

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANIMALS & SOCIETY

Q&A with Artist Asher Jay “Cut Throat Captivity”

How did you become interested in ocean issues?

My earliest memory of encountering marine wildlife was in a large picture book of deep sea creatures. I was in my diapers, because I recall the white of my tiny butt in stark contrast to the black backdrop that suspended a giant demersal octopus. My palms were the size of its eye and his shape was unlike anything else I had seen before. In that moment the ocean worked an irreversible love spell on me.

Since then the ocean has steadily and effortlessly found expression within every cell in my corporeal frame, which is a given as she pours into my heart daily and nourishes all my organs without skipping a pulse. For those who do not already know this incredible fact, human blood bears the same salt ratio as the blue, thus the ocean is within each and every one of us! This only makes it all the more obvious that our continued survival on this planet is inextricably linked to her health. I love the oceans and want to preserve her beat and biodiversity because I do not perceive my form as separate from her depths, and I know I owe my breath and blood to her expanse.

What issue do you address through “Cut Throat Captivity?”

This artwork deliberates the enslavement of cetaceans for dolphinariums, which are but circus shows that pander to the ignorant with routines that have zero educational value. As Jacques Cousteau once lamented, "No aquarium, no tank in a marine land, however spacious it may be, can begin to duplicate the conditions of the sea. And no dolphin who inhabits one of those aquariums or one of those marine lands can be considered normal." “Cut Throat Captivity” portrays sentient organisms

that are capable of the quality of emotions and depth of intra-familial interactions we pride our upright selves with, being captured for entertainment and slaughtered barbarically for consumption. Like Homo-Sapiens, wild Belugas, dolphins, porpoises and orcas are incredibly social animals. They live out their lives in the pods they are born into, and their relationships deepen with time as they learn



Cut Throat Captivity, NMAS Accession #2012.4.2

from one another, much like we do. To isolate such creatures and to coerce them to perform says more about our intelligence or the lack thereof than theirs. It also places an enormous amount of emotional and psychological stress on these beautiful marine mammals. When people attend dolphin/orca shows, they unwittingly finance and support the slaughter of these animals, for the ones that aren't collected as showcase specimens are massacred shortly after.

There is one more angle to this story: All marine mammals are considered hazardous waste when they strand along our shorelines, for they contain high concentrations of toxic substances such as mercury, BPAs, flame retardants, carcinogens and other heavy metals, which they (like us) tend to bio-accumulate from their diet over the course of their lifetimes. Consequently, killing these animals for their meat is not a viable dietary choice, as it results in neurological disorders, sensory and motor impairment, as well as stunted development in children. *[See this report from Blue Voice, regarding toxicity among marine animals: http://www.bluevoice.org/news_issues/effects.php, Ed.]*

What was your inspiration in creating “Cut Throat Captivity?”

This piece was primarily inspired by the dialogues stirred by Ric O’Barry and Louie Psihoyos in “The Cove.” “The Cove,” a 2009 Academy Award winning documentary directed by Louie Psihoyos features the concentrated efforts of Ric O’Barry to save dolphins from captivity and culling. Whilst this movie strongly addresses the slaughter of dolphins in Taiji, Japan, it does so against the backdrop of a large range of interconnected environmental concerns: From policy change, quotas and scientifically stipulated moratoriums, to ecological crises that have not been inflation adjusted, capitalistic myopia, and the upright ape ability to serve as a catalyst for biodiversity loss.

Many have elected against viewing this movie on account of disturbing graphic content, but this is a PG13 picture that does not intend to entertain but educate its viewers. Contrary to popular preconceived notions, Louie Psihoyos masterfully employs a restrained and eloquent visual vocabulary to unravel the truth about the cove and portray more than meets the eye. Having personally viewed it, I can say this with utmost confidence, it is absolutely crucial that everyone watches this movie, for as Sylvia Earle often states, "You can't care if you don't know, you might not care even if you do know, but you can't care if you don't know."

Can you describe your creative process, from the moment of inspiration to completion of a piece?

