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# *Monuments and Megachile: Lessons from the Insect Graveyard*

by Cole Swanson



## About the Artist

Cole Swanson is an artist and educator based in Toronto/Tkaronto, Canada. Through a multidisciplinary, collaborative, and materially focused practice, he explores the complex relations emerging between creatures living together in tension in the so-called Anthropocene. Swanson's work opens to multiple ways of knowing; he learns from/with conservationists, scientists, community partners, and more-than-human actors to inform key aspects of the creative process. Swanson is undertaking PhD research in Environmental Studies at York University, Toronto. A 2023 Vanier Scholar, he is currently engaged in multispecies and artistic research into Toronto's massive and maligned double-crested cormorant colony.

# Monuments and *Megachile*: Lessons from the Insect Graveyard

Cole Swanson

*The expression of our ethical lives will be visible in how we inhabit the death zone: how we call out, how we refuse to abandon others, how we refuse hard-heartedness, and thus how we embrace the precious beauty that permeates the house of life.*

—Deborah Bird Rose

The silhouettes of expired houseflies (*Musca domestica*) formed an unlikely constellation in the light fixture hanging over my bed. I gazed up at the tiny corpses and counted them—fourteen—conjuring images from imaginary lines articulated at arthropodal joints. It was winter in Toronto and my apartment was shut up tight, insulated from the cold and the (non-human) animals that might seek refuge from it. Where did these insects come from? Are there entomological flight paths crisscrossing the airspace of my home? Reaching up to the ceiling from the shaky mattress underfoot, I unhinged the fixture's frosted glass reservoir and peered into it; fourteen broken and battered bodies, strewn across a dusty graveyard stared lifelessly back at me.

This brief encounter between the living and the dead spurred a decade-long artistic relationship with the insect body and its teachings. As curiosity became obsession, I developed an alternative practice in entomology in which collecting, archiving, and displaying the reclaimed skins of fallen arthropods embodies complex, multispecies terrain. Inscribed upon chitinous skins are a myriad of epistemological possibilities; they muddle scientific visions of a well-classified nature, modern and colonial expansionist and extractivist regimes, but also interspecies intimacies, fleshly forms of communion, visceral notions of beauty and disgust.



Figure 1. Swanson, Cole. *Monument*, Installation detail, 2018. Reclaimed insects, 24 carat gold leaf, gold silk, and entomological pins, 240" x 96" x 2.5". Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Photo by Sam Mogelonsky.

When it comes to insects, it makes perfect sense to begin the journey in death. In recent years, a crescendo of frenzied voices rose up after startling reports on global insect losses were released (Entomological Society of America 2019). Anxieties about the ecological and economic implications of rapid and widespread insect declines were fueled by the sobering realization that the anthropogenic stressors responsible are not simple but manifold and complex—"death by a thousand cuts" (Wagner et al. 2021, 2). The loss of typically abundant species is a major cause for concern among researchers in the entomological community. There is a new urgency to ensure the flourishing of not only common-variety insects, but also the expansive network of lives that such creatures

support, *Homo sapiens*' included (Wagner et al. 2021, 2). One can no longer take for granted the presence of a common housefly in a bedroom light fixture.

