

Artist's vision creating a buzz

Bugs come to life on giant canvases at Union Station

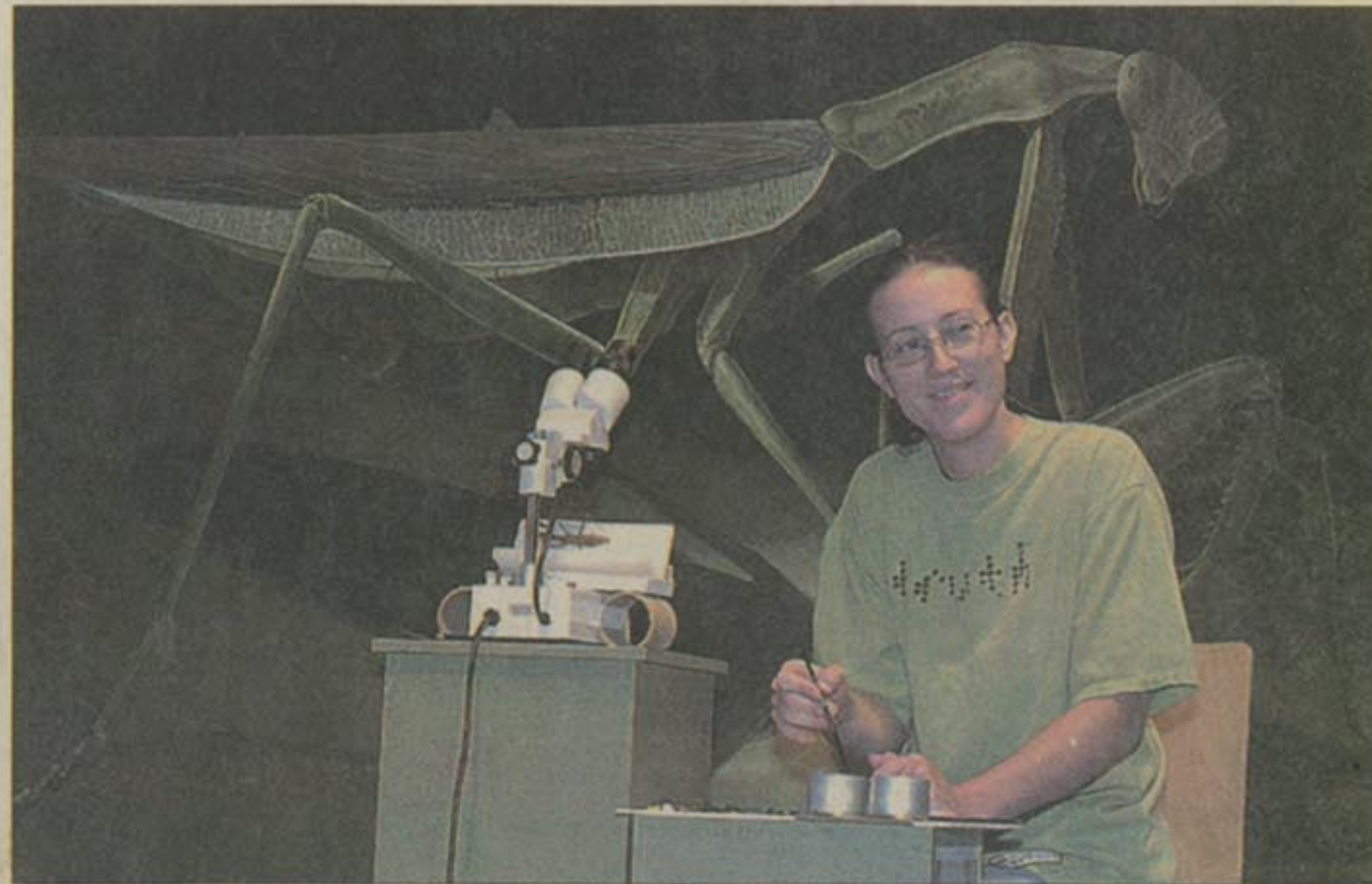
BY ROB ROBERTS
SUN STAFF WRITER

Overland Park artist Jessa Huebing's career was at a crossroads. The down economy had slowed demand for her paintings, and she was spent creatively, wondering, "What is my thing?" Then her husband, James Reiting, put a bug in her ear. "James said, 'Why don't you just paint big bugs?'" Huebing recalled.