I am kind of in love with my work. It is the best relationship I have ever been in, and it cloaks me in a veil of happiness, warmth, and calm. I invest all of my emotions and self in to the creative process and I only paint after I am well-nourished and hydrated. When I am a mess it shows in my work. Filling a canvas is both emotionally and physically grueling, so I do everything in my power to be balanced and wholly accessible—mind, body and soul—to my art. Every minute that I am in front of my work I am fully present. I usually organize my thoughts and affairs such that I am not distracted by externalities when I am actually working. I frequently get possessed by a message or idea which helps anchor the work that I then churn out. Sometimes I am aware of this cerebral abduction and I sketch out thumbnails in advance, at other time the work evolves as I cooperate with it. I think of it as the universe channeling me, because more often than not, I simply do not know how I do what I do; it is compelled out of me by a greater context. I do however, try to aid the process by setting up all my materials in convenient range to my easel or work station, but the real magic happens when my hand lands that first brush stroke against the primed grain of the canvas. From there on I am in a sort of trance, floating through mind space lit by everything I have ever come in contact with and they all sing into my palette and composition. It feels like taking wing, ascending only to free fall through

weightless ether, unbound by time. It's a symphonic light show high and makes me feel one with the world around. When I am creating my skin is the only thing keeping me from being everywhere at once. It is as though painting disintegrates that final membrane of separation.

How do you view your work in relation to the animal advocacy movement?

I create to comment, conserve, and contribute. It is important for messages pertaining to conservation to find a voice through art, because such alternative media is more likely to connect with the masses than academic presentations involving statistics. Everyone is aware of the numbers yet so little change has been instituted. By the end of the day the masses have not been able to internalize the issues on account of the vocabulary they have been expressed in. The animal advocacy movement needs to be part of the daily fabric that people swaddle themselves in. Art and design help me present an otherwise marginalized reality at mainstream venues where I am no longer preaching to choir but engaging those not in the know. If we do not find ways to include the majority, the minority will continue to call the shots on behalf of the larger faction! Through form and function I am able to involve a broader demographic in the wildlife preservation dialogue.

What is your goal as an artist? What would you like viewers to take away from your work?

My goal as an artist is to amputate ignorance, apathy, segregation, and avarice from global societies, and seed awareness, compassion, community, and conservation in their place. I create works that will help challenge the values and priorities dictating our current mode of subsistence, as it is apparent to me that we cannot (as a collective) continue to rapaciously harvest the earth's resources as we have been doing. The earth is not engineered to sustain continuous economic growth, for its natural wealth is a finite reserve.

Every piece I generate aims to spur an internal dialogue that can shake one out of one's comfort zone. A lot of the time, opinions or comments expressed by viewers of my artwork give me new insight into my own creation. I find that I learn as much from my viewers as they do from me.

There is a reciprocity I hanker after when I create each oeuvre.

Why do you choose art as a medium for activism? Do you think art is effective in creating change?

Art can be a democratic medium if the artist targets the public from the get-go. I use my art as a vehicle to mobilize and educate the masses, and I help guide individuals toward specific causes, so they can contribute toward the animals or ecosystems that most



Asphyxiation X-Ray, NMAA Accession #2012.4.3

resonate with them. A lot of important changes have come about because of an image. The impact that visual input is capable of having on the public is tremendous, so you can say I am on a quest to create the one image that will push us to finally fix the things that we have broken, that will evoke real action, and propel us to address global warming or ocean acidification or end the reign of fossil fuels. I create image after image to highlight one issue after another, in the hopes that at least one of my works will help to realign our present paradigm. If even one image I make steers us toward a more inclusive path, one that will finally help us connect to animals as equals and see earth as a single living entity, I would have served my calling. Art, like any other tool, is only as effective as the person using it, so I am constantly reinventing myself, trying to do one better than my previous effort. Art for conservation isn't simply about aesthetics; it strives to invoke action and change.

What other projects are you currently working on?

I am presently adding another 100 Ocean Voices and illustrating another 100 bottles for "Sea Speak Sphere: Message in a Bottle" (www.seaspeaksphere.com), a marine conservation platform I launched on World Oceans Day, June 8, 2012, at Green Spaces.

I am figuring out ways in which I can lend a voice to the conservation efforts in Whyalla, Australia, where industrial development has caused a considerable decrease in indigenous Giant Cuttlefish numbers. Dan Monceaux, a documentary film maker, is presently working on a picture called "Cuttlefish Country" (<http://cuttlefishcountry.com/>). We are trying to brainstorm ways in which we can raise awareness and funds on this critical issue, as this is but a microcosmic view of biodiversity loss worldwide.



Ark in a Bottle, NMAS Accession #2012.4.4

Two of my artworks on Whale Sharks (*rhincodon typus*) are presently on board Pangea Seed's "Great West Coast Migration Tour," an art collective that intends to raise awareness and funds for shark conservation over the course of July and August.

