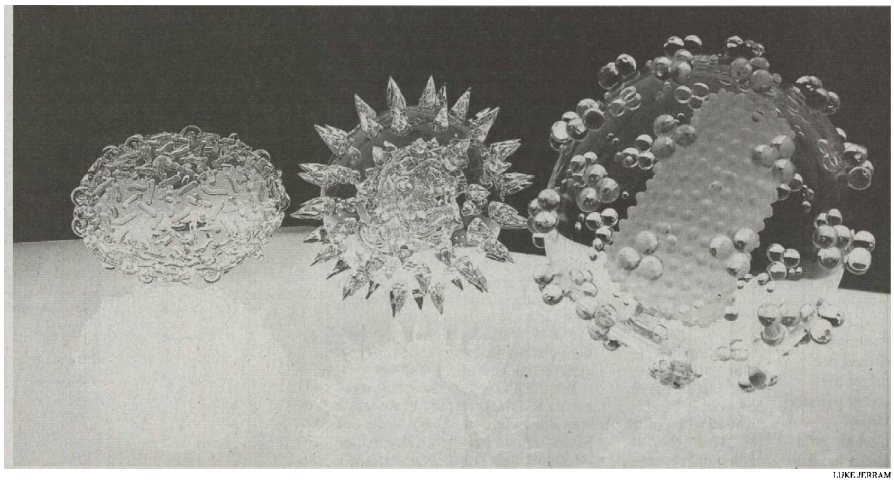
Headline	**Rendering beauty to natural-born killers**		
Date	**17 Jun 2010**	Language	**English**
MediaTitle	**International Herald Tribune**	Page No	**10**
Section	**Health Science**	Article Size	**376 cm²**
Journalist	**N/A**	Color	**Black/white**
Frequency	**Daily**	ADValue	**7,014**
Circ / Read	**91,039 / 273,117**	PRValue	**21,041**

Rendering beauty to natural-born killers

British artist designs 3-dimensional sculptures of deadly viruses

BY DONALD G. MCNEIL JR.



LUKE JERRAM

The smallpox virus, left and, H.I.V., right, as imagined by Luke Jerram. The sculpture at center is an untitled work of a future mutation.

In a gallery in Manhattan's meatpacking district, balanced delicately on mirrored surfaces and quivering slightly with each passing truck, is a lineup of history's greatest killers: smallpox, influenza, HIV.

They are all beautifully rendered in blown glass, their shining, spiky capsids (you have to wonder how they get the window cleaner into those delicate crevices) encasing their destructive RNA or DNA cores, which are rendered as spiraling dots of milky glass. They are beautiful hand grenades, the illusion heightened by their precarious perches over a hard floor.

Medical journals have cooed over them, and a rendition of the AIDS virus by the artist, Luke Jerram, is in the collection of the Wellcome Trust, Britain's equivalent of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

But as someone covering infectious disease, I found myself offended: I've watched people dying of these things now rendered as $10,000 paperweights. There's something unseemly about celebrating the beauty in something that does such ugly things — in a way that I don't feel when Steuben does it to a snail.

Mr. Jerram defends his work by arguing that it is in the tradition of today's young British artists contemplating death aesthetically — he cited Damien Hirst's dissected animals.

But Mr. Jerram is also on a mission. Science journals, he said in an interview, always color their pictures of viruses — sometimes for clarity, but sometimes just to make them look scarier.

As a partly colorblind person, he feels that inserts bias. After all, electron microscope photographs are black and white, since they are essentially miniature X-rays. Viruses, most of which are 10 to 300 nanometers long, are actually smaller than a wave of visible light.

His renditions, he argued, are in the "natural colorless state." (He checks his sketches with a virologist, Dr. Andrew Davidson of the University of Bristol. The sculptures themselves are made by professional glass blowers.)

However, Mr. Jerram's renditions are adjusted, too — they are not to scale. The outer spikes that pierce cells (the hemagglutinin "H" of the H1N1 flu virus, for example) are exaggerated into medieval battle maces. Did he, I asked, do that to make them look scarier? Real viruses, in electron microscopy, resemble fuzzy, irregular balls.

That thought — viruses as irregular, fuzzy balls — suddenly raises the question of whether I am being a pious hypocrite. Maybe it's the price tags I find irksome, more than the idea of swooning over a killer's beauty — though I would be offended by, say, a portrait of the cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer celebrating his good looks.

After all, I don't mind anthropomorphized viruses when they're rendered as $8 plush toys with googly eyes. I even have hepatitis and chikungunya on my desk (hep's yellow, chik is white with a red faux-hawk.) And, as a colleague noted, I sometimes wear a bubonic plague necktie.

No, Mr. Jerram said, there was no plot to make them scarier. His limitation is glass's fragility; if they were to scale, they would crumble.

And to judge from the rest of his work, he's nowhere near as in love with death as his contemporaries. When he has blended art and science before, it has either pulsed with life — a concert using the sounds made inside plants — or has been filled with wonder — another concert played on squeaky water-filled globes he swears were tuned by the pull of the moon.

And next week, he has an armada of pianos coming to New York City to be left on street corners for anyone to play. Clearly, it's showmanship he loves.

But then he groused in a way that would endear him to any grumpy science-journalism hack.

"I'm just now on the front page of one of the Nature journals," he said. "But they used one of my swine flu sculptures to illustrate HIV. You'd think they would have known better."

ONLINE: THE WORK OF LUKE JERRAM

A slide show with more of Mr. Jerram's creations, and the latest health and science news. **global.nytimes.com/science**