

a bug's afterlife

BY NICK THOMAS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

mike Libby doesn't mind admitting that his house has bugs. But visitors to his South Portland home should be forewarned about reaching for the fly swatter.

That's because Libby's bugs — an assortment of dead wasps, dragonflies, beetles, spiders, scorpions and more — have been reincarnated, in a way, and transformed into unique biotech minisculptures by fitting them with components from recycled antique watches and electronic devices. Cogs, springs, dials, brass gears, resistors, capacitors and LED lights are just some of the hardware painstakingly glued together to create the bionic bugs — Libby's unique brand of "bioart."

"It takes anywhere from 20 to 40 hours to create one," said Libby, 30, from his home studio. And since they sell for hundreds of dollars apiece, squashing one would definitely bug the artist.

A Bangor native, Libby grew up in nearby Holden and collected local wildlife — such as salamanders — as a kid. He graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design with little formal training in science or biology, but says he always appreciated the great diversity and design of the insect world.

Which is probably why, in the late 1990s, a particularly colorful dead beetle by a vending machine caught his attention. Ideas ran through his mind in the next months and in 1999, while attending a summer artist residency program at the Vermont Studio Center, he assembled his first "cyber bug" as a way to artistically stage the blending of nature and technology.

"I look at nature through the filter of an artist's eye," said Libby, who salvaged the innards of an old Mickey Mouse watch and transplanted them into his first beetle. "This was your basic artist's epiphany."

At first, he worked on beetles, then expanded to other insects, as well as spiders and scorpions.

"Over the years I have become much better at matching the components with the insects," he said. This can be seen in the blue sheen of a steel watch gear that picks up the color of a butterfly's wing or a red LED light bulb that matches the color of an insect part.

Libby still collects local insects — an occasional monarch butterfly, dragonfly or bumblebee that strays his way — but most of his specimens come from companies that specialize in supplying bugs to insect collectors and entomologists, enabling him to adapt his art to exotic species from around the world.

One of his largest projects to date is a 5-inch-long Central American grasshopper known in the scientific bug world as *Tropidacris dux*, or the Giant Brown Cricket. So large is the wingspan of these megabugs, that hunters have mistaken them for birds and blasted them with shotguns. Libby's giant high-tech 'hopper, which is adorned with brass and copper parts to complement the grasshopper's orange-brown body and wings, is priced accordingly at \$950.

So who buys Libby's bioart? Clients as diverse as the bugs themselves, says Libby. That includes scientists, insect collectors, techno-geeks, sci-fi fans, antique watch collectors, and quite often, someone just cruising his Web site, looking for that one-of-kind gift.

Bob Nelson, a geology professor at Colby College in Waterville, thinks Libby's art is intriguing. Nelson, whose research involves studying the fossil record of insects and is a member of the Maine Entomological Society, also thinks the artist should take the process one step further.

"Given the scale of some of these insects, I think it would be far more fascinating if he were to actually insert small, working watches in the specimens," said Nelson.

But Libby says he has deliberately avoided doing that, or using any sort of working electronic components in his bugs, even though it would be fairly easy with today's miniaturized technology. "I don't want them to look cheap or toylike," he says. "Any activity or function should be in the mind and imagination of the viewer."

Occasionally, Libby also runs into conservationists who question his use of dead animals — even bugs — as art. But he points out that he has only sold a hundred or so since starting — hardly enough to decimate any insect population — and that most people probably kill many more insects with their car bumpers or windscreens every week.

Some of his bugs, such as the Giant Brown Cricket, are also considered regional pests in their native countries where they can destroy crops. His more exotic specimens come from a commercial supplier that actually collects bugs to study their population distribution in various countries.

Libby's bug art — which can be viewed online at his Web site, www.insectlabstudio.com — has been featured in exhibits throughout the U.S. and Canada, and it's currently part of an exhibit at the University of Minnesota's Goldstein College of Design.

In Bangor native's art, insects undergo **one more metamorphosis** as their insides are replaced with gadgetry



The boldly colored *Eupatorus gracilicornis*, more commonly known as a rhinoceros beetle, is characterized by its long five horns. The insects are used by boys in Thailand as pet fighting beetles. They are about 2 inches long.

PHOTOS BY MIKE LIBBY