

Q&A: The exhibition designer

A pioneer of interactive museum installations, **Edwin Schlossberg** lets young visitors experience science first hand, from launching a space shuttle to seeing the world through an animal's eyes. As his neuroscience-inspired paintings are shown this month in New York City, he explains how he applies cognitive science to harness children's curiosity.

How do you engage children with science?

If you put a bucket of water in front of a child — 2 years old, 5 years old, even 8 years old — they will play with it forever. They learn a lot because they can craft a range of experiences as they integrate their sensory and physical worlds. I try to design like that. Most science museums try to train future scientists or to say “Isn't science cool?” To me, neither of those attitudes is appropriate. I like to make experiences that allow you to see something differently, in a way that encourages you to have a conversation with other people in the room. It's more about provoking questions than giving answers.

What challenges do science museums face?

Today's parents are afraid of their kids growing smarter than them. When the theme park Sesame Place opened in Dallas, Texas, in the early 1980s, a survey found that the vast majority of parents would not come because they were worried their children would ask questions they couldn't answer. They were afraid of their kids' curiosity. We decided to print tens of thousands of comic books that answered all the questions kids might ask. And we got an audience.

How do you draw on cognitive science?

I want to make exhibits that engage all the senses, so I look to people who have the best understanding of neurophysiology and learning. When I designed for the Brooklyn Children's Museum in New York, I talked with child psychologist Jean Piaget. Then I read sociologist Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which argues that we often behave like actors, taking on roles that influence how we respond to our surroundings and each other. I've consulted educational computer scientist Seymour Papert and artificial-intelligence pioneer Marvin Minsky at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Most of these scientists think that learning by doing is better than just looking or hearing.



How does the public see neuroscience?

Amazing discoveries are happening in labs all over the world, but they are not visible to the public. I'm not aware of any current major exhibit on neuroscience in the United States or abroad. For the US pavilion at the 2005 World's Fair in Japan, I proposed an exhibit with my company ESI Design on how people are imaging neurons. We thought it would be important, beautiful and interesting. But President George W. Bush didn't like it.

You designed a museum for NASA at the Stennis Space Center in Mississippi?

Yes, it's right next to the highway — the first science museum in the country that is also a rest stop. It is now scheduled to open next year because the site was completely destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and construction was delayed. It's a space museum, but the main focus will be on meteorology. You'll walk into a big spherical theatre, put on 3D glasses and feel like you're at the centre of a hurricane. Then the sides of the theatre will roll up to reveal labs where you can explore the tools that allow us to

make the weather visible. You'll be able to turn on sensors to monitor the wind speed and water temperature at buoys in the Gulf of Mexico, and compare that with what you see outside the building.

What other exhibits are you working on?

Did you ever see a Tamagotchi, the digital toy that would 'die' if you didn't pay attention to it? I found that idea creepy but brilliant. For the exhibit at the Children's Museum of Los Angeles in California [which was due to open next year, but the funding for which is now uncertain], we tried to make it feel as if it was an ecosystem the children had to take care of with their own hands. They walk into this fantastical place with a giant tree and animals called Dogbear and Puppycub that seem to be sleeping. If the kids start to blow air and shine lights, the creatures wake up and they can pet and feed them.

Is there anything you've always wanted to build?

An oversize scale model of the human body as a giant pinball game. It would be the size of an American-football field. A hundred people playing together would make all the systems work so the body wakes up. It might help us to think of ourselves not just as individuals, but as a gigantic community of cells.

You're also a painter. How does your art relate to the brain?

My new set of paintings shows what I imagine your neuron patterning would be if you were thinking of a phrase — such as “You being focused”, “You considering stillness”, “You absolutely certain”. It thrills me that scientists are able to see neurons. My art is what we might see if we could witness the process of thinking itself. ■

Interview by **Jascha Hoffman**, a writer based in New York.

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