

MICHELLE STUART:  
Aurelian Variations

*AURELIAN: an 18th century term for butterflies and lepidopterists, derives from the Latin aureolus. It refers to the golden chrysalids of particular nymphalid butterflies.*

The Drawing Room in East Hampton is pleased to present a new body of work by Michelle Stuart, *Aurelian Variations*, on view from June 1 through 26, 2006. In this recent series of mixed media works on paper, Stuart, who divides her time between studios in New York City and Amagansett, takes butterflies and moths as her subject. A selection of related paintings will also be available.

An extension of Stuart's longstanding dialogue on the intersection of cultural and natural histories and the delicate balance of the natural world, this intriguing exploration of an exotic array of butterfly varieties conveys Stuart's appreciation of their multiplicity and fragility. From her important early site-specific works of the 1970s to the panel paintings of the 1980s, to the seed calendars of the 1990s, Stuart's work reveals an observant world traveler, collector of natural elements and an advocate for preservation.

These new works have a strong tactile quality that connects them to our physical experience of the natural world. Her rich use of mixed media – wax, pigments, collage, vellum and string among them – lends intrigue and freshness to each exploration of the butterfly and moth forms.

In many of the smaller works (8 ½ x 8 ½ inches each), a veil of vellum creates a translucent layer – sometimes for the wings and other times as a mysterious atmospheric background element – aptly conveying the fragility of her subject. The larger butterflies measure roughly 11 x 14 inches and are immediate and bold, painted on handmade paper with considerable texture. Stuart's evocative titles refer to specific butterflies – *Peruvian Metalmark*, *Luna*, *Elis Emperor* and *Variable Cracker* – some earthy in palette and others with flashes of brilliant color.

Stuart was born and raised in California where her wonder of the natural world took hold at an early age. There she recalls viewing the Swallowtail and Monarch butterflies on their migration path to Mexico. Her first work about butterflies, a monumental triptych that was exhibited in Germany and Japan, was created in 1979 when she learned that two endangered Lotis Blue butterflies were observed in Mendocino, CA. She returned to the subject many years later when she witnessed butterflies fluttering over her Amagansett garden in the late 1990s. At that time, Stuart was engaged in a series about endangered plants, and the notion of the symbiotic relationship between butterflies and the plants that attract them, as well as the threat to their survival posed by human intervention, prompted a group of works on paper called *Collections*. The current series was sparked by a visit to her father's homeland, Australia, where one night in the outback, the artist saw large, ghostly white moths congregating on the screen of her bunkhouse window. Stuart found the scene both poetic and haunting, and a metaphor for the artist's quest for light and metamorphosis.

Stuart moved to New York in the 1950s after spending time in Mexico and Europe. Over the past thirty years she has exhibited widely in Europe, Asia and the United States. Her work is represented in major museum collections including The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The National Gallery of Art, The Walker Art Center, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, as well as many corporate and private collections. Among Stuart's numerous awards are four National Endowment Grants, two New York Foundation for the

Arts Grants, a Ford Foundation Grant, a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and an American Academy in Rome Residency.

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