



## The Hunger

The insects, amphibians, and reptiles in Catherine Chalmers's video *Safari* are born to eat and be eaten **BY CHRIS CHANG**

Some of Catherine Chalmers's neighbors are not particularly fond of her. Not too long ago, one of them (or perhaps a coalition) anonymously sent an exterminator to her apartment. The problem was less one of infestation than of aesthetics. Chalmers makes art with live house flies, cockroaches, beetles, snakes, and other things whose presence in a New York City co-op are not entirely welcome. A few of the aforementioned creatures not only live in her home, but are nurtured there—some from larval states.

You could classify Chalmers, incorrectly, as a nature photographer. She is obsessed with the animal planet but, more important, with our misconceptions about it. She recently shot a photo essay, commissioned by *The New York Times*, that chronicled the mating habits of praying mantises—an

insect pas de deux that necessarily ends with the female arthropod systematically devouring her hapless mate. Humans, the world's most unnatural inhabitants, are repulsed yet mesmerized by such behavior. We feel the pain but somehow get off on the poetic justice.

The International Center of Photography's *Ecotopia* show (which closes January 7, 2007) is an ingenious compendium of contemporary art concerned with the ecological state of things. It also provides an opportunity for visitors to see Chalmers's new video, *Safari*. There are no opening or end credits, but the artist provided me with a cast list that includes both common and Latin names. The video begins with a very quick, ethereal sequence: diaphanous white vapor gives way to a watery surface upon which scurries a large, energetic American cockroach (*Periplaneta*

*americana*). The bug aggressively makes its way ashore (recalling *The New World*) and darts into the undergrowth. Focused, frenetic, and seemingly unstoppable, it scuttles into the sightlines of a California king snake (*Lampropeltis getulus californiae*). Chalmers quickly cuts to the roach's POV as the reptile makes eye contact. The viewer is drawn into a staredown whose outcome, hinted at by the snake's flickering tongue, is fairly obvious: flee or be eaten. As it turns out, the roach will survive the serpentine threat, only to satisfy the palate of a different predator later in the video. As the action unfolds, a plethora of species reveal themselves: an lo moth, hickory horn devils, red-spotted newts, Puerto Rican millipedes, walking sticks, and a vast assortment of reptiles and amphibians. In one tremendous out-of-the-frying-pan sequence a fly struggles within the confines of a Venus flytrap. Miraculously, it forces the jaws of the plant open, but is then quickly snapped up by a praying mantis who immediately begins gorging on its victim's eyeballs. The noises

accompanying this sequence are truly disturbing, but the effect was actually created by the soundtrack artist's wife eating a piece of fruit (the video was shot MOS).

During first viewing, *Safari* fooled me completely. I assumed it was filmed on location somewhere in the wild. It was actually staged in Chalmers's loft over a period of about 18 months. (The video runs

vision

just over seven minutes.) The artist, in her attempt to build a microcosm, constantly struggled with a three-point problem: "To create the environments I first had to choose the background elements [houseplants, grasses, moss, etc.] that looked right to my eye. Then I had to check them with the way they appeared to the camera's eye—and it was almost always different. Then I had to create an atmosphere that made the creatures comfortable. And that was always different from what I originally intended visually."

There's a subgenre in contemporary photographic work that derives its power from the concept of the "built environment"—the early dioramas of Gregory Crewdson, the architectural fabrications of James Casebere and Thomas Demand, etc. Chalmers's form of artificial world has an unusual twist. When you think of her art in terms of subjects and objects, and consider the fact that she is practically breeding members of her cast, the notion of art-making acquires a new dimension. This is the sort of thing gods are supposed to do. □