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Behind the Curtains

Acrylic, mixed media

My installation explores the domestication of wild animals. Particularly, the American obsession with exotic cats like tigers and lions. I spent most of my freshman year volunteering at Zoo Atlanta (AZA). My job was to educate the guests on the animals and conservation efforts. I spent a large portion of my time at the big cat exhibits. My experience at an AZA-accredited zoo gave me an interesting perspective on ethical conservation.

The inspiration for this piece came from the popular Netflix documentary “Tiger King.” I wanted to explore the psychology behind the keeping of exotic animals as pets. It takes a certain type of person to want to see a big cat in a small cage. In America there are thousands of people who profit from trapping large animals. The Tiger and Lion are the main focus of this piece because these species are the “stars” at many roadside zoos. A roadside zoo is unaccredited and animals are subjected to abusive conditions. In a historical sense, many big cat species are symbolic of royalty and fierceness. These fierce animals are being subjected to the treatment of a general house cat. When people attempt to domesticate wild animals, they are deprived of their ability to exhibit natural behaviors. The animals are put in an environment that they do not belong in and become a danger to anyone in close proximity.

My piece visually takes the appearance of the generic home, filled with generic things, lamps, curtains, with the exception of a tiger or two. I used fabric for my curtains and painted the tiger with acrylic paint. Throughout this process I changed my direction many times and my ideas developed over time.

Big Cats are Not Your Pet



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What motivates a person to domesticate a wild animal and what are the implications? It is some people's fantasy to be the owner of exotic animals such as tigers, lions, and elephants. These animals can be dangerous to humans, yet people want to cage them in their backyards. This essay will explore the motivations of owning an undomesticated animal and how this can be dangerous for both parties involved.

I am drawn to this topic for a multitude of reasons. My initial interest came from my experience as a volunteer at Zoo Atlanta. In my freshman year of high school, I volunteered at Zoo Atlanta almost every weekend. Up until the pandemic hit, I had worked a total of 135 hours in less than a year. As a teen volunteer, my job was to be an interpreter, which basically meant educating the guests about certain animals. I would stand outside of their exhibits and talk to anyone who walked by. I spent a portion of my time interpreting at the tiger, clouded leopard, or lion exhibits. These were my favorite spots to interpret because I simply enjoyed talking about these animals. Before becoming a volunteer, I had to go through a week-long training where I was educated on many of the species at the zoo and the zoo's mission. My basic knowledge and understanding of big cats came from the background that I learned at training. When I started researching my topic I kept thinking back to my time as a volunteer and it allowed me to have an interesting perspective. My whole job was to preach about animal conservation and the ethical way to do that. To explore more perspectives on my topic, I began watching the documentary "Tiger King." The strange behavior of the people involved made me even more eager to research the practice of keeping exotic animals as pets. I was able to recognize the clear mistreatment and lack of knowledge that the owners of these wild cats had. Just by having a basic understanding of the species, it was hard for me to watch them living in these horrible conditions. It is difficult to believe these "animal

lovers” would not have sympathy for their own animals. Watching this show raised several questions for me. When it comes to people who claim to be animal lovers, what drives them to abuse them and endanger the animals and the people around them? How does the domestication of big cats affect their species?

The Documentary “Tiger King” follows a man named Joe Exotic who operated the Greater Wynnewood Exotic Animal Park in Oklahoma. The show highlights many other zoo owners but for the purpose of this paper I will focus on the self-proclaimed “Tiger King.” Exotic was a collector and breeder of big cats. He profited from breeding and selling these animals as well as charging guests for photos and up-close time with the animals. Exotic’s incentive to keep his park alive was clear to me. While initially, his intentions may have come from a pure fascination with animals that quickly changed when the power began to get to his head. In an interview, Exotic explained that he wants people to see him with these tigers and envy him. He wants the public to envy his power and closeness to these animals. The tigers and lions were his sources of attention. Exotic craves fame and realized it was achievable through the animals.

There are many psychological factors that give people motives to own exotic animals. Tigers and lions in a historic sense have been known to symbolize nobility and fierceness. These animals are seen as a status symbol as many have been depicted next to royalty. Many portraits of royalty depict large cats by their side. Royal crests are made up of drawings of lions connecting the species to a powerful status. In a more modern sense, owning a tiger serves the same purpose as owning a sports car— to show off. It is clear that Joe Exotic has a hunger for the spotlight and being in control of these animals is what makes him feel deserving of the title “King.”

People like Joe Exotic feel that they are helping conservation because they are breeding the animals. This is a common misconception amongst private owners. Many justify ownership of

big cats because of their endangered status. Personal ownership and domestication of big cats is not helpful to the conservation of their species. When an animal is out of a natural environment and treated like a pet, it cannot benefit its ecosystem. There are proper ways of conservation in captivity but these roadside zoos only focus on profit.

Many private owners use conservation as an excuse to speed breed big cats. Speed breeding is the act of mating tigers and immediately domesticating the cubs. It is very similar to a puppy mill. Tigers are most valuable to these parks when they are cubs. These parks profit off of the cubs by charging people to take selfies with them or pet them. Attempting to domesticate these animals completely takes away from the purpose of conservation. Within a year tiger cubs will grow hundreds of pounds and develop canine teeth. A playful bite from a cub could be fatal to a human. What happens to these cubs after they outgrow profit is varied. Once a tiger has aged to mature size they are rendered almost useless to roadside zoos. Many are sold off or even rumored to be euthanized if the park does not have enough space.

