

Patterns in nature: The intersection of art and science

By Anne Bellegia | Sep 24, 2021 04:45 AM

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Shoshanah Dubiner's painting *Endosymbiosis: Homage to Lynn Margulis* (©2012) depicts our most ancient bacterial ancestors as they merged, the first step in the evolution of complex organisms like ourselves.



If a person's life resembles a quilt, Shoshanah Dubiner's may have initially appeared as random pieces of vividly colored fabric. With the passage of time, however, the "fabric blocks" of this artist, educator and lifelong learner have become assembled into a coherent pattern.

Many of the elements in Dubiner's "quilt" have been preserved in her art. The stitching together began when Dubiner discovered D'Arcy Thompson's book "On Growth and Form." She became fascinated by its theme that recurring geometric forms in nature can be explained by physics and chemistry.



“Working in the cinema is not as grand as it sounds,” Dubiner laughed. “I lacked a permit to work in Italy, so I wasn’t getting screen credit. That short circuited my film career.”

But this is getting ahead of the story. The journey to Rome started in San Francisco where Dubiner grew up. As early as age 6, her eye for form and color was evident. Dubiner’s formal art training began in junior high under the tutelage of Jane Kastner, educational curator at the Palace of the Legion of Honor.

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“Being inspired and guided by a professional artist and mentor made an indelible impact that I felt compelled to pay forward when I got the chance,” Dubiner said.

Dubiner wanted to attend art school after high school, but her parents’ advice to get a teaching credential led to a degree in Comparative Literature at the University of California Berkeley. A graduate program in comp lit at Harvard followed, but Dubiner soon realized she did not want a career in academia.

“As if I needed more signs that I missed the visual arts, I was experiencing vision problems that disappeared whenever I was in a drawing class.”

Dubiner transferred to Brandeis University to pursue a master’s degree in Theater Design. “The collaborative aspect of theater seemed more appealing than the solitary life of a painter. I hadn’t yet realized that painting could also be collaborative.”

It was Dubiner’s love of costume design that took her to Italy’s film scene, but once she recognized that she could



Four years with Barbara taught me to tap into the unconscious sources of my creativity and abandon my notion that creating pleasing images was the goal of creating art.”

In 2004, Dubiner moved to Ashland to join her future husband Craig Comstock and devote herself full-time to depicting the psyche in the language of natural forms. A course in evolutionary biology at Southern Oregon University in 2007 swept her into the world of the tiny. She took additional courses in cellular biology at OLLI at SOU and began reading extensively in this field.

In November of 2011, while reading Lynn Margulis’ book “What Is Life?,” Dubiner learned of Margulis’ sudden death. She created Endosymbiosis: Homage to Lynn Margulis to honor Margulis’ pivotal contributions to biology.

“Through a series of connections, a large reproduction of this painting was displayed at the memorial service for Lynn Margulis, which I attended. It was profoundly moving to see my painting there,” Dubiner said. Endosymbiosis remains on permanent display in the Morris Science Center at the Amherst campus of University of Massachusetts.

In 2012, Dubiner taught her first OLLI course on Patterns in Nature and repeated it several times. But the failing health and death of her husband in 2019 left Dubiner too low in spirits to paint or teach.

Dubiner’s zest for life revived, however, when she learned that Endosymbiosis was selected to be transformed into a video animation for the 2021 exhibition Science Friction at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona. She tapped OLLI instructor and cell biologist John Kloetzel to ensure the movements of microscopic life forms were depicted accurately. She has been inspired to resume teaching Pattern in Nature at OLLI. Visit cybermuse.com for more information about Dubiner.

Anne Bellegia, a retired communications professional in the medical products industry, volunteers on the OLLI



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