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Utopia

RISD Museum

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I'm Neal Overstrom. I'm the director of the Lawrence Nature Lab here at Rhode Island School of Design.

We're here looking at Damien Hirst's work entitled *Utopia* from 2008. I find it a quite fascinating piece to explore both from the standpoint of a zoologist and also from an exhibition standpoint. This is a composition that's been assembled using butterfly wings of many different species with different colors, and patterns. It's laid out in a circular form and the exhibit designer in me reflects a lot on the symmetries represented here. That is, I'm mindful of the fact that in many informal learning situations, we approach an object, exhibit, or display from multiple distances. So the experience we have from 30 feet away is much different than at 20, 10, and five feet.

What's fascinating about this and what struck me at first is that from a distance, you're really impressed with the radial symmetry you see in this work. It's this organization of the wings as they radiate from this central point.

But of course, once we get up closer, we see that the wings are actually organized in pairs. And when we think of a butterfly or moth, we think of that bilateral symmetry as really one of the identifying features that distinguishes moths and butterflies whether they're in flight or alighted onto a leaf or flower. So I think it's an interesting exploration in symmetry as we move in and out.