



Joseph Scheer's Moths: *Flight, Light and Desire*

University of Arizona Museum of Art August 17 – October 8, 2006








Joseph Scheer's work is both hallucinatory and edifying, a close encounter with species often eclipsed by cultural preference: here are moths, rendered light and dazzling, mysterious and beautifully strange.

Scheer's luminous iris prints — richly saturated images realized in outrageously oversized or elegantly attenuated formats — warrant accolades in their own right. Yet I am most compelled to write of the artist's ephemeral installation work, which combines a contiguous presentation of tiled and hanging images, carefully distilled sound, and looping video flow into an immersive environment. The prints testify to a world glimmering at the periphery of human awareness, demonstrating the ever-increasing capabilities of visual technologies and the subtle marks of natural diversity only recuperable by these means. Scheer's installations push even farther, reinserting us in something simultaneously "natural," otherworldly, and psychologically interior — an animate dream, where fluttering beings still and expand to encompass the field of view; and sound, filtered to elemental layers, rebounds into something wholly unexpected yet eerily familiar.

Scheer's representational strategies — the choices he makes in composing his images and installations, combined with the historical precedents on which they rely, and the ways in which the images gather meaning in the



world — situate his work unusually, in a realm where art and science overlap. This is equally true with regard to his conceptual interests and manipulation of materials. As Scheer articulates in his “Foreword” to *Nothing*, the catalog published in conjunction with the UA Museum of Art exhibition, the investigation of “how we see and know things in our world” is fundamental to his practice. Moreover, a broader “concern with the senses” in the process of knowing — regarding “sight, sound, smell (which evokes taste) and touch (which evokes desire),” as he puts it — “illuminates the intersection where art and science collide with and inform each other.”

That Scheer’s work depends on a tradition of naturalist precedents — the professional practices of fieldwork, specimen capture and careful identification, and museum presentation, is clear. Driven by an interest in the “human need for nature,” Scheer has worked with moths since 1998, branching out from early collecting around his home in Alfred, New York, to as far away as Australia. He has collected, mounted, scanned, and printed thousands of moths from around the world. Through trial and error, Scheer perfected a way to pack and ship the moths to his studio, where he painstakingly prepares them for presentation and scanning.

The species presented in this exhibition and catalog came from two collecting trips to sites in Southern Arizona (including Peña Blanca Lake, Copper Canyon, and the Atascosa highlands), conducted during the summer monsoon months of 2004 and 2005. Working through the hot, moonless nights Scheer collected the astonishing range of moths, both common and rare, represented here.

Scheer writes:

“I believe that we live in a time in which it is highly critical to promote our respect for, and redefine the delicate relationship to, the many living things on our planet. I have chosen moths to study and create work from because of their diversity (approximately 14,000 species found in the United States) and their rich mythology in history. They are also a family of insects that most people know so little about, both visually and environmentally.

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A goal of my artwork is to bring this information to a diverse audience who may not normally be aware of, or come in contact with, the beauty and diversity of moths."

Scheer's colleagues and collecting partners contribute essays to the exhibition catalog that explore the intersection between art and science, through close consideration of moths. From their respective areas of expertise, a surprising picture of human-animal connection emerges.

Michael Wilson's "The Smell of Love" describes and analyzes encounters between lustful moths attracted by scent in the pitch-dark of night, and the human parsing of odors that suffuse the moth world:

"... Moth odors have been noted for centuries. While the effective components of female pheromones are largely undetectable by humans, male moths often produce odors that are noticeable and overt. In fact, some moths, such as the goat moths (Cossidae), were named for their fragrance. Males of *Galleria mellonella* (the greater wax moth) smell musk-like. *Megalopyge* smells like peanut butter. *Estigmene* smells of maple syrup."

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In "Moth Acoustic Signaling and Vibrational Communication: Songs of Love and Sounds of Peril," Mark Klingensmith details the expressive frequencies of moth communication:

"Many people find it hard to imagine what sound a moth makes other than the incessant banging an adult moth makes slamming into a screen door while circling the porch light. However, moths have an incredible repertoire when it comes to producing sound that

includes humming, buzzing, chirping and singing, clicking, whistling and sizzling."

