

# Where Art meets SCIENCE

Children generally decide whether they want to go into arts or sciences at an early age in their schooling, and once they've made that decision, it's an us-versus-them type of scenario. Daniela Brill Estrada and Guadalupe Aldrete have found ways to smash that glass ceiling and will be showcasing their art installation, with a scientific edge, ReFraming Carbon, at Science in the City on September 28. They explain it to Rachel Zammit Cutajar.

SCIENCE and the arts seem worlds apart, but Daniela Brill Estrada and Guadalupe Aldrete, also known as Lala Nomada, say this isn't the case. Art is made up of the physical, which is commanded by science.

Daniela, born in Bogotá, Colombia, went down the road of fine arts, however, her family was strongly tied to the world of science, particularly physics, so she was always trying to link the two worlds together. This becomes evident in her drawings, representations and installations.

Guadalupe, born in Mexico, has been studying art for the last 10 years, however, at school, she was always interested in science and couldn't believe she had to choose between the two. "I understood that science is everywhere. Even art is chemical, so I needed to find a way to do both," she says.

The two met at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, Austria, where they were both studying for a Master's in Arts and Science. Guadalupe having completed the course earlier this summer and Daniela set to finish in January of next year. Though they had never worked together before, both artists had done some work with carbon. Guadalupe looking at it from a socio-economic point of view and the materialisation of social problems, while Daniela had taken a more physical and bio-chemical standpoint.

So how does all this fit into an art installation at Science in the City on September 28? The artists are taking a biochemical virtual route of some of Malta's oldest archaeological sites. Setting up their installation in St. George's Square in Valletta, they will be leading the audience on an interactive journey through time using the chemical carbon.

"The idea is to form a link between past, present and future using carbon. We are using carbon from the past in the archaeological sites we have selected in Malta and Gozo, namely Ġgantija Temples, Tarxien Temples and Skorba.

"Carbon is involved in the entire structure of the human body, even as the holding structure of our DNA, therefore, we will be using it from the participants' own bodies in the 'present' frame of the installation.

"It is also one of the changing elements in the planet's chemistry, and carbon dioxide prints, produced by air travel, will form the frame we chose for the 'future'," they explain. And it's an interesting aspect for an island such as Malta.

"From an ecological perspective, we need to reduce our carbon footprint and reduce air travel, however, you cannot talk about saving the environment in a vacuum.

"Because Malta is an island, air travel is vital to the Maltese, both for Maltese people getting out and for a flourishing tourism industry. We somehow need to find a middle point where the environment can be protected along with everyday life."

At Science in the City, they will be projecting these three frames together by creating a virtual route through Malta's greatest and oldest archaeological sites, which are a symbol for the archipelago's interest in technology and innovation, as well as the traces of a 6,000-year-old civilisation.

History lectures should be reserved for the classroom, and this project is far from a mundane lesson. It is people-dependent, and the audience can expect to be taken on a journey through Malta's technological prowess in pre-history and be fully involved in the story telling.

The playful project should be of interest to people from all walks of life, young and old, scientists, artists, and anyone else, the women say. "Those coming to see the installation are imperative to our project, as they will be the ones activating it. It's an interactive installation, but not in the way that you press a button and something happens; without people the project doesn't work at all."

Archaeology has an important meaning for Daniela and Guadalupe. Guadalupe has worked professionally in archaeological excavations and research projects both in Mexico and in Europe. For Daniela, the archaeological inspiration has been triggered more by poetry than by actual research since she has used poems by Latin-American writers that use mythology of ancient and indigenous tribes as inspiration.

Although the megalithic temples in Malta, which are some of the oldest free-standing structures on earth, were very interesting to the duo, this was not what brought them here. They were drawn to the island by an open call invitation from the University of Malta to the University of Applied Arts in Vienna.

The University of Malta was looking for artists interested in working in Malta, and after some research into Malta's prehistoric temples, they were confident they could produce something of interest.

Even during their application, Daniela and Guadalupe received a lot of help from local scientists, aiding them with their own research into carbon dating of the temples and building a network of communication that would help the duo realise their dreams.

The Fragsus Project, a European initiative that aims to shed light on how the Maltese Islands were transformed and exploited during the first few thousand years of human activity, was also of invaluable support to them. With the help of Dr John Betts from the University of Malta, Caroline Malone, Catriona Brogan and Rowan McLaughlin from the Fragsus Project, they won the application and got to work on their project, spending a week in Malta in March gathering data.

"Though we are appreciative of any help we get from scientists around the world, this is not always the case when working in this male-dominated environment. We are disadvantaged in more ways than one in that we are two young female artists who are not scientists.

"Though a good percentage of people take us seriously and are excited to work with us, we have often come across the attitude where we are just considered cute little girls, trying to get into the world of science, with many scientists simply dismissing us completely. "Getting what you want is hard in this kind of environment, but not impossible," Daniela says confidently. "You just need to stick to your guns and not feel intimidated by the condescending scientist. Once they realise you're not afraid of them, they take a step back and there you have earned a little bit of respect. Stick to

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Guadalupe Aldrete and Daniela Brill Estrada.

your focus and even if you don't know the science, you can learn. Keep pushing your ideas, and eventually, they will get through to the right people.

"Then there are also people who will help you to a certain point, telling you it's good enough – good enough for a young female artist. But good enough is not enough. I will not rest until I can do something worthwhile."

When talking about the 'present' frame, where the artists are using carbon in our own body structure, Guadalupe talks about her own life. She has performed under the name of Lala Nomada, however, she is going back to using her real one after her last exhibition *Dilúidos*, which focuses on political and security issues in Mexico.

"Working with carbon has made me look inwards and I need to go back to my Mexican origins to tell the story of who I really am. I feel like the era of Lala Nomada is over, and as a grown-up artist, I will be using my real name Guadalupe Aldrete."

Daniela and Guadalupe will be in Malta from September 21 until October 8 to set up the installation and prepare for their big day at Science in the City, where they will have two volunteers to help them explain what participants need to do to activate the installation. They will exhibit the same artwork again at Notte Bianca on October 6.

While they are here, they hope to visit the temples they have spent the last five months working on. And on a personal level, Daniela hopes to visit the monastery where Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal wrote a number of his poems. ■