This Is A Replica Of Vincent Van Gogh's Ear, Grown Using Real Genetic Material

The Huffington Post  | By Katherine Brooks

Vincent van Gogh is known for many things. His monstrously famous "Starry Night" painting, his love of wilting sunflowers, his obsession with self-portraits, his paintings’ record-breaking sales at auctions after his death. And -- who could forget? -- that time he allegedly sliced his own ear off with a razor.

So the story goes, Vincent cut off his own ear in 1888 following a confrontation with artist-friend Paul Gauguin, a bloody scene that ended in Vincent's hospitalization. The tale of mutilation has gone down in history as evidence of the late painter's serious mental illness, as well as fodder for mythologizing the mysterious life of an art world legend.

Well over 100 years after his death, art admirers and history nerds are still fascinated with Vincent's severed body part. Case in point: artist Diemut Strebe and her artificially engendered replica of that notorious left ear:

(AP Photo/Diemut Strebe.Sugababe)
Strebe used living cells "grown" from genetic samples provided by one of Vincent's distant relatives -- Lieuwe van Gogh, the great-great-grandson of the artist's brother Theo, the Associated Press reports. On view at the Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, the 3D-printed oddity was grown at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital and shaped to resemble Vincent's actual ear. It sits in a case of liquid for preservation purposes, but that doesn't stop the ear from "hearing" viewers around it. "You can talk to the ear," the exhibition description states. "The input sound is processed by a computer using software that converts it to simulate nerve impulses in real time. The speaker remains in soliloquy. The crackling sound that is produced is used to outline absence instead of presence."

The spooky project was originally based on DNA plucked from an envelope thought to be licked by the Post-Impressionist master. But "the postman messed it up," Strebe explained to AP, so the floating ear consists of only 1/16 Vincent's genetic material. Strebe hopes to obtain mitochondrial DNA from a female relative for future installations (get excited for 2015, New York!).

Vincent van Gogh's 1889 self-portrait with bandage (Photo by Universal History Archive/Getty Images)

The strange and slightly macabre Vincent van Vogh tribute, on view in Germany until July 6, is a perfect reflection of contemporary culture's sensational fascination with famous figures... even deceased ones. Still, there's something spiritual about the desire to preserve Vincent's memory through methods generally associated with mad scientists or religious zealots.

"Just as the fingers and even heads of saints were kept in medieval cathedrals as precious connections with the Christian martyrs," The Guardian's Jonathan Jones writes, "so Van Gogh's ear is a thrilling relic of the most visionary painter of the modern world."