

NOVEMBER 1999  
\$4.75 CANADA \$6.75

# NEW | ART

EXAMINER



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Paul Palement, Long Beach, California  
by Jacqueline Cooper

In his small, well-ordered, Long Beach studio, the artist Paul Palement works quietly and methodically, cataloguing the formal qualities of inanimate objects and splicing them with their organic doppelgangers to create meticulously rendered, Frankensteinian arthropods. Painstakingly painted in egg tempera on gessoed wood panels, these jewel-like images glisten against pristine white grounds; eerie evocations of the glory days of entomology and a time when species were being discovered rather than destroyed. Palement has been classifying objects according to form since graduate school, where he developed an extended series of Rorschach-blot-like drawings that form the basis of the conceptual inquiry fueling the current work. In the early works, Palement divided images according to their relative degrees of formal similarity, further subdividing these classes according to incrementally smaller differences, approximating the standard "family," "species," and "genus" of scientific classification. Having determined a quasi-psychological system for classifying the non-objective, monochromatic marks he was producing during the time, Palement expanded the dialogue by introducing a variety of hues. He determined the emotional characteristics of a number of color combinations by using the psychoanalytical structure of the Lüscher test. This test, devised by Dr. Max Lüscher in 1969, claims to identify personality traits by examining a subject's choice of color combinations from a restricted palette of eight hues. The Lüscher Color Series resembles Rorschach blots but with representational images on each side of the fold. When the images on the right and left sides meet at the fold they generally reveal a third image with an individual color combination formed by the intermingling of the two original images. These are then sorted according to their proximity to a personality trait described in Lüscher's texts. In Palement's version of this "experiment," he was

both the interpreter and the interpretant; all scientific objectivity was removed. Instead, the meaning of the exercise resided in conceiving a hermetically sealed, perfectly useless, arbitrary method of taxonomy.

The current work merges the formal, design-based characteristics of techno-gadgetry (compact disc players, the computer mouse, cellular telephones) with the bilateral symmetry and segmented external covering observed in insects. Taking the segmentation of various bugs as a ready-made form, Palement seamlessly interjects objects from the contemporary world of product design. For example, in *Coccinella Walkmanana*, the rounded carapace of a scarab beetle is mirrored in combination with the closed shell of a portable compact disc player. Further emphasizing the simplistic geometric vocabulary that links organic to synthetic, Palement overlays his mutation with concentric circles, which radiate from the center point of the conjoined beetle/electronic machine. In *Argiope Mouseii*, the flattened abdomen of a spider is formally likened to the body of a computer mouse, while the legs of the creature are partially replaced by the articulated tools of the dental hygienist.

Following a brief stint as a musician, Palement worked as a designer for a number of magazines and it is the designer's eye that informs much of the structure of the work. To accentuate the role that methodical fragmentation plays as an organizing principle in his paintings, Palement frequently divides the support into bilaterally symmetrical quadrants, each slightly separated from its neighbor like pieces in a simplistic puzzle. The resulting paintings are always larger than the insect used as a reference, but small enough (most works are under 24-by-36 inches) to necessitate close scrutiny. At first glance, the works resemble the product of a computer morphing program, it is not until later that the viewer discovers the trace of brush strokes and a host of seductive imperfections that announce the

work as a "paint-ing." Beginning with a small drawing, Palement carefully dissects his source material into major shapes, pencilling them onto the surface. Matching these silhouetted forms with others he has collected, he begins to paint his beautiful monsters, his hands encased in white cotton gloves to protect the delicate surfaces of the panels used as supports. At first, Palement used extant creatures as his inspiration. Now, he feels comfortable with inventing the source as well as creating the resulting cross-breed.

With scraps of information pinned to his bulletin board, Palement continues to build his rebus. Continually cross-referencing existing systems of classification, Palement restructures their categories to suit his own purposes. Specimens (both organic and inorganic) sharing a similar winged appearance, for example, a tiger moth and a helicopter, are grouped together. From this starting point, the forms are further broken down so that the limbs of the tiger moth may be reclassified

with dental tools and laser pointers. Currently, Palement is in the process of adding musical instruments to the system and suspects that the possibilities may be limitless. Existing only in diagrammatic form, this constantly evolving web of thoughts informs the intimate gamesmanship Palement plays with his subjects and the viewer. One is never quite sure where reality lies in the work, apart from the material insistence of the medium and obvious facility of technique. Yet I am always returned to the concept of the multi-tiered game as the locus of meaning in the artist's discipline as an entirety. One is tempted to reference Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa, who turned into a giant cockroach, but this seems too literal. Instead, I would suggest, in his laboratory/studio, Palement is producing amoral mutations for the viewer to consume: beautiful and hopeful hybrids cultivated purely for visual pleasure.

Jacqueline Cooper is an artist and writer currently living in Los Angeles.

#### Paul Palement

*Hybrids B-Tettigia Screwini*, 1999. Egg tempera on panel, 25 1/2" x 23".  
Courtesy of the artist.

