

Is there an artist in the house?

At Harvard Medical School, the answer is yes. Now Brian Knep is about to reveal 'Deep Wounds,' the work he created during a yearlong residency.

By Geoff Edgers, Globe Staff | April 7, 2006

Think of an abstract, ever-changing rug.

Each time you step on it, a pattern is created. Each movement produces another wormlike wiggle.

Brian Knep is a trained computer scientist turned artist who uses technology to make such pieces. The organisms Knep creates try to squirm back into place -- that's human nature -- but they never quite fit. The scar remains.

"The point is really to take something finite -- like a computer, like a mathematical equation -- and pull something organic out of it," says Knep. "How do I make an interaction more soulful?"

The search has taken him to Harvard Medical School, where, since September, Knep (pronounced as you would "knish") has served as its first artist-in-residence. He's always been inspired by science and fascinated by the way living things move, change, and, eventually, die. That's why Knep chose a desk in the Department of Systems Biology, so he could pick the brains of some of the school's leading research scientists.

Now he's presenting the residency's crowning achievement: "Deep Wounds," a public work that will be up in Harvard's Memorial Hall through April 23. With each step through the hallway, a visitor will strip away a virtual skin projected underfoot to reveal a series of words and dates.

On a literal level, this text is meant to reference the Harvard-educated Confederate soldiers who died in the Civil War. (Memorial Hall was built to honor Harvard's Union dead.) The message, though, is meant to highlight one of Knep's constant themes -- unfinished healing.

"Things that go unhealed in our own lives, which we cover over superficially, need to be opened up, cleaned out, and then the real healing can begin," he explains in his fourth-floor studio on Harrison Avenue in SoWa.

A lot of what Knep gathered during his time at Harvard was inspiration. He spent four hours one afternoon with Tim Mitchinson, who showed him how cells split. He learned more about how a parasite operates from Bill Brieher. The science didn't influence his work in a literal sense. But the discussions, he says, have helped him consider many philosophical questions about how living things behave.

"Take apoptosis, which is when a cell kills itself," Knep says. "It happens when DNA is damaged. There are just some incredible metaphors for people who are mentally

ill and try to kill themselves, but not even to that extreme. Just how we live our daily lives."

On the Cambridge campus, Knep made another important discovery. He learned that the Union dead had their names listed in Memorial Hall. The Confederate dead did not. "To me, it just talked about this idea of unfinished healing, and even the conflict we're having right now between the red and the blue states," Knep says.

The art of chance

Knep's gig at Harvard happened largely by chance.

The school's Office for the Arts, Knep's cosponsor, has had a resident artist for each of the last 31 years. The Harvard Medical School, though, had never had one. But one night, Becky Ward, the executive director of Harvard's Systems Biology Department, came to visit an artist in a neighboring South End gallery.

She strolled into Knep's space and, after striking up a conversation, discovered that he was using equations in his art that had similar applications in biology. They kept talking.

Not everyone was so welcoming. Some of the scientists grumbled when they heard of the artist's residency.

"The way I saw it, bringing an artist into this environment wasn't going to have any impact whatsoever," remembers Brieher, a biologist. "Why were we doing this?"

But he went one day last fall to see Knep make a presentation. Standing in front of the biologists, the artist, who had traded his typical jeans for slacks, showed how he uses computer-generated equations to create something that behaves like a living organism. He played video of his "Healing Series," which was exhibited at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in 2004.

Brieher was impressed. He even asked a question about the programming. "In the end, it took me about 30 minutes to change my mind," he said.

Healing arts

Still, Knep admits the idea of doing such a public work was daunting. Though he's one of the area's most promising young artists -- in February, Knep and Jane Marsching were the only locals awarded grants from the Creative Capital Foundation, a New York organization whose members include Laurie Anderson and director

Richard Linklater -- Knep had never done a public work before.

He also only recently felt comfortable calling himself an artist. After graduating from Brown University in 1991, Knep headed to California for a job as a software engineer at Industrial Light & Magic. Over three years at the company founded by "Star Wars" creator George Lucas, Knep developed technologies that led to a pair of Academy Awards for technical excellence and scientific work.

He got restless, though, and felt he was no longer creating his own work. Knep quit ILM to follow his then-girlfriend to Ann Arbor, Mich., where she enrolled in law school. Once there, he barely logged onto his computer. He did register for a community pottery class. The experience was liberating, he says, and so different from his programming work.

"To make good pots, you have to work with the clay. You can't fight it," says Knep. "You have to get into this mindful state. It's so different from computers, where it's abstract in your head. I'd finish on my pottery and feel energized and powerful. When I worked on my computer for four hours, I'd feel dead."

Re-energized, Knep headed back east in 1997 with his girl-friend, who had been hired at a Boston law firm. With a colleague, he did design work for the Science Museum and Boston Computer Museum. He also started to show a few friends the work that he would later call his art. He created his "Healing Series," which remains a model for his work.

With an overhead camera, Knep projected on a rubber mat images that resembled bacteria seen under a microscope. A second camera detected the figures walking across the mat. With each step, the pattern would change. Sometimes, it parted like a stretch of beach sand being stepped on near the waterline. The patterns would try to repair themselves, but never to their original states.

Emboldened by the positive response to his work at an open studios event at SoWa, Knep invited over George Fifield, the founder of Boston CyberArts and the new media curator at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park.

"I was blown away," said Fifield, of his visit to the studio. Knep's piece would be included in the 2004 DeCordova annual.

To develop his Harvard piece, Knep walked around campus. He settled on Memorial Hall after learning about the building's history. Originally, Knep planned to put the names of the dead Confederate soldiers into the piece. They would be revealed when somebody walked through the hall. Cathy McCormick, director of programs at the Office for the Arts, was unsure.

"The fact that he wanted to use typography, at all, was fascinating," says McCormick. "This is an artist who had worked abstractly, whose work is usually about blobs."

But, she asked, did he really want to list those names? Was his project about wounds and scars and healing, or about pushing to get the Confederate dead listed

alongside the Union soldiers? Knep began to question the implications. Was he somehow making a statement about race relations at the university, or even the school's conflict with departed professor Cornel West? Or was the university interfering?

For a moment, Knep almost gave up. He decided after a few days that McCormick might have a point. Knep's artistic statement had a lot more to do with philosophical questions than a campaign for the Confederates. Still, making a decision so late in the process made him nervous.

"What I needed was some café time," he says.

Knep took his blue notebook to the B-Side Lounge in Cambridge. Over a pizza and beer, he sketched and dismissed a handful of ideas. Then inspiration hit. He thought of his own reaction to war.

"When you hear about a missile going off target and killing people in a house, it's just a statistic," he says. "You feel it when you actually think of the people. That it was somebody's friend or brother or mother."

That was the answer. Instead of names, he would list the relationship a dead soldier had with another person - father, brother, son -- along with where the graduate was born and the date he died.

"I didn't want it to be a compromise piece, but once I came to the final solution, I felt pretty good about it," says Knep. "I'm not sure how to explain it other than it felt right."

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