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UCI looking for artists to create biological art

BY NICOLE EINBINDER
STAFF WRITER

IRVINE • A new international exhibition debuting this winter at UC Irvine aims to bring artists' work to life – literally.

The university's Beall Center for Art and Technology is seeking artists who can create art through the techniques of synthetic biology, an art form that gained prominence in the last couple of decades and uses biological materials like DNA strands, cells and living organisms to mimic nature.

One artist will be chosen in September for an exhibition dubbed "Traces of Vitality," that will be on display Feb. 6 until early May.

The winning artist will be invited to UCI for a two-week residency in the fall to work with scientists on campus prior to the unveiling of the exhibition. Additionally, the winner will receive $10,000 for travel and living expenses.

The theme intends to push artists to explore their definitions of what exactly is life, said David Familian, the Beall Center's artistic director and curator.

"Synthetic biology is synthesizing something new," Familian said. "They can't do this work without exploring how living things emerge."

The art must be engaged conceptually or politically with the implications of biology, Familian said. To achieve this, artists can either pursue "wet" synthetic biology art – which uses living materials – or "dry" art based on computer simulations. A third category coined by British artist Roy Ascott is "moist" art, based on a combination of the two.

Examples of early forms of bio art exhibits include biological artist Eduardo Kac's famous rabbit that glowed in the dark – thanks to a green fluorescent protein gene from a type of jellyfish inserted into the animal – and the Critical Art Ensemble's exhibitions on genetically modified foods.

A major emphasis of UCI's exhibit will be on the visual art and exposing audiences to something new, Familian said.

"I don't want people to come in thinking they are seeing scientific experiments," he said. "It has to be visually intriguing, conceptual based, all the usual criteria."

UCLA professor of design media art Victoria Vensa, a trained artist who founded the UCLA Art/Sci Center 10 years ago, is one of the judges in the competition.

"I'm always interested in true collaborations between artists and scientists and work that raises awareness about our environment and our relationship to nature and animals in a smart way," she said.