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Delray Beach exhibit goes 'Wild' for endangered animals



Alex Beard's oil painting "The Limpopo Ferry" appears in the group-art show "Wild," opening this week at the Cornell Museum of Art in Delray Beach. (Cornell Museum of Art/Courtesy)



By **Phillip Valys** · Contact Reporter

JANUARY 13, 2016, 4:18 PM

Alex Beard's fascination with protecting endangered wild elephants started on African safaris as a teenager, but the reason he paints them can be traced to a memory he shared with his son in northern Kenya. Four years ago in the foothills of Mount Kenya in the Ngare Ndare Forest, Beard and his then-7-year-old, Landry, spent the night in camping tents, listening to the rumble of slumbering elephants.

"Things had gotten pretty bad that year with all the ivory poaching and merciless killings," Beard recalls. "I realized in that moment that if I didn't do something to help the animals I loved, it would be shameful and irresponsible."

The safari inspired a rash of new paintings by the artist: large, swirling landscapes populated by wild elephants, pelicans, scores of monkeys. It also spawned Beard's nonprofit the Watering Hole Foundation, which he used to start a tree-planting campaign in the Ngare Ndare Forest and build an armed security outpost to protect migrating elephant herds.

Speaking from his New Orleans studio, Beard, 45, says these paintings, like his charity, set about fixing what "has upset the balance of nature: the killing of animals."

His conservation effort dominates the atrium of the Cornell Museum of Art in Delray Beach, site of the new environmental-art exhibition "Wild." In paintings hanging near the entrance and the museum's staircases, Beard shows whimsical scenes of animal abandon: a monkey prying open and gazing inside the maw of a crocodile; wading birds that seem entangled in spirals, a nod to what Beard calls "repeating geometric patterns in nature."

"Swirl patterns are in everything, from conch shells to the shapes of galaxies," says Beard, who learned about conservation on safari with his uncle, famed African wildlife photographer Peter Beard, in the 1980s and '90s. "They show how we're all interconnected with nature, and I'm a big believer in keeping systems intact."

Paired with Beard's paintings is an upstairs screening of "Drawing the Line," a 33-minute documentary shot on one of Beard's 2014 African safaris (he goes three times a year with his son). A portion of sales from the 107 artworks featured in "Wild" will benefit the Watering Hole Foundation, Cornell Museum curator Melanie Johansen says.

Johansen says she was drawn to the "stream of consciousness, almost mathematical" spirals of Beard's paintings as a "jumping-off point" for "Wild." Beard's pieces share a conservation-minded kinship, for example, with sculptures by Florida Atlantic University professor Diane Arrieta, whose piece "My Kingdom Ain't So Magic" depicts a Florida black bear wearing a Mickey Mouse hat. The animal and hat are painted yellow, and the bear wears a vanity Florida license plate necklace with the phrase, "Ursus Americanus."

In another upstairs gallery, Elizabeth Jordan's "The Lives of Birds" is a collection of driftwood shaped like birds. Some 140 painted driftwood birds hang from the ceiling, each wrapped in strips of leather, wire and clay, in what the artist calls a re-creation of "migrating birds in the sky." This project, ongoing since 2007, uses driftwood sourced from water banks around her Brooklyn studio, and are a throwback to her childhood in New Brunswick, N.J., where Jordan recalls clapping her hands in empty fields to scare up flocks of birds.

"If you look at the pieces individually, they're not pretty. They're rough and awkward," Jordan says. "This is my way partly to find peace in nature, but also to teach people to realize that these animals' lives are very fleeting."

The "Wild" exhibition is on view 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday through April 17 at the Cornell Museum of Art, 51 N. Swinton Ave., in Delray Beach. Admission costs \$5. Call 561-243-7922 or go to OldSchoolSquare.org

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Interview with Elizabeth Jordan, by Jennifer Palmer

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I wanted to start by asking you about your experience at the Penland School of Crafts, and how that shaped you as an artist.

Lithography and printmaking were my primary mediums in those days, so I took a lithography class with the artist Melinda Beeman at Penland. It's a beautiful place nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains. One of the things I loved about lithography was the sensation of drawing on limestone. Because of the nature of grease pencil on the stone surface, it feels very tactile and expressive. My imagery consisted of animals, fish, and birds, which is not that much different from what I do today. It was also interesting to watch other craftspeople at work, doing everything from glassblowing to furniture design. You are really exposed to serious, personal dedication at Penland.

