

A glimpse at time

Bio art comes of age at a small gem of a show, finds **Simon Ings**

Life Time: Biological clocks of the universe, MU Artspace, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, until 18 February

MAKING art out of biological material, living tissue or even recordings of whole ecosystems is no longer a new idea. In fact it is one that is fast approaching its majority: SymbioticA, the pioneering art and science research laboratory that did so much to establish the field, was opened in 2001.

Life Time, a small show running at MU Artspace in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, shows this quintessentially 21st-century art at its best. Few pieces here would ever find their way into a regular gallery. A striking exception is *An Incomplete Life*, a performance installation by Dutch physical theatre company Wild Vlees (styling itself as Proud Flesh in English), in which a recumbent actor is slowly engulfed by a pile of salt spilling from the inverted cone of a giant hourglass.

More often, the artists take the scatter-gun conceit-making of traditional conceptual art and push it towards real experiment and analysis. The pieces that result are more interesting than beautiful, but with good curation this need not be a problem. It would be a dull gallery-goer who didn't appreciate the exhibits, including those by finalists of the 2017 Bio Art and Design Award.

The BADs, developed with leading Dutch researchers in the life sciences, have been pushing the boundaries of bio art since 2011. Three winners from last year take centre stage.

Wild Vlees's *An Incomplete Life*: an actor is slowly shrouded in salt

South Korean artist Jiwon Woo collaborated with Han Wösten of Utrecht University to study whether there is a bacterial or fungal basis to the Korean notion of *son-mat* or "hand taste" – the subtleties of flavour imparted to food by the person who prepares it. Some local hooch-making kit was on display – in case you didn't get the point.

Then there's an immersive eight-channel audio installation called *Seasynthesis*: a thudding and horrific distillation of the sound pollution besetting the North Sea. This is the work of Dutch artist Xandra van der Eijk, working with Han Lindeboom at Wageningen University.

Meanwhile, Chinese artist Guo Cheng has worked with Heather Leslie at Free University Amsterdam on a Canutic effort to remove all traces of human activity from a cubic metre of soil taken from a dockyard in the city, sorting, washing and rinsing, and removing rubble, plastics

and other chemicals. The Anthropocene has never seemed so immediate, or so insidious, as in this video installation.

So much for the art. What of the curation? MU Artspace's show juxtaposes the BAD shortlist with works by more established artists to make a statement about the nature of time.

Time is difficult to talk about – the show's cumbersome title is proof enough of that, and even

"*Ex Nihilo* affords us an ice-cold glimpse of a bureaucratic, post-natural future"

the gallery's lucid handout by William Myers, a curator based in Amsterdam, labours under the title "A Non-Circadian Cadence". But the show itself does much better, embracing a wide swathe of temporal landscape, "from the universal to the personal and from the cellular to the geological". Time, we are told,

is "simultaneously binding us, through heredity, and separating us, by death".

It is significant, I think, that of the works by established artists featured here, the strongest are two video pieces.

Noah Hutton's film *Deep Time* documents the destruction of the oil-rich North Dakotan landscape by 1970s-style big engineering. And *Ex Nihilo* by Finnish artist Timo Wright juxtaposes footage from the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a frozen brain being prepared by a cryonics company, and a workshop working on an advanced humanoid robot to afford us an ice-cold glimpse of a bureaucratic, post-natural future.

Visiting Life Time is rather like watching one of those allusive, polymathic documentaries by British documentary film-maker Adam Curtis. While the show exhibits some of the method's shortcomings, it manages the old Curtis trick of delivering much more than the sum of its parts. ■



LIFE TIME: BIOLOGICAL CLOCKS OF THE UNIVERSE, MU Eindhoven, 2017. PHOTO: HANNEKE WETZER



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