

Science — it's a fine art

This new Wellcome Collection show of artworks made in collaboration with scientists is fun and thought-provoking, says **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

Every art should become science, and every science should become art. That was the vision of the 19th-century radical Friedrich Schlegel, who was, along with his brother August, a leading thinker of the Romantic movement that would do so much to shape the modern world. In our contemporary era, art and science increasingly coalesce. Their methods may arise from different traditions; their audiences may not be, for the most part, shared, but their motivations and goals are fundamentally similar. They both set out to try to understand the world in which we live and, through describing it, to share it with others.

It is the no man's land between these two disciplines that the Wellcome Collection sets out to claim. At the core of this London museum, branded the "free destination for the incurably curious", lies an eclectic assemblage of medical artefacts and original artworks that together elaborate and explore the connections between medical science, life and art. Temporary exhibitions further test the link.

Somewhere in Between is the latest of these. It presents works arising from collaborative exchanges between four contemporary artists and scientists and their teams. Spectators will find themselves immersed imaginatively into four very different realms.

Maria McKinney, working with a geneticist, David MacHugh, and veterinary scientist, Michael Doherty, leads a herd of magnificent pedigree bulls into the gallery, creating a line up of photographic portraits that ask us to consider the complex breeding involved in increasing agricultural productivity. John Walter, in consultation with the infectious diseases expert Alison Rodger, invites

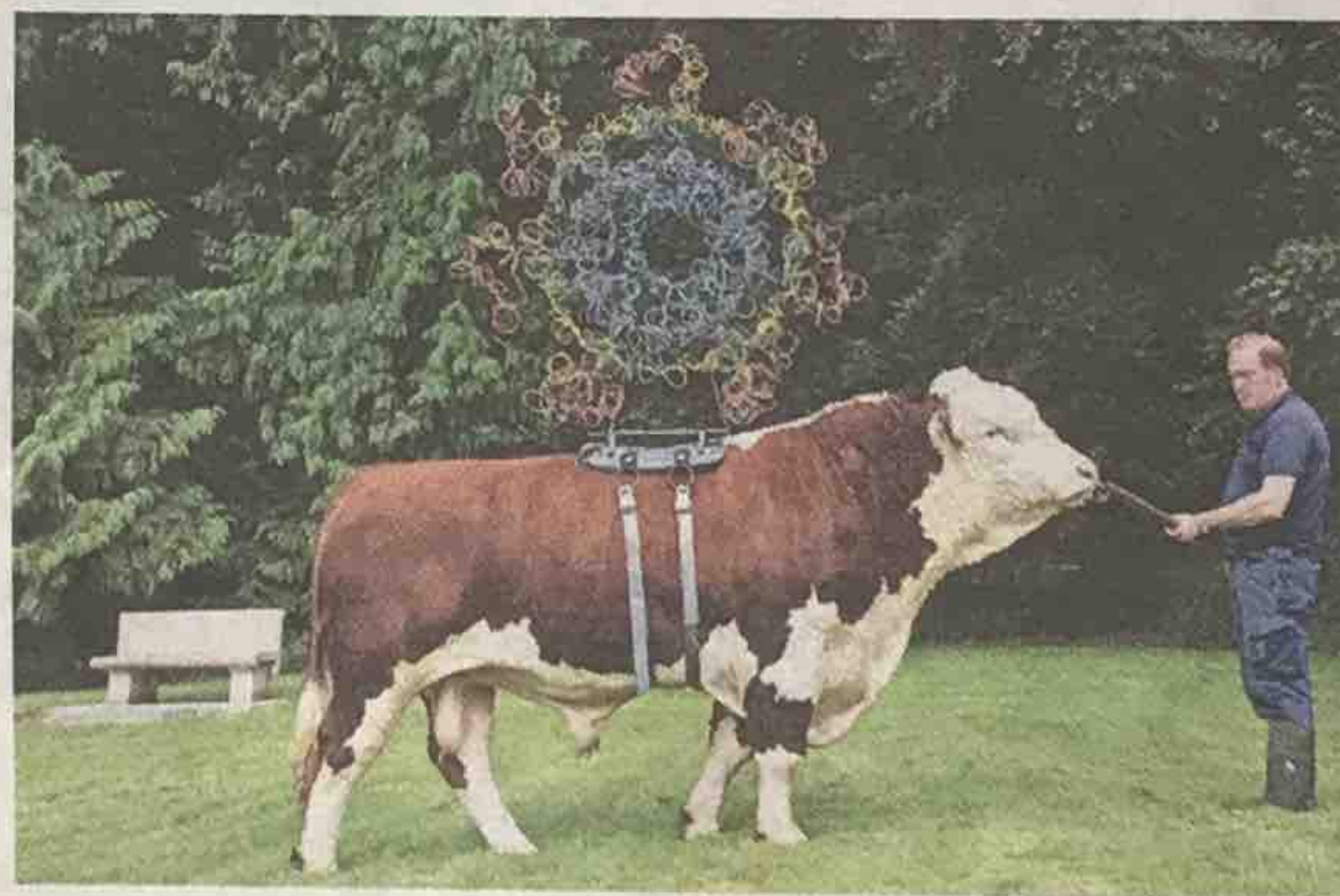
us to cruise the maze of a lurid sex club and so confront today's attitudes towards HIV. Daria Martin, working with the cognitive neuroscientist Michael Banissy, delves into the discombobulating experience of mirror-touch synaesthesia, a neurological condition whereby someone feels the sensation of what another person is touching.

