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American cockroach takes over Boise Art Museum

Explore the world of 'American Cockroach' through the lens of artist Catherine Chalmers

By Dana Oland

Is the cockroach the new poster bug for the save the planet campaign? Artist Catherine Chalmers' exhibit "**American Cockroach**" now at the **Boise Art Museum** makes a good argument for it, at least in the abstract.

Periplaneta americana, or the **American cockroach**, has a high creep-factor with its alien appearance, reputation for spreading disease, and click-click of their little feet in the night. If you've lived any place where the little buggers thrive, you know they can drive you crazy.

Yet, seen through Chalmers' lens, this pest, and all of its cultural baggage, might make you begin to question your place in the ecosystem.

"If the smaller animals (such as insects) were taken out the soil would rot, nothing would get pollinated, things wouldn't get recycled, everything would sort of stew in its own junk and we'd all be dead," Chalmers said. "So as a group, they are the most important to planet functioning, and yet we hate them the most."

This duality creates the starting point for Chalmers' exploration of the relationship of humans to the planet, told through the life of one of its most reviled creatures. It is also a weird allegory of contemporary urban life.

ART OF IDEAS

Chalmers' work is primarily in photography; this exhibit expands to include sculpture, drawing and video. As an artist, she is connected to her ideas more than to any one medium.

"I don't have a primary medium. My medium is my ideas, and where they go I follow them," she said. That paradigm began at Stanford University, where she studied engineering design. There, the idea superseded all. "They were trying to teach us to be inventors in the very broad, classical sense. So there was never a specific assignment or project. You had to invent the project," she said.

After college she designed toys for Mattel for a few years, then her love of painting took her back to graduate school. She studied painting at the Royal College of Art in London, which was a profound experience. "Being in London, in

an old-world country, I believed painting more," she said. "When I moved to New York City, somehow I didn't believe it anymore. I found my ideas taking me in a different direction."

Her thoughts turned to the world around her, the growing concern about the environment and the widening gap between people and nature. "If I was living 200 years ago when we were still clubbing the planet and making it produce for us, perhaps this wouldn't be relevant. Now it's so bludgeoned into submission, and it's disappearing," Chalmers said. "It's a different time to be alive and have an interest in animals."

ONCE UPON A ROACH

Cockroaches look almost alien. Holdovers from the prehistoric era - 300 million-year-old fossils have been found - and they are completely contemporary, even omnipresent in urban life. "They are completely different from us. The way they live and interact with their ecosystem is refreshing because it is so nonhuman. In working with them, I'm trying to get away from seeing the world as a human, and try to see it from another point of view," she said.

Though there are many species of cockroaches in the world - some that are quite exotic and beautiful - the **American cockroach** is no longer found in the wild. "They have moved in on our side of the walls, seemingly for good, though who knows what the future will bring. But like we have, they have separated themselves from nature," she said.

"**American Cockroach**" fills the main galleries of the museum with a range of insect musings, from whimsical to savage: the cockroach in nature, camouflaged in beautiful and colorful garden settings, or their spiny legs integrated into sculpture, or ironically juxtaposed against smart images of contemporary life.

There are cockroaches in the boudoir, in the powder room, molting against images of Robert Motherwell paintings and other trappings of modernism in tiny sets Chalmers built for her home-raised roaches to exist. "Bringing them into the human arena in a cultural sense, as opposed to a scientific sense, to bring them more into our awareness that perhaps we might be more careful about what goes extinct," she said.

Another section shows cockroaches being brutally executed, not by conventional methods such as pesticides and the bottom of a shoe, but in an electric chair, burned at the stake and drowned en masse. Relax, no actual cockroaches were harmed to create these photographs, though few people would care. Chalmers used already deceased roaches for the photos.

The exhibit also contains several video installations that explore the role of insects in evolution and contemporary culture. One video shows a cockroach struggling to scale a wine glass only to end up swimming in the red beverage.

FOOD CHAIN

"**American Cockroach**" grew out of an earlier piece, "**Food Chain**," that vividly shows animals in the act of mating, devouring one another, and in the case of the praying mantis, both. Chalmers raised the animals in her photographs and videos in the tony SoHo loft she shares with her husband, artist Charles Lindsay, whose solo exhibit at the **Boise Art Museum** will open Aug. 30. The couple also have a home in Ketchum.

The project took three years to complete. During that time, Chalmers' life ran on cockroach time, she said. They are nocturnal, so her clock turned upside down for awhile. There were many weekend nights she stayed home waiting for her roaches to molt or mate, often taking photos into the early morning hours.

Despite the fact that she raised these animals - she buys her clean cockroaches for \$2 a piece from a lab that raises insects for scientists - she admits that cockroaches still creep her out.

Photos by Joe jaszewski / jjaszewski@idahostatesman.com

Catherine Chalmers installs her "Tree," 2008, a sculpture made of Northeastern cherry, with limbs shaped like cockroach. This part of the exhibit, "**American Cockroach**," blends the thing which is "hated in nature with that which is beloved," Chalmers said. "So you have this grand, stately tree that is half insect."

Catherine Chalmers' "Hanging," 2003, resin, rubber, rope. Humans spend so much time trying to kill cockroaches; Chalmers takes it one step further.

Provided by Catherine Chalmers

"Pile of Legs," 2003, resin.

Catherine Chalmers "Pop Beetle," 2000, C-Print photograph. Chalmers' large-scale photographs show an idealized version of the cockroach, hidden in nature, beautifully blending into the flowery scene, not in the silverware drawer.