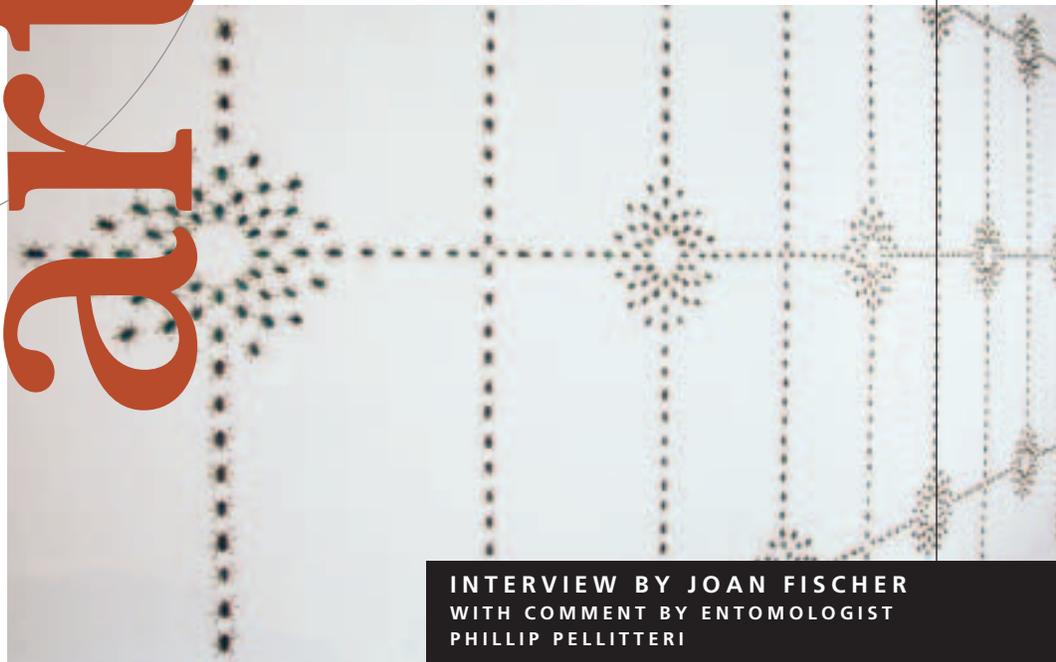


# insect artistry

Jennifer Angus, a professor in the school of human ecology at UW–Madison, brings her insect artistry to the Wisconsin Academy Gallery October 7–31 in an exhibit called “The Observation Room.” Her work draws viewers from the worlds of art and science, including teachers and school groups who are fascinated by the discipline-bridging nature of her art. For example, the Wisconsin Center for Academically Talented Youth has created high school enrichment courses based on the exhibit. Students will do everything from helping Angus pin up her exhibits to studying the characteristics and habitats of the insects and exploring the interplay between science and art. As the following interview shows, the artist is as unusual and intriguing as her creations.

*Eupholus Bennetti, 2002*



INTERVIEW BY JOAN FISCHER  
WITH COMMENT BY ENTOMOLOGIST  
PHILLIP PELLITTERI

Jennifer Angus works in a most unusual medium: she pins real (but no longer living!) bugs to the wall to explore pattern and color—and challenge our notions of beauty in nature.



*Surrounded, 2001*

Which came first, your love of art or your love of insects?

**Jennifer Angus:** My love of art came first. My mother studied art history and archaeology at the University of Toronto. Growing up I was surrounded by works of art—my parents were avid collectors of contemporary painting, prints, and ceramics—and all of my mother’s books on art and various artists. My interest in insects came considerably later. 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, head-dresses, and baskets.

How and when did you decide to meld the two?

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—Yoshi, Daiske, and Nori—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. It is not unusual for Japanese children to keep insects as pets. 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 dressing up the corpses in costumes. These were large rhino beetles, so I was able to dress them in paper

kimonos and mount them on a board so that they appeared to be standing. So we had rhino beetles modeling spring and autumn kimono fashions, dung beetles as sumo wrestlers, and so on. The culmination of my little insect sculptures was a whole three-ring circus done about five years after my time in Japan.

The bug circus was as far as I could go—there was nothing new or exciting to me about doing that any more, yet I still felt interested in the insects. Doing these works was always a sideline to my more serious sociopolitical-type pieces that were photo-based and utilized pattern in very specific ways to communicate ideas. At this point I thought, why not take the insects and put them into patterns? My training and teaching revolve around textile design and developing 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.

