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My Journey of Knitting Wildlife¹

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Part of Panel - Unraveling Political Knitting



*Figure 1. Left, “Chinese Tiger”, 2011, 110” x 72”, detail view. Photo credit Robert Lowell.
Right “Amur Leopard”, 2007, 92” x 53”, detail view. Photo credit Maja Kihlstedt.
Artist Ruth Marshall.*

In a nutshell, I knit artworks that are based on the pelts of endangered animals. Two detail images, seen above in figure 1, are hand knitted textiles with string and sticks. A question I get asked frequently is, ‘how did you come up with that idea?’

It all started at the Bronx Zoo. I had arrived in the United States from Australia in 1993 with a scholarship to study for my Masters degree in sculpture at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. When I graduated I didn’t want to leave New York and in order to stay and extend my visa I had to find employment in my field of study, which was a daunting task. I saw an old ad for a position at the zoo in the career office at Pratt and long story short I wrangled my way into the zoo and happily worked there until 2009. My job as an exhibit sculptor varied but basically I became versatile at

¹ This is an abbreviated version of the talk I gave at the Museum of Art, University of Maine on the 16th May 2012.

replicating natural things artificially in different materials. (Figure 2.) The zoo is a very captivating place and my love for animals exploded there, so much so that I wanted to change my personal art message into talking animals and the conservation efforts surrounding them.



Figure 2. Bronx Zoo, pheasant exhibit, World of Birds, photo credit, Ruth Marshall.

My first forays were with polyester resin, casting antlers and gorilla hands with this material I had never used before, which was exciting. After a few years I became dissatisfied and didn't feel the resin was a good 'fit' for me. It was fragile and inclined to breakages, particularly with the antlers, I was tired of the hundreds of hours of hand polishing to achieve the glass like effect I was after, only to then be confronted with the fact that it may yellow with age if exposed to ultraviolet light. Also casting from life didn't have enough of my fingerprint or personal expression in the work.



Figure 3. "Coral Snake Series", Ruth Marshall, 2006, size variable. Hand knitted textile, t-pins, specimen labels. Photo credit Maja Kihlstedt.

Then on a trip home to Australia to see my family I got really bored and picked up some of my mothers knitting needles again, and began to knit. The pleasure that I derived from my childhood activity returned, and it was so much fun, so I knitted socks for all my family! When I returned to the zoo it seemed as if the animals that I had been trying to figure out how to represent were begging to be knitted. I started with snakes first, (figure 3.) I had an idea to knit every single species of this snake, and then prayed that it wasn't in the hundreds, thankfully there are just around 70 species of coral snakes so I knitted all of those. I was able to exhibit them all at the Museum of Art & Design in New York City as part of their, "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting" exhibition. The curators at MAD enjoyed the work as the snakes all roll up into a briefcase for easy transport!

After the snakes I had this idea to knit my cat. Yes, my adorable tabby cat Rocky. But I was a little worried about the possible connotation of a crazy cat lady who actually knitted her cat as a pelt, and how that would affect my contemporary art career. I actually sat on that idea for a whole year. When I thought about it again I decided to go ahead anyway, it was still a good idea, edgy, a visceral concept wrapped in the luxury of woolly knitting. So I went ahead and began research on my cat. Rocky, however had other ideas, and would whine and hide whenever he saw me approaching him with a tape measure. I remembered that he was due to have his teeth cleaned. So off to the vet we went and I got permission to man handle him for an extra twenty minutes while he was under anesthetic and I was able to get all the measurements and photos I needed!

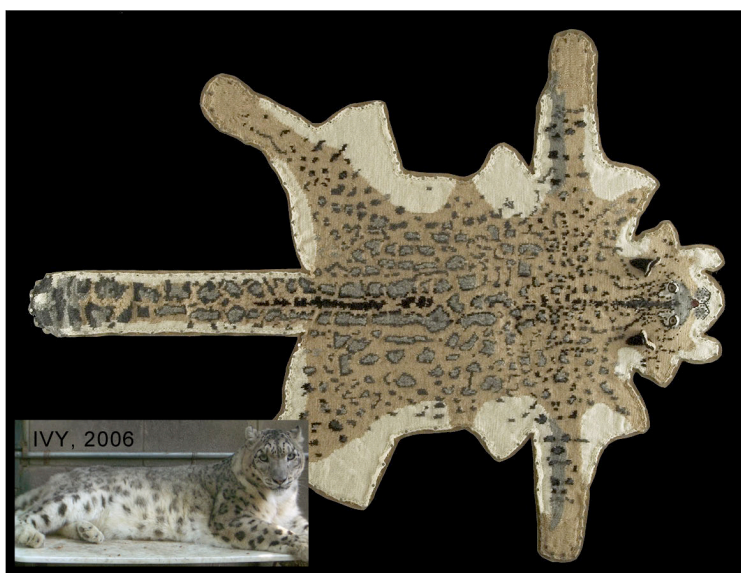


Figure 4. Ruth Marshall, "Ivy", 2006, 88" x 66". Hand knitted textile, string, sticks.
Photo credit, Maja Kihlstedt.

I was very much aware at the time that knitting my cat was the first step in working towards knitting other cat pelts, much bigger cat pelts. The Snow Leopards at the back of my workplace were now ready to be interpreted into fully realized artworks. I approached a keeper and asked who had the best winter coat that year and without hesitation she said, 'Ivy'. So a few hundred photos later I started to piece together a live Snow Leopard into a chart for a two dimensional pelt. (Figure 4.) At this point, like the snakes, I was pinning the pieces to the wall as museum specimens. I then knitted two jaguars, and an Amur Leopard. However I'm going to jump ahead at this point to some of my most recent work.



