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# News

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\*\*\*\*\*Artist creates unusual soft sculptures representing human reproductive system.

DALLAS--Sue Benner is a scientific explorer who has traded in microscope and slides for hot wax, dye, needle and thread.

Now a graduate student in medical illustration at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas, the former molecular biology major was headed for a career in either medicine or laboratory research. However, during her junior year at the state university at Madison, Wisconsin, she realized that "something was missing from my life."

Her search for that missing "something" has led the Phi Beta Kappa to a sensitive blending of sciences and art that has brought her recognition, creative satisfaction--and not a few headaches.

Why? Her out-of-the-ordinary choice of scientific subject matter for artistic expression: the human reproductive system.

Benner's career crisis came in her senior year when she had to choose a thesis topic for her special honors degree in molecular biology.

She says her major interest was in science but that she had come to the realization that medicine or laboratory research wasn't what she wanted to do with her life. "I liked being able to look at science and apply it aesthetically as you can appreciate a sunset. I feel that understanding how such things as cells work is an enrichment to your life."

Consequently, Benner said, she wanted something different as a thesis research project.

"I was already going crazy cutting off rats' heads, using radioactive chemicals and being around hardware all the time. What I wanted to do was find a way of telling people about the biology behind human life--and to do it in a way that was fun."

So with a go-ahead from well-known molecular biologist Gary Borisy, her advisor, and the other members of her thesis committee, she began her quest for a subject and a medium of expression.

Spending all her free time in the library researching the human anatomy, she narrowed her topic down to the human reproductive system. "I wanted something," she explained with a grin, "that everyone would be interested in."

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Because she is talented with a needle and was fascinated with the batik work of a friend, she tried soft sculpture, an artistic medium just then coming into prominence at the time when Benner was beginning to experiment with her thesis pieces. Stuffed and sewn, the pieces are batiked cottons with quilting and other fine handwork, some with borders of satins and velvets.

Subject matter ranges from the entire human figure to cross sections of genitalia. One of her most unusual works is a large replica of a human sperm with the function of each component described in script by the hot wax batiking process.

Other media in Benner's medical collection include, water color, water color batik on rice paper, silk screen and linoleum block. All use a carefully chosen color scheme in which neutral fetal tissue is royal blue, male systems are other various shades of blue and greens, and female systems are pinks and purples.

The student says that one of the things that was difficult for her to deal with at first was the negative reactions--even shock--expressed by many people viewing her work. She now realizes that the subject matter is controversial outside medical-scientific circles, "so I don't get so upset anymore."

Benner's first show was in the biology faculty lounge on the Madison campus. "It was great," she says. "There were all these glass-topped tables to put the work out on so that people could pick up the soft sculptures and enjoy them in the way they should be enjoyed. It was also fun seeing the scientists' reactions."

Her thesis show was in the college's gallery, which is usually reserved for graduate art shows. "But when I took my work in, it just blew the gallery director's mind. She had never seen anything like it."

For this more formal showing, which had to be scheduled almost a year in advance, Benner included light microscope pictures of the subject beside the art work. She also included an explanation of her artistic representation on the title cards. Her work has also been shown this year in an informal exhibit in the medical library on the health science center campus.

Bill Winn, Benner's advisor for her graduate degree, is very excited about her work which he calls "refreshing."

"As a matter of fact," he related, "no one else in the country is doing anything like Sue's work with soft sculptures." Duplicating Benner's style would be almost impossible because of her highly specialized background in biology and anatomy. Another artist simply could not attain her level of scientific accuracy.



Winn says that the soft sculptures in her portfolio caused the admissions committee to this highly selective medical arts program to consider her with particular interest. "The originality of Sue's sculpture had a lot do to with our admitting her because of her creativity."

Most of the students in the program come from commercial and fine arts backgrounds.

"We usually look for ability in drawing and painting in considering admission for this program. But Sue expressed herself in a different way."

Benner was taking the first art course since she was an eighth grader when she came up with her thesis concept. She gives a lot of credit to the teacher of this beginning course for inspiring and encouraging her.

The day that the honors-degree candidate was called in to defend her paper on estrogen and protein receptors before an awards committee, she was running late after a long session in the art lab. She arrived in her paint-spattered shirt and skirt, dragging her portfolio.

"I hadn't even had time to re-read my paper, and all these professors started firing questions at me. One stopped me cold--it was 'What did you learn from doing this paper?'

"Before I could think, I blurted out, 'I learned what I don't want to do for the rest of my life.'"

The question of what Benner did want to do was settled soon after. A chance encounter with a student planning to become a medical illustrator changed the molecular biology major's career perspective.

"The medical illustrator on campus strongly cautioned me about the difficulty of getting into school because I had no art background. But he gave me a look at 'a day in the life of a medical illustrator,' and I was hooked."

The next year she went home to Oshkosh to study advertising design, life drawing, water color, sculpting and other courses at the local university in preparing for admission to one of the country's six demanding schools of medical illustration. All her spare time was spent art work for her portfolio or adding to her thesis collection.

Benner, who is in her first year of the two-year Dallas program leading to a masters degree, has a full schedule including filmmaking, photography, illustration techniques and media production. Her hours last summer were filled with classes in gross anatomy and anatomical illustration.

In general, the program focuses on preparing the highly trained scientific artist to illustrate medical texts and prepare slides, filmstrips and other teaching materials. Many choose to specialize in depicting certain areas of the body to correspond with specialities in medicine. However, all of these students must be familiar enough with the total human body to work with researchers in any field.



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Benner is being encouraged by Winn to consider specialty areas even a little more off-beat, such as a career as an illustrator of children's biology books or, even more exciting, as a designer of scientific educational toys.

"I have big dreams," she related, a far-away look in her brown eyes.

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