*When people see your exhibits, what kinds of things do you want them to think about? What kind of response do you hope for?*

I have thought a lot about how people will feel when they look at my bug wallpaper. I graduated from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, which is often thought to be one of the incubators of the conceptual art scene. Later on, for my MFA, I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which is also very theory-heavy. While the insects I use are undoubtedly beautiful, I hope that after spending time with the work people will consider many things beyond the beauty. When you first enter the space, you are greeted with something you think you know—that is, a patterned wallpaper that could be in anyone's home. However, upon closer examination you discover it is made up of insects. I know very few people who welcome insects into their home. In fact, we have a certain hysteria about insects, particularly when found inside. Culturally insects signal dirtiness and disease to us. Some of that hysteria is based upon fact. For example, the bubonic plague was spread by fleas that resided on rats, West Nile virus is spread by mosquitoes, and I read recently that cockroaches in a crowded apartment block in Hong Kong may have helped spread SARS. However, most insects are quite harmless and don't deserve the blast of Raid that we generally inflict upon them.

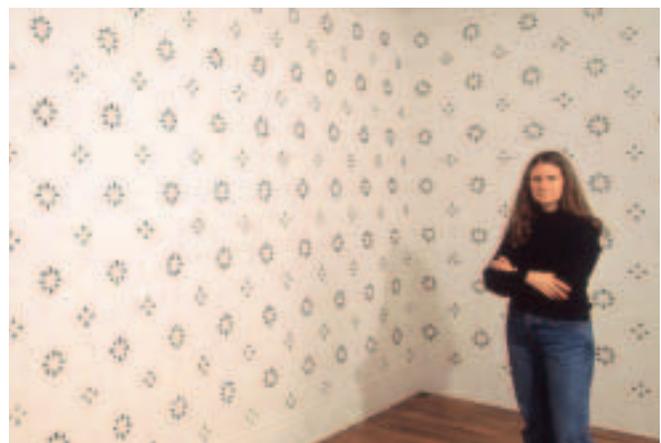
When people are confronted with so many insects, issues about collecting are bound to arise as well. I draw references from the Victorian era in terms of color and pattern. Victorian collectors were seemingly insatiable and nothing was sacrosanct. I think the work addresses the obsessive need to collect and own at the expense, exhaustion, and extinction of a species. This in turn brings up issues of population, community, and environment. Different patterns seem to evoke different responses.



The letter "O" in *MOM* (detail), 2001



*Eupholus Bennetti* (detail), 2002



*Eupholus Bennetti* and Jennifer Angus, 2002



*Bug Circus (detail), 2000*

**What kinds of responses have you had from different people?**

The two most common questions I am asked are, “Where did you get so many insects?” and “Have you painted the insects?” The answer to the former is that there are many insect specimen dealers around the world. Most collectors only want two of a species—a male and a female. Since I want considerably more I have to deal with many people. The positive of this for me is that I have made some good friends. Last summer I visited the dealer I work with in Malaysia, and he drove me all around the Cameron Highlands, where most of the insects I use come from. In January at my exhibition in Stratford, Ontario, Ken Thorne, an insect dealer from London, Ontario, came to the opening and I was so happy that he could see what I actually do with all the insects I order from him. I deal with another man in Belgium and at some point I am sure we will finally meet in person.

As to the second question, regarding the color of the insects: I have not

painted any insects. What you see is their natural color, whether it's beetles that are metallic green or blue or grasshoppers with pink and purple wings. Nature is truly amazing!

Perhaps the response that interested me the most came from an elderly man who was walking by the gallery in Toronto when I was installing an exhibition. He asked if he could come in and when he entered he asked me why there had to be so much pattern. I explained that I was trying to create a wallpaper effect. He stood studying the work, and finally he asked me, “Are you a drug addict or an alcoholic? Is this what you see?” I explained that that was not a motivating factor, but what he asked me raises some interesting psychological issues and is a reminder that we all carry some baggage. It reminds me of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic story “The Yellow Wallpaper.” In the story a woman who is undoubtedly suffering from postpartum depression is confined to a room in which she begins to believe the wallpaper is moving and that something or someone is living and moving in

it. I've often thought, what if these insects came to life and started to move! There was a man named James Velez, I think, who for most of his life felt that insects were crawling upon him. Eventually he scratched himself to death—died of infection, I suppose. In extreme situations I have found there are people who have such negative feelings about insects they don't even want to enter the room.

**Does your art send an environmental message?**

I did not begin with the intention of having an environmental message, but I think it is unavoidable when one is surrounded by hundreds if not thousands of dead insects. Most people are unaware that these insects even exist, as most species we come into contact with in North America are brown or black, and bite or sting. People are simply amazed that such creatures exist, and I think they have a greater appreciation for Mother Nature's creativity.

