

TIME

Catherine Wagner: "Photographer: Through A Different Lens"

By James Poniewozik

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Pick up a piece of fruit – a common red fruit, the kind that keeps the doctor away. What do you see? An apple? Not really. You see a bulbous round of apple skin. Maybe a piece of stem. What you don't see is white flesh, black seeds, core – 99% of what makes an apple an apple.

For years, Catherine Wagner, like any other photographer, was limited to documenting the skin of the world. But in the early- to mid- 1990s, doing a series of photographs of science labs, Wagner, 48, was struck by how much of modern science depends on images that a camera cannot capture. To keep exploring the nexus of science and art – part of her ongoing interest in the systems people use to organize and make sense of the world – she decided that "I needed access to the same tools that the scientists work with."

Collaborating with researchers at Stanford University and the Weizmann Institute in Israel, Wagner, whose studio is in San Francisco, began using magnetic-resonance-imaging (MRI) machines and electron microscopes as cameras, magnifying or looking inside objects as prosaic as comcobs and as elusive as dividing cells. The resulting work, collected in the show "Cross Selections" (beginning Nov. 3 at the San Jose Museum of Art), takes the typical still life and turns it, sometimes, literally, inside out.

The luminous black-and-white images are both crisply detailed and ambiguous, allowing Wagner to call attention to the leitmotifs of form that recur throughout nature: "The shark's teeth are like pearls," says Anne Wilkes Tucker, curator of photography at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. "The scallions look like some intricate body part."

The centerpiece of "Cross Sections" is Pomegranates Wall, an 8-ft. by 40-ft. curved, backlit transparency containing thousands of interior views of a pomegranate. Seen close up, the cross-sectioned fruit could be microbes; viewed as a whole, the work resembles a panorama of galaxies. When Wagner shows you a pomegranate, you see all of creation, microscopically and macroscopically. And you really see a piece of fruit as you never have before.

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