The Passion of Proteins: Julian Voss-Andreae ’04 Takes on Life’s Fundamental Structures

How does a physicist from Germany wind up becoming an artist in Portland, Oregon? Love has a lot to do with it. So does quantum physics. And so do proteins, the tiny building blocks of all life on earth.

For Julian Voss-Andreae, proteins act as the building blocks of inspiration, too. The 2004 PNCA graduate creates sculptures based on the molecular structure of proteins, garnering praise from the worlds of science and of art. Whether captured in powder-coated iron, assembled from wood, folded in paper, or intended to rust over time, Voss-Andreae’s structures suggest delicacy, motion, and the fluid sense of order that underlies life itself. Winner of the Scientist’s 2004 art contest and a RAGC (Regional Arts & Culture Council) grant, he has been featured in various publications, including Science magazine. He exhibits work internationally.

Voss-Andreae set out to study drawing and painting at the art academy in Berlin when he was 18 years old, but became friends with a poet who was studying biology at the Free University of Berlin. “I realized I had always had this love for science, and I always read these popular science magazines when I was a kid,” Voss-Andreae says. “I’d had it pretty much all figured out for myself, what I thought of the world. But with stuff like quantum physics, I totally didn’t feel comfortable... it makes the conceptual concrete floor I used to stand on kind of shake.” He enrolled at the Free University and studied physics, mathematics, chemistry, and philosophy, an extremely time-intensive and demanding course of study. “I used my youth for going to a point where I could safely say, ‘OK, now I know what we as humans know and don’t know about this, and I can find peace with it.’”

Still, after studying in Berlin and Edinburgh, and eventually focusing on quantum physics in Vienna, he felt like “a tourist” in the world of physics. “I loved the people, they were unbelievably talented and they were really beautifully intelligent and smart people,” Voss-Andreae says, but he found a lack of “spirituality and passion for the most part.” He considered returning to art for those qualities. Then, at an interdisciplinary workshop for natural scientists who explore religious, philosophical, and psychological issues, he met the daughter of a physicist delivering a lecture about quantum physics and parapsychology. Voss-Andreae fell in love with Adriana, now his wife, and moved to Oregon to be with her (their third child was born in 2007). Here he would also be able to pursue his artistic dreams. Earning his Bachelor of Fine Art degree at PNCA, Voss-Andreae discovered that “the sculpture teachers were all wonderful people.” He also connected with the forms that could inspire him artistically, spiritually, and intellectually. Proteins. Voss-Andreae says that his spirituality doesn’t manifest in the form of religious or “New Agey” beliefs, but as “a deep feeling of awe of creation—a deep humility.”

“It’s really exciting to map this terrain, I understand these protein structures in the sense that I make them my own language, my form of language, but also in a kind of scientific way that I understand the importance of these things. Finding his voice as an artist and searching for a way to adequately express that awe leads him to many explorations, of which the protein sculptures are a prominent part. “It’s really exciting to map this terrain,” he says. “I understand these protein structures in the sense that I make them my own language, my form of language, but also in a kind of scientific way that I understand the importance of these things. This is going to be the technology of the future. Life has evolved for three and a half billion years and it’s not a coincidence that it manifests itself in these really amazing structures.”

London-based science writer Philip Ball contextualized Voss-Andreae’s work in the March issue of Chemistry World: “I admit that I am not usually a fan of attempts to turn molecular shapes into art; all too often this draws on the chemist’s rather particular conception of beauty, and a pretty picture does not equate with a piece of art,” he writes. “But Voss-Andreae’s work is different, because it looks to convey some of the underlying scientific principles of the subject matter, even to viewers who know nothing about them. That’s what good ‘sciart’ does: rather than seeking to educate, it presents some of the textures of science in a way that nudges the mind and enlivens the senses.”

His unusual debut from quantum physics to sculpture, his pursuit of love, and a spiritual passion have brought Voss-Andreae to his distinctive place as an emerging artist. As he puts it, “One of the most difficult things you can do, but the most beautiful, is to find your voice.”

Voss-Andreae recently created the piece, “Birth of an Idea”, for Nobel Prize and Linus Pauling Legacy Award-winner Roderich MacKinnon. He also installed “Unraveling Collagen” (2005) in the Big Rock Garden and Sculpture Park in Bellingham, Wash., which won the Juror’s Choice Award there. He is currently working on “Angel of the West,” made from about 1,400 laser-cut pieces of stainless steel, for the Scripps Research Institute in Florida (to be installed in Fall 2008).

In Memoriam Scott Fuentes ’91

For anyone who has picked up anything with the Columbia Sportswear brand on it in the past decades, chances are you wore or read the work of PNCA alumnus Scott Fuentes ’91.

A talent and love for printmaking and design sparked Fuentes’ career. He worked for a range of individuals and companies, including Dark Horse Comics and Columbia Sportswear. Sadly, his career and creativity were cut short last year—Fuentes died in a car accident on August 17, 2007. He was 43 years old.

The designer and father of two was most grateful to his PNCA instructors, especially Christy Wyckoff, according to his family. “He found his greatest excitement in the art of printmaking,” said his parents, Linda and Raul Fuentes. “Printmaking became a huge benefit as he advanced to the world of logo design, graphic design and other areas of printed materials.”

Adrienne Butzer ’08:
Telling the whole other story

Building a relationship is important to PNCA 2008 graduate Adrienne Butzer, whether it through her camera lens or talking to fellow students in the PNCA Commons.

Though Butzer describes herself as a shy, private person, she also speaks her mind. A graduate of PNCA’s photography department, Butzer retains a pride and sense of conviction that demands only the best. It is through a combination of these traits and a desire to connect with others that Butzer created an intimate and compelling book about breast cancer survivors for her senior thesis.

Landslides of Invasion is an emotional yet light-hearted book that profiles six women surviving breast cancer. Through rich