

## The art and science of David Nyzio



David Nyzio's work can be seen at Postmasters Gallery, New York City, USA.

David Nyzio is an artist whose work bridges the gap between art and science. Although primarily a sculptor, Nyzio's work takes on many forms (ie, photographic, painterly, and environmental) often resembling an eccentric scientific experiment. The Massachusetts-born artist reminds one of a heterodox alchemist who melds science and art to create a rare hybrid. Nyzio transforms a variety of media, most notably: insects, butterfly wings, algae, moss, and golf balls, usually in conjunction with metal, a medium he skilfully works.

On entering Nyzio's studio in Brooklyn, New York, one is first drawn to a vitrine containing a model of the recently active volcano, Mount St Helens. On closer inspection, the model consists of hundreds of dead milkweed bugs pinned to the sides of the mountain. Nyzio's interest in entomology led him to raise the insects and use them in various pieces of art. He has fed them dye and let them "draw" on paper with their excrement. Other insects he has used include African beetles that resemble shiny Christmas ornaments, creating decorative patterns with their forms. Probably the most beautiful material the artist has used is the blue morpho butterfly from Brazil. Nyzio cut

squares of the iridescent wings of the butterfly and used them to stunning effect in such pieces as *Beyond a symbolic reality*, a wall relief sculpture (5 years in the making) of butterfly wings arranged within a frame of intricate stainless steel, suggesting a hybrid landscape of the natural and the fabricated. Although beautiful, these insect art works have an



43 days of growth under the influence of bacteria rule (1998)

unstated cruelty, reminding us of the price of beauty and of the fate of animals used by scientists and other human beings.

David Nyzio is best known for his use of plants, especially the blue-green algae called cyanobacteria *Oscillatoria*. His piece, *Apple trees in winter*, is a large photograph made from blue-green algae grown on watercolour paper. Nyzio's observation that the algae grew only in light led him to use the bacteria as a photo emulsion. His "life prints" are made by immersing paper in an algae-filled tub and projecting a negative (in this case an Ansel Adams photograph) onto the paper. The algae grow only on the parts of paper that have been exposed to light, resulting in a remarkably clear image, consisting of varied shades of green and brown algae. Here we are presented with a reprint of a famous photograph about sublime Nature, ironically

made out of the lowest form of nature. (Adding insult to injury, this print has some paw "prints" on it where the artist's dealer's cat walked on it in the gallery exhibition.)

Another algae-print, *Bacteria rule*, is made of the cyanobacteria on glass (Nyzio likes to experiment with different grounds for his prints, sometimes making a print on paper and one on glass of the same image). The print, 43 days in the making, pays homage in *Star Wars*-like computer graphics, to Earth's oldest and most prevalent life form. The process of creation is evident here, as the viewer can watch the print "grow" over weeks in an exhibition. Nyzio's graphic statement is both factual and portentous—perhaps it is also a commentary on the art world.

Nyzio's art is not without humour. His art mixes the serious with the humorous, the simple with the complex. Homegrown, inventive, slyly irreverent, Nyzio's art draws on many sources. Shop-talk with the artist sounds more like talking to a science enthusiast, with references to Plato and Aristotle. Although he studied art, Nyzio is a self-educated scientist, applying his biological discoveries to his art. His working procedure consists of noticing an aspect of nature, such as the refraction of light on butterfly wings, and then incorporating this observation into art. The resulting work has a broad appeal because of its combination of natural materials with sophisticated ideas about art and nature.

Nyzio is a long way from the 19th-century romantic artists' notion of depicting nature as pure and separate from human intervention. His pieces are usually a combination of natural elements and man-made ones. *Adventures in articulation* is a self-portrait algae print of the back of the artist. Probably one of the most unorthodox of self-portraits, we are humourously reminded of an example of Jackson Pollock's famous discovery, "I am Nature".

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