

# Sanctuary Asia

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The Amphibian World • Masters of the Subterranean • Frogs, Famines and the Future • A Thousand Voices from the Field



## HOMO SAPIENS

WILL WE WISE UP IN TIME TO SAVE OURSELVES?



COURTESY: ASHER JAY

*from understanding the complexity of the whole, Asher's work is at the nexus of storytelling, marketing, public relations, corporate social responsibility, nonprofit impact, and philanthropy. Her background in fashion design and development, marketing, merchandising, and as managing director of a company that oversees both CMT production lines and large-scale factory planning, has given her a personal experience of the corporate world and equipped her with business acumen.*

*Much of her best-known work spotlights the illegal ivory trade. More recently, Asher opened two permanent exhibits at National Geographic Encounter in New York's Times Square, a large-scale wall-mounted installation entitled Piece of the Planet, and an immersive, sound-scaped installation called Message in a Bottle.*

*From big name brands like Prada, Biotherm and Adidas to well-known nonprofit organisations like WWF, BSR (Business for Social Responsibility) and National Geographic Society, this interdisciplinary designer is fluent in sensorially evocative visual discourse that transcends normative communication barriers. Vance Martin spoke with Asher about all this and more.*

*wildlife trafficking, promoting habitat sanctuaries and illuminating humanitarian emergencies. Her core message, again and again: biodiversity loss during the Anthropocene – the Age of Man.*

*Harnessing the effective application of the arts to address simple disconnections that prevent individuals*

## The Sanctuary Interview Meet Asher Jay

*Asher Jay is an international adventurer and public figure whose compelling paintings, sculptures, installations, animations, ad campaigns, and films all have a single purpose: to incite global action on behalf of wildlife conservation.*

*Her travels to the frontline have made her a witness and storyteller, combating illegal*

self, and contributing as only you can, is to have the courage to actually be you.

### How can you "be you"?

Life gets more difficult when you don't flow with the opportunities and blessings that flow your way daily, and believe me even when everything feels stuck or stagnant, even when things feel impossible, if you are present for it and trust that everything is happening to help you find your best and fullest expression, in favour of advancing the collective consciousness, then nothing, no moment, is ever a failure or does wrong by you.

You may adopt the title of 'Creative Conservationist' I coined by necessity – I am not possessive of it. I only coined it to receive the National Geographic Emerging Explorers Award, they wrote to me humorously saying if you can't think of a designation, we cannot award you. I laugh out loud when I think back on the how and why of my life, none of which was because I was calculative or formulaic. I rather rolled with the punches, and learned to stand back up from the punches that took the wind out of my gut.

### Who and what were the major influencers, turning points, in your life?

The WILD10 Congress (Spain 2013) and meeting you, Vance, was a major turning point. You have been a mentor, father figure and dear friend. I owe my path and evolution to those who understood and supported my vision, passion and person as I was developing. It is those who see you as you are unfolding and nurture you while you are in process that ultimately help you uncover your path and self. The only way to pave a path for yourself, and know your path is to be open to such support as you brave forward into the unknown one step at a time. No one else can actually take that step forward, and the first few steps will have to come from you and you alone, but as you endure, more support galvanizes and aligns with your integrity of self-expression.

Just as the World Wilderness Congress always is, WILD10 was about innovation, exploration and discovery, in the spirit of inclusivity and evolution. This Congress singlehandedly launched my trajectory and put me front and centre in the eyes of



COURTESY: ASHER JAY

ABOVE Asher engaging with children in New York City through art. She believes creative expression is a powerful tool to spur positive change. FACING PAGE Asher at work, painting bottles for Brita's 'Niagara Now' installation in Toronto Union Station.



ABOVE Asher speaking at the United Nations.

BELOW Inherited Legacies, was used to propel the translocation of 100 black rhinos from South Africa to Botswana to create a genetic seed population, in response to the rise in rhino poaching.



