

THE TERRIBLE BEAUTY OF MOTHS

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Scientists don't usually write about topics where they have no expertise, so it was with some hesitation that I accepted the invitation to contribute to this book. However, it has been such a pleasure to follow eX de Medici's journey and watch just where she took the small moths we both love, that I could not resist an invitation to tell the story from the moth curator's vantage point.

I will never forget my first meeting with eX. Leeanne Crisp had told me that a friend of hers had painted some butterflies, and my reaction was: not butterflies again – tell her to come and see some moths. So eX appeared, with a few small water colour sketches, obviously to establish her credentials. Even though I had been scathing about painting butterflies, it was the small image of a dead, broken butterfly she had extracted from the grid of her car that immediately attracted me. It was the essence of a fragile creature, once so alive and now broken and dead. It was clear that eX would do my moths justice. To my delight she was immediately seduced by their beauty under the microscope, and by the entire treasure house of the Australian National Insect Collection, this Wunderkammer at CSIRO with more than 10 million specimens reflecting the incredible diversity of Australian insect life. And I think eX was also intrigued by the scientists, these obvious fanatics passionate about their work.

The scientific world eX walked into 13 years ago is the classical discipline of taxonomy, or systematics, dealing with naming and classifying organisms. Although we now use a variety of modern methods such as gene sequencing, this pursuit has very old roots in every culture. Without names there can be no communication, and some of the oldest myths deal with naming the world, as in the story of the Wagilag sisters from Arnhem Land. It is really quite extraordinary that we have a much better inventory of far-distant stars than of the plants and animals on earth which are the basis of our survival. Half of Australia's over 20,000 moth species are still unnamed, and many thousands have never been collected – yet destruction of their habitat through human activities is relentless, and many will become extinct before they have ever been seen. This was

a message not lost on eX de Medici, and she set to work. The many unnamed species recognised as such in our collection are denoted as 'species', abbreviated as 'sp.', and this was the name she chose for her first moth-based exhibition, a gallery of 27 portraits of the moths I work on and their transformation into arrow head shapes, denoting their appropriation before they were even named [Plate 11].

eX immediately fitted into the meticulous and probably compulsive world of the Australian National Insect Collection during her six months' residency in 2001, funded by the Australia Council. She chose to concentrate on the moth family I work on, and I was very happy finally to see somebody who could do justice to my beautiful study objects. It was exciting to watch eX become familiar with 'my' moths, which were becoming hers as well. My research and my classification are largely based on microscopic characters not visible without dissecting the moths, so it was exciting to realise that eX started to recognise many of the same groups simply by their external appearance, their 'Gestalt' – which we as scientists to our frustration cannot usually express in words, but which was clearly evident to eX with a very different frame of reference.

The excitement of watching the progress of eX's work had far deeper roots than just the pleasure of seeing my world view – i. e. my view of my moths – confirmed through an artist's eyes. I think a large factor in the satisfaction of this project is the revelation of this usually hidden world, this wealth of colour and pattern in animals so small that they are revealed only under a microscope, and which fly at night in the dark where they cannot be seen. And which, when they die, quickly turn to dust. So why this opulence? And then their metamorphosis into arrow-heads and guns, these fragile creatures covered in powdery scales as weapons. Though I try to be open-minded I was sceptical when eX first mentioned the intended transformation – to then be immediately seduced by the beauty and improbability of the first gun she brought back. Exactly what eX had in mind and has done ever since with her beguiling images of moths and scale pattern.

In addition to the revelation of the great diversity and hidden beauty I think there was a second crucial parallel between eX's involvement with these moths and mine. As mentioned, an important part of a taxonomist's work is naming new species. There is an obvious, logical reason for naming things – we cannot talk about them without a name. Naming the world around us is a fundamental human endeavour, repeated in many legends. But there is a deeper level to this: naming implies knowing, understanding, becoming aware of all the variety, the differences, the richness of the world around us. And the more we know and understand, the more we see and appreciate, and are prepared to care for and protect. To find genealogical lineages in the unbelievable diversity of shapes and pattern, to recognise a form principle in its many guises and disguises, is for me the most satisfying challenge. As an artist eX has done exactly the same with different tools. With her paintings she makes the usually overlooked visible and known; her portraits reveal and celebrate these minute moths in all their beauty and diversity.

