

## ART MATTERS

## What separates us from animals? You'd be surprised

DAN TRANBERG  
Special to *The Plain Dealer*

Artists have merged images of humans and animals for thousands of years, creating mythical beings that can't possibly exist in the real world.

Or can they?

The work of New York artist Rona Pondick (on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, 8501 Carnegie Ave., through Sunday, Aug. 8) prompted an energized discussion last week on topics ranging from the striking similarities between animal and human DNA to the ethical questions that arise from the vast potential of genetic engineering.

Surrounded by Pondick's eerily lifelike stainless-steel creatures, Dr. Stuart Younger, who heads the bioethics program at Case Western Reserve University, and Dr. Clemencia Colmanares, a scientist at the Cleveland Clinic's Learner Research Institute, offered glimpses into the host of issues regarding the

*Dr. Clemencia Colmanares revealed a startling bit of information: 99 percent of the human genetic code is identical to that of primates.*

genetic interface between humans and animals.

Colmanares, who was born in Bogota, Colombia, and has worked at the Clinic since 1993, began with a brief explanation of the building blocks of genes, showing projected images of DNA molecules and their substructures.

She revealed a startling bit of information: 99 percent of the human genetic code is identical to that of primates.

Her statement created a palpable stir. How could the difference between humans and apes be just 1 percent?

Colmanares explained that the human genetic code is expressed in a long sequence of letters — 3 billion to be exact. One percent

of that number amounts to 30 million differences, which account for the dissimilarities between humans and primates.

She went on to show the similarities in the genetic codes of insects, fish, chickens, rabbits and so on, demonstrating that many species overlap significantly. This led to her second revelatory statement: Scientists can easily mix and match genetic material between animals and humans and make hybrid cells.

Younger stepped in at this point, sharing a story about a colleague who chose not to attend the night's discussion because he found Pondick's work "too disturbing."

The idea functioned as a segue to the topic of "the yuck factor,"

which Younger defined as the uneasy feeling people get from the idea of genetic engineering.

Younger cited several academics who have argued that "the yuck factor" is evidence that genetic engineering is morally wrong. The term was coined by Dr. Leon Kass, chairman of President Bush's Council on Bioethics, who published an essay in the *New Republic* in 1997 titled "The Wisdom of Repugnance."

Younger said that, according to Kass, the revulsion people feel at the thought of humans and animals merging should indicate that genetic engineering goes against the laws of nature.

Colmanares responded by saying that repugnance often is based on ignorance and fear.

Younger agreed, pointing out, for instance, that homosexuality is not tolerated in cultures in which men and women are expected to function in narrowly defined ways but is accepted in societies that understand that both genders can function in a wide range of roles.

A question-and-answer period followed, which was so lively that it took several attempts to bring the evening to a close.

Can scientists raise pigs for the sole purpose of generating hearts to be transplanted into humans? What about kidneys and livers? Can they really create hybrid animals?

Leaving the gallery, it was impossible not to peek back at Pondick's sculptures with new eyes and to wonder: What if . . . ?

---

*Tranberg is a Cleveland artist and writer. Art Matters is a column that runs weekly in Friday! covering the area art scene. To be considered for publication, items about shows or openings must be received three weeks in advance. Mail to Plain Dealer Art Critic, 1801 Superior Ave., Cleveland, OH 44114, or fax to 216-999-6269.*