Last Friday, six months after she pounced on that idea, Huebing was finishing up her first giant-bug masterpiece — a 6-by-8-foot portrait of Mildred the praying mantis.

She's been working on the intricately detailed oil painting from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Tuesdays through Saturdays since May 12 in a lower-level room at Kansas City's Union Station. There, crowds have swarmed to watch Huebing alternating between a microscope, which allows her to study the minute details of an actual praying mantis specimen, and the huge canvas where her vision — dubbed Project InSECT — has begun crawling to life.

Several people have returned multiple times to watch Huebing's progress on Mildred — the first of five giant bugs she'll paint at Union Station before creating



KEVIN BLAYNEY/THE SUN

Jessa Huebing of Overland Park is painting giant bugs with microscopic detail for Project InSECT at Union Station. Shown with Huebing is her first bug creation, Mildred the praying mantis.

hundreds more at the Kansas City Zoo, St. Louis Zoo, Chicago Field Museum and beyond.

"When people watch a piece of art being made, they feel like they're part of it, and they are," Reiting said, explaining one of the premises behind the unique painting-in-public project that the couple hope to spin into an interactive art-and-science museum some day.

Children, especially, enjoy watching the creepy yet awe-inspiring features emerge from

the canvas, he added. And they enjoy participating in other free Project InSECT activities, from creating their own bug art to posing for photos behind insect cutouts. Just ask Huebing's 8-year-old son, Caine, one of the project's biggest fans.

Project InSECT (International Spectrum of Enormous Crawling Things) will continue at Union Station through Jan. 4, 2004. That's also the closing date for "Bugs!" the award-winning 3D film now showing on Union Station's

Extreme Screen.

The idea, Huebing said, is to have one completed bug painting on display and another in progress at Union Station at all times before Project InSECT moves to the Kansas City Zoo from January through May, 2004.

This week, Huebing is scheduled to begin work on her second giant-bug painting — a 9-by-7-foot dragonfly. After the dragonfly is completed, a giant bee will begin to take shape. And at that point,

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Mildred will become the first painting in the collection to start touring the city.

Down the road, likely in May or June 2004, all of the Project InSECT paintings created to that point will come together for the first time for an exhibition at a location yet to be determined. None of the paintings will be sold, however. And combined with the fact that they receive no payment from Union Station or their viewing public there, that begs the question: What are the couple going to do for money?

"Money? I'm so glad you reminded us of that," Reiting joked. "What are we going to do, baby?"

Actually, Reiting and Huebing have approached the company behind cable television's Discovery Channel and Animal Planet channel about a sponsorship.

"They're very interested," he said. "But they need to know what we're doing educationally. Now that Mildred is done and we've sent in the paperwork to get our non-profit-organization status, I can put together a presentation about what we're doing down here."

Though it might seem risky to invest so much time and effort in a project for which funding has not yet been secured, Huebing said she's leaving the financial worries to a higher power.

"God gave me the vision for this whole project," she said, recalling the images of completed bug paintings that popped into her head as soon as Reiting voiced his suggestion.

And looking back, Huebing added, she can clearly see the developments that prepared her for the new calling. ... Like meeting James.

A former over-the-road trucker, Reiting first spied Huebing one night about 18 months ago, after dropping in at the Pub on Santa Fe in downtown Overland Park. He didn't get up the nerve to speak to her that night. But Reiting turned down an outbound truckload the next day and vowed to return to the pub that night on the off chance that Huebing might do the same. She did, and as soon as

they began talking, their accents gave them away as fellow Wisconsin natives.

"We grew up 30 miles away from each other," Reiting said.

They never met in Wisconsin, the couple added, but both had painting with bugs as children there.

"I didn't have a lot of toys when I was a kid, so I played with bugs," said Reiting, who studied the natural sciences in college.

Huebing's childhood bug experiences, she recalled, included witnessing the wondrous metamorphosis of a Luna moth. More than 25 years later, the 32-year-old has undergone several metamorphoses herself — artistically speaking.