Invest in your children's future.  
Stop Rhino poaching today.

the largest network of similarly engaged individuals. National Geographic found me through this platform, based on my emotionally raw presentation at the global symposium in Salamanca Spain. National Geographic, the legacy brand, has been an immense support, particularly those within the institution I have a personal relationship with – they have my back and I have theirs. There have been many others, too, people like Ann Luskey, Stephanie Kann Tobor, Patty and Rick Elkus, many other people... I am blessed.

**Asher, your words about me are too generous, but thank you! You have a strong influence of India in your life, yes? Has this influenced your work? Does it affect how you look forward to WILD11 in Jaipur in March 2020, where you will be a presenter and an installation artist?**

Yes, I have family background, of course, but it has been so much more. I am grateful for the awareness the land and culture have evoked in many people, and thus their contribution in evolving human consciousness. Not sure what about the land of mystics encourages the exploration of self so effortlessly, but self-discovery is more common there than anywhere else in the world, isn't it? And isn't that the gateway to better engagement in the world around? Well, maybe even that is not limited to India; it is prevalent in the East, from Zen and Buddhism to Tao and Sufism. Most of these spiritual practices that work to awaken the individual originate in the East, so by and large, spirituality has found greater expression outside of religious contexts in the East than the West, yes? The East has long prioritised "being" over "doing" and we in the west do more than we ever elect to be. I enjoy that I get the best of both sides of our sphere. To "be" in a doing society is an interesting challenge. India is unafraid and unapologetic about its proclivity for colours, textures, patterns and stories. I don't think I'd have my appetite for visually titillating, bold compositions if India were not part of my portfolio of being.

I so look forward to WILD11; I would go to this event no matter where in the world it is located but I am ever more enthusiastic that it's in Jaipur, as I have been to Rajasthan once before and I cannot underscore how much I loved the



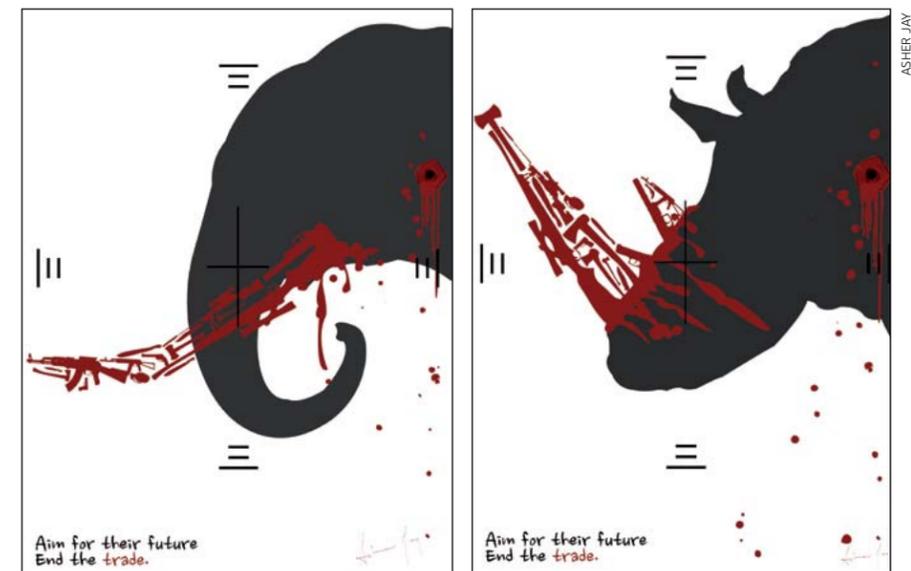
art, architecture, food, textiles and scenery. India is so diverse and exciting to explore. This time I hope to make a trip up to Jodhpur as well, as I have never been there before. As for WILD11 and being a part of its context in March 2020 as a presenter and installation artist, I am excited to share myself and my efforts as of now – which has evolved substantially since WILD10 – with the community gathering for it.

