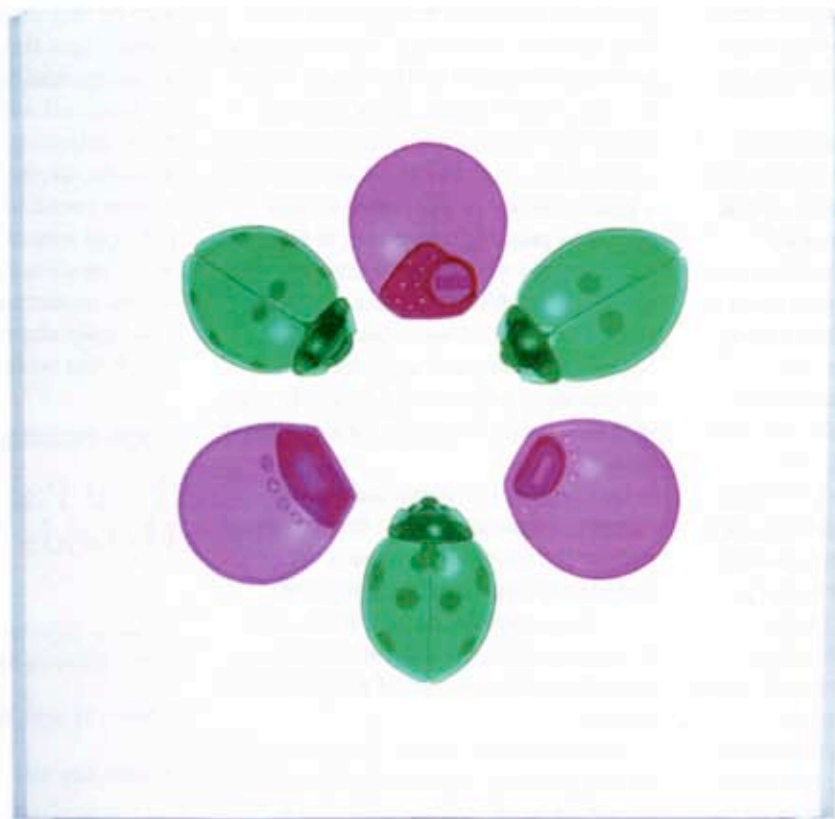


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**CALENDAR**

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**WONDER:** Paul Paiement links the organic with the inorganic in "Coccinella mpthreus."

**ART REVIEW**

## Don't be squeamish: These bugs deserve a closer look

BY HOLLY MYERS  
*Special to The Times*

At a glance, the first half a dozen paintings in Paul Paiement's "Hybrids 1.0 - 3.5" could easily be mistaken for straight entomological illustrations. Each of the 11-by-14-inch watercolors portrays a single insect, painstakingly rendered, floating against a pristine white ground.

Look closer, however, and idiosyncratic details emerge: They're rendered in cool, candy-store colors and emblazoned with optically seductive patterns, such as bull's-eyes and stripes. Look closer



**WINGED:** The watercolor "Nymphalidae Nintendo." still and you'll find strange things grafted onto their bodies: the buttons of a portable CD player across the back of a

ladybug; a Nintendo control pad where a butterfly's wings should be; or, cleverly enough, the body of a Volkswagen standing in for the shell of a beetle.

As the title of the Laguna Art Museum show declares, they're hybrids. The conceit extends even to their pseudo-scientific titles: "Nymphalidae Microsoftmouse," "Artica coja personalorganiza," "Belinota laserpointa," "Yponomonta speakera."

Despite the fantastical nature of the project, Paiement's attention to the physiological structure of the insects, combined with his elegant technique,

over

carries the work. Although he admits to a degree of creative license — "I'm banking on the fact that a lot of people don't know much about insects," he says in an interview with curator Tyler Stallings — he's clearly driven by a formal fascination with his subjects and reproduces their physical characteristics in painstaking detail, down to the veins on their wings and the spindly hairs on their skinny little legs.

He's meticulous in his hybridization of the insects as well, choosing objects that echo their dimensions precisely, so that the fusions are subtle and remarkably natural looking. Indeed, most of his creations seem no less likely than a pluto or a praying mantis that looks like a twig.

The show is modest in size but encompasses 10 series, produced more or less simultaneously over the last five years and titled alphabetically. The watercolors, "Hybrids A" and "Hybrids AA," are the simplest, each portraying a single specimen, usually centered, on a single sheet of paper. "B" through "G" — all egg tempera on wood panels, ranging in size from 12 to 60 inches across — incorporate progressively more complex compositional strategies.

In "B," the insect is still centered but straddles several intersecting panels; in "C," it bisects two opposite edges of the same panel, as if frozen between two frames of a filmstrip. In "D," Paiement varies the size and shape of the panels and deconstructs his creatures, surrounding a single hybrid with a patterned

swarm of one of its component parts. "E" involves geometric arrangements of the creatures at various stages of hybridization, while "F" and "G" play with layering.

It is an impressively balanced body of work. The formulaic potential of the premise is offset by the rigorous variation; the cool, controlled, almost clinical precision tempered by the cheery color and the playful nature of the pairings. There is a touch of social commentary, a gentle dose of art historical allusion and a good quantity of intelligent optical play. The painting, moreover, is lovely. The tempera works have a smooth, creamy palatability that strikes a near-perfect balance between the work's organic and inorganic aspects, linking the powdery delicacy of a butterfly wing with the plastic sensuality of a computer mouse.

In "Hybrids I," "Pyraetomena flashlightis" — the only one of this last category in the show — a site-specific installation approximates a nighttime view from what might be a back porch in Paiement's home state of Minnesota, complete with a chorus of ambient insect noises.

Tucked into an alcove roughly the size of a large closet, the installation offers viewers a patch of fake grass and a bench from which to regard a woody diorama dotted with blinking, firefly-like lights, as well as a mock information panel devoted to the specimen in question, which is, not surprisingly, shaped

like a flashlight.

The work gives the impression of an enthusiastic if not altogether assured experiment. After the tight precision of the mostly small-scale paintings, the dimensions of the installation feel slightly beyond Paiement's control, which may be why he chose to take it on. It doesn't have the artistic resonance of the paintings, and the exhibition would be no worse off without it, but there's something refreshing about stepping into it. A pleasant, soothing space, it brings the viewer 'round to what seems to be the principal source of the entire body of work: an earnest layperson's appreciation for the mysteries of the insect world and a curiosity about the myriad ways in which that world overlaps our own.

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## 'Paul Paiement: Hybrids 1.0 - 3.5'

**Where:** Laguna Art Museum, 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach

**When:** 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily

**Ends:** July 10

**Price:** \$9 for adults, \$7 for students and seniors

**Contact:** (949) 494-8971  
[www.lagunaartmuseum.org](http://www.lagunaartmuseum.org)