ARRANGING NATURE

For the past twelve years, Jennifer Angus has been creating installations composed of insects pinned directly to a wall in repeating patterns which reference both textiles and wallpaper.

A tension is created by the beauty one observes in the pattern and the apprehension we feel toward insects.

Where do you obtain such large quantities of the same insect? And how do you preserve/store so many of them?

The insects come from specimen dealers. The insects are dead and dried. When I receive a shipment, the insects are in handmade packages which consist of a piece of cardboard upon which the insect lies and then covered with cellophane which is stapled obsessively. I then place a piece of cardboard upon which the insect lies and then covered with cellophane which is stapled obsessively to hold the specimen in place. The insects' legs and wings are not spread. It's my job to "relax" them, in other words rehydrate them so that then I can move their wings or legs and pin them into position. I have to create a humidity chamber and leave the insects in for a few days before they are soft enough to move their limbs. Once they are pinned into position, they dry and will hold the specimen in place. The insects' legs and wings are not spread. It's my job to "relax" them, in other words rehydrate them so that then I can move their wings or legs and pin them into position. I have to create a humidity chamber and leave the insects in for a few days before they are soft enough to move their limbs. Once they are pinned into position, they dry and will hold the specimen in place.

Some insects are pinned onto foam core boards and stacked into plastic storage boxes.

How do you create your installations? How long do they usually take to complete?

Installations are sometimes inspired by the physical space particularly if it's a historic one like my recent exhibitions in Germany and France. In both cases the museums were formerly villas of old aristocratic families. It's a lot of fun to be inspired by a space, and create a kind of narrative with my installation that reflects the history of that place.

Sometimes a gallery is simply a white box without much history. I'm not interested in doing the same things over and over. In every exhibition, I try to do something new because that's what keeps things exciting.

I always work with the gallery floor plan. I have a picture of each insect to scale on my computer and in Photoshop work out my design. The physical installation typically takes a week to ten days depending on the scale, complexity and how much help I have.

What is the symbolism behind each of the arrangements? How do you become inspired for a new idea?

Perhaps you have walked on a warm summer evening and seen fireflies dancing in the sky. There is something magical about the light, and one wishes one could be part of the festivities and the mystery. Such a desire may seem childish, and I note that indeed children's literature is populated with wonderful six-legged characters such as the insect companions in James and the Giant Peach or the fabulously glamorous cockroach in La Guancheita Martina. In fact, what is considered the first children's story in the English language that was not a moral tale or fable is The Annabellas Ball and The Grasshoppers Feast by William Roscoe dating from 1808. In the Victorian era, both adults and children were introduced to the natural world through a large number of educational publications in which insects were anthropomorphized so as to have greater appeal to the general reading public. In 1849, Cecil Alexander wrote:

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All wings arise and wonderful
The Lord God made them all.

The message is simple: treat each person and every animal with the respect they deserve. Yet it's easy to hate insects. They scurry across the floor in an odd way and on occasion they bite. Culturally, they are a sign of dirtiness and disease. I seek to rehabilitate the image of insects and draw correlations between humans and members of six-legged kingdom. The fear we have of insects is generally unwarranted. Their role in the environment is vital; whether it be in the pollination of flowers that in turn produce the fruits we so enjoy, or the decomposition of matter. They don't deserve a blast of "Raid" or a beating with a flyswatter.

I attempt to channel the Victorian aesthetic of taste, clutter and exotica from an age in which travel, exploration and scientific study were immensely popular. In my mind, the elephant's foot umbrella stand is the quintessential object which defines the era, for it is exotic yet grotesque. For the irresistible Victorian collector, nothing was sacrosanct. In the heyday of collecting, the prestige of a large collection with the finest and most unusual specimens was enormous. White men of science worked in the field collecting, the wealthy sponsored expeditions and were the great accumulators.

What do you love most about patterns?

I am interested in the way pattern functions as a kind of language. Without written word, a pattern can identify one's gender, ethnicity, position in a community or even marital status. In the oral story telling tradition, a pattern upon cloth is often the starting point for a very tall tale.

My installations are to some degree inspired by the wallpapers associated with the William Morris and Liberty companies of the mid to late 19th century. These companies created wallpapers that were lush and abundant with flora and fauna.

My work is dependent upon the supposition that there is a cultural understanding of pattern. When viewers enter my installations, they are greeted with something they think they know: a patterned wallpaper. I am inspired by pattern to which repetition is inherent. Thus the notion of infinity is closely linked, for when does a pattern end?

The connection I have made between insects and pattern is not arbitrary. Scientists have identified over 950,000 insect species, and the bee (Insecta) population alone makes up one quarter of the animal population.

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