Stephen Buchmann, in "Moth Scales: Phantasmatic Mosaics," recounts the experience of field collecting as a way into the complex history of the order, Lepidoptera:

nd Desire

"We anticipated an invigorating night of "mothing" under that black Arizona night sky with its fuzzy Milky Way swath. We'd selected this date, this night, and the new moon. There would be no extraneous light to confuse the moths, or divert them from wing beating a patch to the bright UV-enriched lights and landing sheets... Moths by the thousands arrived, mesmerized..."

In "A Touch of Madness," Gerar Edizel reconsiders the mythological tale of Psyche, whose name means both "moth" and "soul," through Joseph Scheer's images:

"Since my first encounter with the hallucinatory intensity of Joseph Scheer's moth imagery, I have enjoyed speculating that the story of Eros and Psyche was developed with wisdom accreted over millennia and retold with relish among those gathered around fires where moths immolated themselves in the darkness of warm and windless nights."

Scheer recovers moths and renders them sublime — in the philosophical sense, possessed of an awe-inspiring power at once terrifying and beautiful. Through these beings, often discounted as "pests" in favor of their presumably more pleasing butterfly counterparts, he expands our encounter with the unseen and dismissed, now writ large and wondrous. Mapped in the brilliant beauty of these moths is our inability to see the world we inhabit — without assistance, without the aid of art, of science. And as Scheer's work so adeptly demonstrates, the experience of seeing is fundamentally one of transformation.

It is an enormous pleasure and privilege to present Joseph Scheer's work at the University of Arizona Museum of Art, for the first time in the state. As the accompanying exhibition catalog details, the species that comprise the exhibition belong to a wave of migratory pollinators sweeping across the Sonoran desert night, which makes this debut particularly meaningful. Joseph Scheer's work, as is true of his moths, eschews borders and in so doing offers us the great gift of a rare encounter.

Dr. Lisa Fischman
Chief Curator,
University of Arizona Museum of Art
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Acknowledgements

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Joseph Scheer is professor of Print Media, and the Co-Director/Founder of the Institute for Electronic Arts at the School of Art and Design, Alfred University in Western New York. His current works, which span print media, video and web based projects, use technology to re-examine nature through interpretive collecting and visual recording. His work has been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (New York), The National Museum of China (Beijing), The National Museum of Sweden (Stockholm), and The Field Museum (Chicago). Monographs on his work include *Night Visions, the Secret Designs of Moths* (Prestel), and *Night Flyers* (Nexus Press); he has also been written about in *National Geographic, The New York Times, Flaunt, ArtNews, Science, Nature, Forbes, American Photo, DER SPIEGAL, The Chronicle for Higher Education, and The Ganzfeld*, among other publications.

Michael Wilson has served as Research Director of Drylands Institute (Tucson) since 1993, and is involved in environmental and public health, agriculture and horticulture. Wilson's primary areas of interest are entomology and botany. He is a coauthor of *Trees of Sonora*, and is writing a series of articles on the insect life of Sonora. A current project is the *Medicinal Plants of Arizona and Sonora* coauthored with Richard Felger, a book that will cover nearly 1000 species of plants with medicinal uses.

Mark Klingensmith is a Technical Specialist at the Institute for Electronic Arts, School of Art and Design, Alfred University. As a media artist he has collaborated with Joseph Scheer on moth sound and video installations across the US and in Sweden. With a background in research information management working for the NSF-funded Long Term Ecological Research network, he has a strong interest in art and science collaborations. He also runs an organic farm in Western New York where many nights are spent collecting, studying and recording moths.

Stephen Buchmann is an amateur beekeeper, Associate Professor of Entomology at the University of Arizona in Tucson, author of *The Forgotten Pollinators*, and founder of The Bee Works, an environmental company. His most recent book is *Letters from the Hive: An Intimate History of Bees, Honey and Humankind*, published by Bantam in 2005.

Gerar Edizel, art historian and visual artist, is Chair of the Division of Art History and Associate Professor of Art History at Alfred University.



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