Martina Amati, in *Under*, a project developed with the anaesthetist Professor Kevin Fong, plunges us into the mesmerising undersea realm of the freedivers who, challenging limits in ways that science cannot quite account for, push themselves to physiological and mental brinks.

At their best these pieces are not merely about getting an artist to interpret complex scientific ideas to make them more easily understandable — and hence appealing — to a wider public. Instead they set out to add new layers of something to a study.

McKinney's cattle, for instance, stand like contemporary photographic versions of traditional 18th-century agricultural paintings. They are there, on the most simple level, to be admired in all their muscular physical bulk. But McKinney, who typically works with materials that don't normally belong to art-making, places an elaborate sculpture on each of their backs. These are constructed from coloured plastic straws — the straws that are used as receptacles for their semen, which is then sold for artificial insemination.

With the same handicraft that once would have created corn dollies (associated, McKinney tells us, with pagan fertility rituals), she weaves them into elaborate forms that reflect the characteristics that geneticists are trying to breed into bovines. One is a milk-production graph, another shows the horns that are increasingly being bred out of cattle because they make these creatures harder to handle.



Sire, as the piece is called, articulates complicated scientific ideas in a clear way. But over and above mere illustration it asks us to consider moral questions about man's relationship to beast. For most urban viewers, the bovine is not something that they think much about. Milk comes from supermarkets; the cow is scarcely considered. Yet, as McKinney leads a herd out into the limelight, she interrogates the geneticists who have acted like gods. Science, she suggests, must consider more than merely what is possible. Morality must also be taken into account. Can a living creature be treated as a consumer commodity?

The most entrancing contribution is Amati's *Under*, an immersive multiscreen installation depicting the underwater world. What is up and

what is down? We can't tell. We have entered a place where all defining limits are tested, where everything dissolves into the all-swallowing blue.

Freedivers not only defy physiological possibilities, but their practice poses questions to which scientists have as yet no answer, Fong says. It does not make sense that a process so fundamental to mammalian existence as breathing should be under voluntary control. Perhaps, he says, since we need to control our breath to speak, it brings us an evolutionary advantage. Still, he adds, "it's very weird to be able to stop doing something upon which life depends".

Yet this "weirdness" — not least when it comes to the sense of trance-like euphoria that freedivers describe — is what Amati's work captures. With each film, shot on a single breath of air, the viewer is drawn farther into what feels like a meditative state. Science is lured beyond its conventionally rational boundaries to account for a spiritual realm. It is perhaps an awkward environment for the determinedly logical, but one that we, by our very nature, must address.

The shared aim of artist and scientist, this show suggests, is not just to see the world in new ways, but to communicate that vision. If they are successful, they can change the way in which we also look at things. They can reveal a new "truth", factual or philosophical. "The greatest scientists," declared Einstein, "are artists as well."

From top: *Under* by Martina Amati; *Longevity/Apoptosome*, *Black Water Lad* by Maria McKinney

***Somewhere in Between* is at the Wellcome Collection, London NW1 (020 7611 2222), to August 27**