

THE REMA HORT MANN FOUNDATION PRESENTS
BUY WHAT YOU LOVE
 2011 A BENEFIT ART AUCTION

DART DesignArtsDaily

Catherine Chalmers' Jungle Book

By Peggy Roalf Thursday March 24, 2011
 [Dart]

Catherine Chalmers, a visual artist whose installations include photography, video, and sculpture, and who is widely known for her *American Cockroach* project, is currently working on something new in the Costa Rican jungle. When I learned that her subjects are ants, and that she would be spending the next several years bringing her artistic and scientific view of their work and social life to light, I decided to look into this.

In her artist's statement for a Guggenheim Fellowship proposal, which was awarded last year, Catherine wrote, "But it is the leafcutter ant as a dominant species and rapacious defoliator from which this project takes its cue....They do not clear-cut rainforests quite like we do, but they can strip a tree in a single night, and repeat this night after night. At a time...when humans are causing deforestation at an alarming rate, this insect provides rich and relevant opportunities for reflecting on our relationship to the environment." I contacted her by email in late February, and this is what we wrote:

Peggy Roalf: You've made a practice of photographing the underbelly of the life cycle in the animal world, stuff that makes some people queasy. What attracted you to this subject?

Catherine Chalmers: Well, it's not really the underbelly – it's essential to life. This dichotomy, that we see shun something so central to the ecology of the planet is what interests me.

PR: In the past, you raised your own critters from hatchlings and worked in the studio, using detailed sets and highly controlled conditions. Now you are in the jungle, in Costa Rica. Describe how your current work differs from, say, the *American Cockroach* project.

CC: Insects are wonderfully uncontrollable – in the city or the jungle. Can I be politically incorrect and say ants, as a super-organism, are a hell of a lot smarter than roaches? They are endlessly intriguing and a pleasure to work with. After a decade of raising roaches, I'm still uneasy with them.



Left: Leafcutter ants at work; photograph copyright Catherine Chalmers. Right: A boa constrictor that got into the chicken coop is about to be escorted away; photograph copyright Charles Lindsay.

PR: What is there about the leafcutter ant that interests you – as a species? Are they more violent than, say, red ants? Are they always organized to do whatever the job of the day or week might be? Who gives the orders? Do they fight among each other? How do they defend themselves from predators? Can you tell when they are having sex?

CC: Leafcutter communication is like a Google algorithm. The colony is a fascinating headless network. The decisions to wage war, harvest particular plants, change colony locations – are based on millions of individual antennae hits.

Leafcutters are vegetarians. They cultivate fungus in their underground gardens. So, no they're not carnivorous like red ants, but that doesn't mean they're not violent. The colony I am currently filming is attacked on a daily basis by its larger neighbor colony. It's brutal. And I've taken sides!

Regarding your prurient question – the colonies are sex free. They're a celibate population of females with one egg-laying queen. Males are sent out to mate and die.

PR: In your video, "Safari," you constructed a gorgeous fake jungle environment where creatures that don't normally cohabit engaged in a dance of death – which gave "Safari" an oddly fictional quality. Now that you are shooting on location, is the leafcutter ants project more of a documentary?

CC: No, it's actually more fictional. The ants look like they're doing things outside their normal behavior. Whereas, in "Safari" the animals just did what they do.

PR: What is the most surprising thing that the leafcutter ants have done so far?

CC: I keep track of five large colonies, all the same species, and each behaves somewhat differently. And within a colony, individual ants of the same cast exhibit different levels of industriousness. For example, some look to be working very hard and others meander around seemingly doing nothing. I've even witnessed what looks like ants stealing plant pieces from their sisters.

PR: Can you describe what a typical day's work in the jungle is like for you?

CC: Wake at 5:30 to howler monkeys. Get up at 6 when the sun rises. Build a set for the day's shoot. Film until late in the afternoon. Download the footage and review it in Final Cut. Figure out if the scene works. Go for a swim. Be in before the sun goes down and the snakes come out. Have a beer. Strategize for the next day. Sweat a lot in between each of these activities.

