



The artist, Robert Pope: "Technologists are obsessed with Newtonian science, which is an incomplete view of the universe".

# A new Renaissance

Could a 'science-artist' lead the scientific and artistic communities into a new Renaissance. CALVIN MILLER writes.

## THE ARTS

Asking the right question — or a new question — is often more important than getting the correct answer.

In these times of "publish or perish", many journal editors and academics view one good question as worth more than scores of pedestrian rehashed papers which contribute little (or nothing) toward advancements in fundamental medicine or science.

As a pharmacology professor once commented about one of his junior colleagues: "Dr X burns the midnight oil doing his experiments,

and he certainly churns out the data, but he has yet to pose one good question."

Artist Robert Pope isn't claiming that he can unravel any of nature's perplexing paradoxes or secrets, but he is actively searching for the right questions.

Refusing to draw any barriers between the humanities and science, he is trying to unite these two endeavours which most people would consider alien to one another.

Based in Berri, about 200 km to the east of Adelaide, Robert has been putting his philosophies on canvas for the past 20 years. His "science-art" has endured ridicule from some ungracious quarters, but others have had a greater appreciation of his inquiring mind.

"Pope's work is important in artistic terms and sociologically. In an age of divided cultures, the humanist and the scientific... he may well be doing more to establish communications between the two cultures than any other living artist," said Professor J.D. Frodsham from Murdoch University's School of Human Communication.<sup>1</sup>

"Pope's ability to 'picture-think' abstract concepts is now taken for granted, but his ability to transmit these thoughts rationally to aca-

demics, scientists and the laity is exceptional... and a unique rarity," said Dr George Cockburn, a Sydney physician.<sup>1</sup>

And Dr Bevan Reid, a Sydney University cancer researcher, who also has been roasted for his novel ideas about 'life forces', told me last year, "Traditional scientists need to study artistic forms so that their science can re-acquaint itself with human ideals. Science has lost touch, and people like Robert Pope are trying to remedy that."

### Visiting artist

I met Robert when he was a visiting artist in Dr Reid's laboratory. Seeing a palette-in-hand artist hunched over his easel and canvas in a research lab seemed as incongruous as a particle-beam accelerator in The Louvre.

Having an enormous 'Enthusiasm Quotient', he began explaining, with great gesticulations and intensity, the meaning of his abstract. I admit to becoming quickly lost and resumed the interview with Dr Reid, who was busy outraging to the point of apoplexy his university adversaries with talk of biological transmutation of metals.

Robert Pope may be in the

forefront of a new Renaissance, comparisons with the 14th century Italian Renaissance being irresistible. Emerging from medieval science, where new-age scientists had to concentrate on purely physical systems to minimise wrath from the church, the Renaissance was a revolution in the arts, medicine, biology, geographic exploration, printing (*a la* Gutenberg), chemistry, physics and astronomy. Humans were adopting new philosophical and mechanistic views of their world.

While science and art changed in tandem during the Renaissance, it is art which symbolises that period. Art was not separated or isolated from science, as it typically is today.

Robert feels that the world is prepared to accept new concepts because contemporary science has swelled on a Newtonian universe of energy decay and entropy, while ignoring concepts about "creative physics".

"Technologists are obsessed with Newtonian science, which is an incomplete view of the universe. It takes into account only destructive physics, with the universe being thermodynamic decay. But we also have creative physics, forces which

represent living energy," says Robert.

"So much happens within the human experience which Newtonian physics cannot account for."

He is worried that, unless science begins to soul-search and reconcile with the humanities, technology will continue "growing into a monster".

"More and more data is being churned out, but most of it is alien to the betterment of people and has nothing to do with the formation of human emotion.

"It's looking like a cancer, and at the rate we're going, we're entering the terminal stages. Learned people are studying the latest journals, but are they devoting as much time to altruistic thoughts?" he asks rhetorically.

### An imbalance

His concern began in earnest some 16 years ago while he was contemplating art's relation to the physical sciences and his role as an artist. Deciding that modern physics was imbalanced, he studied ancient philosophers, such as Epicurus, a Grecian who taught that wisdom was attained through the action of atoms on the soul.



"The biosphere energy flow" an oil on canvas: sunlight is converted to sugar to support life.

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He sees science-art as being an important catalyst for change. "We must have a tangible symbol for the restoring of science for

ethical ends, and that is art." Robert, his art and his ideas have received some recognition among politicians, academics and the

media. The BBC is considering a documentary, and he has appeared in a recent ABC documentary on science philosophy.

But the wheels of acceptance grind slowly. Meanwhile, he is content to keep asking questions, even if the answers are evasive. MO

I. Pope R. *The Science-Art of Robert Pope*. First edition, 1979. Science-Art Research Centre (publ), PO Box 417, Berri, SA 5343.

# M E D I C A L O B S E R V E R

22 January-4 February 1988, Fortnightly

Note: 28 years later, in 2015 the above painting was represented by the multi-million dollar commercial art gallery, Park West Gallery of Michigan.