### *Monument: An Insect Cartography*

Meditation on the dire nature of a global insect apocalypse can paralyze the ponderer. While there is no guarantee of better outcomes, the late anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose stated that “we need an ethical poetics that brings us into proximities that awaken us both to others and to ourselves, and thus to our responsibilities” (Rose 2013, 12). The lives of individual insects are worthy of contemplation and ceremony, and so for five years, I collected and cared for every insect body I found in the course of daily life. A ritual was born from this alternative entomology, in which each corpse became a sacred specimen, pinned lovingly through the thorax and gilt in 24 carat gold. A toolkit of insect pins and forceps, miniature painting brushes and gilding size, entwined the processes of science and art. In *Monument* (2018) (see Figure 1), I created an installation of over 250 illuminated insects that are meticulously pinned to gallery walls and threaded together with golden silk. The insects are displayed in overlapping, geometric arrangements. Their fractal organization can be expanded, contracted, and reorganized according to the scale and dimensions of different exhibition spaces. The piece consists of geo-spatial maps defining the discovery locations of individual insect remains. I derived this forensic cartography from human-made spaces that insects occupy and succumb to—light fixtures, windowsills, vehicle interiors, a swimming pool. It is a representation of how life changes with the presence of actors working across species lines, living and dying together. *Monument* acknowledges the vanities and paradoxes in commemorative sculpture; contrary to their purpose to honor, raise up, and preserve icons and ideologies ad infinitum, all monuments will eventually degrade, and their referents will be forgotten. As a temporary installation of buggy bodies in various states of decay, the artwork signals the impossible feat of freezing and reversing time. The insects are delicate, woven into a multispecies threadwork so fragile that any notion of permanence is but one clumsy gesture away from being unraveled.

Gold is a powerful signifier capable of shifting relations between humans and other species, for better or worse. The inscription of economics, religion, myth, and empire on the material is complicated when gold seduces onlookers to become intimate with the (formerly) abject bodies of disintegrating insects. Observed from inches away, networks of tiny veins on the wings of flies and cicadas dazzle in their illumination (see Figure 2). The abdomens and wing casings (elytra) of beetles are radiant when wrapped in golden hues. The material reveals the fragility of our biases toward other earthly beings, those

prejudices tenuously built upon human-interests that hinder our ability to recognize the miraculousness of the world's *awkward creatures*.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, the rituals and processes embedded in *Monument* echo Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2015) attestations that ceremony can "transcend the boundaries of the individual and resonate beyond the human realm. These acts of reverence are powerfully pragmatic. These are ceremonies that magnify life" (249).



Figure 2. Swanson, Cole. *Monument*, Cicada detail, 2018. Reclaimed insects, 24 carat gold leaf, gold silk, and entomological pins, 240" x 96" x 2.5". Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Photo by Toni Hafkensheid.

### *Megachile Alienus*: On Pests and Profits

Insect specimens are exoskeletal husks left behind by lively creatures that are absorbed and abstracted into science and culture. They become parts of the embodied, material-discursive practices that build and destroy entire multispecies worlds. Recognition of the agency and knowledge embedded in the entomological specimen has inspired my interdisciplinary research. In 2022, I conducted a comparative study of two bee species whose migration lines and presence in Canada and Italy demonstrate how the flows of capital, power, and people *become-with* tenacious arthropods surviving in the

Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup> *Megachile Alienus* (2022) is a portable gallery, a cabinet of curiosities-meets-scientific laboratory (see Figure 3).<sup>3</sup> The black box is fitted with magnifying lenses, mixed-media installations, data visualizations, and altered bee specimens. The design embodies the ideological and political forces driving mainstream imaginaries on bees, revealing and disrupting the hegemonic practices responsible for their construction. Inspired by Anna Tsing's (2022) ideas on interspecies entanglements, the work embodies *ontological edge effects*, places of interspecies sociality “where touching and overlap occur even across varied projects of world making” (30).



Figure 3. Swanson, Cole. *Megachile Alienus*, Installation view, 2022. Mixed-media. 240” x 96” x 2.5”. Sala del Camino, Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice.

