



Photographs by Felipe Buitrago

Valley of the Dolls: Tamara Stone's installation 'Ouch' dares viewers to walk through a hallway of hanging, moaning effigies.

We Can Build You

Frankenstein's Monster lives on in the works of 15 women artists at the San Jose Museum of Art's new show about creation and horror

By [Richard von Busack](#)

THE LEGEND of Frankenstein's monster serves as our key precautionary tale against the presumption of science. While we celebrate the heroism and selflessness of the scientist during the day, our night

thoughts take the form of Frankenstein's Monster.

Last seen headed for the North Pole, the Monster is still at large. We can imagine him in the moment he greeted his creator, in Mary Shelley's 1818 account of his nativity: "His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks."

That slack, black-lipped grimace peers at us through the gamma ray-swollen weeds near Chernobyl and Three Mile Island. He stares in the window of a lab, "with yellow, watery but speculative eyes," at the phenomenal sight of a mouse with a live human ear growing out of its back. He has been glimpsed lurking near the Dugway Proving Grounds in Utah. Here come Ol' Flattop, grooving up slowly on the glassy sands at Alamogordo.

In 1831, 13 years after she published her best-known book, Shelley noted that she was always asked, "How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea." Then again, it was a fictional woman, Shakespeare's Ophelia, who implied the idea of humans on the threshold of new life when she murmured, "We know what we are, but not what we may become." In honor of Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein and his creation, the San Jose Museum of Art is hosting "Brides of Frankenstein," an exhibition about artificial, genetically engineered and synthetic life.

The women's perspective implied in the word "brides" is key. The show doesn't just honor Mary Shelley's gift to lore: the Monster, a myth not built on any previous tale-telling tradition. *Frankenstein* is also the story of a man's grotesque mockery of women's ability to create life. Says guest curator Marcia Tanner, "Anne Mellor, a Mary Shelley scholar, comments that Dr.

Frankenstein seems to want to do away with women."

For the exhibit, Tanner brought together 15 women artists—"metaphorical mates of Frankenstein"—who created some 30 pieces in various media. Tanner says that she aimed for accessibility in this show: "It's not going to be the most radical of new art." In many respects, "Brides of Frankenstein" is a friendly, whimsical show. Still, many of the works suggest a reckoning to come.

Monster Making

Marcia Tanner lives in the Berkeley hills. Her attic office has skylights open wide to the light of the afternoon. Certainly, there is enough floor space and heavenly exposure here to get into the monster-making racket—an electric-wired kite or two could easily fit through the windows.

And her bookshelves hold eldritch lore by the pound: Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, essays by Susan Sontag, the OED and that classic of man-machine lit, *Crash*, by J.G. Ballard. On a nearby table, I glimpse some small art pieces, including a replica of the obedient giant robot known in America as Gigantor.

Except for a table laden with the books she used as research for the show, the only reference to *Frankenstein* is a tray-size painting by Isabel Samaras. The artist restaged the famous lakeside scene of Frankenstein's Monster being presented a daisy by a little girl, before murdering her. The face of Mia Farrow was painted for the flower girl. Next to Farrow was the glowering, appropriated monster Franksinatrastein.

Tanner, a slim, convivial woman in her middle years, came into the art world by a path she doubts could be followed twice.

She was a lit major who studied in England: "I was married to a Cambridge don, so that was an education in itself." She had been the director of public relations at SFMOMA. In 1994, Tanner found out about another curator, Marcia Tucker at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City, and of Tucker's plans for a show of art called "Bad Girls." Tanner assembled the West Coast version.

Tanner remembers that "Marcia Tucker was noticing the same phenomena as I was: the rise of female artists who weren't diatribey, if that's a word. 'Bad Girls West' included 41 women artists—a monumental project."

Tanner describes the show as controversial. Some of the controversy concerned the use of the word "girl" for the purposes of art. *Art Forum* fretted that the word might be good enough for singer Cyndi Lauper, with her "adolescent *joie de vivre*," but what was it doing in a show of feminist art? Bearing up well to this reprimand for excessive *joie de vivre*, Tanner continued her curating. "I got the bug," she recalls. "It was like the crocodile who got the taste of Captain Hook."

In the April 2000 issue of *Wired*, Tanner read an article by ex-Sun Microsystems executive Bill Joy titled "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us." "I already knew that new technology ... genetic engineering and nanotechnology, gave us the power to remake the world," Joy wrote.

