

## Catherine Chalmers: We Rule

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**Free Admission**  
Wednesday-Sunday: 12–6pm

New York, NY . . . Working at the intersection of art and science, New York-based artist Catherine Chalmers has built a multidisciplinary practice that celebrates nature and confronts humans' often adversarial relationship with the earth. For her exhibition *We Rule*, Chalmers presents recent work alongside two site-specific installations inspired by her observation of and engagement with colonies of leafcutter ants on the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica.

Over a ten-year period, Chalmers returned annually to the same spot on the Costa Rican peninsula to film, photograph, and track the fate of more than a dozen leafcutter ant colonies. Not unlike a field biologist who uses the tools of science to set up experiments, collect data, and test theories, Chalmers uses art-making tools to explore and expand her connection to nature. For Chalmers, leafcutter ants are metaphors for humanity's life on earth: they farm, communicate, and collaborate; they also colonize, battle, and destroy. Yet the drawings in *We Rule* highlight a significant way that the insects diverge from humans—as an integrated part of their ecosystem, the ants carry out their actions in harmony with the earth.

In her site-specific sixteen-panel installation, *The Drawing Center Ant Colony*, Chalmers provides a glimpse into the complex labyrinths of tunnels and chambers that comprise the leafcutter ant colonies. These intricate ecosystems appear in a range of sites: a fungus farm, carefully cultivated and tended by the ants to sustain the entire colony; a chamber in which the colony's queen lives and lays eggs; and networks of thoroughfares through which food sources are transported and waste is disposed.

With more than eight million ants in a mature colony that can occupy thirty square feet and be twenty feet deep, the complexity of leafcutter ant societies rivals that of their human counterparts. In her four-chapter *Leafcutters* video, Chalmers accentuates the ingenuity of these miniature yet mighty civilizations, focusing on four traits often considered unique to humans—language, ritual, war, and art—and highlighting the tenuous boundaries between culture and nature. Other works on view—including a twenty-foot long photographic scroll titled *Colonize the Earth* and drawings of the ants carrying letters that spell out “we rule” in their mandibles—highlight the ants' ecological power.

Extending the length of The Drawing Center's lower-level corridor, the site-specific wall mural *Builders of Greatness* depicts thousands of drawn leafcutter ants as they dismantle the gallery wall. A behavior typical of the species, this careful deconstruction of their surrounding environment takes on new meaning in a gallery setting, raising questions about humans' more careless destruction of the ants' native rainforest home.

One of the more subtle indicators of climate change, the loss of biodiversity and insect collapse in ecosystems buried below ground in remote locales often goes unnoticed by the general public.

Throughout *We Rule*, Chalmers harnesses the narrative possibilities of drawing in an effort to bridge this rapidly increasing gap between humans and these ecosystems and to provide a lens through which we can reexamine our relationship with and impact on the natural world.

The exhibition is organized by Olga Valle Tetkowski, Deputy Director.

### About the Artist

Catherine Chalmers holds a BS in engineering from Stanford University and an MFA in painting from the Royal College of Art in London. She has exhibited her artwork at venues around the world including MoMA P.S.1; MASSMoCA; Kunsthalle Vienna; Today Art Museum, Beijing. Her work has appeared in a variety of publications, including the New York Times, Washington Post, ArtNews, and Artforum. She has been featured on PBS, CNN, NPR, and the BBC. Two books have been published on her work: *FOOD CHAIN* (Aperture 2000) and *AMERICAN COCKROACH* (Aperture 2004). Her video *Safari* received a Jury Award (Best Experimental Short) at SXSW Film Festival in 2008. In 2010 Chalmers received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 2015 she was awarded a Rauschenberg Residency. In 2018 she created and taught a course called *Art & Environmental Engagement* at Stanford University. Her video *Leafcutters* won Best Environmental Short at the 2018 Natourale Film Festival in Wiesbaden, Germany, and in 2019 it won the Gil Omenn Art & Science Award at the Ann Arbor Film Festival. She lives in New York City.

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