The enclosed chamber contains an interrogation of the giant resin bee (*Megachile sculpturalis*), which is conceptually and corporeally dissected. Sometimes deemed a pest in its introduced range, the robust insect was first spotted in North America in the 1990s and Europe in the early 2000s having stowed away on maritime vessels arriving from Asian ports (Lanner et al. 2020).<sup>4</sup> Its formidable size, imposing jaws, and resin-regurgitating behavior—occasionally used to immobilize other (native) bees—have earned it a reputation as an evil, alien-invader.<sup>5</sup> To emphasize such an imaginary, I have perforated the gallery with spyholes to magnify the specimens several times their natural size. As the viewer peers in, they witness insect bodies lying upon stark platforms (see Figures 4 and 5). The optically-expanded room is wallpapered in graphs and biological illustrations and is coolly lit by a colorless film projection. On a loop, the dismemberment of a female *M. sculpturalis* is performed, her appendages prodded and systematically severed (see Figure 6). In this action, the audience is reminded of the notorious 1995 *Alien Autopsy* hoax-video (Santilli 2021); released into the mainstream as speculative evidence of a clandestine, state interrogation of an alien crash-site, the footage depicts two forensic scientists dissecting the remains of a Martian-corpse. The video emerged amidst the Culture Wars of the 1990's in which science and faith were concurrently taken-up to repair the schism between traditionalists and progressivists around questions of truth (Arras 2018). In a similar fashion, the *M. sculpturalis* specimens in *Megachile Alienus* are subject to the same complimentary and contradictory systems of knowing, in which scientific data and socially constructed identities—introduced, invasive, evil, or alien species<sup>6</sup>—reflect the limits, ironies, and unequal relations embedded in positivist pursuits.<sup>7</sup> The line between science and fiction is blurred, calling objectivity into question, and gesturing toward the inevitability of violence facing organisms re-made into pests.<sup>8</sup>

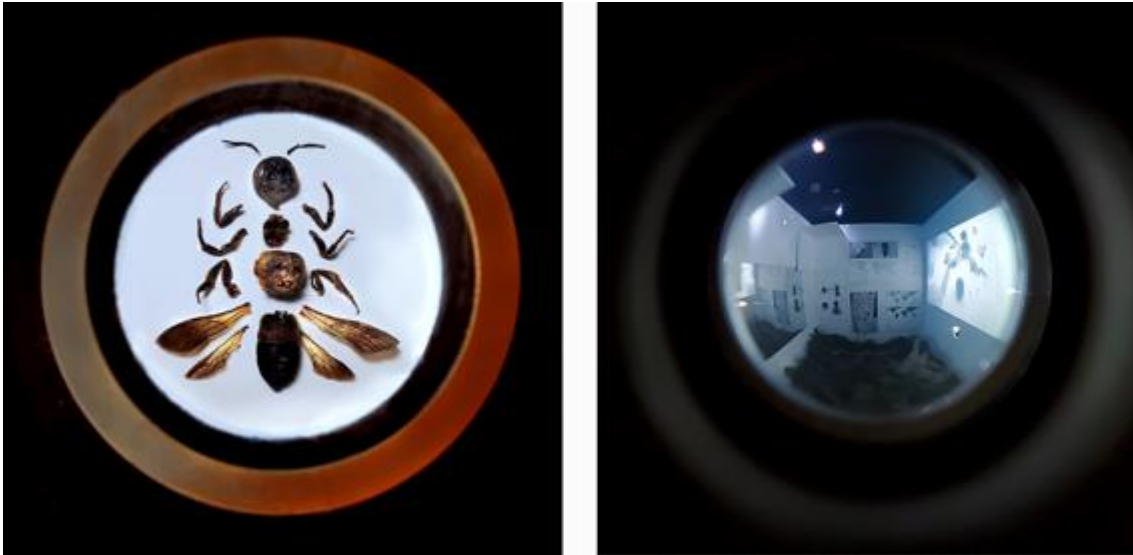


Figure 4. Swanson, Cole. *Megachile Alienus: M. sculpturalis* specimen, Installation detail (left), 2022; Figure 5. *Megachile Alienus*: Interior chamber spyhole view, Installation detail (right), 2022. Sala del Camino, Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice.