Joy was further chilled by a conversation with a colleague on the growing intelligence of machinery. He speculated about a future in which the human race would be at the mercy of machines. Decision-making machines could act in their own interest—as fantasized about in the new movie *Stealth*, where a bolt of

lightning turns a servile droneplane into a flying Frankenstein Monster.

In another chilling scenario, an elite in control of the machinery supporting human life could decide that the human underclass was redundant. Unlike Frankenstein Monsters on the wing, this particular phenomenon can be seen in rust-belts coast to coast.

Interested in the direness of Joy's predictions, Tanner curated a show using Frankenstein's Monster as "a springboard and symbol." (Tanner is particular about terminology. She adds, "I don't call him the 'Monster.' I call him the 'Creature'—it's what man does to him that makes him a monster.")

What interests Tanner the most "is the conflict about how to reconcile creativity with being a mensch. The myth is more of a jumping-off point for the show. Our time is very similar to the late 18th and early 19th century, with revolutions in every field, and new sorts of social configurations. It's a time of anxieties as well as change. So the show deals with technology, as both dystopic and utopic."



The Raaf of the Godlike Artist: Sabrina Raaf poses between two of the glowing neon, ink, gut and beeswax illuminated petri dishes in her pieces 'Breath I: Pleasure.'

Croft Werk

JoAnne Northrup, the San Jose Museum of Art's senior curator, leads me on a preview of the "Brides of Frankenstein" show. The museum's Richard Karson has laid out the first-floor display space to look as foreboding as a mad scientist's lab.

There is a precedent for dimly lit shows, when displaying prints and medieval texts that are sensitive to light. For a contemporary art show, "Brides of Frankenstein" is particularly shadowy. Light boxes illuminate panels of interpretive text. Many of the pieces are shown on LED screens, so the lighting is soft enough for digital-film projection.

Upon entering, viewers are greeted with Andrea Ackerman's *Rose Breathing: Version 1*, a digital 3-D projection of a flower respirating in a 34-second loop. This is a fleshy rose, like something internal, seen at the point of a medical scope.

Camille Utterback's *Untitled No. 5*, an interactive video piece, responds to the presence of passers-by who step on a wired mat on the floor. After the first few steps, the program in *Untitled No. 5* continues to weave patterns based on a walker's first impressions on the mat. Electronic flora blooms in color. Stroke and streaks visually echo the first disturbance by a footstep, like rings of water in a creek after a pebble is thrown in. The artist aims for what she calls "a continual flow of unique and fleeting moments."

"It's a painting, really," says Northrup, as we watched Utterback's piece trace and retrace polychrome patterns. As we walk away, *Untitled No. 5* continues to illustrate how a chance encounter would be mulled over by a machine.

Three of the so-called Bride artists use

digital techniques to re-createthe female form: Kirsten Geisler in *Dream of Beauty 4.0*, Peggy Ahwesh in *She Puppet* and Kristin Lucas in *Five Minute Break*.

Geisler animates a Barbie-ish nude descending an endless treadmill of a staircase. Ahwesh's model is derived from another toy, of sorts: video-game star Lara Croft, the cartoon adventuress with the distended chest. Ahwesh's Croftoid girl, projected on a wall in a 15-minute loop, is unable to make contact with men; they menace her or walk right through her. At one point, she is hit with bullet after bullet, groaning orgasmically.

"She can only shout, and she can only die," according to Tanner.

Of this trio, Lucas' work is the most dryly funny. Her low-tech avatar—reflecting state-of-the-art animation from about 1990—prowls around a basement of an office building in a DVD projection.

The mundane quality of Lucas' *Five Minute Break* is the joke. Movies condition us to expect something bad will happen to a lone woman in an empty garage. Lucas' protagonist prowls, looks at some garbage, observes the janitor's instructions on the wall and tries but fails to make a powerful leap.

Erzsèbet Baerveldt's 14-minute video *Pièta* is the most overtly Gothic piece in the show, and the one most reflective of the themes of *Frankenstein*. The Dutch artist, who adopted for herself the first name of the vampiric Countess Bathory, is viewed in a muddy courtyard wrestling a clay cadaver onto a table. The cadaver slides and falls apart as the countess attempts to balance it—an image of death stubbornly refusing the efforts of life to challenge it.

By contrast, Elizabeth King created the show's most uncanny replica of human life.

"Look, that's not a human," Tanner had told me when she previewed the piece for me on her laptop. I had been deceived the first time I'd seen King and Richard Kizu-Blair's animation *What Happened*.

