

The Theater of Insects

Photographs by Jo Whaley, Essays by Linda Wiener and Deborah Klotchko, Chronicle Books

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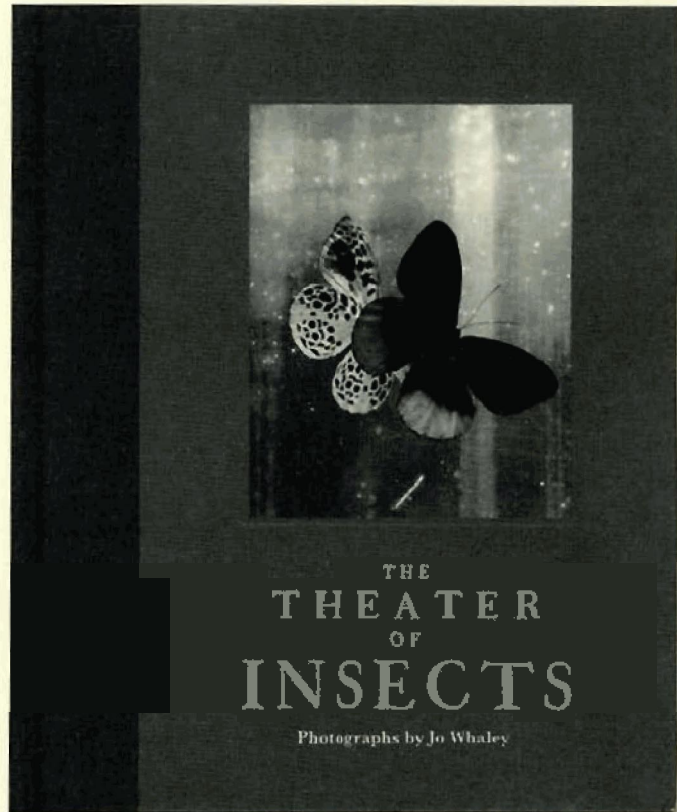
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Catherine Chalmers's cockroaches and praying mantises, the Starn brothers' moths, Damien Hirst's maggots, Gregory Crewdson's fireflies—how will Jo Whaley incorporate a fresh perspective into the topic of insects and tableau photography? Her new book, *The Theater of Insects*, does so by combining images of insects with constructed environments. Whaley categorizes the work as "fantastic field illustrations," inspired by old history museum dioramas. In her essay, Deborah Klotchko, director of the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, describes the work as a "fusion of art and science, a personal cabinet of curiosities."

Upon first glance, I thought the images were digital collages, but I examined them more closely after reading the section of the book "Notes from the Studio," where Whaley articulately describes her process and ideas. Beyond her interest in the formal elements of the composition, such as line, color, form, and pattern, she addresses the history of vanitas paintings from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Here, the medium has shifted from painting to photography and the insects become the primary focus rather than a background detail. The fanciful backgrounds are not digital collage, but meticulously created miniature stage sets, utilizing detritus from urban consumption. The actual prints are monumental, with the insects' size roughly that of a human head. In an exhibition setting, the monstrous scale would certainly shift the experience for the viewer with the ability to perceive texture and detail in each image.

Most compelling are the images of the beetles, which exude a quirkiness or edginess missing in many of the other photographs. Some images rely too heavily on beauty, and, when combined with butterflies, the effect is somewhat trite. Other compositions combine old photographs with the insects, with mixed results. The images' conceptual framework deviates from the nature vs. culture theme prevalent in the other work, and so seems contrived.

Accompanying the color reproductions are essays by Klotchko and Linda Wiener, a Santa Fe-based entomologist. Both essays are well written, contextualizing the photographs within a broader framework. Klotchko's essay, "The Spectacle of Nature," references photography's origins in science and art by citing the work of Anna Atkins and William Henry Fox Talbot. But I disagree with Klotchko's description of Whaley's work as a personal cabinet of curiosities; in the context of a collection, the specimens do not seem overtly curious or unusual. In her essay, "Philosophy of Insects," Wiener speculates on how the study of insects and the theories of natural selection help us understand the world. Through a microscopic examination, we grasp a macroscopic view of our interconnectedness with the natural world. The essays in *The Theater of Insects* provide a discourse for engaging with the photographs beyond the formal or aesthetic level, as well as appeal to a diverse audience interested in art, philosophy, science, entomology, and photography.



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