

WETTERLING GALLERY

The Butterfly Effect – New Works by Nathalia Edenmont

Nathalia Edenmont has created intricate collages using real butterfly wings that she meticulously arranges and then photographs to create prints of a monumental dimension. Her earliest and simpler butterfly collages date from around 2006 and they have since become increasingly more complex. Traditionally butterflies symbolize rebirth and the process of transformation and therefore relate to her work's characteristic themes such as time, beauty, fertility, fragility and change. By observing the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into a chrysalis out of which emerges the butterfly, the ancient Greek philosophers regarded the butterfly as the perfect metaphor for the human soul represented by the goddess Psyche which is also the word for butterfly in ancient Greek. The virtue of Nathalia's butterfly collages is that like abstract art they are open to interpretation and can communicate on many levels. They possess artistic principles like harmony, variety, balance, contrast, proportion and pattern and can evoke different ideas and emotions in the mind or psyche of the viewer.

They are meticulous and time-consuming and require a highly organized working practice for collecting, cataloguing, treating, storing the butterflies. Also before she starts work, Nathalia needs to be in a particular state of mind, which is more often at night. Ideally, she's slightly tired so that her brain isn't too active to distract her focus yet not too tired as the work can be physically demanding. She's found by experience that when her mind is overactive it will force her to make wrong decisions but when it's switched off so that her hands are working seemingly automatically it always turns out right. So effectively she's in a kind of trance working as if by instinct. Sometimes she feels just as if something external is guiding her as her hand is moving to different boxes to select and take out various butterfly wings and arrange them. Occasionally she experiences that even her eyebrows raise involuntarily as if surprised at a particularly successful combination and if she were fully conscious of what she's doing then surely she wouldn't be so surprised. As she puts it 'sometimes when I'm

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working it feels like it's not me who's doing it, it's like someone is using my body'. She goes into the zone when working and her completed collages can have a similar hypnotic effect on the viewer.

She likens her working process to 'building a labyrinth' into which she goes deeper and deeper as if moving away from reality. In her head she can already visualize glimpses of what butterflies will look good together and needs to find them from her countless storage boxes. She then arranges them on white paper and in what seems like a split second decides on which combinations give her the wow factor she's looking for and that gives her an adrenalin rush. She doesn't make preparatory sketches instead she improvises as she goes along which she compares to 'moving from one room to another room in a large labyrinth'. She's constantly searching for new combinations she's never seen before. Although she may have preconceived images of how the finished work will look, once she starts working it changes a lot and ends up more complex.

She might glue as many as ten wings overlapping so that only a little part of each wing is visible and they appear like flower petals. All the moth and butterfly wings have different structures and properties, some are transparent and some are not. Therefore she needs to hold each wing in a different way in her fingers to understand and appreciate its structure, in order to cut and glue it. Her vast archive of butterflies are carefully sorted and stored in countless archive boxes. She needs to hire a team of about a dozen local people to help her prepare them by removing their wings. It's a laborious process that takes many days and they need to wear masks because the butterflies have been impregnated with acetone. She also needs to wear a mask while making the collages and can still get rather dizzy and nauseous when she sometimes works for 17 hours non-stop and some works can take up to 500 hours to realize. Another collage she has occasionally been working on for over two and a half years is still awaiting enough rare butterflies to complete it

The butterflies need to be stored in a dark place as they are sensitive to direct sunlight and have to be kept in the freezer to retain their colours. This is why the collages of

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Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) who stuck butterfly wings to the surface of canvases have since lost some of their original colours. She didn't even know his work existed until quite recently when she'd already been making her butterfly works and isn't generally influenced by other artists. She is aware of Damien Hirst's butterfly works and although she appreciates them maintains her working methods and artistic objectives are completely different. Her collages have obvious parallels with the earlier series of works she created of dresses composed of masses of flowers. She also thinks the colours and floral patterns of the traditional costumes and scarves she saw as a child growing up in the Crimea may have subliminally influenced her butterfly works. There's no doubt that butterflies generally evoke feelings of happiness bringing us back to our childhood memories that are somehow retained in our creative consciousness later in life. Nathalia has some fond childhood memories of butterflies that she always tried to catch but never could and she remembers her mother showing her a small box of butterflies that she treasured.