Surrounded by photos of King's work, a digital screen projects the 90-second film. King and Kizu-Blair use the stop-motion technique to bring life to *Pupil*, one of King's sculptures. The opening shot melds King's face with the look-alike *Pupil*, a manikin with downcast eyes. Seeing *Pupil* move, one's first impression is of a plastic-masked model posing as an automaton. This illusion persists until the first rear view. Although the slope of the bare shoulders look warm, human and female, the bald head has a cantaloupe-size cavern in its crown.

Even with the illusion understood, King and Kizu-Blair's video is disturbing. The manikin's pensive face suggests the first moment of consciousness. Her fingertip drags gently in her palms, showing what looks like the flexibility of real flesh. Most eerie of all is the whirling shuffle of her fingers.

What Happened ends with the closing of a lidded, disembodied eye, another of King's sculptures brought to life. The image is akin to the dangerous wink of the robot Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.



If the Shoe Fits: Heidi Kumao makes last-minute adjustments to her motion-activated half-human/half-machine 'Protest.'

Tantrum Machines

Some of the pieces at the show aren't quite as obedient as King's *Pupil*. Heidi Kumao's sculptures *Protest* and *Resist* consist of disembodied metal legs that thrash their Mary Jane-shod feet in little-girlish wrath in response to a voice-activated program.

The protest is milder in Tamara Stone's *Ouch*. Stone works in the growth industry of creating corpses for the movies. She has assembled a dozen childish torsos and hung them from the ceiling, hair hanging in their rag faces, in the manner of the Well Girl from the movie *Ringu*. Unlike Kumao's tantrum-machines, Stone's creatures have voices: they cry out when you brush against them.

Creating animal life is the tactic of sculptor Patricia Piccinini, whose work Tanner spotted at the Venice Biennale.

Bodyguard: Golden Helmeted Honeyeater, is a sharp-toothed genetically engineered what's-it with an armadillo-like shell on its back. It comes complete with a legend—the beast was supposedly engineered to protect a real-life endangered Australian bird (seen in a video on a nearby wall),

under siege by predators in the antipodes. Piccinini has also mothered *Siren Moles: Exellocephala parthenopa*, synthetic pigletoids used for animal testing. A pair lie in a glass cage with faint, dead smiles on their ducklike faces. Occasionally one twitches its ears or switches its stubby tail. The illusion of life is furthered by the details in the cage: a rubber glove for handling the subjects, a chart to monitor their health and feeding. A portion of the glass is slightly smeared by the mole's paws, and some fecal droppings rest in the sawdust.

This lab animal of the future reminds you of the too-smart mutant pigs haunting Margaret Atwood's Frankensteinian novel *Oryx and Crake*. (On our preview walk, Northrup tells me that Atwood's novel had been popular with the museum's staff: "We passed it all around.")



Siren Song: Gail Wight's kinetic sculptural installation 'The Sirens' refers to the lessons of evolution.

Siren Songs

Working farther down on the evolutionary scale, local artist Gail Wight's two pieces concern insects and microscopic flora. *The Sirens* is a kinetic sculptural installation of oversized cast-urethane bugs that honors the memory of the Victorian-era case of the Peppered Moths.

These moths lived in England's industrial Midlands in the Victorian era. Somehow, they learned to darken the pigmentation of their wings in order to blend in with the coal-smoke fouled trees and buildings.

The story of the Peppered Moth is the kind of tale an advertising copywriter for an oil company might use, speciously, to prove how tough nature is no matter what we throw at her. Writing about *The Sirens*, Wight explains the title: "Adaptation becomes the siren song, luring us into comfort."

Also in the show is Wight's beautiful triptych of biological videos. *Creep* is about a gentler natural phenomenon; these time-lapse observations of slime molds reveal almost harshly strong colors as they grow. (No emerald was ever quite as vividly green as some ordinary slime-covered irrigation ditch.)

As seen on her beguiling cabinet-of-wonders website (notochord.org), Wight has worked in a range of media and as a conceptual artist. In one project she created speculative pharmaceuticals. She graphed out two proposed drugs: "Emotionil," to totally deaden the emotions, and "Il Logique," a perfume that causes disorientation.

During a visit to her studio, the artist tells me that she never tested the drugs: "On paper, they would seem to work, if anyone would possibly test such a thing. At least, the placebo effect should work."

Wight gives me a cup of tea, and we sit on the polished wooden floor of her Bay Area studio. Around Wight's neck hangs a triangular pendant, a present from her husband. It contains, frozen in resin, a spider with sharply serrated legs. Near us are some new larval butterflies she is creating. Wight worries that the heads are too large: "They're overfed." She

compares the sculptures to her sketch book, where she had drawn precise pencil sketches of the life stages of the brimstone butterfly.