I noticed that you have lived in different parts of the country. Does location influence your artwork?

Going from growing up in New Jersey to moving to New Mexico was like entering another world. The mountains and deserts changed color all day long, and culturally, it was the Wild West. I attended the Tamarind School of Lithography in Albuquerque, then got a job as a fine art printer in Tampa, Florida. It was interesting going from an arid desert to an extremely humid jungle. I was taken by the amount of birds in Florida, and loved being near the Gulf of Mexico. I ended up going to graduate school in Tampa and was lucky to meet a lot of great artists there. After graduate school we moved to New York City, and have been here for thirty years. There's no shortage of intensity, energy, and variety of people. It's possible to get a lot of ideas from that energy, and the streets can be a source of found materials too.

What advice would you give artists starting out?

My advice is don't just live the lifestyle, do the work. Ultimately it's the experience of hard work that's the most enjoyable and worthwhile reason to be an artist. Putting time into the craft of making something will reward you with a piece that can stand on its own.

Your work has such a focus and power by the choice of medium. How do you choose what materials to use?

At times it just makes sense to use a specific material, it's a matter of trusting one's intuition, and some seem to have the potential to really change the way you see things. I like to be open to materials that are unexpected and untraditional, like the thick wires I found cut from a telephone pole. Frequently, I start a piece with wire mesh or chicken wire because that helps to visualize it three-dimensionally. When I use tree branches, I'm looking for a gestural resemblance to legs, wings, or paws. Clay, joint compound, or paper clay make a skin-like surface that can be painted. All of these together build up a history and patina unique to each work.

Do you like to collect anything? And if so do you have a favorite place to collect things?

I collect a variety of natural things, from bird's nests to turtle shells, which usually come from the beach or woods. When in the city, I collect things that people have lost or thrown away, like army men, jewelry, and handwritten notes. I keep my eyes to the ground whenever I'm walking outside.

How does nature play a role in your work?

Years ago an esoteric consultant summed up my experience as being "of the earth." I think that's true of my personality and my work, and because they're both so connected, the natural world is a starting point of ideas. Nature has taught me that there isn't any sentimentality about life and death in that world—life is temporal and very fragile. I'm trying to make pieces that are about that ephemeral place where something can be both vulnerable and powerful.

I am really drawn to your series *The Lives of Birds*. How did this series influence your future work?

The Lives of Birds is a work that began by making birds at the end of a workday, when I had a few leftover materials and a little time left. Because the process has infinite permutations, I feel I can mine this subject indefinitely. It also is a series that can be assembled as an installation, which is a means for me to work a little bigger and with more complexity—it seems to gain strength in numbers. Creating the birds opened me up to the idea of combining many materials in one object, and how that made each object quirky and unique. Most of the work I'm doing today evolved from seeking the gestural quality of wood and combining it with multiple materials.

Who has influenced you as an artist?

I've had so many great art teachers and known a lot of artists over the years that no single person stands out. In many different ways, they've all contributed to my experience. I can honestly say that I love art from the Dada period and enjoy Outsider Art very much.

What is your most important artist's tool?

A knife that's capable of whittling.

What is one item you could not work without in your studio?

Wire.

Could you describe your artistic process?

It's a strange thing to say but I try not to overthink things too much, preferring to just go into my studio and start, and then keep going until I have to stop. At the same time there's a running dialogue going on in my head, although it's often about anything but art. I just try to keep the process intuitive rather than idea-driven.

While there are times that I have specific intentions and goals, my favorite days are when I go into the studio and start something totally unexpected and unplanned. It's rewarding to pick up a piece of wire and see how it could be made into something new. Trying to make something out of nothing is a mystery that I'm very interested in.