Figure 5, left. Ruth Marshall, exhibition, “Vanished into Stitches”, University of Maine, Museum of Art, 2012. Photo credit, James Daigle.
Figure 6, right. Ruth Marshall, “#4 Ocelot”, 2010, 46” x 26”. Hand knitted textile. Photo credit, Maja Kihlstedt.

I was laid off from the zoo in 2009, and while that was traumatic, I also immediately realized that it was time for me to fly out of that warm, safe cocoon and embark more fully on my journey as an artist. Now my working hours didn’t clash with the visiting hours at the American Museum of Natural History, (AMNH). I got approval to conduct research in the mammal department, now I could get a really close look at the actual pelts themselves that I have been doing for three years now. The first specimens I was dying to see were the Ocelots, and it was quite apparent when I began diving into the two cupboards of them that there was so much variation in the pelts that one artwork was not going to do this gorgeous animal justice, so I created series of six knitted pelts. Here is what they look like installed along with some detail shots. (Figures 5 and 6.)

I always knew that when I began to create these pieces that knitting tigers was in my future. When I first started visiting AMNH I would sneak a look inside the tiger cabinet where the skins were hanging and would be overwhelmed by their size and beauty. Finally after knitting ten cats I was ready. After my first tiger I had news that the University of Maine Museum of Art was offering me my first solo museum show, so it was great knowing that upon completion of the first installment of six tigers, that they were going to be exhibited. So my days at AMNH would entail me working on life size charts, printed and glued together, drawing the outline of the pelt to locate my registration of the shape and then painstakingly drawing onto the chart in pencil all the stripes of that particular tiger. This means the angle, width, length, location, and the relationship of the stripes to one another. Photographs, color studies and notes would be worked on as well. All the while attempting to mimic nature’s paintbrush onto a geometric map, a process that would take about one week. Then I would work on the chart at home, coloring in every square in the asymmetric grid, this is the most tedious to me, often procrastination threatens to slow the work down but eventually the need to begin knit



Figure 7. Ruth Marshall, “#70374”, in process. Photo credit, Ruth Marshall.

would urge me to complete this step. (Figure 7.) Then I can start casting on the first stitches for the tail, where I always begin, peering down a tunnel of months of knitting ahead. I was very fortunate to have Lion Brand Yarns sponsor for my yarn needs. Examples of the tigers I have created, and an installation shot from Maine, are pictured in figures 8 and 9.

By this time I was lashing the pelts onto bamboo or willow sticks, which was an idea I got from Dr Alan Rabinowitz’s book, “Jaguar”, in which he relates the story of how he lost the radio signal of a study animal only to discover that it had been poached. In his book there was an image of his live jaguar next to a photo of the same animal’s pelt stretched out on a frame of sticks to dry. I highly recommend his book by the way, it is a wonderful story of how as a young scientist working in the field he was able to establish the first jaguar reserve in the world.

I just want to put in a word about white tigers here, since I get asked about this popular animal a lot and there misconceptions about them. White tigers are not a species, they are the results of excessive inbreeding that can cause defects. The AZA, American Zoological Association has banned the breeding of white tigers in their member zoos, no credible animal establishment will exhibit these tigers, which are bred for economic gain and not for conservation reasons.

And so this is where I want to talk to you a little about tiger conservation as an example of what is going on in the illegal wildlife trade, which keeps company with drug trafficking, human



Figure 8, above, bottom. Ruth Marshall, exhibition, “Vanished into Stitches”, University of Maine, Museum of Art, 2012. Photo credit, James Daigle.

Figure 9, above, top. Ruth Marshall, “Russian Tiger”, 2012, 106” x 74”. Hand knitted textile, string, sticks. Photo credit, Robert Lowell.)

trafficking and arms trafficking as the top illegal activities in the world. In 1987 CITES the Commercial International Trade in Endangered Species banned the trade of tigers worldwide. Even with this effort the wild population of *Panthera Tigris* has been decreased by 97% in the last century and there are thought to be only approximately 3,200 wild tigers, but a larger population unfortunately lives in captivity. Five thousand of these captives are thought to be in China where there is considerable pressure put on the Chinese government to legalise 'tiger farms', to produce the bones, skins, and even tiger wine that is in demand for Chinese medicine with the belief that body parts of the tiger are imbued with virility and healing properties. This strategy of supplying the demand is not a solution to help save tigers, certainly not the last twenty wild tigers left in China. If attitudes in China do not change the tiger will disappear, it's as simple as that, they are driving the illegal tiger trade that triggers poaching of these animals. (Figure 10.) There are signs of change however. This April 2012, a huge Chinese police operation shut down hundreds of websites, raided thousands of markets, made hundreds of arrests, and seized hundreds of thousands of animals. This is just one of many stories pertaining to the dynamic state of wildlife conservation today and the fight to protect species for the future. During the Chinese year of the tiger in 2010 there was a pledge at the first ever international tiger summit to double the population of wild tigers by 2022. As long as people care about animals and there is a will to help them, there is a chance for survival, we have the tools to accomplish this and it is not impossible. Thank-you very much.



Figure 10. Poached tiger, photo credit, Wild Aid Thailand.

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