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Cells of Beauty

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Photographer Catherine Wagner's foray into science started unintentionally- it was quietly seeded during a series called "American Classroom": an array of photos from empty classrooms all around the country, exhibiting the learning sites as tiny replicas of a larger culture. It was on reflection of the exhibit that Wagner was struck by the questions the classrooms and labs seemed to be asking. No matter if they were used by first graders or high schools, large questions were being asked, questions similar to her own as an artist. This realization would be the start of an extraordinary career in which Wagner worked side by side with many scientists creating works with science tools, artifacts and archives. Shedding the intimidation she felt towards science in high school and college, Wagner delved right in and now operates under the belief that the two fields are not so different, that "there are many paths up a mountain."

Wagner's exhibitions range from a series on the history of light bulbs to Trilogy: Reflections on Frankenstein, the Arctic Circle and the History of Science." But it is the work that happened without a traditional camera that stands out the most. With an artist's fellowship to work with technology, Wagner decided she wanted to see beyond the naked eye. She wanted to see what the scientists saw, so she proposed working with science imaging technology- Magnetic Resonance Imaging and Scanning Electron Microscope machines. With subjects like onions, pomegranates, green beans, an 80-pound pumpkin, and more, Wagner used the MRI technology to get to the essence of the objects; to create a new perspective

using the technology of science and the eye of an artist. Keeping the objects in the machine for over an hour at times, the resolution increased creating highly defined images that no longer represented fruits and vegetables. Instead, many of the images were very cell-like, especially the pomegranate ones, which were often mistaken for actual images of cells. This wasn't the first time genetics had played a part in her art. A previous series of photos featured freezers filled with cell and tissue samples and other archives of genetic research as still lifes, creating, according to Wagner, a portrayal of the human vulnerability that the field of genetics exposes. This human vulnerability seemed at the heart of Wagner's approach,; she wanted to show the miracles and the madness that exist in our ability to change humankind with genetic research. So when the pomegranate images turned out to be cell-like, the work took on this essence of human vulnerability for Wagner, which she expanded into Pomegranate Wall- an 8 foot high, 40 feet long illuminated journey through a single pomegranate.



Catharine Wagner
Pomegranate Wall, 2001
Lambda Duratrans and lightbox
8' x 40' curved wall



The Lamps of 1900 Catherine Wagner



Energy Efficiency Experiment 1980s Catherine Wagner