

EXHIBITION

The art of arthropods

Nick Thomas

A Californian entomologist uses insects as living paintbrushes to create abstract art. After loading water-based, non-toxic paints on to the tarsi and abdomens of insects, Steven Kutcher directs his bugs to create their 'masterpieces'.

Kutcher controls the direction and movement of his arthropods — such as hissing cockroaches (pictured), darkling beetles and grasshoppers — by their response to external lighting. The result is controlled and random movements, created in a co-authorship between the artist — with predetermined ideas about colour, form, shape and creative flexibility — and his living brushes.

Kutcher's art is more than just a novelty, because it reveals the hidden world of insect footprints. "When an insect walks on your hand, you may feel the legs move but nothing visible remains, only a

sensation," he says. "These works of art render the insect tracks and routes visible, producing a visually pleasing piece."

An insect-lover from childhood, Kutcher has a master's degree in entomology and has taught biological sciences at various US colleges. Since the 1970s, he has worked as a 'bug wrangler' on some 500 movies, TV shows and advertisements, where he also used hair dryers, electric tape, and chemical repellents and attractants to control insect movement. He manipulated the tiny *Steatoda grossa* spider (painted blue and red) that nipped actor Tobey Maguire in *Spiderman*.

The idea for Kutcher's bug art originated in 1985, when he was hired to create fly footprints by making a fly walk through ink for an advertisement for Steven Spielberg's television series *Amazing Stories*.



J. ALCORN

This unique artist-arthropod partnership has so far yielded over a hundred works, typically characterized by vibrant, eye-catching colours and designs, splattered with trailing dots and dashes (see www.BugArtbySteven.com). Kutcher is now gathering pieces to form a travelling exhibit for art and natural history museums throughout the United States.

"I hope people will look at these works and see the duality of art and

science," he says. "Each insect is writing a page in its life, and every painting is a new discovery." ■

Nick Thomas is associate professor of chemistry at Auburn University, Montgomery, Alabama 36124, USA.

Kutcher's bug art is on display at the Entomological Society of America meeting in San Diego (9–12 December) and at the Lancaster Museum (15 December–13 January 2008), in California.