it might be abstract symbols and shapes, jazz, or a symphony—tell us where we fit in and can be used as templates for structuring our scientific investigations, for better or worse.

GM: Studying conceptual art at Columbia University in the 1980s sparked my interest in cognitive psychology—the study of concepts, categories, memories, and decisions. Other creative genres and media—contemporary realism, psychedelia, graphic novels, music (not least Talking Heads)—convinced me that cognitive psychology was missing all the sex, violence, emotionality, and absurdity of being human. I realized that behavioral sciences must address at least as much of human nature as artists have depicted.

Art has also shown me the limits of scientific language in describing human experience. 19th-century evolutionary psychologists like Nietzsche, Darwin, William James, and

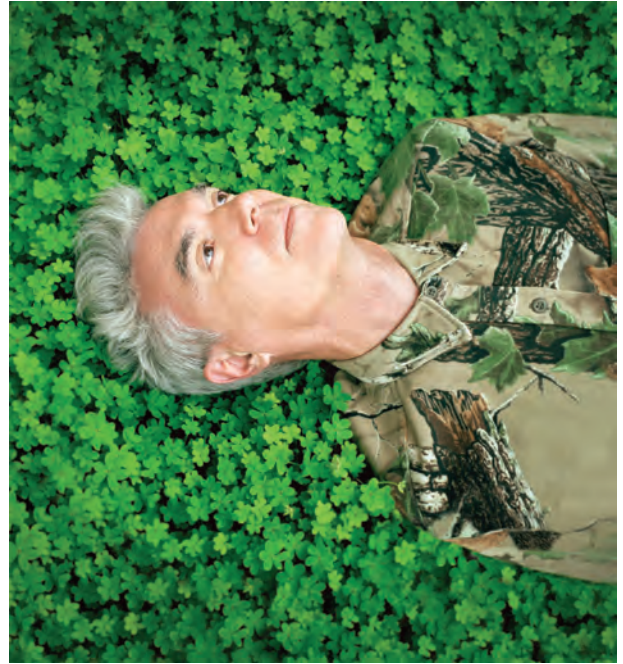


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indeed Henry James used language playfully and evocatively, but since then, psychologists have become afraid of the mind's complexity and its dark, protean web-work of emotion. Read a modern psychology journal paper, and you'll rarely recognize anything resembling lived human experience. Contemporary artists, however, communicate provocative insights about the human condition by using rich, metaphorical, and symbolic language. I take artists and writers as role models for how to talk about human experiences.

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"Connections Between Biology and Culture, Sex and Beauty, Genes and Creativity"

Wednesday, October 10, 6:30 pm
