Maggot Art: Insect Education

MIKE SINTETOS

WRITER’S COMMENT: A journalist must engage the reader from his or her article’s first sentence or else risk losing that reader. The writing must be succinct, but also informative and interesting. This is the style I tried to maintain in “Maggot Art—Insect Education.”

I wrote this piece for my ENL 104C: Journalism class, in response to an assignment to write a full-length feature article on a topic of our choice. I immediately thought of the Maggot Art organization I had been introduced to two years before while working for Dateline UC Davis. I thought the subject would be perfect for my assignment because I wouldn’t have to work too hard to pique the interest of my readers—the maggots would do that for me. The interview was a pleasure to do. Rebecca, Brandi, and Charlotte struck me as passionate people who were using their talents in a unique way. They gave me such a wealth of material that the story wrote itself. I only hope that “Maggot Art” garners them some of the recognition they deserve.

—Mike Sintetos

INSTRUCTOR’S COMMENT: I always encourage students in my Journalism classes to submit their work to Prized Writing—their articles should appeal to the students and faculty of UC Davis. But I also always ask them to think about their work commercially: what will sell? It’s rare that a student will write a piece that succeeds in both the academic and the commercial worlds. Mike is to be congratulated for accomplishing that feat: “Maggot Art” is not only a prize-winning student essay, it is also, having appeared in the Daily Democrat in June of this year—a published newspaper article.

—James McElroy, University Writing Program
They’re just baby flies, right?
That’s what Rebecca Bullard says. The UC Davis Ph.D. student and forensic entomologist thinks maggots have gotten a bad rap. Bullard is trying to set the record straight, though. That’s why she started Maggot Art—a children’s educational program aimed at telling the critters’ true story.

Maggot Art is indeed as unusual as the name implies. Bullard and her two volunteers, Brandi Schmitt and Charlotte Wacker of the UC Davis Willed Body Program, visit elementary school classrooms and help children create unique designs by placing squirming, paint-dipped maggots onto paper.

Although the maggots’ colorful creations are amazing, the program focuses on education. Bullard, Schmitt, and Wacker teach children about maggots’ essential role in the environment and their place in the human world. Besides decomposing organic matter, the larvae play an important part in forensic entomology (Bullard can use the maggot/fly life cycle to determine a corpse’s time of death) and in medicine (some clinics use maggots to disinfect wounds).

Since she founded the program in 2001, Bullard has brought her creatures to elementary school classrooms from Hawaii to Ohio. When she came to UC Davis in 2002, Bullard picked up Schmitt and Wacker. The three began making the rounds to such local schools as Cesar Chavez Elementary in Davis and Woodland’s Whitehead Elementary.

The Maggot Art crew focuses on grades two to four, hoping to make an early impact on their students. “Most people’s experiences with maggots have been negative,” says Bullard,
“but we’re trying to get past that by targeting a young audience. If we can get to them before their parents have pounded fear into them, we can maybe teach them respect for life in all its forms.”

Not all children are anxious to play with insects they associate with rotting food, but Bullard says they all come around in the end. “We have kids that are adamantly opposed to touching maggots,” she says, “and by the end of the lesson they want to take a maggot home as a pet. It never fails. I’ve never had a kid refuse to participate.”

Bullard says maggots are perfect study subjects because of the many scientific fields they bring together. She, Schmitt, and Wacker use maggots to teach children about basic biology, life cycles, ecology, and animal behavior. The maggot–fly metamorphosis parallels the better known caterpillar–butterfly transformation.

Maggot Art’s genesis, like that of so many other innovative ideas, occurred late at night in a laboratory. Bullard and a fellow University of Hawaii graduate student were brainstorming ideas for an elementary school outreach activity in 2001 when they came up with a brilliant idea: maggot races. Although the maggots weren’t too keen on the competition, Bullard noticed that the creatures made an interesting pattern when crawling through meat juice. She dipped the maggots in paint, hoping to duplicate the result. The experiment worked.

“The next week, I was scheduled to do a classroom presentation,” Bullard says, “so I decided to give it a shot. And Maggot Art was born.”

When Bullard moved to Davis, she met Schmitt and Wacker through her forensic work. She asked her new colleagues to volunteer in classrooms several times, and they immediately took to the program. “I don’t know if it was our
sick sense of humor or our desire to be educators,” Schmitt says, “but we discovered that we just loved it.”

Since the three forensic scientists joined forces, Maggot Art’s reputation has exploded. The trio’s annual demonstration at Picnic Day, UC Davis’s open house, draws more than 1,000 people. The Explorit museum in Davis exhibited the program for two days last January, and Mishka’s Café displayed Maggot Art paintings as part of its “Featured Artist of the Month” series.

Maggot Art has appeared in the national and even the world spotlight, too. Bullard sent one of her paintings to the popular television show *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, and it now hangs on main character Gil Grissom’s office wall. Grissom, played by William Peterson, is a forensic scientist. “He was supposed to mention Maggot Art on the show, it was written into the script,” laments Bullard, “but they must have cut it out at the last minute.”

“The Tom Green Show contacted us too, but then the Tom Green Show got cancelled,” Bullard says.

“Which was probably a good thing,” Schmitt adds.

With all the attention, requests for classroom visits began rolling in. Bullard started getting a request per week from elementary schools, which, she said, “was just too much.” She, Schmitt, and Wacker couldn’t juggle the increasing commitment with their regular occupations.

“This whole thing is funded out of pocket by me,” says Bullard. “We don’t do it to make money. We do it because we love it.”

Although Bullard and her friends still demonstrate at Picnic Day, they are trying to move the program away from personal classroom appearances. Instead, Bullard would like to train teachers to make their own maggoty presentations. She plans to make a workbook available for educators who would
like to do Maggot Art in their classrooms. At least one teacher, Natalie Kelley, has already reared maggots in her San Diego classroom.

Regardless of what happens to their program, Bullard, Schmitt, and Wacker will always have the art. The painting began as just an amusing diversion to entertain kids, but Schmitt and her art history undergraduate degree helped turn Maggot Art into a legitimate form of expression for the three women. Besides their “featured artist of the month” selection last year, they have sold several paintings. Recently, Schmitt sold a painting for $80 at an auction to raise money for the American Medical Student Association.

Bullard, Schmitt, and Wacker often get together for “Maggot Art parties” to make new creations. And although the untrained observer might claim that the maggots do all the artistic work, each woman claims to have a distinct style. Paper choice, paint consistency, and color use all make a difference, as well as the maggots’ configuration and number. Schmitt insists that each artist’s technique comes from “the way you utilize the maggots.”

Bullard, Schmitt, and Wacker have utilized their maggots quite well indeed. They estimate they’ve reached close to 3,000 children with their hands-on demonstrations, and their website, www.maggotart.com, has over 50,000 visits.

*Bullard & company recently demonstrated their maggot art at UC Davis, on Picnic Day, April 16, 2005.*