The current exhibitions at the National Academy of Sciences galleries highlight the large range of contemporary practices evolving at the intersection of art and science. Jeffrey Kent, from Maryland, and Stefanie Bürkle, from Berlin, show two very different bodies of work, yet they are both dedicated to a similar purpose of using their visual language to transform the viewer’s
perspective. Kent’s paintings explore the world of cellular microscopy, expressing his concern with medical ethics, politics, and race, while Bürkle aims her camera at the creative processes of art and science, weighing in on ideas including time, space, and creativity.

Curated by Carol Rhodes Dyson, Jeffrey Kent’s exhibition "Surface from Under the Microscope: The Henrietta Lacks Series" is devoted to Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman who died at the age of 31 from cervical cancer in 1951. Her biopsy samples, which were extracted at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins hospital, were the first sample to successfully produce immortalized cells. These cells had the unique virtue to propagate in vitro, and were invaluable for medical research. They were named HeLa Cells, after her initials. In fact, they were perpetually grown and continuously sold by lab researchers and medical businesses without any acknowledgement or compensation to Ms. Lacks or her family, a well-known story now due to the nonfiction book by Rebecca Skloot.

Following this history, Kent paints HeLa samples from virtual contrast reference microscopy imagery. The paintings, which look at first like pure abstraction, feel gooey and muddy, as he manages to reinstate on his canvases the appearance of their original biological consistency. In his thick painting process he endows the scientific images with new materiality, which reads as cellular matrices. Using turbid colors and varnish, he renders the paintings with gel appearance, which he stacks with heterogeneous mixtures of small amorphous bodies. The muddy texture appears broken and peeled in some instances as he adds on top of it single streaks of brilliant unmixed colors. The panels are stuffed; each layer is crowded with biological shapes and textures that blend into each other. This mass of paint is confined by a meandering perimeter that
allows the impasto build to extend almost to the edge of each frame. The jammed gooey areas create a sense of disease on the paintings. Their turbidity translates into congealed gel viscosity, and small streaks that Kent applies on their face read like cuts or some foreign penetrating bodies.

"The Carnival, Anything Can Happen (A Positive to Every Negative)" (2018) by Jeffrey Kent. Photo credit CPNAS.

"Split Decision 2" (2017) by Jeffrey Kent. Photo credit CPNAS.

"Studio + Laboratory: Workshops of Knowledge" exhibition at CPNAS. Photo credit CPNAS.
The exhibition "Studio + Laboratory: Workshops of Knowledge" by Stefanie Bürkle is monochromatic in comparison, displaying an ink jet print survey of architectural interiors that are dedicated to creation. In two sets of photographs, of science laboratories and of art studios, she creates a visual analogy between the two territories.

"Berlin Electro Storage Ring (BESSY)" (2001) by Stefanie Bürkle. Photo courtesy of CPNAS.

"Studio Jonathan Meese" (2017) by Stefanie Bürkle. Photo courtesy of CPNAS.
Bürkle started this series by photographing laboratories at the Technical University of Berlin, where she has been teaching for over 10 years. Capturing their structural geometry, she documents arrays of scientific devices, which seem enigmatic as they are nestled in grids of shelves, windows, beams, and rods. Her Berlin studio photos show similar architectures with assortments of artistic tools, arranged on tables and shelves. The similarity of the images of the different spaces is hard to miss. Some visual parallels include stretchers at the Data Assimilation Low Speed Wind Tunnel Laboratory echoing those at the Studio Asta Gröting. The photos Studio Tomás Saraceno with the recognizable polygons of his preparatory models for the current Venice Biennale installation are reminiscent in shape to the spheres at the High Voltage Hall. In other pictures the visual parallel is more loosely implied between rows of ordered art objects and scientific devices.

Surveying these interiors methodically, Bürkle captures them void of human presence while the creative work is still far from its final stage, a product not yet in sight. Capturing each space at a time of repose, the contents of these workspaces appear frozen. The commendable order of functional objects creates a sense of stopped action in the multiple workroom images. The inaction itself becomes a performative anticipation, allowing a glance at the in-between.

"High Voltage Hall, High Voltage Engineering" (2019) by Stefanie Bürkle. Photo courtesy of CPNAS
This visual rumination on creation by Bürkle attains an additional meaning next to the meditation on society by Kent. Her presentation of quiet atmosphere and striking order in both art and science is powerful, yet it is further enhanced by comparison to the turbulent expression and amorphous optics in the adjacent hall. Her series, initiated as a philosophical survey of the creation process, becomes a cultural witness. At the same time, Kent, whose work stands as a social examination, expands and demands systematic introspection. The simultaneous exhibitions begin a new meditation into the ramifications that the intersection of science opens to artistic practice.