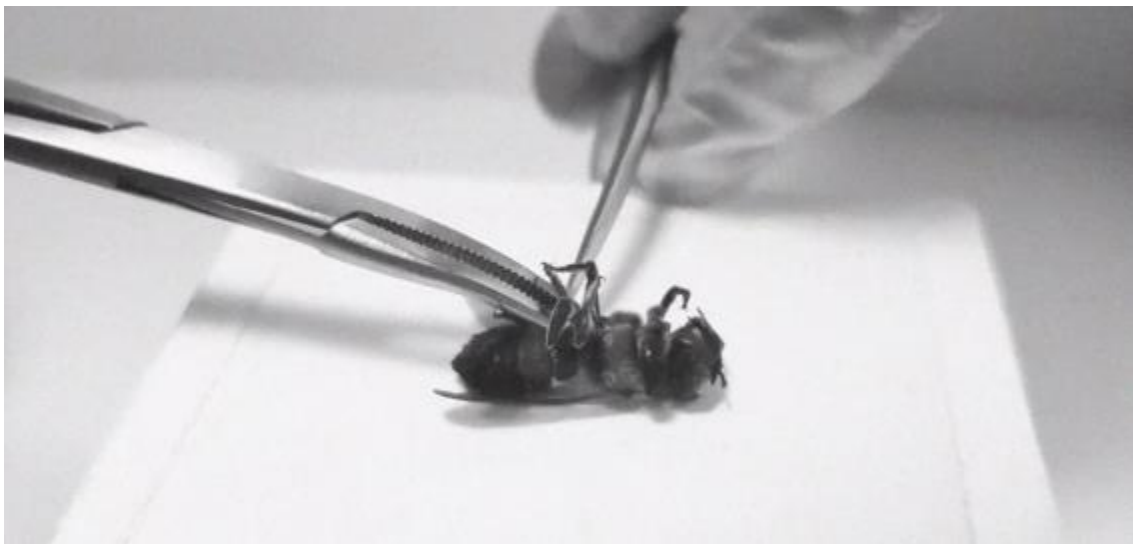


Figure 6. Cole Swanson. *Megachile Alienus: M. sculpturalis* dismemberment (Video installation detail) 2022. Sala del Camino, Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice.

The second half of the gallery is opened up to the viewer. An old wooden board is covered in geometric forms and cryptic text and is perforated with a grid of uniform holes. Eight specimens of alfalfa leafcutter bees (*Megachile rotundata*), which hover in perpetuity, are pinned to the board (see Figure 7). Comparatively tiny next to the giant resin bee, these insects appear delicate and harmless, their gilded wings donning an imperial flare.



Figure 7. Swanson, Cole. *Megachile Alienus: M. rotundata diorama* (installation detail), 2022. Sala del Camino, Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice.

*Megachile rotundata* are beloved for their efficiency in pollinating crops like alfalfa and blueberries, whose reproductive mechanisms require consummate tactile operations the bees are adept at performing (Packer 2010, 22). This diorama conjures solitary bee-farm imagery, wherein tubular nurseries are carefully prepared to support an eco-colonial enterprise.<sup>9</sup> The bold, black shapes throughout the installation can be *read* by leafcutters who study their rectilinear edges to help locate nesting holes (Packer 2010, 25). To acknowledge arthropod-agency, I re-designed the taxonomical labels for each specimen so that they appear more legible to alfalfa leafcutter bees. Such knowledge on *M. rotundata* perception emerges amidst ramped-up scientific efforts to support their effective integration into industrial-level agriculture (Pitts-Singer and Cane 2011).<sup>10</sup> The systematic arrangement of nests evokes the mass-cultivation of crop-based monocultures whose scalability is decimating global biodiversity.<sup>11</sup> All of the staging and research embedded in the diorama thinly veils the fragile nature of commodity relations. In fact, the bees glittering in the box are long dead; they are but hollow skins filled with air and dust where guts once powered lively appendages.

Since *Monument* and *Megachile Alienus* were created, I have collected thousands of insect bodies from across numerous taxa, mostly from happenstance (see Figure 8), but also from the generosity of friendly entomologists.<sup>12</sup> I have a compulsion towards carrying these tiny and wonderous bodies with me, wherever I go. This is because my initial curiosity toward these insects reformed my imagination of the world(s) I inhabit in significant ways, and also because attending to my arthropod kin, especially in death, has ignited an awareness of the sacred and fragile constitution of multispecies living.



