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Science

## Desert Dwellers on a Fast-Food Diet



Richard Perry/The New York Times

FOOD FOR THOUGHT “Corpor Esurit,” a work by Elizabeth Demaray at Exit Art, involves red harvester ants being given an all-McDonald’s diet for a month.

By SHEILA PRAKASH  
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Elizabeth Demaray, an artist based in Brooklyn, is at the counter at a McDonald’s in Midtown Manhattan. She is ordering up a storm. Cheeseburger. Apple dippers. Chicken nuggets. French fries. Baked apple pie. A strawberry shake. The shake is unavailable. “Then make it a strawberry smoothie — in your largest size.”

Whether the red harvester ant *Pogonomyrmex badius* will enjoy this food is the subject of her current exhibition — “Corpor Esurit, or we all deserve a break today” — at Exit Art on Tenth Avenue and 36th Street through Wednesday. For one month, the ants, which usually thrive on seeds, are being fed a steady diet of McDonald’s Happy Meals. They even get the toys.

The ants are housed in a roughly 6-by-10-foot plexiglass farm that is packed with Perlite pebbles and sealed with clear packing tape and nylon panty hose — “for gnat abatement,” Ms. Demaray said. The food is placed in a numbered grid on the floor of the feeding area. Ms. Demaray worked hand in hand with Dr. Christine Johnson, a scientific assistant at the American Museum of Natural History who specializes in ant research.

This gallery offering may appeal to followers of the art world. Ms. Demaray’s goal is to stage a commentary on the effects of the American diet on the creatures that depend on us for food. But scientists bring a different lens.

“My first response as a scientist would be bafflement as to why *Pogonomyrmex* was chosen,” Dr. Colin S. Brent, a research entomologist with the federal Department of Agriculture, wrote in an e-mail. “They might enjoy the sesame seeds on the buns, but that would be about it.” Ants of the genus

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Pogonomyrmex are desert seed harvesters known for their deep nests and toxic venom, not the kind of ants that intrude on a picnic.

Dr. Michael S. Engel, a paleontologist and entomologist at the University of Kansas and a co-author, with David Grimaldi, of the sweeping book “Evolution of the Insects,” said the exhibit sounded fascinating but added, “If I had to toss in a particular group of ants into an enclosure to see how well they were going to thrive off of junk food, I’d throw in generalist carnivores and omnivores like army ants.”

Pogonomyrmex, or “Pogos,” as they are affectionately known in the trade, are more selective eaters. Though mostly granivores, Pogonomyrmex badius workers will sometimes patrol for dead insects and termites to bring to the colony after a desert rain.

At the gallery last week, many of the ants were dead. A few looked disoriented. This exhibit lacks a queen and brood, so the workers are leading a life devoid of its fundamental purpose.

Bert Hölldobler, an Arizona State University professor who won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize with E. O. Wilson for their definitive book, “The Ants,” said by e-mail, “I have been asked repeatedly to help artists to fill their creations with ants. Some of the proposals were quite mind-boggling.” He added, “When we keep them in the laboratory, we pay very close attention to simulate their ecological requirements as closely as we can.”

A whitewashed art gallery is a far cry from the ants’ ecological niche, but the craterlike nests in the tank have small, circular entrances that are particular to Pogonomyrmex badius. And while there is little foraging activity, the ants seem to be eking out an existence on apple slices and, apparently, the chicken nuggets — which on inspection seem to be totally excavated of meat.



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