

WHAT'S ON

VISUAL ARTS

Art is where you find the dead bodies

Once in a while, you come across something that just grabs you. That's how it felt seeing Amy Swartz's *Pest* series at Angell Gallery recently. Its prosaic title belies its epic frame: Collecting thousands of dead insects, Swartz has taken the archaic scientific practice of pinning specimens to paper for study to a fantastical extreme.

Liberal mixing antiquated entomological display conventions with toy miniatures and an absurdist sense of humour, Swartz constructs a world where monstrous butterflies are herded by a game crew of winged warriors, or warrior bees stand off against a rag-tag crew of lesser bugs in an epic entomological confrontation.

Subversive science, conceptual process, a cheekily critical reprisal of the consistent human urge to cast any and all lesser creatures as decorative and at our disposal: *Pest* is all these things, and more. You'll spend more time than you ever thought possible with your face pressed against the glass. I spoke with her recently for a look inside the frame.

There's a wonderfully weird sense of dislocation I experienced when I first saw the work. At first glance, it looks like an artfully arranged science project, until you get up close, and then whole worlds emerge. That's exactly the experience that I wanted: Coming upon it without

ing on her birthday. Shortly after that, I found a dead dragonfly on my windowsill. It was perfect: this still, beautiful creature. I was fascinated by it, so I put it in a container and kept it. Sometimes I'd scare myself when I'd find it, because I forgot I had it.

I started to collect: dead bees, a couple of moths. Not many, I must have had 10. I hadn't made art in almost 10 years. I was concentrating on raising my two daughters. Then one day, my mother-in-law came over with a bag of old army figures. They belonged to my husband when he was a kid.

Some of them had been broken, and it occurred to me: I should make something again. I had these bugs, and I had these toys. I wish I could give you a more profound rationale, but really, I took an army man's head and stuck it on a moth and called him Mothman. I laughed; I thought it was the stupidest thing.

But it sat with me for a while. And, I still had the dragonfly. One day, I took the same guy, whose arms had fallen off, and I put them on the dragonfly. And it was like the world unlocked. I had a lot of schooling in art work, I understood these pro-

cesses, and suddenly, it became very easy for me to just go with it. I could see, I could conceptualize how this could become a whole world.

It sounds like you didn't really have any intention to show the work; the gallery approached you because they saw pictures of it on a blog.

Of course, I was happy to show them, but I never intended to sell them. I used all these little bodies, so selling them doesn't seem right. I'm just happy they're out there where people can see them.

So is this the end of the *Pest* project?

There's still a little tail end I haven't processed yet. I still have 2,000 insects, so we'll see.

Amy Swartz: *Pest* is at the Jamie Angell Gallery, 12 Ossington Ave., until Saturday.



From Amy Swartz's "*Pest*" series, at Angell Gallery on Ossington Ave.



MURRAY WHYTE

knowing right away that it's art. There was an interesting play, I guess, with the idea of the Modernist case, but really, I wanted there to be that tension.

Well, that's the thing: There's the reference to classical entomology, where bugs are pinned to white linen backgrounds in this sterile viewing case for observation, but then you completely subvert it with this bizarre, fantastical, epic mythology.

(Laughs) Over time, it morphed; I

was setting up whole systems. They're all so idiosyncratic; every one of them has its own story, and I was getting really involved. If you saw my studio, you'd think I was insane. There were toys covering tabletops, there were all these bugs, and I was figuring out which one went with which.

My mind started reeling at the amount of labour you must have put into this.

I know! The physical construction took three years. There are so many elements. I decided not to kill anything, so they were all found dead — donated by the Ontario Science Centre, the Cambridge Butterfly Conservatory, many others.

How did it begin?

When I was pregnant with my first daughter, my mom died quite suddenly. She actually died danc-