



Jessa Huebing uses a microscope to capture the fine details of Rusty, a red dragonfly, the second of nine insects she will paint at Union Station and the Kansas City Zoo.

Ready for their closeups

Project InSECT puts bugs and the artistic process in the spotlight

By Lisa Waterman Gray
Photos by Chris Oberholtz

Mildred wouldn't have looked the same if not for comments from a 7-year-old boy and the Amtrak traveler from L.A. just arrived at Union Station. With each visitor's question or suggestion Mildred's image shifted slightly under the practiced hand of artist Jessa Huebing.

Mildred is a praying mantis Huebing painted on a 6-by-8-foot canvas over six weeks as part of Project InSECT — International Spectrum of Enormous Crawling Things.

Mildred was the first of nine insects Huebing will paint at Union Station and the Kansas City Zoo by next May. She is truly stunning: a gargantuan creature in shades of green and brown, set against a deep background that almost makes her image glow on the canvas.

"It's about the subject, not the background," says Huebing, a 1993 Kansas City Art Institute grad. "I take my inspiration for light and shadow from Rembrandt and Caravaggio."

A red dragonfly named Rusty, with delicate spindly legs and translucent wings, had filled another canvas by late July. A towheaded grade-schooler named Sara and her mom stopped by to check on Rusty's progress. They greeted Huebing by name.

"I think you should do a millipede or a centipede," Sara said.

"I want her to do a millipede," agreed Huebing's husband and business partner, James Reitingner, "because we have a canvas that's about 40 feet long."

"I'm also going to do a blue tarantula," Huebing said, "and a cicada."

"You mean the insect that goes SSSsss, SSSsss?" Sara said.

"That's the one," Huebing replied.

It's all in a day's work at Project InSECT, which combines Huebing's creation of insect "portraits" in a public setting with entomological education for all ages, including microscopic views of insect specimens provided by Steven Ashe of the Natural History Museum Biodiversity Research Center at the University of Kansas.

Project InSECT also partners with Sonny Ramaswamy, head entomologist at Kansas State University, and the Environmental Protection Agency and Lakeside Nature Center.

Ninety percent of Huebing's paintings will showcase non-indigenous insects. She paints with oils on canvas or linen, and pastels on paper, six hours a



Visitors to Project InSECT can choose from about 70 specimens, like this bee, to view through microscopes.

day, Tuesday through Saturday, and sometimes on Sundays. (See "Where the Bugs Are," right.)

"As the public benefits from experiencing an artist's creative process firsthand, my interactions with the public fuel my creativity," Huebing says.

She views a specimen through a microscope as she paints. Meanwhile, visitors can choose from 60 to 70 additional specimens they can view through other microscopes. Huebing and Reitingner also discuss art and insects with visitors.

"I love my job," Reitingner said one day as he left a boy and his mother to examine a specimen on their own. Then he bounded across the room and gently pressed a bug stamp onto a preschooler's hand.

Visitors of all ages can create pictures of insects on a communal drawing that rotates frequently. Huebing and Reitingner stock educational and conservation materials from the EPA, the Entomology Society of America and other organizations on an information kiosk. Hundreds of multicolored pushpins that dot a U.S. map commemorate visitors from Rhode Island to British Columbia, Puerto Rico to North Dakota.

Although Huebing's original insect paintings are not for sale, one bidder will choose an original during the Ribbons of Pink Charity auction Oct. 24-25. Prints are available for purchase through the Project InSECT Web site, www.projectinsect.com.

Because Union Station and the Kansas City Zoo provide free space, Project InSECT is free to the public. It

will operate in Kansas City for a year, and then move to St. Louis, Chicago and Milwaukee, starting next summer. The couple is seeking nonprofit organization status and sponsors.

Huebing's 8-year-old son Caine has also caught her vision. During a recent Florida vacation he collected insects and sent bug photos to his mom.

Project InSECT began with a single photograph of a caterpillar that transported Huebing back to a time in her childhood when she witnessed the metamorphosis of a Luna moth.

"The vision I received allowed me to see these tiny and beautiful creatures with a unique new perspective," she says. "I decided to create images that will captivate an audience and help them visually experience insects as never before. They will 'see' the microscopic details and 'feel' the insect's presence."

"Very few people understand or have seen the processes artists use to create. Because of Project InSECT they walk away with a whole different perception of art and insects. And they are returning a week or two later to see the paintings progress."

Lisa Waterman Gray is an Overland Park-based free-lance writer. Chris Oberholtz is a photographer for The Star. To comment on this story, send e-mail to starmag@kcstar.com.



Huebing shows a real dragonfly — the insect she's painting — to a group of children at Union Station.



This is the butterfly Huebing will paint at Union Station starting Oct. 27.

Where the BUGS are

Jessa Huebing's Project InSECT schedule for the next few weeks:

■ She'll be painting a jewel bee inside Union Station (lower level, near the theaters) through Thursday.

■ Between Friday and Oct. 12 she'll be at the front entrance of the Kansas City Zoo in Swope Park,

working on a cicada and other insects.

■ She returns to Union Station on Oct. 27 to start painting a butterfly.

Huebing usually paints between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. For details, check out www.projectinsect.com.