

Her Medium Is Mantises (and Other Small Creatures) With a Story to Tell



Photographs by Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

RIGHT AT HOME Catherine Chalmers raises small creatures and photographs them in her studio in Lower Manhattan. This panther chameleon, a native of Madagascar, will be featured in her video "Safari," part of an exhibition called "Ecotopia," which opens at the International Center of Photography in New York on Sept. 14.

For the artist Catherine Chalmers, whose photographs of cannibalistic praying mantises appear on the first page of this section, the hardest part was raising the mantises.

Ms. Chalmers specializes in close-ups of insects and other small creatures, often in narrative sequences that are gruesome and hilarious in equal measures. For the mantis series, part of her book "FoodChain: Encounters Between Mates, Predators and Prey" (Aperture, 2000), she started with eggs ordered from a biological supply house and carefully raised the insects to maturity in her Lower Manhattan

apartment, a process that took months.

Among other things, Ms. Chalmers also raised the fruit flies, houseflies and blowflies that were the mantises' food supply. And after the insects had molted, she had to consult an entomologist to help with the tricky task of telling males from females.

To photograph the mating mantises, Ms. Chalmers placed a male and a female about two feet apart on a large sheet of white formica and let them meet at their own pace. She used a 35-millimeter camera with a 60-millimeter close-

up lens (set at an f/stop of 19 for maximum focus) and a strobe flash to shoot more than 100 pictures on high-saturation color film.

"You'd think that with insects, it would be very fast," Ms. Chalmers said in an interview. "I thought it would take one roll of film.

"But it took half an hour for them just to join up, then they stayed that way for three hours. It kind of got boring. Then she reached around, grabbed him around the neck and bit his face off."