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Asher Jay

Creative Conservationist and 2014
Emerging Explorer for National Geographic

Job: *I lend a creative voice of advocacy for our collective wild future.*

Education: *I pursued fashion designing, branding and marketing at the Parsons School of Design in New York, clearly a highly relevant degree for a National Geographic Explorer with a career in wildlife conservation and humanitarian work. Honestly though, fashion gave me the focus, discipline and work ethic that helps me deliver on nearly impossible deadlines.*

Aha moment: *The BP oil spill. It was the moment I realized I had to participate more substantially. Signing petitions and recycling were simply not enough for me.*

Talents & traits: *I seldom perceive limits to my learning curve; everything I dabble with contributes uniquely to how I do what I do. Last year I got into improv, belly dancing and field photography. This year I am into stand-up, French, West African dance and flying lessons.*

Materials used in art: *The issues I describe in my work are multi-dimensional, so I resort to multimedia to convey their complex narrative arcs. The raw material that is most ubiquitous in the age of man, the Anthropocene, is garbage, so I often collage with trash, from newspapers to plastic packaging.*

Background noise while creating: *Music. I listen to a diverse range of genres, from Haitian voodoo to the latest hip-hop, but while the tunes may vary, I always commit to dancing a lot when I create. To me, movement is an essential part of making art.*

Office location: *My office is where I am. I am like a dung beetle for work. I carry it with me wherever I go.*

Admirable artists: *The creatives who have shaped my internal landscape—Antoni Gaudi, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Gustav Klimt, Robert J. Lang, Nacho Duato, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Ossey Miyake, Alexander McQueen, and last but not least, Dr. Seuss.*

Favored exhibition: *The exhibit I spend the most amount of time in annually happens to be on the fourth floor of the American Museum of Natural History in NYC—the dinosaur wing. Nothing puts my life in perspective and helps me center the chaos within like deep time and dinosaurs.*

Impactful quote: *The one that put me on my current path is by Her Deepness, Dr. Sylvia Earle, National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence: "A picture is worth a thousand words, but an artwork like yours is worth a thousand pictures. You have a unique voice, get involved now. Never quit."*

Your most prideful artwork: *The first one I created for a public rally: Hydrocarbon Hospice. Its silhouette-driven composition, minimal color ways and strong narrative focus have shaped all the works I have created since then.*

Must-follow social media accounts: *On Twitter, @PetPardons because it uses social media to have real time impact in saving the lives of animals on death row. On Instagram, @OMGLiterallyDead because I can't believe I didn't think of bringing a skeleton to life first.*

