

In the Details: 'Subsystems' amounts to great science-fiction

"Subsystems" at Modified Arts was one of those exhibits that had me excited to see it based entirely on how it was described before its release. The promotional material described the James Angel exhibit as an exploration of very specific concepts of system: "subsystems, supersystems and systems with substrate independence."

These are just analytic terms to describe basic concepts of relationship.

A subsystem is simply a system which operates within a larger system; a supersystem is a system encompassing other systems. "A system with substrate independence" takes on a slightly more philosophical overtone.

The term substrate independence was popularized by Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom, who most famously argued — to simplify a great deal — that an advanced enough computer program would be conscious. This means that the system, sentience, is independent of the substrate, the human brain.

Bostrom used the concept to suggest that a human mind could be transferred to an artificial brain without loss, but in a broader sense, the term can be applied to any system which would exist outside of the physical substrates it takes place on or through.

The next key feature of the exhibit which caught my eye was that it proposed to explore these concepts through a use of "emergent mathematical structures and patterns of spacetime."

These two avenues are often terms indistinguishable from science-fiction jargon thrown about to artificially legitimize an artistic or narrative point. That being said, in studies of physics and physical systems, mathematical structures are often the most intuitive and valuable tool to use. Spacetime — the theory in physics that combines space and time into an inseparable entity — could then simply be used as a specific example to be addressed by the art.

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My expectation then was that I would either find an incredibly deep exercise in art as symbolic logic, or a hackneyed foray into pseudo-scientific reduction. What I got was not quite in either category.

“Subsystems” succeeded in its attempt to enumerate and juxtapose different systems at different scales, but not so much when it came to demonstrating any interaction. It made me think about the esoteric implications of a unified theory of space and time but did so evocatively, not with any true representation of mathematical complexity.

“Subsystems” did accomplish one thing very effectively: it pointed out the sheer number of systems we experience on a daily basis. “S Apostrophe” was evocative of systems of grammar being applied to communication. “Strange Fruit,” with its careful nod to Billie Holiday, brought up systems of division within humanity by depicting a black bull split in two while turning to face a warm orange circle. “Self-Organized” and “Geologic” both evoked systems used by humanity to perceive the rest of nature.

These works never moved beyond being evocative however. They presented no thread of mathematical consistency to follow and were, at least in technique, seemingly grounded entirely in a subjective emotional and aesthetic form of logic.

At the times where the art matched up with the concepts of physics, the works seemed to abandon the idea of commentary. “Gravitational Lensing” was accurate to the concept it was named after, but contributed little to the greater statement of the exhibit. In contrast, “Cosmos Redshift” was irrelevant to the concept of light alteration in the Doppler Effect for which it was named.

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The closest approximation of contributing scientific accuracy was in the work “Dark Matter.” The mixed media work excellently portrayed a form with implied depth that simply exists beyond our perception. I could easily make the connection to physics. This conveyed a sense of meaning seeing the parallel between physicists realizing blackbodies as an explanation of the seemingly origin-less and our recognition of social systems by chronicling their impacts.

That being said I walked away loving the exhibit. The moment of truth occurred when I was looking at “Fluid Dynamics” — my personal favorite of the show. It was a portrayal of a volcano with lava flowing down its face. I initially found the title confusing. Yes, the flowing of lava could be tied to fluid dynamics, but it didn’t change the implications of the representation. It seemed like little more than the science-fiction trope of using scientific terms in place of commonly understood nouns.

Then it hit me. The whole exhibit was an exercise in mathematical or scientific theory but an exercise in science-fiction.

This revelation turned my previous estimations on their heads. “Plank Scale” was no longer a glib attempt to imply structure on a physical scale where the currently unpredictable forces of quantum mechanics are king, but an artist’s imagining of what a structure on that scale could mean if ever discovered.

“Singularity” took on an air of pulp in its visual vibrancy and emotional energy, even while it showed its own approach to juxtaposed objects as a system.

My new self-enforced approach took off the edge of cold pretension from the exhibition’s tone and replaced it with an intriguing, alien approach to human concepts. And even more, in fictionalizing my perception, I was able to see the exhibition free from the expectation for hard logic and answers it set up for itself. I was able to see it — like all good Sci-Fi — as a vehicle to raise questions and demonstrate juxtapositions, as opposed to giving formal solutions.

In the end I would implore anyone to go see “Subsystems,” but I would tell them to expect more Asimov than Bostrom. They will be better off for it in the end.