Raised on a farm, Huebing earned her first commission at age 12, when she began painting pastel equine portraits. After high school, she enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute with the dream of winning a Disney internship and becoming a Disney illustrator. But during her junior year, she enrolled in an art class taught by Wilbur Niewald and everything changed.

Impressed by Huebing's work, Niewald asked her to join one of his painting classes the following semester — the last during the fabled artist's 50-year career at the institute.

"On my first day of painting, I fell in love with it," Huebing said. "About the same time, I found out I didn't get the Disney internship, which turned out to be a blessing."

Huebing, who earned her bachelor's degree in painting 10 years ago, has gone on to big commissions, including the one she received last year for a 6-by-8-foot painting that hangs in the new Overland Park Convention Center.

Similar to that painting, which depicts mechanical elements in painstaking detail, a mural she painted for Fluid Tech Inc. in Lenexa features colorful hydraulics parts, and a commission she did for John Deere's North American Agricultural Marketing Center, also in Lenexa, features precisely rendered green

and yellow tractor parts.

"I can see now that those pieces prepared me to do this," Huebing said as she mixed just the right shade of green for a finishing touch to Mildred. "I've done all those mechanical and technical things, and bugs are very mechanical and technical in nature, too. But they also have the organic side."

Huebing has done lots of animal paintings, from pooch and pony portraits to a sprawling jungle mural for the headquarters of now-defunct Peripheral Vision Inc.

But in pondering her artistic future six months ago, she realized she didn't want to be "just another wildlife painter."

Then, Reiting suggested bugs.

"I said, 'Some of them are really, really pretty, and they're funky looking,'" he recalled. "At first, she didn't say anything. She just sat there in a trance almost. Then she smiled and said, 'I've got to go to the library.'"

After dashing to the Johnson County Central Resource Library and waiting awhile for it to open, Huebing rushed to the insect section, pulled out some illustrated books and began flipping down bug-memory lane.

"I came home from work that night and she had a stack of books this high," Reiting said, putting about three feet of space between his hands. "She said, 'I've got to get on the Internet to make sure nobody else is doing this.' And she searched and she searched and she searched."

To her delight, Huebing found that, while a few illustrators work with entomologists on textbooks and such, no one else was painting large bug portraits for public viewing.

"Probably because it's very hard," Huebing said.

"Plus, people are afraid of bugs, which is really funny," Reiting said. "People love tigers at the zoo — you know, something that if it had half the chance would kill them in a heartbeat. But they see an insect, something that's actually doing something

beneficial for the ecosystem, and they're afraid of it."

Magnifying bugs 200 times on canvas won't necessarily eliminate the public's fear of the six and eight-legged creatures, Huebing acknowledged. But the paintings should help viewers appreciate the roles bugs play in the environment and the fact that they are unique, individual beings — just like people.

Pointing to two heart-shaped spots painted on Mildred's thorax, Huebing drove home her point. "Look through the microscope," she said. "They're really there."

Huebing said it's not always easy to maintain the level of patience required to reproduce such microscopic details. "There are days when I don't even feel like painting," she said. "But then I get in here and start interacting with the people. And the majority are like, 'Wow, I've never seen anything like this' or 'I never knew bugs were so beautiful. When they start getting it, that fills my cup right up. And when the kids start drawing, it charges me to keep doing what I'm doing.'"

Already, Project InSECT is booked for the next two and a half years, including a December 2005 showing during the Entomological Society of America's national convention in Salt Lake City, Utah.

And to think that the original idea was for Huebing to paint her bugs in local storefronts.

"Jessa had to get rid of her studio when people just stopped buying art because of the economy," Reiting said. "So when she decided she wanted to do the bug paintings really big, I said 'Why don't you go out and do it in a storefront.' ... Then we started to consider malls, ... and we were just about to approach those people when we saw Turner White on KCPT one day."

White, the CEO for Union Station, was saying that facility, which houses Science City, needed to start adding attractions that wouldn't cost a lot but would have a lot of pulling power.

"We looked at each other and said, 'That's us,'" Reiting said.

ON THE RECORD

"I didn't have a lot of toys when I was a kid, so I played with bugs."

— James Reiting
Project InSECT