

JONATHAN JONES
ON ART
BLOG

Science is more beautiful than art

From the Higgs boson to searching for life on Mars, science is overtaking art in its capacity to expand minds and inspire awe



Jonathan Jones

The Guardian, Wednesday 19 September 2012 13.05 EDT



Hubble telescope image of the Carina Nebula, 2010. Photograph: Nasa, ESA, M LIVIO, (STScI)/EPA

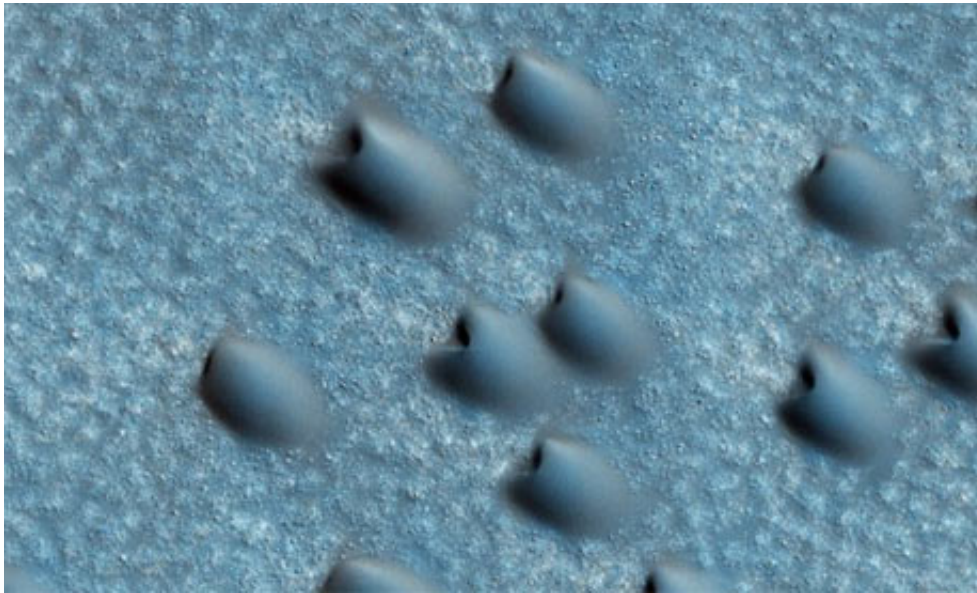
A team of scientists working on a boat off Cape Cod have just landed a huge great white shark, named it Genie, tagged it and returned it to the sea. They hope to track it and learn about the enigmatic lives of these ancient predators. Meanwhile, on Mars, Nasa's Curiosity rover has begun its mission to determine – metre by metre, rock by rock – whether the red planet was once able to support life. This new mission comes days after Curiosity captured a partial solar eclipse on Mars as its small moon Phobos

crossed the face of the sun, appearing to take a tiny bite out of it.

And in the art world ... well, let's see.

It has been announced that Damien Hirst got record attendances for his Tate Modern retrospective, while drawings by Andy Warhol are among works to be exhibited at the inaugural Frieze Masters art fair next month. Somehow, these bits of art news do not seem as thrilling as discovering the secrets of other planets, or the once-unfathomable oceans.

Many projects today try to bring together art and science. London's Wellcome Collection does a resourceful job of marrying medical science and art in its exhibitions, for example. And Cern, home of the Large Hadron Collider near Geneva, has an arts programme that verges on the avant-garde, with dancers impersonating particles in the site's library, among physicists deep in study. The two areas are generally held to have a lot to teach one another. But there is another way of looking at their relationship. Is it possible that, in the modern world, science has simply replaced art? By that I mean, replaced its higher purpose of expanding minds and imaginations and revealing the beauty of existence.



A field of crescent-shaped dunes in the northern polar region of Mars. Each dune is about 100 metres across. The image was captured by the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter, released in July 2012.

It is science that now provides the most beautiful and provocative images of our world – not to mention other worlds. It is hard to name an image made by an artist in the last two decades that is as fascinating or memorable as, say, the Hubble telescope's pictures of the Eagle Nebula or the Whirlpool Galaxy. A visit to the Hubble's website (hubblesite.org), with its tours of the cosmos, its astronomy photographs (free to

print) and its movie theatre chronicling the birth-throes and death-pangs of stars, is arguably as rewarding as a trip to any museum. And then there are all those images of deep-sea worlds taken by submersibles, among them National Geographic's shots of the deepest hydrothermal vents ever discovered. Emissions from these volcanic chimneys, nicknamed "black smokers" and located three miles below the surface of the Caribbean Sea, provide extraordinary images; they are also hot enough to melt lead.

Yet it is not on purely visual grounds that science seems to dwarf today's art.

Proponents of contemporary art are quick to point out that it is not necessarily about the visual. Ever since the rise of conceptual art in the late 1960s, art has claimed an intellectual territory of provocation and contemplation beyond the visible. Yet it is here that science wins hands down. What notion of any current artist can compare with the sublime craziness of quantum physics (in which objects can exist in multiple states and places at the same time), let alone the awe-inspiring prediction and apparent discovery of the Higgs boson after a 45-year search? Here is the real conceptual art, and it turns your head inside out merely trying to grasp its most basic premises – in particular, that all the matter we can see appears to comprise just 4% of the universe, the Higgs providing a possible gateway to understanding that remaining 96%.

Once, art and science truly worked as equals – in the researches of Leonardo da Vinci, for instance. In the 21st century, art rarely rivals the capacity for wonder that modern science displays in such dazzling abundance.



Get the Guardian's Art Weekly email

For your art world low-down, the latest news, reviews and comment delivered straight to your inbox.

[Sign up for the Art Weekly email](#)

More from the Guardian

[What's this?](#)



Spend, spend, spend.
Because your savings
aren't worth a damn
28 Dec 2013



New Year honours 2014:
the full list
30 Dec 2013



Should I make a stand over
colleague's unfair
treatment?
30 Dec 2013



Ten new year's resolutions
for architects in 2014
30 Dec 2013

More from around the web

[What's this?](#)



The Most Amazing,
Hilarious, Perfectly Timed
Photos Taken at the Right
Moment
(All Perfectly Timed)



These Are The AWESOME
Things To Fully Partake in
While Drunk
(Rant Chic)



VoIP over Satellite - Does it
Work?
(Which VoIP)



Gravity Smashes Records,
Runner Runner Bombs
Hard
(Blinkx)

© 2014 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.

;