Steve Miller Finds Art and Beauty in Life's Quantum Puzzles

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The world of gluons, neutrinos and quarks isn't exactly the kind of heady topic one would expect to encounter in the realm of fine art. But for Sagaponack artist Steve Miller, there is great beauty to be found in science, particularly in the unseen particles that function within the mysteries of quantum mechanics, right down to mathematical equations on physicists' blackboards that describe the way things work in space, at least theoretically.

In recent years, Miller has been engrossed by the subject of quantum entanglement and he's taken on the topic in his work and a new art book, "Surfing the Cosmos: Energy and Environment." Published by Glitterati Incorporated, the coffee table book explores the wonder of the universe from the ethereal perspective of unseen energy, and in it, Miller's artwork and photographs offer a unique take on the concept of science and its importance both here on Earth and beyond.

On Thursday, November 10, at 6 p.m., Miller will be at The Church in Sag Harbor to discuss the book and a few of the paintings highlighted in it with chief curator Sara Cochran. With a foreword by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson and an essay by science professor Arthur I. Miller, the artwork in "Surfing the Cosmos" was inspired by Miller's own exploration into the topic of science and it represents the completion of the artist's trilogy of books about energy and the environment. His first book, "Radiographic: X-Ray Photo Inventions," came out in 2017 and featured Miller's "Health of the Planet" series of artwork created using x-ray images he took of the flora and fauna of the Amazon rainforest. In his second book, 2019's "Surf/Skate: Art and Board Life," Miller sought to connect his earlier eco-centric artwork with a youth culture driven by waves and half pipes by presenting the images on functional objects like surf boards, clothing and skate decks.

You might call it targeted messaging in the modern era.

"How do you get this discussion about sustainability into the language of culture where it's more accessible? That was 'Surf/Skate," explained Miller during a recent interview at his studio, a former train station that was transformed into an artist's studio in the 1970s by abstract painter Neil Williams and minimalist Frank Stella. "If you're not connecting, you're not communicating."

Now, with "Surfing the Cosmos," Miller looks at science on a deeper level by focusing on the quest to understand and harness power — from the Large Hadron Collider at CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research) in Geneva, Switzerland, where Miller spent time with physicists in order to better grasp quantum physics and the search for the elusive Higgs Boson elementary particle, to the slums of Rio de Janeiro where he photographed the way in which residents tap into a tangled confluence of electrical wires in order to get their fair share of the resource. In both cases, it's about accessing power.

“I had an idea to do something that was less like an art book and more of an experience,” said Miller of “Surfing the Cosmos.”

For Miller, central to that experience was the time he spent with the physicists at CERN in 2010.

“The scientists were incredibly generous — maybe partially because they don’t think anyone’s interested in what they doing” said Miller, who was invited to CERN to give a lecture and stayed on an extra week to learn more. “Then I came back the next year for another week. I did a lot of reading, I still do a lot of reading. I still don’t get how time slows down and mass gets compressed as you travel in a space ship. I don’t get it. Or how looking at an experiment changes results. In the Newtonian world, looking at something sheds light on it. That doesn’t work in quantum science.

“CERN was a life-changing experience for so many reasons,” he added. “The science is so ground-breaking and complicated and monumental. The world we see, the Newtonian world of what we experience, it’s our immediate level of reality. But the real reality, the deeper level, the more complex or more universal reality, is quantum. It’s cosmic, it’s gravitational waves that move at the speed of light that Einstein figured out. No one has seen them, but we’ve measured them … the cosmos is quantum, it’s not Newtonian.”

During his time with the physicists, Miller absorbed as much as he could about those elemental particles that function beyond the visible light spectrum and don’t adhere to the principles of previously settled science. Another question that inevitably arises for someone like Miller is, why should art and painting enter into this conversation about science at all?

“At CERN, it’s mind-blowing. This whole level of reality that’s very hard to understand and puts most people to sleep when you talk about it, but it’s the art that’s the holder of the content,” said Miller “That is my vehicle for this discussion about reality. Art has always been about this conversation about the nature of reality. And quantum makes you really understand there’s this crazy, illogical non-Newtonian world that’s operating on a deeper basis … There’s this other reality and because of all these tools in science, art can now present this reality.

“For me this presentation takes place in the arena I always loved, like Pollock — the grand-scale narratives that suck you in.”

If you ask Miller to talk about where his interest in science originated, he’ll tell you that it began with the art. He adds that throughout history, new languages and technology have always allowed for new expressions to enter society’s creative life.

“I’m not a science guy, but I’m fascinated by new ways to express oneself and those tools are about the time you live in. Science opens new doors to expression,” he said.

There is also a certain aesthetic sense that finds its way into science, and like art, there are mathematical equations that have the ability to express not only truth, but absolute beauty.

“I love the idea that aesthetics are not confined to traditional notions of fine art. With mathematics, you look at these chalkboards and they’re gorgeous,” Miller said. “I’m trying to bring in as many people as possible. We have figured out conclusively that humans are not going to change their behavior. Science is the only way we’ll have a solution to these problems.

“It’s understanding we’re all in this together, which does not seem to be a commonly held vision,” he added. “I’m a romantic. If you make stuff, you’re hopeful. The fact you’re creating establishes the moment and assumes there’s a future that will look at it. Even if they don’t get it now, it’s there to look at. In the end, I feel like all I can do is be an artist. Art can do many things. I’m always excited about being connected to the time I live in. It’s not just about the science, it’s the visual language of our time.”

On Thursday, November 10, at 6 p.m., The Church hosts a conversation between artist Steve Miller and chief curator Sara Cochran about “Surfing the Cosmos.” The evening will include a Q&A, book signing and a wine and cheese reception. Tickets are $15 at thechurchsagharbor.org. The Church is at 48 Madison Street, Sag Harbor.

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