**Do you have a message for the political leaders and the youth of today?**

Life is so much larger than anything we can conceive of from our limited understanding of ourselves and of the whole. We are far too fragmented to be able to give rise to anything as fragile, complex, real, present and magnificent as the biosphere and all the intricate relationships it harbours. In this vein, I have a T.S. Elliot quote to qualify.

*"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." – T.S. Elliot.*

I cannot highlight this enough for everyone; wildness is where we come from, wildness is who we are, and wildness is what we need to rediscover during the Anthropocene, the Age of Man, to comprehend our own selves and our rightful place in the uniquely layered dynasty of life. We need to be cognizant of our evolutionary and biological development. We would not exist, without our context, and our context is wild. Wild is also the wonderstruck child within us that we stand to lose forever when we fail to preserve their magic with passionate conviction. If



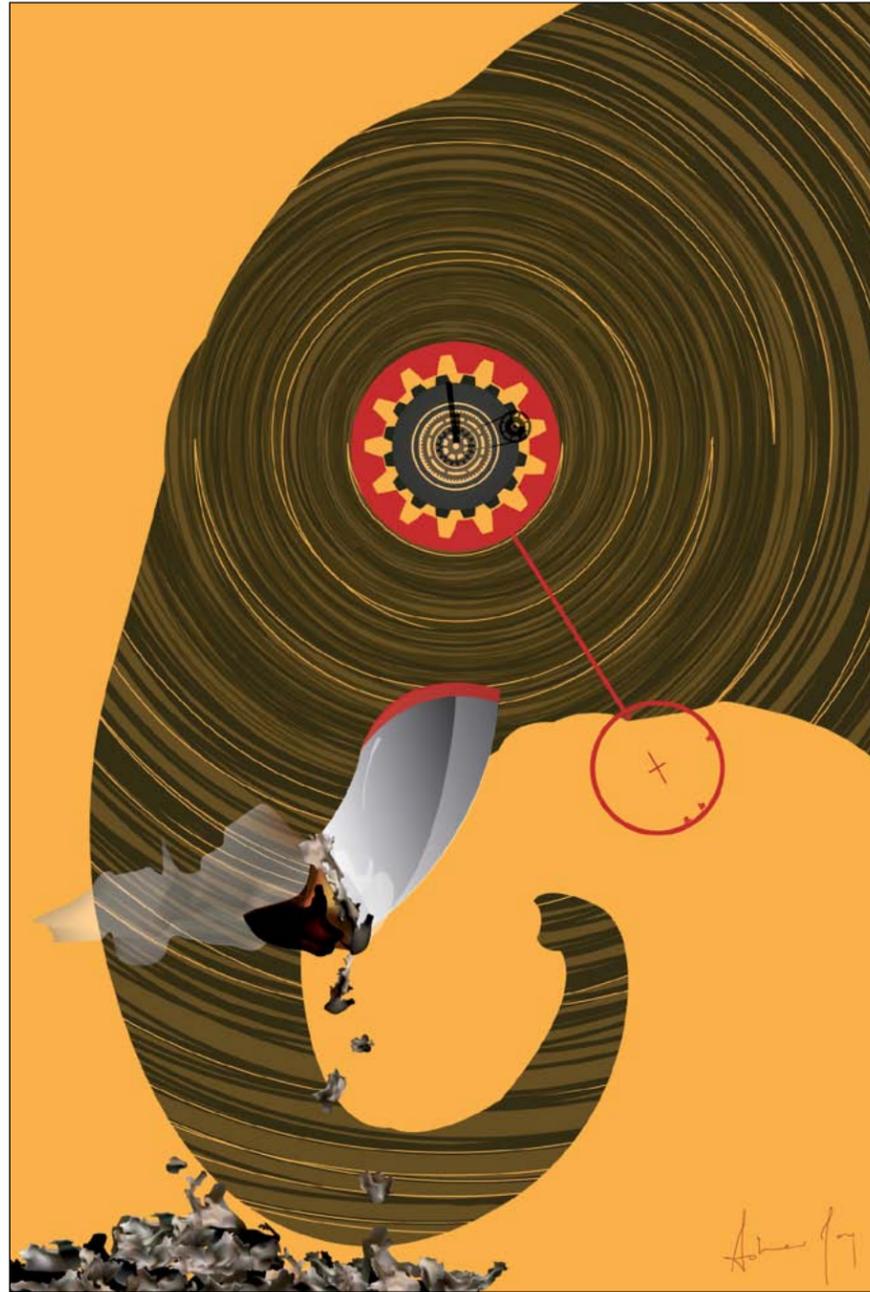
TOP LEFT Deep Rooted Truths displays a distinct inequality between humans and other animals, who are denied their rights and freedoms, while we award ourselves these to the fullest.  
TOP RIGHT Same, Same But Different is an observation of how we all come from the wild, which makes us who we are, just as it does other 'real' wild animals.  
ABOVE Aptly titled Wildlife Under Fire, Asher created these two variations for Obama's Wildlife Task Force, to raise awareness about the illegal ivory and rhino horn trade.

