

Paul Paiement at Heather Marx Gallery

Art is increasingly offering overt commentary on the permeable membrane between science and culture, or reality and fable.

Take the work of artist Paul Paiement, for instance. Upon the publication of the Los Angeles-based painter's provocative *Hybrids 1.0-3.5*, the spontaneous emergence of fictitious species inspired by the cross-pollination between consumerism, militarism and technology was suddenly a more discernible trend.

Paiement's recent exhibition, *Hybrids 4.0*, a solo show at Heather Marx Gallery, revealed the sort of easy meticulousness and unalloyed contrasts you'd expect from computer sketches. His motley assortments of house bugs, molting spiders and grandiose dragonflies are clustered with images of space stations, high-powered gadgets and tactical weapons. These are pieces that draw inspiration from a variety of sources, some not always immediately apparent, such as natural history, anatomy, entomology, biological illustration, taxonomic schemes, museum displays, cybernetics and military strategy. The works bring to mind the conjectures of social theorist Jean Baudrillard and the fictitious mindscapes of Jorge Luis Borges, perhaps as much as they do a diagram in *Scientific American*.

Paiement's wall-size installations and egg tempera panel paintings belie the futuristic scope of his vision, however. Egg tempera is something of a superannuated technique. Known as the second oldest medium after encaustic, it was utilized to nice effect by the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, and perfected by the icon painters during the last hundred years of the old Byzantine Empire. Paiement's soft emulsion renderings of advanced technology and his cross-sections of insect parts resemble a scientific illustration from a spinner of fantasies, or the psychedelic vagaries of a mad scientist who's clearly having fun

with the process.

The outré artificiality of Paiement's world is always intentionally tongue-in-cheek. Just take the title of his luminous site-specific wall installation, *Hybrids I—Tettigia Spacelabeus*. The installation features a simulacrum of the Mir space station against dark blue wallpaper peppered with a procession of splayed-out insects. The collision of such a colloquial image of technological advancement is surprisingly at home in this field of arthropods. In marrying the future to the past (after all, insects have been around for millennia and aren't likely to get extinguished by impending global catastrophe) and courting their similarities, Paiement skillfully displays the infinite regression of technological form into biology.

Paiement draws out scientific simulacra of insect bodies in his assortment of computer mice and nuclear missiles, but he also reveals the mechanical nature of his insects themselves. *Hybrids D—Neochera Racingboateus* is a mammoth panel triangulated by a series of what could be colored insects or, from the title, vibrant little tugboats beating a path to the giant queen bug in the center of the piece. While the piece conjures the notion of almost aerodynamic speed, it is more in keeping with the perfectly regimented pace and order of insect life, which is conveyed as eerily militaristic.

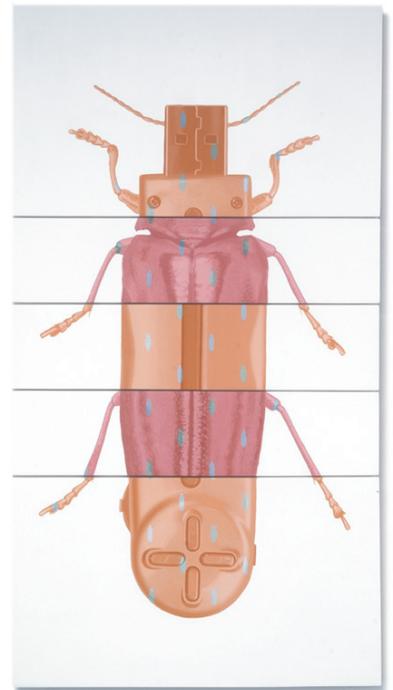
The early hybrids of the Middle Ages had a different preoccupation from Paiement's almost apocalyptic signposts. Social Darwinism and sociobiology were responsible for creating the stuff of myths among taxonomists of yore—pointing to a science propelled by fear and speculation. Paiement's pieces, like the early hybrids, are both allegorical and self-referential, pointing to origins as fictional as they are real; but his juxtaposition of technology against insects reveals the very mechanics of being and the vigor and vitality that unite his subjects. As biology increasingly informs technology, processes such as

mass production or cloning create a thin line between animals and inanimate objects. The diagrammatic nature of Paiement's pieces points to a representational process of relic-making that intentionally melds insect bodies, strange and foreign as they are, with both the creative and destructive physical artifacts of the epoch. You could say that Paiement's pieces connote the archaeology of urban and industrial decay, which only slightly counters the primitivistic imagery of his captivating bug friends.

□ □ — Nirmala Nataraj

Paul Paiement: Hybrids 4.0 closed in December at Heather Marx Gallery, San Francisco.

Nirmala Nataraj is a freelance writer based in San Francisco.



Paul Paiement, *Hybrids F—Chrysochroa Raja Flashdriveus*, 2005, egg tempera on panel, 35" x 17.5", at Heather Marx Gallery, San Francisco.