In some of her pieces, Wight satirizes Linnaeus, the biologist who first tried to order all the world's creatures. She has photographed a lineage of toy wind-up creatures representing the ascent of animals.

One of her pieces is a Supertramp concert of a sort—"Supertramp" is the biologist's word for a species that makes its home anywhere. Wight's *Supertramps* features live male crickets installed inside a tiny set of *La Traviata*.

She also created a mouse-powered work titled *Rodentia Chamber Piece* in which the scurrying and wheel-running of mice triggered musical instruments. On another occasion, Wight mapped a mouse genome on paper and then gave it to the mice to "reconfigure"—in other words, to gnaw, to shred and to soil.

Working with live creatures in her art is a loaded subject for Wight, who says she has her own opinions on animal research but doesn't want to enter that fray. "Scientists would say they're working for a greater goal, and that justifies it," Wight observes. "It does seem like humans are smart enough to invent another way of testing."

Wight's aim is "letting mice be mice." She praises her collaborator on *Rodentia Chamber Piece*, UC-Berkeley researcher Dr. Lucia Jacobs, for creating Mouse City, a huge maze for researching Alzheimer's. In the maze, the mice are allowed to opt out of the experiment if they grow tired or disinterested. ("Mice are nocturnal; scientists are not.")

Wight stresses that she is not a scientist. However, she is a mother who has been

educated in insects, simply by having a 4-year-old son around the house. Wight studied at the Massachusetts Center for the Arts' Studio for Integrated Media. The presence of four hospitals nearby worried the artist; real doctors might see what she was doing, using her art to speculate about science.

"Fortunately," Wight explains, "the scientists who came to see the pieces were delighted to see someone was having fun with science, because they certainly weren't allowed to have fun with it. "

She moved to the Bay Area to attend the San Francisco Art Institute a few years ago. Currently, Wight now teaches at Stanford's 2-year-old Digital Art Center. The center is a small unit of the big university, gathering some 10 graduate students and 50 undergrads. Wight says, "We're taking the focus off the digital, since we're also teaching art and science and analog electronics ...teaching the students how to solder."

Wight admits that digital art is "a fad" in the art market: currently it might be easier to get grants for digital work than the graphic arts at present. "It won't be this way for long," she adds.

The art market is, as always, a boom-and-bust economy, first drawn to novelty, then glutted by it. But digital technology is already a longtime part of the art world, in particular with computer-assisted design programs helping sculptors. The potential to create art with a computer becomes more advanced every year. Happily, the "Brides of Frankenstein" show's futuristic angle makes it a primer for how much can be done in the realm of computer art. The show has a remarkable range of approaches in size and scale, of humor and distemper. Compare Utterback's large and poignant *Untitled* as opposed to her table-

size sculptures, *Balance* and *Shaken*, in which a matchbox-size image of the artist responds to the viewer's touch.

Lightning Strokes

To get at the core meaning of "Brides of Frankenstein," it is necessary to return to Mary Shelley's novel. As Mellor writes, when Shelley had her waking dream of a man-made monster on the night of June 16, 1816, she created "one of the most powerful horror stories of Western Civilization ... on a par with the most telling stories of Greek and Norse gods and goddesses."

After no little throat-clearing, Shelley's classic begins in earnest in the fourth chapter, right at the point when Victor Frankenstein loses his mother to scarlet fever. To reclaim life from the grip of death, the doctor begins exhaustive reading of ancient alchemists. He combines this with a sort of mysterious chemical procedure, using both decayed corpses and vivisected animals to get the work done.

Victor Frankenstein doesn't describe his exact method for fear of copycats. Lightning might not even be involved. It is as if by lightning that the giant creation is illuminated in flashes and glimpses.

After waking, the Monster appears in the moonlight at his creator's bed: "One hand was stretched out, seeking to detain me"—the pose of homeless wretches on sidewalks everywhere. But after this apparition, the beast heads for the hills. And Victor Frankenstein collapses in one of those four-month-long swooning fevers that 19th-century authors used as literary arrowroot whenever the plot needed thickening.

Frankenstein's Monster wanders the Alps

seeking friendship. Rebuffed, shot at and starved, he turns vicious. Tracking down his creator in the manner familiar from the horror films, he demands a wife. Victor Frankenstein first agrees, but then refuses to complete the bride, fearing a race of devil-spawn.

