

# The Portrait of a Siberian Tiger

By Anna Jeretic

Wildlife is a muse for many artists. The eyes of a free lion send us into a dream by their sheer mystery and give us the desire to capture it by reproducing it in paint. The hunter also wishes to capture the wild animal, thereby appropriating it. Whether it takes the form of a painting or fur and antlers, we want a material relic in our house.

The dichotomy of art and wildlife is a source of inspiration for me. In the case of my work, this takes on the form of humoristic paintings, where I stage two contrasting elements, such as “Les Lions du Louvre”, “The Pianist”, “Music on the Zambezi River” or others.

Wildlife has certain powers that can be vital for an artist. It can serve to alleviate the weight and gravity of humanity. One trip to Africa is sufficient to understand the futility of many of our creations in overdeveloped countries, because we are not in contact with the urgency of life. It seems that artists have a tendency to forget the deep sources of true energy, and wander further and further into their own worlds, into the aesthetics of their own productivity, while letting go of the essentials. And the production proves weak, from copying others’ style, or becoming hypersensitive to superficialities.

## **Produce, produce, produce**

For us urban artists, the city becomes our own jungle. Our subjects for painting are often homocentric. This art is an expression of inner torment, of powerlessness in finding meaning in life, as if we have forgotten the earth itself.

We take ourselves too seriously. Our artistic production, heavy, without charm or humor is garbage, superfluous waste. And our ecological era calls for us to reduce waste. You’ll find quite a bit of this in my own workshop.

Picasso, because he was so prolific and influential, is maybe the most bulimic and therefore most materialistic of all artists in the last century. His enormous talent serves as a guide and model to follow: produce, produce, produce...

We are haunted by the idea of not coming out with as much work as he. We only stumble around in the shadows of his genius. The pressure to climb to unattainable heights can eat away at the life of our soul. This star-image complex has us only making more, putting out always more, and we forget about quality.

Have we forgotten Vermeer, master of light, who only painted a mere thirty paintings in his lifetime? Here we see that quantity does not make a genius. Vermeer’s realism called for much assiduousness and perseverance. His painting exudes the quality of enduring love. As he strove to transmit the light of his soul, he had to summon all the

powers of his being.

Will the era of mass production be part of the past?

Now I desire a purified art form, an expression of the magic of nature. In slow and calm circumstances. The slow growth of a plant is a model for my own rhythm.

This search for the magic, the immaterial and ethereal, is an antipode to matter. But actually, I am dreaming of an art form that **is** nature itself.

However, I live within an inherent contradiction. This slow hedonism, this total communion with nature in my daily life, source of sensuality, seems to contradict with an urgent feeling to “save the planet”. This paradox of impatience and earthy contentment motivates us to travel a lot, to draw a lot and paint on this surface and that surface, in order to feel the planet in its totality. Therein lies an insatiable fascination for nature. We would like to do everything, draw everything, capture everything in art’s net. Life is too short to do everything, study everything, grasp all the wonders nature offers us. If we could transmit this feeling of urgency to others, call for them to look at nature with the eyes of a naturalist, or a child, or simply of a fascinated human being, perhaps I will have made several steps ahead.

### **Art’s place in ecological consciousness**

The world dilemmas that concern me the most are the destruction of our environment and the extinction of animal and plant species. These problems don’t leave us in peace. How can we avoid complacency in our artistic work? How can we “intervene”?

An artist must be completely and sincerely in tune with himself in order to achieve a work of quality. To be sincere means to have a full sense of one’s self and to be able to express it with precision. This also consists in embracing the environment in which we live. Today’s crisis in the world will affect artists, through the acute sensitivity they have developed through their profession. A true artist will reject nothing out of facility or luxury.

The artistic field is considered a luxury. This makes it sometimes difficult for artists/ecologists to accept their own artistic strengths, if these be their major strengths. How can we surpass the mercantile facet of the metier (where one has to appeal to the rich in order to subsist), and join the conservationist’s cause? One hope remains: to remain sincere with one’s art, to communicate this way through subliminal means.

It is difficult to do “help the troubled earth” through artistic means. We could donate a certain percentage of our sales to an environmental cause. But if we sell little?

In the United States, a donator gives to an institution, such as the Wildlife Conservation Fund, and may be rewarded with a print or watercolour of an artist, which may represent wild landscapes and animals. This gives the artist work as well, but the institution must still pay for the artist’s job: one more expense that ought to be used for the cause itself. However, the reward encourages future donations. Everyone is happy, even

though this is still an indirect method for assistance. The artist's work remains a luxury item.

### **Some inspirations**

I sometimes think of what Corot said, « a man should not embrace the artistic profession until he has recognized in himself a fiery passion for nature and a disposition to pursue it with insurmountable perseverance ».

