

Silver Wings and Golden Scales: An Installation by Jennifer Angus and Alistair MacDonald

Children's literature is populated with wonderful six-legged characters like the insect companions in *James and the Giant Peach* and the fabulously glamorous cockroach in *La Cuchuracha Martina*. In the Victorian era, adults and children were introduced to the natural world through educational publications that anthropomorphized insects to make them more appealing. Voracious collecting of plants and wildlife was extremely popular, and for the insatiable Victorian nothing was sacrosanct; there was enormous prestige granted to a large collection with the finest, most unusual specimens. While men of science did fieldwork, the wealthy sponsored expeditions and accumulated the bounty. Their specimens were often presented in "cabinets of curiosity" in arrangements that had little to do with genus but everything with aesthetic presentation. This installation channels that quirky spirit of collection and display, which embraces both science and fantasy.

Anyone who spends time outdoors listening to the surroundings will gradually become aware of the many layers of sound. Once the ears attune to the environment—be it a garden or a dense jungle—they begin to distinguish, follow, and even fantasize about the sounds at their ear tips. The soundscape you hear in the gallery attempts to re-create that state of awareness or memory, and it, too, is made up of separate layers.

The foundation comprises recordings made from dawn to dusk in the rain forest of Sarawak, East Malaysia, then "pleated" in time to make a repeating cycle that lasts just over two hours. The sound slowly changes and moves through the room as each creature takes its turn in the daily cycle. Superimposed on this layer are strands extracted from original recordings of single sounds made by birds and insects. These notes, like the colourful insects upon the wall, spin in interlocking circles through the space.

Additional sound elements come not from the forest but from human literary and musical realms, yet they share with the visual elements references to the nineteenth-century fascination with exploration and collection, the flourishing of entomology, and the resulting children's stories and rhymes. The English naturalist and evolutionist Alfred Russel Wallace extensively explored the rain forests of South East Asia in the mid-nineteenth century; we hear extracts from his account *The Malay Archipelago*. There are the nonsense poems of Edward Lear and others, including William Roscoe's "The Butterfly's Ball and the Grasshopper's Feast" (1808), considered to be the first English-language children's story that was not a moral tale or fable. Next a little train of fantasy leads us, in musical boxes, from the tune for a setting of "The Butterfly's Ball" to the old Morris dance tune "An English Country Garden" and then "Brahms' Lullaby."

Other layers result from sound transformations: Wallace's grandfather clock, the voices of children calling out names of insects like tongue-twisters, and the musical boxes all dissolve into the clicking and hissing of the insect chorus and join them in circling around the gallery. Like the forest itself, the soundscape is ever changing and will never sound exactly the same from day to day.

In the Victorian era, the life of a mayfly was a popular metaphor for making the most of one's day. It rises from the water at dawn, and at dusk it dies. Its brief time on earth is spent flying and mating, never eating; and then—as the sun sets—it is no more. "Whether such a short life is heaven or hell is a matter of conjecture" (Jim Loy, 2000). Wander the gallery and journey through a day.

Jennifer Angus would like to thank her assistant Kara Ginther for her invaluable help. She would also like to acknowledge the support of the long-suffering K'gnausa (Sasa) Yodkerepauprai and most of all Robert Apholz, who provided inspiration and motivation, and to whom this exhibition is dedicated.