there is one take away. I can leave you with today, it is this: "let the wild within you relate intimately with the wild beyond."

Artists are critical to the process of cultural advancement because we are willing to explore our vulnerability earnestly. We tumble down emotional hell, and use both the anguish and the catharsis to power our imaginations, hearts and hands.

We create from the same raw space that life finds expression from, and in that unbridled, honest, fresh, inchoate space truth always finds expression. Truth holds accountable the individuals who comprise society. Truth is hard to look away from; it makes the viewer uncomfortable, it penetrates deep into the heart, mind and soul, and it impregnates one with the

ASHER JAY



*Burning All Record Of highlights the ivory trade in all its foul glory. The tusk turning to ashes signifies the burnt ivory confiscated by authorities worldwide, while the target mark on the animal conveys its constantly compromised survival.*

unshakeable need to recognise the value of authentic connection.

As creatives, we may be able to hypothesize a future, but the future isn't here yet; what is more meaningful is to bring to a viewer's attention the tense at hand, to inspire them to do right by the present, in the present. We don't have the bandwidth to assess what our future will be like, be it bleak or bright. What we can do is take responsibility for the moment

at hand, and do better than we have in moments past. T.S. Eliot says it perfectly: "For last year's words belong to last year's language... and next year's words await another voice."

#### **OK, so the roles of art and the artist are...?**

To try 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. Why? Because as people, communication and ideologies change, I must consequently adapt my methods of reaching the masses in ways that will have an emotional impact on them and recruit them to a consciousness of compassion and concern for the larger picture, i.e., the wild world upon which our very existence depends. The voice of tomorrow will find expression when tomorrow becomes today. We need only take it a day at a time, and give it everything we've got. This day, this moment, it includes everything that is, and everything that has ever existed. Why isn't that enough? Why can't we do justice to all that exists now? Why can't we make 'now' count?

I write what insights I have; I create what comes to me, and it reaches those it is meant to mobilise. Artists with integrity have the capacity to serve as conduits and chalices for something greater than the egoistic self, by representing more than just their own limited agenda. True art doesn't sway to trends or wait for appraisals or red dots at galleries to find articulation, it is truth that self-manifests when the creative is willing to make room for the objective from a space of de-cluttered personal awareness. Art can potentially motivate the masses to feel greater empathy for aspects of life that were not even on their peripheral understanding but that can only happen if the artist is authentically available to the masses, and the whole. I may strategise the channels of dissemination, discern the target demographic and determine the benchmarks of a campaign or op-ed before launching it, but creative expression finds me, I don't will it or force it. Art, when it is honest, has a larger impact on shaping cultural consciousness than we have ways to measure it. In this way, it is qualitative and long term. My effort is always to combine the arts with marketing metrics so my clients or collaborators can have some quantitative data on impact, but I frequently receive unexpected feedback on how my work has persuaded someone to care, and it is seldom in the manner I had framed it. 🐘

*Read more about Asher and her work in our special edition of Sanctuary Asia prepared for WILD11 in Jaipur... in our April 2020 issue!*