The photographs she makes of the completed collages are quite different from the originals that are made with real butterfly wings, as they are able to capture and retain all the brilliance of the true colours before they fade. All her photography is analogue, there's no computer manipulation and she uses a traditional Sinar large-format camera with different lenses and umbrella reflectors. She always works with flash, which gives the required depth of field. Using 10 x 8" sheet film enables her to enlarge her butterfly collages in high definition to make strikingly beautiful prints of a monumental scale. These final prints are technically excellent with even lighting and sharp focus, capturing all the brightness and original hues of the shimmering wings through photography. Although butterflies have a short life span of a few days, Nathalia's collages and photographs 'immortalize' them as if suspended in time.

The amazing abstract patterns formed from the arrangement of butterfly wings have a similar effect to looking through a kaleidoscope. They evoke the same sense of wonder that children experience when they hold the kaleidoscope tube up to the light and beautiful symmetrical shapes and the magical array of exotic colours

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appear. Her compositions are also reminiscent of the geometric diagrams used in Tibetan mandalas, with patterns starting from outside to the inner core through various layers representing a symbolic picture of the timeless universe. This infinite repetition of symmetrical patterns creates a kaleidoscopic effect that can be used to assist meditation or hypnosis. In common with her collages, there is frequently a central motif, a kind of 'nucleus' from which the rest of the composition radiates out. Her compositions evoke a similar meditative energy to mandalas and with concentrated viewing they can stimulate a mind-wandering journey through Nathalia's 'labyrinth'. In her work 'Euphoria' a female creature appears in the middle amidst the deep jungle surrounded by colourful flowers and raindrops formed by the tails of a beautiful butterfly from Indonesia. This central figure reminds her of the famous clay sculpture of the fertility goddess, the Venus of Willendorf and the concept of the primordial earth mother.

When she began making these collages Nathalia could never imagine that such a rich variety of butterflies existed, as there are over 17,500 known species in the world with a vast range of the patterns and colours. She has since amassed a large butterfly collection in her studio to use in her collages and her fascination has led her to gain more specialist knowledge about them. But she still needs to have a good relationship with an entomologist to give her advice from time to time and she constantly researches where to find the best examples often travelling widely to acquire unique butterfly specimens. For some time she has been gathering enough specimens of the rare Kandinsky moth (*Baobisa hieroglyphica*), which she finds particularly fascinating. This is so called because the patterns on its wings resemble a Kandinsky abstract painting.

Nathalia delights in placing together butterflies from different parts of the world that have never been juxtaposed before and it is as if all their energies are concentrated together. The bright blue tails of the beautiful butterfly from Indonesia figure prominently in many of the works and to Nathalia they represent raindrops or tears. The wings of butterflies have markings with a seemingly endless colour range since the tropical jungles are often their natural habitat where they feed on exotic flowers.

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In nature they function like camouflage so that they virtually blend into the environment and become indistinguishable from it until they take flight. They resemble flashes of light, creating an inconceivable combination colours that stimulate our senses. It is the butterfly's splendidly colourful wings, that help it attract a mate of the same species but contrary to popular perception they are in reality often completely transparent. They are covered in thousands of miniature scales visible only under a magnifying glass and the sophisticated colours we see are the effect of light reflecting on these tiny scales.

The mass accumulations of multicoloured butterfly wings seem to emit light and are shimmering and magnificent while almost hypnotic in their intensity. Cool and warm colours are contrasted while vibrant animated parts are paired with calm ones. Their subtle shifts of shade and vivid radiating colours create an aura that is both mystical and ecstatic. These seemingly endless colour possibilities, motifs and textures create combinations that no artist could reproduce. In a way they are Nathalia's versions of abstract expressionistic painting where the wings are the brushstrokes that provide both colour and structure so it is as if she is painting using nature as her medium. She is a perfectionist and her painstaking process is demanding and obsessive in its attention to detail so that every element has a specific place in the composition. She has developed a unique sensitivity to how the colour nuances, shape, line and texture of each butterfly wing is related to its adjacent one, and more significantly, to the overall unified composition. This is achieved after much careful consideration to arrive at a balanced composition built up after many hours of work. The balance is very precise so that if she were to make minor changes in her arrangement, alter one line of overlapping wings or adjust a particular colour combination it could produce a chain reaction that upsets the work's perfect balance. This tension of not disturbing the finished work's equilibrium is like the metaphor of 'the butterfly effect' - the notion that a tropical storm can be related to the flapping wings made by a distant butterfly some weeks earlier.

James Putnam

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