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FEATURED

TOP STORY

MONA presents Warren Neidich's 'Brain Without Organs'

By Luke Netzley Pasadena Weekly Deputy Editor | Olivia Fougierol/Photographer

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Warren Neidich, the visionary behind “Brain Without Organs,” has combined neurological and aesthetic approaches to further understand humanity’s evolving relationship with information technologies.

As one of the oldest artist-led and -founded museums in the country, Glendale’s Museum of Neon Art has stood as an eclectic and kinetic destination for light-based artworks and historic signage since 1981.

On April 16, the museum hosted the world premiere of Warren Neidich’s “The Brain Without Organs: An Aporia of Care,” investigating the way the human brain acts as both a biologically and socially constructed organ.

“Warren has been working with neon for several years, but his attitude towards it is highly conceptual and brings together a lot of questions about where we are today as a society and how culture is rewiring the brain,” MONA Executive Director Corrie Siegel said. “I think it’s an interesting way of pondering some really big ideas and bringing people into this immersive environment where you’ll be surrounded by this exploded brain and can think about yourself but also feel these conceptual questions.”

In 1996, Neidich co-founded Artbrain.org and “Journal of Neuroaesthetics” and trained as a scientist with Roger Sperry at Caltech before attending medical school. During his studies, Neidich took an intense interest in both photography and neuroscience.

As an artist for more than 35 years, Neidich has looked to combine his background in neuroscience with a distinct creative flair to explore and question the evolving networks of control, surveillance and information prevalent around the world today and how they are redefining and reshaping systems of the brain.

“The reason I’m working with MONA is that in the last five years neon has become the material of my artwork,” Neidich explained.

The exhibition will run until Sept. 25 and will feature two large neon installations as well as a series of blacklight-activated paintings by Neidich himself using light and immersive installations to consider philosophical and conceptual questions around information, capitalism and the evolution of the brain.

“The core message is that the brain is a malleable and changeable entity, what I call the becoming brain,” Neidich said. “It’s not something that’s crystallized and deterministic. It’s something that’s open and that gives a tremendous amount of power to the human being.”

The hanging sculpture “Brain Without Organs” is composed of constellations of levitating branches glowing in white neon tubing. These marks represent the grooves and folds on the outer layer of the brain that serve as mapping devices for scientists to delineate areas of the organ. Rather than forming an anatomically accurate image of the brain, the fissures create an amorphous form which is reflected and distorted by its surroundings.

“‘The Brain Without Organs’ means that the brain is not organized in a set pattern but that it’s capable of change,” Neidich said. “This piece is really about how we can make a brain that understands our ecosystem, relishes it and respects it, that doesn’t want to consume it and use it for our own devices. This is the first piece in which I’ve been experimenting with those ideas.”

The second neon installation is called “Einstein’s Brain” and stands as a wall-mounted sculpture of branching white and red neon shapes that represent the folds in a section of Einstein’s cerebral cortex.

One aspect in the story of Einstein’s brain that piqued Neidich’s interest was the fact that his brain was once stolen from the pathology laboratory at Princeton during autopsy and carried on a journey to Lawrence, Kansas, where it was stored in a basement.

“Warren takes this idea of Einstein’s brain and uses it as a material for his art making, so it’s an abstracted image of the brain, and in abstracting this image of the folds, which are usually dark, he uses neon and makes them bright and expands the space of this map of the brain,” Siegel said. “It’s very abstracted and speaks to all the questions and considerations of when you map anything, because the map itself can be both a tool for discovery and study.”

Before it was stolen, there were photographs taken of Einstein’s brain and it had been examined to reveal what most experts believe are anomalies in his cerebral cortex that distinguish it from typical human brains. In the exhibition, these unique folds are delineated by red neon tubing.

By highlighting the neurodivergence of one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, Neidich’s installation raises the suggestion that neurodiversity is a generator of possibility, rather than limitations.

“Mapping the brain through abstraction can be a liberatory tool, a way of seeing these pieces of flesh that control our bodies as these things that are actually quite expansive, mysterious and ever-changing,” Siegel said. “What Warren puts forth in a lot of his work is that, with the expansion of digital technology and the way that we’re changing our thinking according to algorithms and Instagram, there’s the path of ability to seeing a way out or seeing new possibilities through art and through abstraction.”

Further into the exhibition, there’s a small room filled with black light and paintings that illustrate the brain both anatomically and abstractly. The folds of the brain branch into emojis, text and symbolism mean to reflect the social and political nature of a world where material labor has been replaced by immaterial labor. The fluorescent marks are reminiscent of diagrams, psychedelic paintings and text threads.

“The ‘becoming brain’ is insinuated in an ecosystem of relations,” Neidich explained. “We have to change our idea of the brain to understand it in its ecological sense, its deep ecology.”

A central theme to Neidich's exhibition is the idea that the ecosystem that surrounds a human being impacts the architecture of their brain, including the technology that people use. He argues that there must be new technologies that seek to understand the relationship between the sculpture of the brain and the environment that surrounds it.

"It's been an exciting way of looking at our gallery, transforming it and seeing new possibilities," Siegel said. "That's been a really fun aspect of working with Warren, because he brings a totally different perspective to our space."

Visitors to the Museum of Neon Art will be able to view "Brain Without Organs" as well as MONA's rotating permanent collection of signage and fine art, the Electric Lab where MONA teaches classes and restores signs, as well as the newly opened outdoor exhibition space, the Sign Garden. Groups of 10 or more can request a docent at least two weeks prior to the day of the visit.

"The Brain Without Organs: An Aporia of Care"

WHERE: Museum of Neon Art, 216 S. Brand Boulevard, Glendale

WHEN: April 16 to Sept. 25

COST: \$10 for general admission. \$8 for seniors over 65 years old. \$5 for Glendale residents with ID. Free for MONA Members, veterans with ID and children 12 and under accompanied by an adult.

INFO: neonmona.org