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Alchemia's new 'Habitat' exhibit is a world of wonder in downtown Petaluma

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"There should be crickets."

Artist Emile Rosewater has just noticed that his carefully-composed soundscape - featuring crickets, insects and various watery jungle-swamp sounds — has stopped. Glancing around, Rosewater takes in the cozy but complex "collaborative installation" he has organized here in the front room at Alchemia Gallery & Studios in downtown Petaluma.

The spotlights all seem to be properly focused, each one aimed at a different group of imaginary creatures — enormous insects and amphibians, tiny mushrooms with eyes and lolling tongues, people made of flowers, flying bird-cat beasts, grinning aliens — all built of wood and paper and found items by a team of 15 Alchemia artists. The fog machine is clearly operational, quietly emitting a stream of artificial ground-fog across the floor. The only thing that seems to be missing is the sound of crickets.

"And frogs," says Rosewater. "There should be frogs."

Rosewater is the current guest-curator of "Habitat," a delightfully playful new art show at Alchemia Gallery, formerly known as AWOL (Art Without Labels). The facility — complete with a gift shop, gallery space, and large studio for participants to paint and sculpt and create in — is the Petaluma-based portion of a North Bay program that includes facilities in Novato and Santa Rosa. Founded in 1998, Alchemia was designed to give adults with developmental disabilities an encouraging, supportive forum for artistic expression and personal growth.

While the Santa Rosa and Novato facilities focus on the writing and performing arts, the Petaluma site is designed specifically for fine artists, who gather at the gallery Monday through Friday to explore their creative impulses. Artist-teachers such as Rosewater — who taught at the gallery for nearly two years before leaving last year to work on his own projects — actively engage with talented artists who are living with an array of disabilities. These range from Down syndrome, autism, and various learning disabilities to a number of physical restrictions.

Though most Alchemia exhibitions are somewhat traditional — paintings on walls and sculptures on stands — “Habitat” is something altogether original.

“Emile has always struck me as someone with wildly imaginative ideas,” explains Liz Jahren, Artistic Director for Alchemia. “He stopped teaching here last year, but we invited him back for this as a guest artist. His idea was to work with our regular participants to turn the gallery into a jungle fantasy world. Then he gave assignments to the different artists, to make creatures to populate that world.

“We’d ask them, ‘What do you think is magical? What does ‘magical’ mean to you?’ And from that we ended up with things like that Cat-Bird hanging from the ceiling, and that enormous praying mantis.”

The slightly menacing mantis, boasting a long, forked tongue, was constructed by long-time Alchemia artist Tony Scagliola. Near it is a tall humanoid creation made from a metallic mannequin, imaginatively adorned with pom-poms, plastic tubes for arms, and pieces of metal for eyes, with a head that appears to be floating above its body. It’s the work of artist Rosie Dawson.

Asked if it’s a friendly creature, Dawson shakes her head.

“He’s not friendly. He’s a warrior,” she says. “I think he needs a tail.”

Asked if the piece has a title, she replies, “Well, I do have a name for the piece. But it’s a secret. Actually, the name is so complicated I had to write it down, and the piece of paper is probably still sitting around somewhere. I don’t remember it. So for now, I’ll just call it ‘Complicated Creature.’”

Across the jungle, artist Michael Cheney is studying a large fly-beast he created for the exhibit. The creature was cut out of cardboard and colorfully painted with a pleasingly comical expression.

Cheney says he created several of the inhabitants on display.

“Yeah! The fly’s mine. The Martian guy’s mine. The tongue-guy is mine,” he nods, pointing them out one by one. “The frog in the corner is mine. And that alligator is mine. I’ve made a lot of art, but it was really different to make all of these guys. I hope people like them as much as I liked making them.”

According to Jahren, the ambitious installation took five weeks to install.

“All of these creatures were developed in collaboration with Emile,” she says. “This was his vision.”

As if on cue, the missing cricket-and-frog sounds suddenly spring to life, filling the room with Rosewater's final touch.

"Crickets!" shouts Jahren, as several visitors cheer.

"This whole thing started with the idea of turning the gallery into a jungle," explains Rosewater, appearing from having fixed the cricket situation. "I wanted a world with lots of scale — tiny detailed things here, and huge things there, lots of diversity. The fun part was figuring out how to incorporate all of the different artists' creations. As an artist myself, it's really exciting to get to work with choices I might not necessarily have made myself. Like the praying mantis. Tony and I had lots of conversations about what would happen if praying mantises really were that big. Those conversations always ended up in talks about worldwide insect domination."

That, he says, is part of the point of the exhibit — to introduce something truly surprising to the Alchemia Gallery.

"I personally enjoy being shocked out of whatever narrative I think I'm in," Rosewater says. "Oh! We're going to an art show? Fine. We'll be looking at pictures on a wall! Then instead, you step into this world of strange animals and giant bugs and flying cat-birds."

He points out a nearby mannequin adorned with flowers, its head a full bouquet of blooms. The piece was created by Namsum Sung.

"Look at that," Rosewater says. "That's amazing! I'm super inspired by all of these artists' work. It was such a privilege, getting to help turn all of their contributions into one harmonious whole."

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