Many people are concerned about the impact upon the environment that the culling of so many insects may have. Most of the insects I use come from the rainforests of Malaysia and Papua New Guinea. They are collected by indigenous peoples who are able to make a livelihood by these activities. Scientists, specimen dealers, and myself are of the belief that if these people continue to support themselves by collecting insects, then they will have little reason to cut down the forest that is the provider. Thus insect harvesting is an environmentally friendly activity, and they are a renewable resource. One should keep in mind, too, that insects reproduce at a tremendous rate. The vast majority of endangered species are endangered because of loss of habitat, not over-collecting.

I hope that people will consider what is going on in their own backyard. How is the expansion of city limits impacting wildlife, and, in particular, the smallest of creatures? It is easy to take up the cause of larger animals and birds, but what about the less glamorous animals that have an important role to play in our environment, whether by pollinating flowers or aiding in the decomposition of various matters?

**Could you elaborate a bit on where you gather your insects, and what kinds of insects they are?**

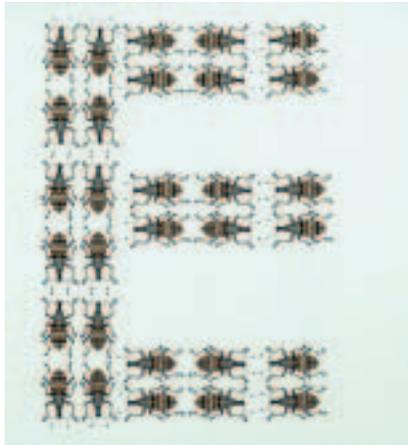
As I mentioned, I deal with many insect specimen dealers around the world. It took me quite a while to research what I wanted because when you get a catalogue of insects all the names are in Latin, and very rarely are there pictures. I'm an artist, not an entomologist. I had to learn about the various families of insects and then the subgroups within those. When I began I was primarily interested in beetles, or Coleoptera. At first I looked for those that had a pattern, whether it was stripes or spots, and were reasonably affordable. I discovered *Eupholus bennetti*, a colorful type of weevil (Curculionidae) from Papua New Guinea. They have vertical black stripes and range in color from turquoise to royal blue to purple. Sometimes they have a metallic sheen, too. Initially I thought I would be arranging them and playing with their existing patterns, but what I didn't realize at the time is that their legs get



*Relic (detail), 2003*



*Relic, 2003*



The letter "E" (detail) and *HELP*, 2001.

in the way! I should have figured that out, but it's their legs that are actually integral to the pattern.

I lucked out when I chose *E. bennetti*, because not only are they colorful, patterned, and affordable, but they're also tough little creatures. I am able to reuse the insects from my installations. When I take down a show I just put the insects on foam trays and pop them into drawers. Sometimes when we are installing a show, we'll drop an insect, and they remain relatively intact despite the tumble, unlike other larger species that will completely shatter. So all in all I like them, and I am rather fond of their funny long snouts. They have personality.

More recently I have been working with phasmids, or those insects that mimic sticks and leaves. In my piece "Relic" I was interpreting a William Morris pattern. Morris' designs were always abundant in flora and fauna, and the leaf-mimic insects were perfect for that project. These insects are so highly and incredibly adapted to look exactly like the leaves upon the trees in which they reside that many people find it hard to believe that these really are insects.

My next project involves cicadas and grasshoppers. I like the grasshoppers because most people consider them pests due to the crop damage they have at times caused. They have an edgy quality, rather menacing faces, and sharp barbs on their legs, yet their wings are incredibly beautiful.

## BUGS RULE!

An appreciation of our many-legged brethren.

By Phillip Pellitteri

Because insects are so different from us, many people have a hard time warming up to anything other than butterflies. Most of us have heard the opinions that insects are a sign of filth, neglect, or disease. Why else would you have bugs? It seems to be part of our culture to have insect and spider phobias, and demeaning terms such as a maggot, roach, or slug have an arthropod basis. Once you get past the alien nature of these creatures, there are amazing life histories, colors, patterns, and shapes to see.

Very few entomologists come into the science without being drawn to the incredible beauty and diversity of the insect world. The biological reality is that insects are the most successful group of animals on the planet and have been this way for more than 300 million years. They are the dominant life form whether we like it or not.

My first impressions of the work of Jennifer Angus are from a practical side. The amount of time and effort it takes to prepare each specimen for display is easily overlooked unless you have taken a course that required an insect collection. Every leg, antenna, and body part must be positioned and allowed to dry. Parts can be very fragile, and to have hundreds of properly mounted insects is quite a task. It also shows a strong devotion to do it correctly.