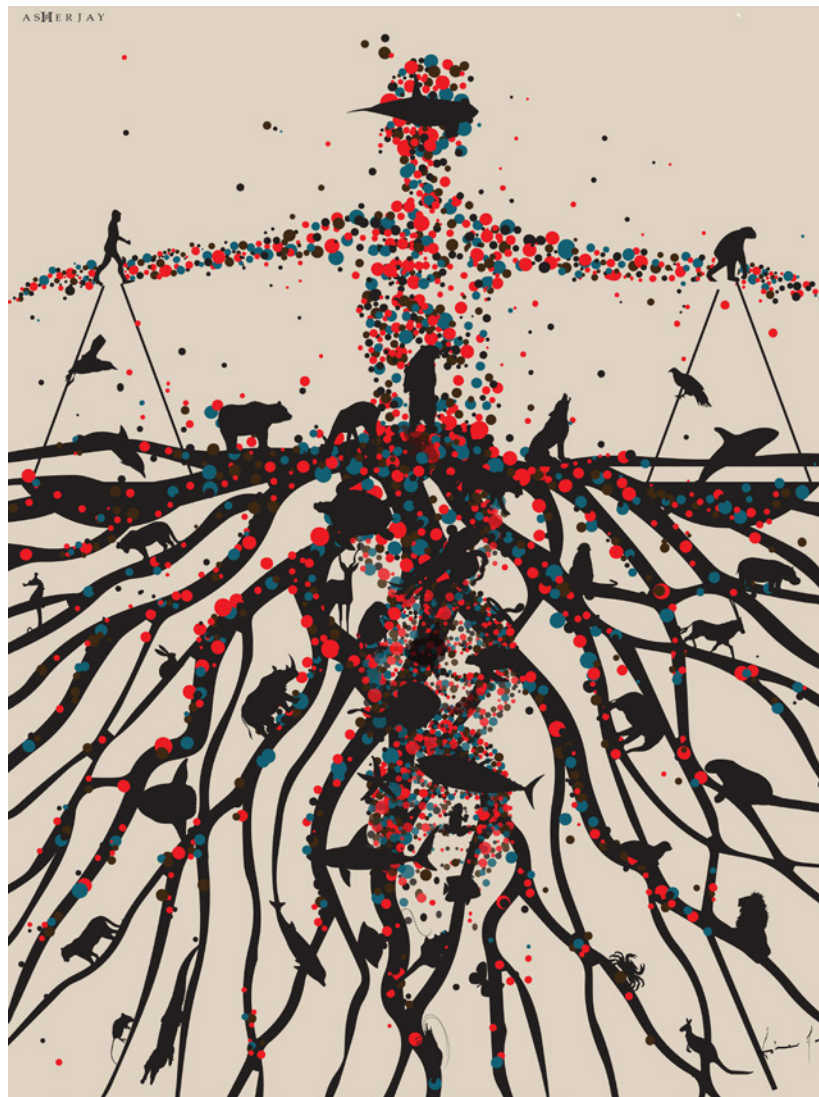
In the Life of

What is your spirit animal?

It's a whole totem pole of wild personality quirks that I emulate, so my spirit animal is a chimera stacked as follows: scorpion mouse (independent, nocturnal, howler), dart frog (self confident, pulls off bright hues), honey badger (don't give a...), African Grey (expressive, inquisitive), topped off by the serval (extremely intelligent, notorious for getting into mischief). I am pretty sure I also have corvid in me, as crows are phenomenal problem solvers.

Do you ever find yourself at a creative roadblock?

The roadblock is the starting gate. Trying to unite a modern world of ever-changing technological advances, social movements, fashion trends and a constantly distracting digital landscape with an irreplaceable and finite wild world keeps my art as fresh as the changing culture of society. Because people, communication and ideologies change, I must adapt my methods of reaching the masses in a way that will have an emotional impact on them and recruit them to a consciousness of compassion and concern for the larger picture of the wild world upon which our very existence depends.



What struggles do you encounter in your career?

There is no clocking in and clocking out; it is a 24/7 commitment. My professional life is as expansive, responsible and inclusive as I make it daily. It means having to be strong, to hope even when things feel hopeless, to figure out how to make ends meet even when there is no money coming in, to know how not to get swept up in the highs of success or lows of failure, to stay centered and sane no matter how the trajectory unfolds.

What is the reaction you hope your art conveys?

When people experience my work, I want them to stop, think and ask themselves questions until they get to a place where they know how they feel about an issue—endangered species or pollution or illegal ivory trade. Not every work is going to get every person who sees it to become involved. However, at least by getting these messages out to the public, there will be greater awareness and the ability for people to make a conscious decision.

When people are informed, they can no longer use “not knowing” as an excuse for not getting involved in the problems that threaten the entire human race. They have to accept the responsibility of making a choice—to improve the world or to turn their back on the planet, which will foster human survival or human extinction.

Why is art an effective way to promote animal conservation?

Art translates across cultures, and it does not require any subtitles. Art is the oldest universal language available to me; it is as inherent to me as the wild. The wild is where I, we, come from. Wild and art both transcend tenses: It was a part of our past, it is an extensive part of our present, and it should be preserved and part of our future. Art has the capacity to bring the story forth from science, to touch all senses, to evoke authentic emotion and to inspire action. Art is the most effective way to promote anything, not just animal conservation.

Deep Rooted Truths; opposite page, Her Horn Costs my Future; a close up of handdrawn postcards by Jay.

What is the most satisfying part of your job?

Everything—even the parts that are annoying, like dealing with paperwork, lawyers and accountants—is part of the process and progress, so I don't pick and choose. It's a privilege to be able to do what I do. I get to dive; I get to hang out with lions; travel extensively; innovate and collaborate with some of the most brilliant minds of the 21st century; and fight for a collective wild future.

Why is conservation an important part of your life?

The real question is why isn't it an integral part of everyone's life?

What is life as an explorer?

The life of an explorer is uncertain and involves braving the unknown with utmost confidence, but as most explorers would admit, that's where the excitement lies, just beyond blind panic, past paralyzing fear and around the corner from crippling physical and emotional breakdowns.

What is one aspect of your job that would surprise people?

A lot of high profile nonprofits, corporations and individuals have tried to take advantage of and failed to value my contributions. It's amusing to me how people can find the money to spend on a designer dress for a gala and yet cry "poor" when it comes to compensating an artist or even a speaker for their work in the same evening.

What is your life philosophy?

I believe in an expansive, inclusive life. Who says you can't do it all? Who says your job has to end at 5 p.m. and that you can only fulfill your bucket list after you retire? We each get 80 to 100 good years on this gorgeous planet. I intend to make the most of it, to live fully, to give without restrictions, to love without expectations, to enrich the world with every breath I draw. None of us get a second chance at now, so what are you waiting for? Make it count! This moment is all I need to contribute.