PR: Is it dangerous there? Do you get some help from the local people to make life a little easier?

CC: Last year a Fer d'Lance (the abundant and potentially deadly pit viper) was on my set. Local help is essential. I couldn't do without it.

PR: Some of the images in your previous work must make animal rights people take notice. Have you ever been harassed by people from groups such as those?

CC: Animal rights organizations, from my experience, have larger concerns than me faking a cockroach death on film, or feeding a baby mouse to a snake. I have only been problems with individuals – nuts with a prior agenda.

PR: Do you communicate with your subjects in a particular way? Do you feel that they recognize you as part of their environment? Have you ever gotten attached to one of your subjects in the way that people are seduced by their pets?

CC: My subjects communicate with me more than the other way around (though communication is not quite the right word). And that's the beauty of it. That's why I do what I do – to try to see into their lives. It's important I remain invisible so they just carry on and do what they normally do.

But, nevertheless, as I mentioned, I am actively rooting for the home team in the nightly ant wars. If I could influence the battles – it's hard to discern one side from another, being the same species they look alike – I would happily try to help my team survive for another day. Does that mean I am attached to my colony? It means I have a lot invested in filming them.

PR: Have you learned something about human relationships by observing animal life so closely? For example, can you recognize a predatory spirit in a predatory person?

CC: Human behavior makes more sense to me in light of looking at other primates. Likewise, by observing another highly social animal, like ants, I better understand human society and the networks we form, especially now in the age of internet and instant messaging.

PR: In what form do you see this body of work being presented?

CC: My goal is to have an exhibition of the entire ant project, tentatively titled "The Leafcutters." It includes 3 videos, 3 series of photos, 3 sculptures and several multi-panel drawings. I think it's a little over half finished at this point.

PR: Your husband, [Charles Lindsay](#), is doing the sound for the leafcutter ants videos. How is it to collaborate with your spouse?

CC: Fantastic!! (He's looking over my shoulder!)

[Catherine Chalmers](#) holds a B.S. in Engineering from Stanford University and an M.F.A. in Painting from the Royal College of Art, London. She has exhibited around the world, at P.S.1, New York; MASS MoCA, North Adams; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; Kunsthalle Basel; Kunsthalle Vienna; and MoCA Taipei, among others. Her work has appeared in a variety of publications, including the New York Times, ArtNews, Artforum, Flash Art, Blind Spot, the Sunday Telegraph, London, the Independent on Sunday, London, Harper's, and Discover, and has been featured on PBS, CNN, CBS, BBC, and NPR. She has published two books, *Food Chain: Encounters between Mates, Predators, and Prey* (Aperture 2000) and *American Cockroach* (Aperture, 2004). She lives and works in New York City.

032411taipei

[Comments \(0\)](#)

[Special for DART Subscribers](#)

By Peggy Roalf Tuesday March 22, 2011
[Dart]

**DART Partners with the Arts at Museum of the City of New York
Friday, March 25, 6:30 m**

Is Local Agriculture Good for the Environment: The Hidden Costs of Food in New York City

In conjunction with the exhibition, ***Moveable Feast: Fresh Produce and the NYC Green Carts Program***, MCNY invites you to a panel discussion about large and small issues that tend to complicate our understanding of this important subject.

Moveable Feast: Fresh Produce and the NYC Green Carts Program features the work of LaToya Ruby Frazier, Thomas Holton, Gabriele Stabile, Will Steacy, and Shen Wei, photographers who have turned their lenses on city neighborhoods where there is little access to nutritious food, documenting street scenes and urban environments in the process. The exhibition, **which opens today**, also reveals a new, important use for a nearly ubiquitous and historic urban icon: the pushcart.

Moveable Feast is organized by the Museum in conjunction with [Aperture Foundation](#), which commissioned the photographs with support from the [Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund](#).



Left: Gabriele Stabile, *Untitled*, from the series *Street Smart*. Right: Thomas Holton, *8th Avenue Traffic*, 2010. Images copyright the artist, courtesy Aperture Foundation.