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## BUZZ OFF

By Patricia Marx

Attention, mosquitoes: The biting season may be almost over, but Dennis Ashbaugh is still out to get you. Ashbaugh, an artist who is best known for his oversized paintings of DNA and computer viruses, first declared war against you two years ago, while he was vacationing in Tenants Harbor, Maine, during a particularly buggy stretch. Since then, in Maine and West Palm Beach, Florida, he has been beachcombing, not only for rocks, twigs, and shells but also for such detritus as shish-kebab skewers, Fritos bags, surgical masks, lighters, lawn chairs, key-chain cameras, and candelabra parts. From these he fabricates aesthetically pleasing traps designed to squash, squeeze, torch, shoot, and electrocute you and your fellow-mosquitoes. To death.

Not long ago, in Wainscott, Long Island, Ashbaugh laid out the hundred and twenty-five or so of his Rube Goldbergian contraptions in a warehouse space that he leases to store his paintings, as well as a few cherished objects, including a pornography tract called “Ladies’ Mistakes” that, according to a receipt found inside the book, was purchased by Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of DNA, in 1954, for fifteen dollars.

Most of the floor was covered with the bug traps, which made walking tricky. If Ashbaugh were five years old and you were his mother, you would tell him to clean up the playroom, pronto.

He’d been preparing to transport the traps to his apartment in New York while he looked for a studio in which to display them. To date, only friends of Ashbaugh have seen the traps. Among those who have

bought them are several Nobel Prize winners in biology, a Maryland folklorist, the writer Paul Theroux (who paid with a first edition of his novel “The Mosquito Coast”), and a nine-year-old who funded the purchase with her allowance.

“All the traps function, but it might take weeks, or even years, for a mosquito to fly into the kill zone,” Ashbaugh said, showing off a model he calls the Culicutron (pronounced *kill- a-q-tron*, and derived from “culicide,” which means the murdering of mosquitoes). The gadget, which is about a foot long, looks like a praying mantis, with sticks as appendages, an electric power strip for an abdomen, and, instead of antennae, a frizzy entanglement of copper wire.

“You plug it in,” Ashbaugh explained, “and then you just wait, maybe forever, for your prey to get within dangerous proximity.” Last summer, Ashbaugh snagged about forty victims, exhibiting them “like stuffed moose heads,” under pieces of Scotch tape stuck to his refrigerator in Maine. “Killing these things fills me with a meditative, Luddite sense of bliss,” he went on, fiddling with a mechanism that utilizes a clothespin to fatally squeeze mosquitoes once they have been lured by carbon dioxide exhaled by a human through a drinking straw. “Who likes mosquitoes?” he said. “Not bats, not bees—nobody. More human beings have been killed by mosquitoes than by human beings. Mosquitoes have only one purpose: to evolve, which they’ve been doing for a hundred and seventy million years.”

On the same table as the Culicutron were several unnamed devices, including a slingshot attached to a rearview mirror, a rubberized bottle cap, and a corkscrew. Another insect-killer was a spring-loaded plunger that activates a four-pronged pincer and inflicts an electric shock on its winged captive, who has been lured by a light on the tip of the spring. Then, there was a rubber flip-flop remnant, rigged with nautical string so that it flexes upward and, on release—*splat!*—squishes its target. Nearby was an empty Mason jar labelled “Human Sweat” and a bunch of yellow sponges in a plastic bag marked

“Human Bait.” Both were left over from Ashbaugh’s research phase, when, to the dismay of his Wainscott landlord, he bred mosquitoes in stagnant water on his porch. In the pursuit of science, Ashbaugh has also spray-painted spiderwebs with fluorescent paint.

“Next on my agenda: becoming a plant guy,” Ashbaugh said. “I’m going to study the strategies and techniques of Venus flytraps to see what cool tricks they have to kill and scare their prey.” Does this mean that mosquitoes can rest easy? Not a chance. “Venus flytraps get fat and hardy on meat,” Ashbaugh said. “And mosquitoes are damn tasty meat.” ♦