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August 18, 2010

Animal Planet Feature

Safari Special:  
Elephant Rescue



Thai Elephants

Paper, Music, Paint: Creative Conservation

By Wendee Holtcamp

Take 3,000 unemployed, domesticated elephants. Add paint, music and a stroke of genius. Loony but true — creating pachyderm Picassos and Pachelbels has yielded the most fantastical conservation story of the century.

After Thailand banned logging, elephants had few legal means to earn their keep. They can dance and entertain tourists, but many are overworked and malnourished. Enter Russian-American artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. After hearing of a painting elephant in the Phoenix Zoo that raised over \$100,000 annually, and reading about the plight of Thailand's elephants, the artists had a wild idea: "Open the world's first quadruped occupational retraining program — an art school for elephants in Thailand!" the artists enthusiastically explain in *When Elephants Paint*, released in 2000. So started the Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project.

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Ele-Fact

The root of the word elephant can be divided into two words in latin: "ele" meaning arch and "phant" meaning huge.

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Komar and Melamid traveled to Thailand in 1998 to set ideas in motion. They created the first art school at the Thai Elephant Conservation Center in Lampang, where Dr. Richard Lair works. After a few lessons, the elephants could paint modern and impressionist masterpieces in minutes. Tourists and locals loved it, and the paintings earned both fame and fortune. Funds raised directly benefit the elephants — and heighten awareness of their intelligence, creativity and fragile plight. Two more schools have opened.

Lair, an American expatriate, went to Thailand over 20 years ago. "At the time I was interested only in wild elephants," says Lair. "I still feel strongly that they should not be kept in captivity, but they're here, and it has been going on for 4,000 years at least." With only 10 to 15 percent of Thailand forested, there are simply too many elephants and not enough forest to reintroduce them to the wild. Lair, who wrote the definitive book on domesticated elephant care, *Gone Astray*, put his creative genius to work on yet another elephant endeavor: music.

"The project started over a bottle of whiskey," says Lair, who collaborated with New York music producer Dave Soldier. "We knew the ellies could paint and jumped to the same conclusion simultaneously: Why can't they make music?" The elephants play sturdy versions of traditional Thai instruments, including slit drums, a thundersheet and a diddly-bow bass. The Thai Elephant Orchestra released their first CD through Mulatta Records, and a second is on its way.

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