There are already many artists who have attained the aesthetics that I am searching for myself. I could mention many examples, such as Yves Klein and his aesthetics of the immaterial and Andy Goldsworthy's land art. The word "ecology" does not belong to the personal world of Yves Klein, although he guides us toward an anti-materialistic architecture. If he stirs our emotions, it is through art itself.

Is there an art form that can fully join the ecological cause, I ask myself again? Perhaps traditional means, that is, sculpture, painting and etching do not suffice. And what about contemporary forms? They don't suffice either. It's up to the artist's imagination to find what may have an effect.

A painting of an animal is not enough. It is like creating a monument for its tomb. This makes me think of the book *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Vaughan, where Ryder, the architectural painter receives many commissions to represent old manors and family castles at a critical moment in history, just before the Second World War, when everything seemed destined to disappear.

In the same vein, portraits of animals would have a tendency to receive more and more attention today, at a time when we are afraid to lose the real ones, our models.

A painting of a plant or a flower decorates the interiors of a house very well. But as a symbol of the ecological mission, it has little potency.

Landart is often only a manipulator of nature. I'm not speaking of the engaging beauty found in Andy Goldsworthy's or Giuseppe Penone's work. It's only when the art which exploits natural elements in a natural setting takes on a solely intellectual value, that I feel it profanes nature.

In pulling away the living from its own environment, the artist, in spite of his good intentions to show his fans certain inaccessible beauties, seems to desanctify nature.

Photographers and video artists edify nature. Without hurting these wonders, they show us what we still have left. Photographs can enchant us almost as much as if we were the photographer ourselves. But they either make us lazy, or they encourage us to go there.

For the lazy, the virtual image replaces the real thing. We can stay in our heated home, keeping calm in front of the electronic screen. On a screen we are far from grasping the real thing. The virtual image is at an opposite pole with the organic. According to a recent article in *The Economist* in February 2007, in the United States, they noticed a considerable downward curb of visitors to national parks. This seems to be in contradiction with the growth of ecological consciousness. According to the article, the electronic world

has taken over, because of its inherent accessibility. In this case, Wildlife has joined the screen world. By not making the effort to go there, we sacrifice its aromas, its air, its grasses, its earth, its live music.

And I am imagining a kind of machine to grind up virtual images, reducing them to organic matter, transforming them into earth.\*

We artists who want to be ecologists as well ask ourselves the following question: do I unveil the beauty of nature in a representative work, or do I exploit its resources? It is difficult to obtain anything original in these two paths. The work will be mediocre and will not have magical powers. I am speaking of the great majority of my own work. The human being, even the talented one, only has limited powers. Only a small percentage has value. From time to time, and very rarely so, something occurs, thanks to the artist's perseverance and the intervention of the Unknown.

In my own art, it seems impossible to integrate the expression of fundamental despair in helping the planet. I persist, however, knowing very well if I resign, I will not get anywhere.

For the true artists, endowed with a personal imagination, attach themselves to others' imaginations, those who have similar experiences in life, who listen to the same news on earth, and share the same worries about their fate. Artists draw their creative energies from this mass of images and wordless sensations. And the greatest works will be accomplished, those which call to the sensitivity of others. The public will look at the work and feel its value, because their imagination will be opened and stimulated. Worry and appeasement, melancholy and peace of mind will all be contained in this image, because these artists will have found the way toward a world consciousness in their works.

This is why the art produced by an ecologist must call for our hidden senses, our interior magnetism, instead of solely producing what is expected of the artist. We have to surprise, make people react. If not, the work has only one value: that of decorating the wall by an artificial version of nature.

I sigh as I look at a portrait of a Siberian tiger I painted fifteen years ago. I feel powerless. The Siberian tiger, the largest of the planet, the most mysterious because it lives in the great cold, in an inaccessible area, fascinates us by its majestic beauty. Our imagination is carried into its wild habitat, which is being reduced daily, where it stalks in the forest for food. Its muscular loins are covered with tufts of coloured fur. After eating, he lazes away in the snow after his stomach has been appeased. Once his daily need is satisfied, he acquires the supreme role of dignitary of nature. This moment of regal peace sparks my wish to draw the creature. I desire this wild poetry, and more so that we have pretty much lost it in our daily lives. The tiger represents our actual essence, our own wild soul, which rules our desires, even for creation. We remain hungry. And wildlife artists try to represent these visions of the wild world, in order to satiate our hunger.

And what does this portrait bring to others? If the portrait is well done, if the

animal's eyes have the power to pierce our hearts, it would produce, in the best of circumstances, a temporary shock in our entrails. And this way we may realize that the wild still exists in us and needs to express itself.

How much time do we need to acknowledge fully that this essential part of ourselves remains undernourished? Without this very element of bare passion, an artist's work is lost.

Chartrettes, France, May 2004

\*Anna Jeretic, *Le Mouvement des Feuilles*, 2007