The point is often made that the creature we call Frankenstein is actually Frankenstein's Monster. It's immaterial, though: Every son is entitled to the name of his father. Shelley's Monster is almost as unrecognizable in his most famous cinematic form, as Boris Karloff played him in Universal 1931 movie. In the novel, the Monster doesn't have a flat head. That was an innovation of the wizardly makeup artist Jack Pierce, who decided razing the skull would be the easiest way to insert a brain.

The Monster doesn't have gray-green skin, either. He is yellow—an 8-foot-tall giant, but a jaundiced one. The doctor makes him extra-extra-large for ease in the microsurgery needed to connect up his wiring and plumbing. In the book, the Creature has superhuman speed. He is conversant with *Plutarch's Lives* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. He can speak French (just like Tarzan in the Burroughs novel, come to think of it). In his own tongue, probably German, he is "eloquent and persuasive." He is a schemer, and a taunter, and he's experienced enough with humans that he learns to carry guns.

Through the deathless James Whale movies (*Frankenstein* and 1935's *Bride of Frankenstein*), Shelley's creation becomes a symbol of the poor and despised everywhere. "The monster is noble," Ian McKellen's Whale says in *Gods and Monsters*. The book mirrors this idea—to a point. Readers have seen Shelley's story as a stage on which religion and science duel. Mellor suggests that Frankenstein's

saga is a metaphor for the French Reign of Terror; as well as symbolic of how the author birthed and lost three children before age 20. Only Shakespeare's Caliban equals Frankenstein's Monster as a figure so fraught with implications.

"The Karloff movie is such a travesty," Tanner argues. "So much more is going on in the book, about the rapid advance of science, of hubris and moral irresponsibility. The book has all of the ideals of the Enlightenment. But there's nothing of the sublime, romantic hero in the movies." Nowhere in the movies does the Creature put it to Dr. Frankenstein in that many words: "You are my creator, but I am your master—obey!"

A schism exists between science and art, creating both Luddite artists and scientists ignorant of the arts. As Mellor writes, the mind-set of the dominating scientist goes back at least as far as the writings of 16th-century proto-scientist and philosopher Francis Bacon: "When Francis Bacon announced, 'I am come in very truth leading to you Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave,' he identifies the pursuit of modern science with the practice of sexual politics: the aggressive, virile male scientist legitimately captures and enslaves a fertile but passive female nature."

Bacon paved the way for the kind of thinking parodied in Kurt Vonnegut's proposed "Monument to the Discovery of Atomic Energy": a statue of a lab-coated scientist with a huge erection.

A Role Open to All

The "Brides of Frankenstein" title is, as Tanner says, a "spinning-off point," an easy-to-remember way to round up 15 women artists working in a number of disciplines.

Being termed a bride of Frankenstein is "a little awkward," Wight admits. Still, the artist is in favor of any emphasis on myth of Frankenstein. "It's really getting revived in the last decade, with the talk of cyborgs in the 1990s and the flurry of feminist sci-fi. There are 1,000 reasons to revive the story. I'd rather not be in the role of the Bride, since she gets torn apart. The part of Victor Frankenstein is of more interest. That's a role that's open to everyone now. Dangerously so."

Aren't the women artists in the show more like mothers of their creatures than brides of a monster? Return to the first encounter of the doctor and his progeny, as Shelley describes it. That sentence again: "His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks."

Shelley is describing a monster. She's also describing an infant. Dr. Frankenstein rejects his creation because of the way it looks. It isn't a mistake a mother would make. In the "Brides of Frankenstein," the artists approach their curiosities with affection as much as trepidation, encouraging further creation of fearful yet hopeful art.

Brides of Frankenstein runs through Oct. 30 at the San Jose Museum of Art, 110 S. Market St., San Jose. The museum is open daily except Mondays; admission is free. **Aug. 14**, 11am-4pm: 'It's Aliiive!' A Kids ArtSunday program gives young people a chance to explore the themes of the show. **Sept. 15**, 8:30pm: A Gypsy Cinema screening of 'Young Frankenstein' takes place in the plaza by the museum. **Sept. 16**, 8pm: 'It's Aliiive! A Night of Performance' by interdisciplinary artist Kristin Lucas. **Sept. 23**, 8pm: Artist Andrea Ackerman and author Ellen Ullman discuss how digital technology may change our notions of what it means to be human. **Oct. 15**, 2pm: Artist Camille Utterback and Mary Shelley biographer Anne Mellor talk about ideas of 'virtuality' and machines. For info, call 408.271.6840 or see www.SanJoseMuseumofArt.org

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