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Portraits of Bees

KATHERINE LARSON

IT'S EVENING in artist Heather Green's studio. The smell of creosote wafts through the open porch door, and Ishmael, the cat whose friendship I've finally won after a decade of persuasion, purrs on my lap in a silky pool of gray. Interspersed between vintage Japanese teapots packed with paintbrushes are hand-stitched books, stacked cases of hefty letterpress type, a smattering of birds' nests, segments of peach gorgonian coral that branch inside a curio cabinet like veins. This night in particular, dozens of entomological

collection boxes line the tables. I sit while my friend—peering through headband magnifiers—paints portraits. But she's not painting human portraits. She's painting portraits of bees.

She works in oil, and it is a painstaking business. She paints them life-sized, on copper, against a backdrop of powdery, stately grays. These tiny residents, endemic to southern Arizona and northern Mexico, are not the honeybees made prominent in headlines about colony collapse disorder. Unlike honeybees, native bees cannot be moved from field to field while boxed. They are, however, industrious pollinators—research indicates that they are often better pollinators than honeybees—and their diversity is staggering. I peer inside the boxes as she works, discover a bee of oil-slick-green

iridescence, a beefy blue bee with tufts of black hair, slim bees with abdomens striped with bands of vermilion or burnt orange, bees smaller even than garden ants. For the installation, Green will hang up magnifying glasses so that onlookers can examine the portraits in detail. The bees' scientific names, etched in glass, will be cast in shadows above them, a gesture highlighting their inconspicuous existence and the fragility of their species in the face of looming habitat loss.

The project originated when Green learned about the work of biologist Robert Minckley at El Coronado Ranch, a ranch in the US-Mexico borderlands that's also a home for scientific research. Because I've visited El Coronado Ranch, I can tell you that it's a magical place, steeped in history and lush with the vegetation



COURTESY CAO XIAOYANG AND HANART TZ GALLERY

Waterfall Cascade, 2016,

and species diversity that thirty years of ecological restoration have produced. Minckley, whose dry humor and enthusiasm for nature's manifold forms are infectious, has been studying pollen specialization in native bees for decades. (He once took my family on a tour of a diverse biological collection housed in his university's basement, the narwhal-tusk cane and taxidermied armadillo making my four-year-old squeal with delight.) Green was fascinated by Minckley's research on these remarkable yet unobtrusive native bees, so she contacted him. In turn, Minckley was inspired by Green's years of installation work focused on the biodiversity of Cholla Bay, Mexico, an area just south of the US-Mexico border threatened with habitat destruction. A collaboration was born.

The practice of portraiture has always had more to do with artful composition than with simple reproduction. The process is meant to be laborious. After all, a portrait's primary job is to memorialize: to fix within both time and space an impression of an individual, living being. How vital to be reminded in this way of another species' existence, to see homage being paid not just with brushstrokes but attention to scientific detail. Green recounts some of Minckley's stories about collecting individual bees as she paints and I can't help but be struck by the melancholy thought that the portraits may outlast the species they represent. If the revolutionary surrealist André Breton was right that "in order to change ways of being, we must first change ways of seeing," these portraits are a compelling example of just how immediate and moving a change of perception can really be. 🐝

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