What inspired you to start using insects?

I spent several years in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s in the area known as the Golden Triangle (where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, formerly Burma, meet) researching tribal dress. At that time I discovered a particular garment known as a “singing shawl,” worn by young women of the Karen tribe, that is embellished with metallic beetle wings in place of beads or sequins. It was very exciting to find something utilized that was so naturally beautiful and readily available. Since then, I have found other groups that use whole beetles or the wings applied to garments, headdresses, and baskets.

In 1995, I finally got my hands on some of the metallic beetles that I intended to use in a piece. I was doing a residency in Japan, just outside of Tokyo. Part of the purpose of the residency was to interact with the locals and any visitors who came to my studio. There were three little boys eight or nine years old who came to visit every day after school. One day, they saw me working with the insects and they thought, “Cool! She likes insects, we like insects!” and a friendship was formed, although we had no language in common. Each day, the boys would stop by and show me what they had caught. If it was dead, they generally left it with me, and if alive they took it home to put in little cricket cages. After a while my studio was beginning to look like a bug cemetery, and so to amuse the children, I started pinning insects to the wall in repeat patterns. It seemed obvious that this should be my next step. And so I began pinning insects to the wall in patterns that mimic textiles and wallpaper.

Do you ever reuse the insects?

I always reuse my insects. I have made a significant financial investment in them, some of them costing as much as $25 a piece. If anything gets broken I repair it. It is beyond repair then I keep the parts to make magical, hybrid type creatures.

Another reason I reuse the insects is that it is the right thing to do! I have spent considerable time in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand and Malaysia where most of the insects I work with come from. While none of these species are endangered, it is important to note that their habitat is under assault. Unsurprisingly, forests play second fiddle to human demands for agriculture and urbanization. Intellectually, we recognize that forests are the lungs of the planet but not enough is being done to protect this precious resource. Virtually every insect on the endangered species list is there because of loss of habitat. Collecting insects is ecologically sound if done in a thoughtful manner but unfortunately it is not always practiced.

Many people who visit my exhibitions were never aware that such unusual insects exist. I hope that my exhibitions will get them excited and perhaps they will be motivated to get involved with one of the many rain forest preservation projects out there. How is urban and suburban encroachment affecting wildlife big and small in your neighborhood? It is easy to take up the case of larger mammals, birds and fish but what about smaller creatures who have an important role in the ecosystem?

The result is a kind of Victorian fancy for they are over the top environments in which the evidence of “horror vacui” (the fear of empty space) is in full display. Emotions range and rapidly fluctuate from fear to awe to distaste to wonder. The beauty one observes is in the patterns and the repetition.

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To me, insects have an important role in the ecosystem.