

3 Questions

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Why I Joke About the Ivory Trade

"I was raised wild," says India-born artist and conservationist **Asher Jay**. The National Geographic emerging explorer, 31, also dabbles in fashion design (such as the outfit here) and stand-up comedy. Her wildlife campaigns have appeared in Times Square and Tanzania and gone viral in China. The irony? She's "allergic to every animal."

When did you discover a passion for wildlife?

When I was younger, my mom allowed me to bring home any animal that fell out of a tree. She told me, "If you see something [broken], it's your responsibility to fix it." Eventually it was like living in a menagerie. I went through a phase where my parents had to tell me, "You are human." Even now when I go out on safari and see an animal, I feel it come alive in me—I don't see a separation. We tend to lose that over time as we begin to view things in a human context. That's why I do what I do—to get back into that space of being wild and unbound.

Are there any rules your art abides by?

Because I talk a lot about ivory, people think I could use it in my art. But if I used it, I'd be creating a gray area—it would seem like this material could be used by some because it has educational benefit, but not by others because it perpetuates death. I keep it very black and white, because life and death is black and white. Art for art's sake is a luxury we cannot afford.

What's the strangest way you've spread the word?

I started doing stand-up comedy just to see if I could get wildlife jokes out there. In my act I talk about how blood ivory has come to affect my dating life. Now every time I go on a date, I think of the fact that we're losing an elephant every 15 minutes. So by the time we get to dessert, I'm like, "Is this chap worth six elephants?"