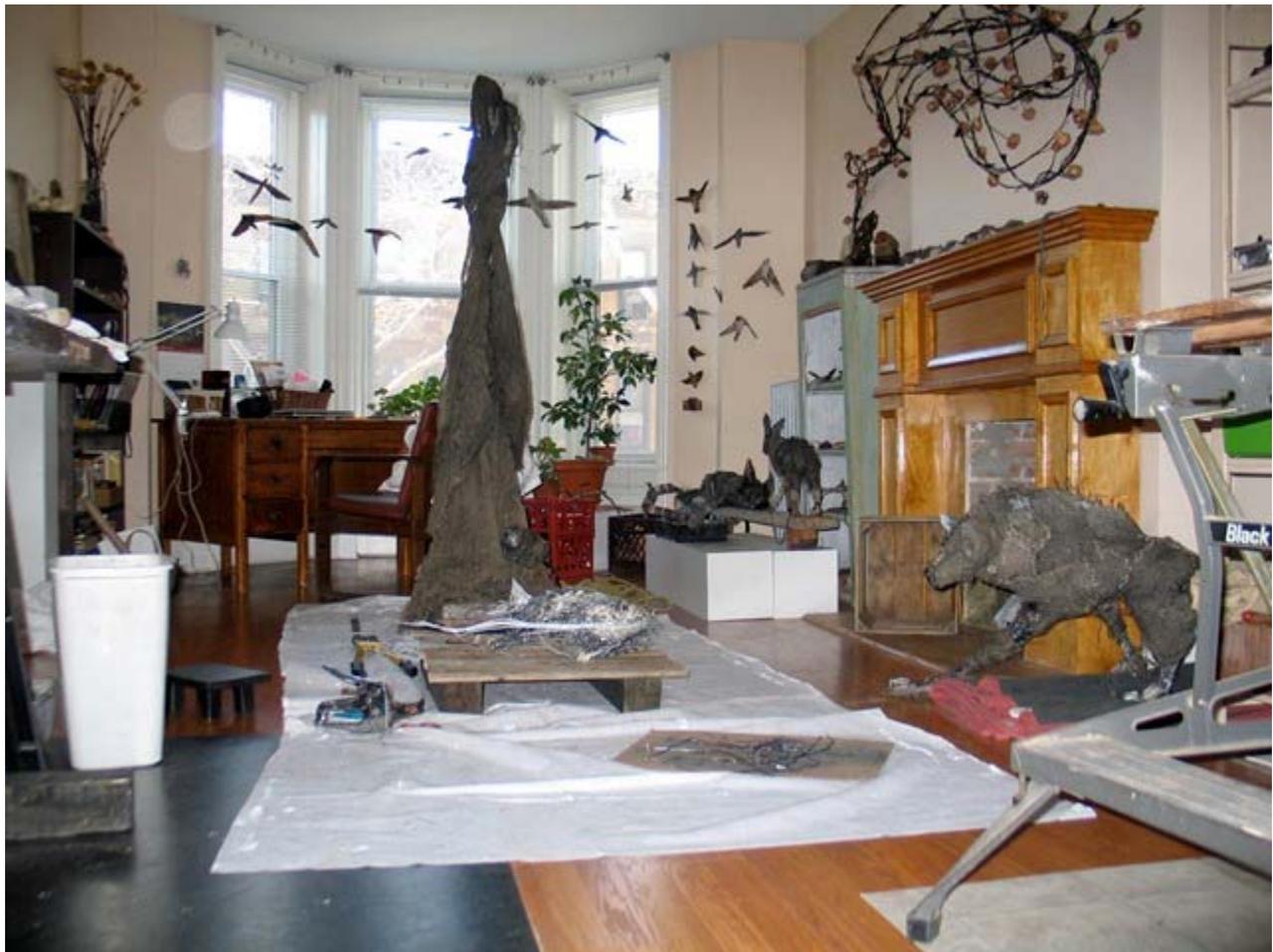
How has your practice changed over time?

I think I'm a lot more patient these days, because I do a lot of repetitive tasks. Those tasks can have a

calming effect because you're just doing the same process over and over. They give me a lot of time to think things over. I also make a lot of prototypes of objects, referring to them as three-dimensional sketches. It's a way to try out ideas and see where they lead. I have a lot of sample objects lying around the studio that may or may not end up in a formal, finished work. I consider those my sketches.

What is your workspace/studio like?

My studio is a parlor in a brownstone-style building, with a non-working fireplace and great windows. I've been here for just a year after working for 20 years in a loft space, so it's still an adjustment being here. There are some practical issues with the space that I'm trying to work around, but it's slowly feeling more and more comfortable. Once it turns into a big, messy pile of disorder I'll be satisfied.



The artist's workspace.

If there was one thing you wanted people to know about your work, what would it be?

I would ask the viewer to invest some time to really look at each piece, because my work isn't beautiful in a traditional sense. It has its own unique beauty, which may seem dark, but it isn't without humor. It would be my wish that people would listen to my work, because it whispers rather than shouts.

What project or projects are you currently working on?

