

## CHEMISTRY

## Enigmatic elements

A Philadelphia exhibition is a playful celebration of the periodic table, reports **Katharine Sanderson**.

humans than on physical matter. In an age of increasing professionalization, especially among botanists, chemists, geologists and physicians, philosophical approaches diverged.

As mechanism was fracturing, Gaukroger notes, a new literary form was emerging that would develop into the novel. He writes, "It is internal psychological exploration, in the form of refined sensibility, rather than external events that have become the focus of the novel". It is true that sensibility needed these new forms of prose, and that it underlies our cognitive life far more than mechanism does. But such pronouncements are too few to explain why sensibility toppled centuries of mechanical thought.

Imaginative literature, later codified as 'Romantic', also drove nails into mechanism's coffin by postulating that matter was more complex than the mechanical natural philosophers thought. A human is not a mere machine; a fly is much harder to study than a pebble. By focusing on human nature rather than physical matter, the language of the new literature helped to alter the way scientists conceived their models, and enabled modernity to commence its work.

In this sense, the 1760s was a watershed decade — except that sensibility had already reared its head in French imaginative literature a century earlier. Just when you think Gaukroger has sent mechanism to its grave, he weaves in broader elements of history that further complicate the evolving drama of mechanism's failures. This is to be expected — intellectual history rarely evolves in orderly ways. Its fault lines are unkempt and its major paradigms overlap. It is to Gaukroger's credit that he avoids facile explanation.

Massive shifts in the history of knowledge are difficult to chart. The late historian of science Thomas Kuhn resorted to the intricate concepts of 'paradigm shifts', whereas philosopher Michel Foucault elaborated the acceptance of certain ideas at certain times in his 'epistemes'. But historians and scientists have different expectations of what constitutes adequate context. In my view, Gaukroger has soft-pedalled the socio-cultural aspects of sensibility. His approach sheds new light on mechanism's decline, but less on its organic replacement. I hope that a subsequent volume will rectify the imbalance. ■

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Elements, the fundamentals of chemistry, have an almost mystical symbolism. The astounding concept that all matter and all life comes from the coupling of energy with this ordered list of atoms unifies an exhibition to celebrate the International Year of Chemistry 2011. *Elemental Matters*, which opened this month at the Chemical Heritage Foundation in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and runs throughout 2011, features the work of seven artists known for tackling chemistry themes.

Canadian artist David Clark jokes that he was inspired to create pieces based on the periodic table because the symbols for the consecutive elements chlorine, argon and potassium spell out his surname. His work focuses on the structure of the table rather than its chemical contents. In *I Don't Think You Understand the Way I Feel About the Stove* (2000; pictured) — borrowing from the words of *Stove*, a song by Canadian indie rock band Eric's Trip — he replaces the chemical symbols with 118 identical rusty electric-stove heating elements. "By collecting objects that are all the same, it emphasizes the table's meaning as a sign," he says.

In *Braille* (2000), Clark reorganizes the elemental symbols into another familiar

**Elemental Matters: Artists Imagine Chemistry**  
Chemical Heritage Foundation,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.  
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chart, the eye test. The letters, also translated into Braille, shrink in size with each descending line. "The Braille fades into nothingness," says Clark. "They are like atoms, moving

beyond our touch." His intent is to remind us that the shape of the periodic table, even without the information it usually holds, has become iconic.

The chemical ingredients of the human body are decoupled in New York artist Dove Bradshaw's *Self Interest* (1999), a series of 58 flasks mounted in a glass case. Each container holds a sample of an element scaled to the amount found in a person weighing 45 kilograms. The flasks containing trace elements such as yttrium, thorium or beryllium are only as big as three pinheads, notes Bradshaw. The piece explores whether our existence can be stripped down to material constituents.

The elemental forces of nature, and the chemical changes tied up with those forces, also find a place in this exhibition. In Bradshaw's *Waterstone* (1996), for example, a funnel drips water at a steady rate onto a limestone block. Running since the mid-1990s, the trickle of seven drops every minute has eroded a small dent in the carbonate.

The displayed works include more literal takes on the elements — in sound as well as vision. *Elements in Descending Order of Creation from Collapsing Stars*, by Oregon-based composer Susan Alexander, transposes the vibrational frequencies of atoms down by 14 octaves into the audible range. Her musical 'scale' runs from hydrogen, helium, carbon, nitrogen and oxygen to silicon, phosphorus and sulphur.

The show also includes collaborative works, such as a giant printed collage of the 118 elements of the periodic table interpreted by 97 artists, with each print in its conventional place.

Chemists usually think of the periodic table in abstract terms, as a reference book or an aid to their research. These artworks remind us of the mystery that the elements can also evoke. ■

**Katharine Sanderson** is a writer based in France.

*"A series of 58 flasks holds a sample of an element scaled to the amount found in a person weighing 45 kilograms."*



Stove elements replace chemical ones in David Clark's artwork inspired by the periodic table.