Figure 8. Swanson, Cole. Specimen collection detail, 2022 (ongoing).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Beisel et al. (2014) introduce a suite of environmental humanities scholarship on *awkward creatures*—those whose lives rest upon liminal and undefined ways of thinking and knowing the world. The authors consider the complex dynamics at work in flourishing, which is constituted, in part, by violence permitting some species-assemblages to persist over others.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Haraway’s concept of *becoming-with* provides an ontological model built upon connections rather than individualism and in unequal power relations, through which worlds are made and unmade. She states that “becoming is always becoming with, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake” (Haraway 2008, 244).

<sup>3</sup> *Megachile Alienus* is the first interdisciplinary iteration of the *Emergent Gallery*, a conceptual exhibition model conceived by collaborators Roberta Buiani, Ilze Briede (Kavi), and Lorella Di Cintio. It is a portable gallery space designed to meet the challenges of a post-pandemic world. I was invited to create a multispecies intervention that would consider shared ecological concerns between Toronto, Canada—the city of my residence—and Venice, Italy—the host city for the ACM 2022 *Creativity and Cognition Conference Exhibition*. The exhibition was hosted at the Sala del Camino, a late fifteenth-century Benedictine monastic complex on the island of Guidecca. For more information on the *Emergent Gallery* and the conference exhibition, see Buiani et. al 2022.

<sup>4</sup> While the specific port of Asian origin is unknown, the first specimen of *M. sculpturalis* was found in North America in 1994 in North Carolina, USA and in Europe in 2008 in Aullach, France (Lanner et. al 2020).

<sup>5</sup> In discussion with one scientist to procure specimens of *M. sculpturalis*, the bees were referred to as *evil things*. Conceptions of the creature’s moral and ecological status seem to vary widely, indicating conflicting imaginaries from within and outside of academia.

<sup>6</sup> Some evidence suggests that the Asian-native giant resin bee (*M. sculpturalis*) usurps the nesting holes of North American-native Virginia carpenter bee (*Xylocopa virginica*), which may qualify its emergent status as both an introduced and invasive species (Packer 2010, 154).

<sup>7</sup> See Donna Haraway’s (1988) highly influential essay challenging the rhetoric of scientific objectivity and proffering a feminist scientific rationality based in multiple, situated knowledges.

<sup>8</sup> I am reminded of Deborah Bird Rose’s (2022) discussion on the fate of pests. She states: “when an animal is declared a pest, death becomes its destiny. Suddenly, whatever it does is wrong in the eyes of those who are determined to get rid of it” (186).

<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive examination of the vast and systematic farming of alfalfa leafcutter bees in the United States, which includes a description of bee-board architecture for maintaining industrial-scale leafcutter bee operations, see Pitts-Singer and Cane, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> For a fascinating introduction to the economic potency of domesticating alfalfa leafcutter bees (*M. rotundata*), see Packer 2010 (22–24).

<sup>11</sup> Anthropologist Anna Tsing has developed an examination of the concept of scalability relative to natural systems and the salvage economy represented by the commerce in matsutake mushrooms. She asserts that the commoditization of nature into natural resources has its foundation in colonial violence and the Transatlantic passage. The development of plantations systematically organized nature into biological regimes of high production at low cost, which became the standard model for industrialization around the world, and a significant cause of ecological catastrophe (Tsing 2015, 38–40).

<sup>12</sup> I would like to express my sincere thanks to mellitologist Dr. Laurence Packer, who maintains an impressive entomological collection at *The Packer Lab*, York University, Toronto. Dr. Packer

prepared several specimens for inclusion in *Megachile Alienus*, and has provided invaluable support, allowing me to access information, resources, and personnel to make the resulting exhibition possible.

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