

ARTSTAR

ARTSTAR BLOG

Joseph Scheer- Captivated By The Beauty Of Moths, An Artist Uses Digital Scans To Transform Backyard Fliers Into Fine Art.

By Lynn Warren for National Geographic



The moth hunt began with Joseph Scheer using his Alfred University office as a lure, leaving lights on and windows open at day's end, collecting whatever had wandered in overnight when he returned the next morning. Plenty of moths showed up, but janitors howled about the buggy mess. So Scheer moved the hunt to his colleague Mark Klingensmith's yard. "Mark's a gardener with lots of stuff growing on his property," Scheer says. "Moths like it." The two set up lights glowing over a five-gallon (18-liter) bucket and shining on a white sheet. Then they watched, astounded, as moths came looping, fluttering, zooming in. "We got a different species every night that first season," Scheer says. "The patterns and colors were overwhelming."

A technical specialist at the university's Institute for Electronic Arts, Klingensmith coaxed a scanner designed for film and transparencies into capturing pictures of three-dimensional moths. The scanner records so much information—67 million data points per square inch—that a single specimen may take 20 minutes to scan. The data files generated are huge: Two small moths fill an entire compact disc.

With resolution that high, scans can be enlarged 2,700 percent and still be perfectly clear. Moths that in life rest comfortably on a fingertip splash across 34-by-46-inch (86 by-116 centimeter) art papers. You'd need a microscope to see the tiny scales on body and wing as clearly as they're revealed in Scheer's prints. At every step from scanner to monitor to printer, the artist keeps the actual specimen in front of him, constantly comparing his digital representations to nature's original. "Every moth requires hours of work," he says. "Color correcting the scan, adjusting the printer so the final image truly matches the moth. It has to be perfect."

Scheer and Klingensmith improve their self-taught bug-handling skills from season to season. The ultrasmall moths called microlepidoptera present special challenges. "One twitch of a finger and there goes a wing," Scheer admits. "I try to drink less coffee when I'm working on micros."

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