Exotic tropical insects have become a more common viewing experience than they used to be. Concerns for the rainforest, natural history programs, insect zoos, butterfly houses, and exotic pet stores have exposed people to many strange creatures. The advantage of many of the tropical insects is that

their large size makes it easier to see the bright colors, unique shapes, and endless diversity found in the insect world. Small insects are just as exotic, but people rarely look close enough to realize this. When we display insects, people often accuse entomologists of painting or somehow enhancing the large tropical specimens. They cannot be real, can they? The *Eupholus* weevils used in the exhibit are a great example. Even after looking at creatures like this for more than 30 years, I am still fascinated by the colors, textures, and shapes. They bring the same delight they brought when I was 8 years old. It is easy to see why insects and their parts are used as jewelry throughout the world.

Jennifer's work goes beyond the visual because it forces you to experience insects. It would be impossible not to stir some unique feelings or thoughts after an exposure to these pieces. As you move close enough to realize the patterns on a wall are made up of real, exotic, six-legged creatures, you might be amused. When you are surrounded by hundreds of cicadas, grasshoppers, and walking sticks, you may even feel you are taking part in a science fiction movie. Actual insect specimens have so much more of an impact than prints or pictures. A room full of patterns made of insect bodies even forces an entomologist to experience insects in novel ways. Exhibitions such as these are likely to leave you in awe of the creatures we often ignore or step on in disgust. As with so many experiences in life, if you go in with an open mind and look closely, you will be rewarded. There is so much more to insects than just pretty butterflies.

*Phillip Pellitteri is an entomologist with the UW-Madison Insect Diagnostic Laboratory.*

It's probably worth mentioning that the insects don't come all ready for me to just pin to the wall. They are individually packaged on a piece of cardboard with cellophane wrap over the top. Usually they are curled up in an almost fetal-type position. They are very dry and brittle. I have to stick them into a humidity chamber, usually for a couple of days. When I bring them out they have rehydrated and I am able to move their limbs and pin or position them. They dry again and then they are ready to go. This is a very time-consuming task. On average I can pin about 15 weevils an hour and grasshoppers maybe six an hour if things are going well—which usually they're not because their legs are so strong and difficult to wrestle with.

*Describe your work process. What's it like to compose a piece? How does the idea move from your head to the wall?*

There is considerable preparation involved with my work as the actual piece is created on site. Usually I need a lot of lead time since all parts of the process are very labor-intensive. The greatest amount of time is spent relaxing and pinning insects, which I have already described. Before that happens I need to work out the pattern for the installation. For me this is challenging and fun. I need information regarding how much wall space I will be covering. I like to know something of the history of the space or the place the installation will be in. This gives me direction as to what the pattern should be like or inspired by. Sometimes I have to make decisions based on how many insects I have on hand. This is not ideal because it can cramp my vision of a piece, but at times I am not in a position to obtain more insects. If I'm lucky I am in a situation that allows me to order what I need, but economizing is always important. I have to spend time on the internet communicating with dealers, making sure of availability and arrangements for the shipping of insects. When I have all the information I can begin designing.

As my training is in textile design, I enjoy working out what we know as the "repeat." This is an acquired skill in which the viewer should not be easily able to recognize where the repeat unit begins and ends. I apply the same



*Bug Circus (detail), 2000*



Below: Cross, 2001, and in detail above.



knowledge I use for designs on cloth to the insect wallpaper. Part of the design process is playing with the actual insects in various arrangements. From this I take measurements and then I am able to create a facsimile pattern tile on the computer. I like to have pictures of the actual space I will be installing the work so that I can do a mock-up on the computer. It's amazing how much I can learn from this.

Of course one can do all sorts of planning, and then in the installation changes need to be made. It's a matter of thinking fast.

**Is there anything you'd like to add?**

One other thing I would like to mention is that thus far I have focused on negative Western attitudes toward insects. There is one case in which we have positive opinions on them, and that is in children's literature. The first-ever children's story that was not a moral tale is *The Butterflies Ball and the Grasshoppers Feast*. There are plenty of famous insects in children's literature, from the caterpil-

lar on the hookah in *Alice in Wonderland* to the insect companions in *James and the Giant Peach*. I mention this because something I am trying to capture in my work is that wonder we experience as a child. I would like people to discover it once again when they see my work, and for a moment just stand there and say "Wow!" ❁

*Jennifer Angus holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. A native of Canada, she is currently an assistant professor in environment, textiles and design at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Angus has an extensive exhibition record that includes shows in Toronto, Chicago, and Tokyo. Her Wisconsin Academy Gallery show runs October 7 to 31. You can meet her at an artist's reception on **Friday, October 10, 5-7 p.m.** at the Wisconsin Academy Gallery, 1922 University Avenue, Madison.*