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Boston's Weekly Dig: Arts: Brian Knep

Arts

## Brian Knep

### Blinding us with science

by Jason Feifer

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In his small, laboratory-like room inside the Alpert Building at Harvard Medical School, Brian Knep daintily dips a green net into his fish tank. Inside are three amphibian siblings—they're all the same age, but one's a tadpole, one's a fingertip-sized frog, and one's awkwardly in the middle. Right now, Knep wants the frog; he's trying to get it into a beaker of water, so he can place it on a lightbox and begin photographing it. "It's been taking forever to figure this out," Knep says, as he chases the frog with the net. "I felt so scared working with these frogs, because I kind of feel responsible for them, you know?"

Catching them is the least of Knep's problems. He wants these little guys to star in a fluid, stop-motion animation sequence, in which they'll swim around on a screen, morphing back and forth between tadpole and frog. It's tedious work. He'll be taking pictures of them every day—tens of thousands in total—to chronicle the full transformation. Then he'll write a computer program to match one day's photos up with the next, finding shots that capture the animals in the exact right poses. It's an exploration of the inevitability of aging—the way, as he says, that everyone's life is a straight line, despite all the meandering we do.

It's an exciting idea, but he's freaking out a little: This thing is due in April, for the Boston Cyberarts Festival, and yet he's still trying to find the best way to photograph the frogs. Knep, after all, is an artist, not a scientist. He's the Harvard Medical School's first and only artist-in-residence—the perfect fit for a guy with Brown University degrees in computer science and math, but who gets wide-eyed and jazzed by the complexities of biology. It's part of what moved him away from the special-effects industry (he won two Academy Awards for digital technology development) to a life of working from grant to grant, residency to residency.



But he's not the only one benefiting from the relationship. Some of his previous work involved videos of evolving blobs, which mimicked the inner workings of cells. One is now on display in Alpert, projected onto a wall across from an elevator; Knep says he often sees Harvard scientists standing around contemplating it. "It's not like they're going to take this stuff and put it in their science," Knep says, "but I think they get inspired by it."

In some of Knep's interactive video works, a cellular-like pattern is projected onto the floor, and the image rips or changes as a person walks over it. Afterward, it heals itself, regenerating the portion that was damaged. Although Knep isn't fond of the comparison, it's a similar technology to those mats now showing up in movie theatres—

Indeed, that's what some Harvard scientists recognized when they walked into his South End studio a few years ago. They quizzed him about his artwork, and found a shared delight in fusing simplicity with complexity. They began talking, became friends—and in 2005, he began his residency.

Knep has a busy spring ahead of him: His video art will be on display at the Montserrat Gallery in BeverlyBostonNew York show: The Ronald Feldman Gallery will host a solo installation from February 10 to March 10. from April 1 to April 29. This week marks the debut of Knep's first from February 16 to April 7, at University Gallery at UMass Lowell from April 11 to May 11, and at the Judi Rotenberg Gallery in

Follow Knep around the department of systems biology for a while, as he trades friendly greetings with the scientists and then describes all the neat stuff behind their closed doors, and you begin to wonder why all med schools don't have artists. He's the perfect public liaison—a guy who understands the science, can translate it into something creative and fun, and still has an outsider's sense of awe. ("I saw my froglet eat with his hands for the first time today!" he wrote recently on his online journal, at blep.com. "He sat over the food pellet and used his tiny hands to shove it into his mouth. Then I saw a man wearing large orange rubber gloves run excitedly down the hall. Love this place.")

But the public can wait. For now, there are frogs to attend to. "That's food, not poop," he tells me, when I notice little pellets on the bottom of the frogs' tank. "I sucked the poop out before you came."