I have three projects in the works. Bones and teeth reoccur often as a theme, so one piece is a series of bones made from clay that will be embedded into a chunk of wood. There is also a wire piece that's reminiscent of barbed wire; it has a series of wire dragonflies attached. The idea came from something I saw—about 50 dragonflies all resting on a clothesline. I continue to make different animals, and currently have the understructure of a wolf laying on its side. It will be attached in an eccentric fashion to a wooden base that resembles a shipping pallet. In pieces such as this, the base and the animal are all part of the work. These are all works begun in 2015, none have titles as of yet, and all range in size from 12" x 20" to 24" x 36". The materials so far consist of claystone, chicken wire, wood, hangers, and wire.

Whose work interests you right now? And what artists/poets/presses/galleries put out work that you find exciting?

There are a number of artists whose work I like to seek out: Louise Kruger, Petah Coyne, and Phoebe Washburn are a few artists I admire. I enjoy also seeing works by unknown artists in group shows.

Where do you see American sculpture/painting/drawing/photography headed right now?

American art is headed in so many directions that I wouldn't venture a guess. I'm just hoping that eventually the cream will rise to the top.

'Thaw' breaks through some of the ice

Dorsky Gallery explores climate change effects through art

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Posted: Thursday, January 23, 2014 10:30 am | Updated: 11:28 am, Thu Jan 30, 2014.

by Tess McRae, qboro editor |

The effects of climate change have generated debate for some time now but 11 artists sought out the most drastically changing parts of the world to see the transformations for themselves.

Their findings were made into art and are now on view at the Dorsky Gallery in Long Island City.

The tiny exhibit features 23 drawings, paintings, photographs, collages, sculptures and videos that address different aspects of Earth's "natural but forced transformation, hinting at the potential scientific and geopolitical effects in the wake of ongoing natural disasters."

Inspiration for the exhibit came after NASA released satellite images in 2012 that showed the thaw of Earth's northern icecap was detectable over as short a time span as several days.

The agency called the thaw a localized phenomenon that was evident over the entirety of Greenland's ice cover. The warming responsible for this thaw may shut down the Gulf Stream, the warm current that traverses the Atlantic Ocean and drives the predictable rhythms of most of Earth's climate, it said.

The 11 artists went on fact-finding expeditions around the world, including Cape Breton, Newfoundland and the Gobi Desert in Asia, and presented their visual predictions of what will become of the planet if climate change continues.

For a project that required artists to submerge themselves so far into unfamiliar environments, not many of the pieces display the amount of depth one might expect to come out of such a long journey.

Many of the pieces are decent and it is obvious that all of the artists possess talent but there wasn't much exploration and it was difficult to be emotionally moved by much of the exhibit.

There are exceptions: Blane De St. Croix's piece "Everglade Forest Fires" was a clear standout.

The collage involves limited supplies —archival ink jet prints, ink on paper mounted on canvas — but the detailed and textured design is a beautiful portrayal of the sheer destruction a forest fire can cause.

His sculpture "Nomadic Landscape," which uses natural materials from the Gobi Desert, is also a standout in the gallery's collection.

Elizabeth Jordan's piece "Looking for a Way Out" is a fantastically chaotic miniature sculpture of fish trapped behind a straight pin fence. Her second piece, "The Moon Grazing Hare," is also good.

Itty Neuhaus' imagined environment below an ice cap is one of the larger installations.

The piece, entitled "Understory," is a fabric-enclosed cocoon that features a video installation juxtaposing the depth of the ocean with the sky.

It is beautifully done without being over the top.

Janet Biggs has a more traditional piece entitled "Fade to White." The 12-minute video follows through the icebergs of the Arctic an explorer who only escapes the ice when he boards the ship he inhabits.

Vicki DaSilva's piece "Anthropocene" is a bit lackluster. The high-definition video loop with sound uses a camera with slow shutter speed picking up the light used by one of her assistants to spell the word "anthropocene," meaning Age of Man.

The cave in the background is lit beautifully but the letters get in the way of it.

While "Thaw" may not go as deep as it could have, the exhibit is worth a visit for the works of Neuhaus, Biggs, De St. Croix and Jordan which utilize the environment they surrounded themselves with for an extended period of time in such a way that the art they have produced needs little to no explanation. They stand well on their own.

'Thaw'

When: Thursday to Monday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., through April 6

Where: Dorsky Gallery, 11-03 45 Ave., Long Island City

Tickets: Free.

dorsky.org

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