I am also writing a proposal for a project that will help me combine field exploration with my creative efforts, so I can better document the realities confronting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems worldwide. By the end of the day I am a story teller and I tell the stories of my time, and I do this so

people can connect with one another and band together to conserve the resources that we are all dependent on for our continued survival on this biosphere.

Last but not least, I just created a tee shirt for GreenChanges.org about plastic pollution, which is available in 40 Whole Foods stores. Sale proceeds will be channeled toward expanding the educational wing of my ocean conservation art display, "Message in a Bottle."

What can people do to help cetaceans and the ocean ecosystems as a whole?

The first step is awareness: If you do not know, then you cannot care, and you certainly will not be able act, for as they say, "the blind cannot lead the blind." The second step is self-empowerment: Own your voice, take responsibility for your words and actions. Change starts with you and as an individual be acutely aware of the immense transformations you can incite simply because there is no other you than **you**. You are unique and thus have a say that cannot be replaced by others. Thus what you do or fail to do leaves a lasting mark on our collective story.

All the life forms on earth are looking to connect with us, from the squirrels in the park that scamper up to investigate the snack you are unwrapping, to the dolphins that swim along your surf board when you paddle out into open waters. The wonderful default disposition of life is that it is a symbiotic, inclusive, dynamic state of shared breath and collective growth. We are all part of the same air space. What I inhale you have exhaled, and in this way we are all linked to each other's chemistry and core. People can elect to be more aware and pay closer attention to these graceful connections that they are cocooned by but have taken for granted because they are so caught up in their own sequestered bubbles. I think everyone needs to love more and care more, for themselves, one another and the world around. From such awareness and sensitivity comes honest and objective action that encompasses the larger picture.



Circus Cetaceans NMAS Accession #2012.4.1

Start small, start locally, within your own house and community and always remember that you cannot make people do things that you yourself are unwilling to do. The most effective way of spurring change is to embody the transformation you yearn to see in the world.

Simple things you can do for the ocean at large: Carry a refillable, portable, stainless steel water bottle that is BPA free instead of purchasing mineral water in plastic containers that incidentally leach chemicals and hormones into your system. Carry a cloth bag or a collapsible tote with

you at all times, so you don't allow plastic shopping bags to invade your home and local habitat. Buy items that have less packaging. Divert as much waste from landfill as possible. Take a hard look at

the cosmetics you use, ensure you switch to natural and organic products. They are better for your skin, your health, and the earth. Be aware of your fresh water use and carbon/ecological footprint. Buy groceries from local farms and support indigenous products to foreign alternatives. Switch to green energy; say no to fossil fuels as much as possible.

I quit eating seafood when I read “Tuna’s End” by Paul Greenberg, and shortly after, I quit meat, because as Louie Psihoyos often states, we have the choice to practice compassion three times a day. I was a dedicated carnivore before but now I always think before I eat. So if I can stop, believe me when I say you can stop. A meat-based diet uses 7 times more land than a plant based diet. That means you use 7 times more natural resources than you need to be using to lead a balanced, healthy lifestyle. Meat farms also result in deforestation, as large tracts of rainforests are cleared for dairy and meat production. Watch Mathis Wackernagel’s “Ecological Footprint” to know more about the compelling mathematics of your lifestyle choices.

Dolphins and whales don’t need much to be dolphins and whales except living space, and we deprive them of that. Ensure that the cruises you go on carry whale apps (<http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/22/world/whale-iphone-app/index.html>). Insist they do, so they can avoid collisions on the high seas. Watch “The Cove,” “Ocean Odyssey,” and “A Fall From Freedom.” DO NOT ATTEND dolphin/whale shows at marine parks that house them. Petition against any aquarium bringing in wild cetaceans for captive living. This is not what state/national aquariums are meant to facilitate. If anything aquariums should strive to foster wild populations of marine fauna and flora like the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Last but not least sign and share this petition for Cetacean Rights: <http://www.cetaceanrights.org/>. Also, get involved with the fight to save the rarest and smallest dolphin in the world: Maui’s/Hector’s dolphins, native to New Zealand’s waters: <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/jul2012/2012-07-10-01.html>, <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO1207/S00079/nz-criticised-over-failure-to-protect-rare-dophins.htm>, <http://www.lets-face-it-dolphins.com/let-s-face-it>

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