Ten years ago SymbioticA, an art-science collective based within the School of Anatomy and Human Biology, University of Western Australia, embarked on an ambitious program wherein artists would be invited to enter scientific laboratories as “residents.” There they would learn various biological techniques and protocols and would be mentored by both scientists and other artists as they produced “bioart.” A retrospective of some of the resulting work is currently on display in Visceral (curated by SymbioticA cofounder Oron Catts and member Ionat Zurr), at the Science Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin. The show’s three-day opening (“birth”) included a symposium that drew together the curators, former residents, other bioartists, and scholars working in the art-science collaborations. In the wet lab at the University of Western Australia, artists are fully implicated in the biological world that they comment on and from which they draw inspiration. Indeed, the immediate focal point upon entering the Dublin gallery is a working biosafety level 2 laboratory, in which the artists grow and maintain their artworks. All 15 pieces in the exhibition deploy “living” biomaterials as an expressive medium. Tissue Culture and Art Project’s now-iconic Semi-Living Worry Dolls (2000) was crafted from degradable polymers and surgical sutures and seeded with living cells that are nurtured within the surrogate body of a microgravity bioreactor. In Neurotica’s Silent Barrage (2009), a set of robotic relays, responding to audience movement, amplifies neural activity in distantly located, cultured nerve cells. Boo Chapple’s Transjuicer (2010) takes advantage of the piezoelectric nature of bone matrix to make cow-bone audio speakers that emit nanosonic vibrations. Elsewhere in the exhibition, works—such as Alicia King’s The Vision Splendid (2009), Svenja Kratz’s Afterlife: Immortalisation of Kira and Rama (2011), and Tagny Duff’s Cryobook Archives (2010)—examine technological and ethical issues involved in the storage of tissue-based bioart as well as more philosophical issues involved in thinking of cells and living systems as reservoirs for inheritance and memory.

The embeddedness of the artist within the laboratory underts any easy reading of these works as critical of the “monstrous” capacity of the biological sciences to reorder and reform living material. Certainly, such works as Abhishek Hazra’s Let a Thousand Proteins Bloom (2011), which attempts to produce ammonium nitrate from human breast milk, speak to an underlining philosophy of science that privileges utilitarianism. And the exhibition’s guidebook points out the squeamishness invoked by the chimerical, semi-living creatures on show elsewhere within the gallery. But, taken as a collection, these works harken not to a Faustianism but to the classical monster (from the Latin monstrum, to point to that which is worthy of warning). These singular wonders portend a radical shift in the social order, prompting horror and anxiety in some but also the promise of a more open, inclusive world for others. Several exhibits—including Paul Vanouse’s Latent Figure Protocol (2008), which uses DNA samples from an industrially produced organism to create an image in reactive gel; Andre Brody’s Proto-Animate (2009–), in which Escherichia coli and the gene APOE (associated with Alzheimer’s disease) are used as creative agents; and Nigel Helyer’s Host (2003), which presents 200 live crickets with a video presentation on the sex life of insects—explore questions of how we are to consider and negotiate both life and agency in a post-Darwinian world.

The significance of the exhibition’s title thus seems to ensue not so much from the gory spectacle of experimentally manipulated viscera but from the desire to seek within these tissues a vision of things to come. Collaborators such as Paul Thomas and Kevin Raxworthy do not seek to present the “truth” of science but rather to place particular scientific endeavors and techniques within a format and setting that allows them to be experienced via the senses, thus encouraging the emergence of a complex set of feelings and thoughts toward them. In Thomas and Raxworthy’s immersive installation Midas, this is accomplished by realizing touch at the nanoscale (otherwise indiscernible) as a series of atomic vibrations recorded via an atomic force microscope. This sonic representation is played back by touching a gold-coated model of a skin cell connected to a digital projection of a cell.

A work created especially for the exhibition, Perdita Phillips’s The Summer Flurries (2011), collapses both scale and space. Wearing headphones and using a Global Positioning System receiver, visitors walk the streets of Dublin while listening to the sounds of an Australian wetland. The waves of sound displace one’s sense of place but also allow for connections to emerge between the human and nonhuman, the city and the environment.

Although encompassing a wide range of practices and materials, the works appearing in Visceral are drawn together by a sense of ongoing experimentalism and a delight in exploring what contemporary experimental systems make possible. Such bioart is at once wondrous and unsettling, spectacular and deeply felt.

References and Notes
1. Deborah Dixon was an invited speaker at this symposium.