The early inspiration for eX's nature-based images was her encounter with Ferdinand Bauer's exquisite taxonomic drawings from Matthew Flinder's exploration of the Australian coastline, but her unfettered mind soon saw far-reaching connections, leading to a journey which was exhilarating to follow. The juxtaposition of emblems of power and control with the fragility of moths, underlined by their colourful but ephemeral scale cover, led to ever new and unforgettable images, from the early arrow heads to guns and helmets covered in moth scales [Plates 2, 12 & 14]. What a delight to discover the scale pattern of an unforgettable species I collected 40 years ago in New Guinea in one of my favourite paintings, *Isaac and Ishmael* [Plate 21], such an apt symbol of the foolishness of much human endeavour. Other associations led to the *Vanitas* images of the toxic *Red (Colony)* [Plate 15] and the disconcertingly beautiful *Skinny Day Ambush (Superfamily)* [Plate 20], harking back to the symbolism of moths and butterflies as transient and short-lived creatures, hence a reminder of ever-present death. Dutch *Vanitas* paintings with their disturbing combination of opulently beautiful flowers and sinister objects like a skull, a fallen glass and

a snuffed-out candle had left a deep impression when I first saw them as a child. Sharing eX's concerns about how we treat the world, I revelled in the glory of her shocking images at the 5th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane [Plate 17]. Indeed 'seduce and destroy' is a very apt description of eX's explicit intention to beguile us with her beautiful canvases in order to leave us fully exposed for the punch when we finally realise what we are admiring.

eX was quickly recognised as a kindred spirit in the collection, fanatical about her work, meticulous about details, admired by all, and several of my colleagues tried to lure her away from moths, tempting her into painting their preferred insects. Through her art she has become a most effective advocate for the Australian National Insect Collection, making our hidden treasures visible and fostering our goal of making the wider public aware of the riches of the natural world. Quietly, she has also been a greatly appreciated and very generous benefactor over the years.

I always realised that eX would eventually move on from being inspired by moths, and the thought that this exciting journey would come to an end saddened me. Art has long provided inspiration and sustained me, and I'm still envious that in the Renaissance the same person could combine the two disciplines and be both an artist and a scientist, whereas today one is assigned to one or the other side of what seems to have become a deep divide. With eX's help I could vicariously take part in both worlds. It had been such a pleasure discovering images and pattern of moths living in the dark drawers of the collection in her vibrant images, their exquisite details revealed for all to admire. So there was a sense of loss at the thought that at some point I would no longer share the inspiration for eX's imagery.

It was a double gift from Fate when I received an invitation from friends to visit Iran and fulfil an old childhood dream to see Isfahan. Hearing about my plans, eX revealed her own fascination with this fabled country. So we embarked on a new journey together. We were both overwhelmed by

the beauty of Iran, its landscape and architecture, with the mosque in Yazd moving me to tears on my first day. Moshen Hajisaeid very quickly became a friend rather than a tour guide, opening our eyes to his country, and eX has been back several times with his family since that first trip. One of the indelible images I took back from Iran is the contrast between the stark, forbidding mountain ranges of this dry country and the lush and secret walled gardens with their fountains, flowers and birds. I instantly understood the concept of being driven from paradise, and also the longing behind the imagery of Persian carpets conceived in the midst of deserts. In eX's paintings of the last few years I constantly find echoes of the images I remember from Iran, from the roses of Shiraz to the pink-breasted doves on the tiles of its mosques. Another wondrous and fragile world under threat through the greed and thoughtlessness of current attitudes.

My friendship with eX has enriched my life for the last 13 years and her example is a constant admonition to stand up for one's beliefs. Whilst I share her concerns about the state of the world, the destruction of nature and the abuse of power at all levels, like most people, I tend to switch off to recover from all the horror in my own small private world. eX is much braver, she does not flinch, she has the courage and strength of mind to relentlessly face these unpalatable truths, all the time, working with all her talent, skill and dedication to hold up the mirror and show us with ever new images exactly what we are doing.

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