



Cassius Blue

SURFACE TREATMENT

What: "Species at Stake" by Mujtaba H Naqvi
Where: Artist's Gallery, The Weslaco Museum of Local History and Cultural Art,
500 Texas Boulevard, Weslaco
When: Aug 1-Aug 31, 2019
Hours: 10am-4pm Tues-Sat
Contact: (956) 968-9142
Regular admission applies.

Paying Attention

The museum's gallery literally overflows with photographic images of Valley wildlife; many of them are smaller creatures such as insects, magnified and presented for our delight.

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

BY NANCY MOYER

Mujtaba H Naqvi is on a quest to capture the wild creatures of the Valley with his camera. His photography exhibition at the Weslaco Museum speaks of his fascination and pleasure in discovering what lives in his backyard, both literally and colloquially. The gallery literally overflows with Naqvi's images of wildlife, many of which are small insects that he discovered and magnified beyond what we normally would see. Overflowing the wall space, there are additional photographs installed on the floor. As a child his parents advised him not to step on other creatures, and passing good advice along, he has us watching where we step with numerous floor installations depicting these small creatures. At first, there is the common

reaction of not realizing they were there, then being careful not to place a footprint on a beautiful photograph. Or image-wise, a creature.

Naqvi's initial interest in photography was as a therapy tool after the death of a family member. Peace was found in the state parks, hiking and experiencing nature; photography was a distraction from his depression. This sudden awareness of mortality ignited his decision to fuse photography and nature into a single focus - life was too short not to spend it doing what he loved. He actively began to seek out the tiny wonders of nature that became his subjects.

Other nature photographers often set out hoping to shoot a particular species, but Naqvi is out to investigate nature and enjoy her unexpected surprises. The common subjects such as green jays and hawks that appear in most wildlife photo shows are not here. Numerous images of tiny insects that we don't commonly think about have found their place in Naqvi's lens. These are not trophy photographs in the usual sense, but they are a testimony to the photographer's appreciation of life. The "Banded Cucumber Beetle" crawling on the petal of an uneven flower is perfect in its brilliant patterning. He also captured the breathtakingly beautiful "Saucy Beauty" butterfly against a green leaf, perfectly demonstrating its tiny points of orange and turquoise coloring against jet-black wings; found in the U.S. in only three counties, this IS truly a trophy photo. The wary "Gray Fox" was photographed in Edinburg and contrasts with the more commonly seen and audacious "Eastern Gray Squirrel."

Growing up in Karachi, Pakistan, Naqvi had never previously interacted with nature. One of the largest cities in the world, its tall buildings block sunsets and sunrises. "You don't see normal birds or creatures because of the buildings and pollution," explained Naqvi. "For most people interaction with nature is limited to the desktop. Now, it's so exciting! Even in my backyard (he lives in central McAllen) I have a 4'x4' square area where I can find so many species, so many things, which I probably never would have paid attention to." The National Butterfly Center also amazes him. He finds hundreds of species Every time he goes there.

He was astonished by the clean air in the Valley when he moved here. "I walked out of the McAllen airport and I couldn't breathe," he remembered. "The sudden freshness didn't work for me because I wasn't used to it." He walked outside later on just for the pleasure of inhaling Valley air. Most of us take nature's beauty and benefits for granted, and never being able to interact regularly with nature is difficult to imagine. These photographs are a record of the freshness of life that exists all around us if we would only pay attention.

"Species at Stake" will be at the Dustin Michael Sekula Memorial Library Sept 17 – Oct 24, if you miss this August showing.

Nancy Moyer, Professor Emerita of Art, UTPA, is an art critic for The Monitor. She may be reached at nmoyer@rgv.rr.com