"Epigenesis" is one of those rare works of art that combines a whole series of opposites. It uses archaic and archetypal symbolism to celebrate advances in medical science. It is a fundamentally poetic piece that depends dramatically on exact engineering. It is a consciously timeless piece with a time capsule at its center, though one intended to be opened in only half a century. Fifty years will be enough time for aesthetics to change radically; and if there is one thing that the past century of self-confident predictions has taught us, it is that visions of what the future will be like are almost invariably wrong. Read, for example, some of the Bicentennial prophecies about the year 2000, or the 1939 Futurama’s vision of the brave new world of 1960.

The future of Maria Artemis’ sculpture is equally impossible to predict, except that the space that surrounds it will be changed utterly in many, many ways. If some unimagined economic or environmental circumstance prevents the scheduled demolition of the antique barracks opposite the new building for which “Epigenesis” was commissioned, they’ll have fallen in 2052 through the simple process of decay. If no catastrophe intervenes, the building that is now the sculpture’s closest neighbor will be nearing the end of its designed life cycle, having been constructed with architectural imagination but also with the knowledge that structures housing research facilities cannot be built for the ages. The square-footage needs of rapidly changing sciences are too unknowable to allow that.

Artemis’ work has been created to take history into account, since it contains paving stones inscribed with the recent discoveries at the facility that research workers themselves nominated as significant. This cycle of the past blends with images of the molecular and genetic basis on which the National Environmental Health Laboratory’s research rests. The unknown future is symbolized by gaps in the overlapping circles of information, and, of course, by the time capsule inserted in the center of this plaza.

Fifty years hence, the very idea of symbolism may be even more alien than it already is to generations that have to be taught anew the whole notion that a physical object or an image can stand for another, more abstract concept. But if Artemis’ careful planning endures, what observers will still be asking in wonderment as they behold the boulder slowly twisting in the slightest breeze is, “How did they do that?”

How they did that, of course, involved considerable structural analysis, and seven-foot-long underground supports for the pipe from which the boulder is suspended. The cable has been attached to both pipe and boulder in a manner meant to ensure longevity. But as might be suggested by the symbol of an immense weight slowly turning in a seemingly impossible manner, our times are ones in which only the fact of unexpected change is completely predictable.

If “Epigenesis” beats all the odds and is a widely understood and celebrated work of symbolic art half a century after I write these words, it will be interesting to ponder what viewers will think of it in the years after the time capsule is taken out. As with so many previous works including history, the sculpture will then be an aesthetic object standing alone “after the future,” to borrow the title of a work about life after the demise of so many self-confident systems for knowing what tomorrow would bring.

But barring events that would pretty much guarantee the absence of viewers of any sort half a century hence, the science practiced at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will continue to advance the level of human knowledge; despite questions about the social conditions in which science gets made, genuine advance is in the nature of science. “Epigenesis” stands as a reflective monument to the fact that scientific advancement takes place in the context of a larger human and natural story that is and necessarily will always be just a little beyond the grasp of total understanding. Then as now, there will be debates about just how significant that unexplorable remainder really is. In its deft combination of hard physical fact and emotionally evocative relations between itself and its viewers, “Epigenesis” is itself on the cusp of that ongoing discussion.

- Jerry Cullum, June 2002

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