The G.W. Zoo privately owned a total of 230 lions and tigers. These animals were subjected to abusive conditions. There are an estimated 5,000 tigers in the US that are being held in captivity. However, only 3,900 tigers remain in the wild. About 98% of wild cats die within two years of being taken into captivity. Tigers are predatory animals that weigh around 600 pounds and can reach up to 11 feet in length. Tigers are an extremely territorial species and in the wild a male tiger's territory covers about 40 miles while females cover about 7 miles. They are solitary animals and the only time they would come in contact with one another is for mating purposes. This fact alone is enough to recognize abuse in these private zoos. At the G.W. Zoo, many tigers are confined to the same small space. The cats were piled into the cages with little to no room. When they feel their territory is being invaded, tigers can be triggered to fight or even kill one another.

These are not healthy living conditions for an adult tiger. Animals also require enrichment to maintain their well-being. They need to be able to play, climb, and partake in natural behaviors or else they will become bored which often leads to depression. The reason so many animals in captivity suffer from depression is because of their lack of enrichment and stimulation.

To make conditions worse, many tigers at roadside zoos become malnourished or eat meats that are harmful to their system. An adult tiger can eat 88 pounds of meat at once. Behind the scenes footage of the G.W. Zoos shows where their meat is supplied from. Exotic would take expired meat from Walmart and use that to feed the cats. Rotting meat was the animal's main source of protein. Exotic would also shoot horses or cows and feed their remains to the tigers. Saving money was more of a priority than actually providing his animals with proper nutrition. These so-called "animal lovers" are very quick to ignore an animal's natural needs.

One would think that it is common sense that a large, predatory, solitary wild animal would not make a good pet, but thousands of tigers and lions are living in people's backyards. The keeping of a wild animal in a neighborhood setting is abusive towards the animal and dangerous for civilians. Tigers and big cats often turn against their long-time trainers or owners. A tiger can easily fatally injure a human. A staff member at the G.W. Zoo which was owned by Joe Exotic, had their arm ripped off by a tiger when trying to feed. The victim had to have their arm amputated as a result of the accident. Even the great "king" of tigers Joe Exotic is seen being dragged by his foot by a tiger. No matter how young a tiger is domesticated, you can never get rid of animal instincts.

There are many instances where tigers have escaped from their cages and killed civilians. Tigers are very difficult to keep contained because of their ability to swim, jump, and climb. They have been known to find a way to escape their "tiger-proof" enclosures one way or another. When

these animals are let loose they are often killed by police in concern for public safety. Many other species of exotic pets have been known to escape into the wild and threaten the ecosystem. Pythons that were being kept as pets have been set loose into the everglades and are now threatening the populations of native species. As more people import exotic animals the issue will only continue to get worse.

The importation of exotic pets can also threaten the health of the US population. Humans can contract various diseases from wild animals. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 75% of infectious pathogens are Zoonotic. A Zoonotic disease is an infection that is transmitted from animals to humans. The displacement of these animals can also cause harm to other species and disrupt ecosystems. The outbreak of monkeypox in the US is an example of how harmful proximity to wild animals can be. Due to close contact with prairie dogs that were being sold as pets, humans (mainly children) developed monkeypox. The viral disease was being spread amongst rodents and primates in rainforest areas. The risk of infection and injury outweighs the benefits of importing wild animals.

Animals can also develop viruses from humans. During the COVID-19 outbreak, many tigers and big cats tested positive for COVID-19. Even after it was proven that tigers could get COVID-19 from humans, The G.W. Zoo and many other roadside zoos remained open, disregarding the public safety of their guests and the health of the animals. In the second season of the documentary "Tiger King," footage was shown of people coming in close contact with tigers and continuing to play with the cubs. These animals do not have a choice to protect their health and should not be subjected to hazardous conditions.

The majority of states in the US have restrictions on the ownership of exotic animals. 35 states have a complete ban on the ownership of big cats and 21 states have a ban on dangerous

pets. Even with these restrictions, there is still a large market for the trade of big cats and other exotic animals. In recent years there has been more of a push to pass the Big Cat Safety Act. This bill would enforce strict regulations on the trade of big cats. It would specifically target the possession and exhibition of big cats to prevent their use for public entertainment. Zoos and sanctuaries would be exempt from this act and so would people who already own these animals. In late 2020 the bill passed the House of Representatives and has been acted upon by many law enforcement officers.

I think that it is important to understand the difference between a “good vs bad” zoo. There are a few easy signifiers of an ethical zoo. An ethical zoo has realistic enclosures for its animals. They are not confined to small cages and their enclosure is similar to their native habitat. The enclosures are also very large, especially for the bigger animals. There is plenty of space for the animals to roam and explore. The animals are supplied with enrichment to keep them entertained. Larger animals especially require toys and games to keep their minds sharp.

For tigers to have the proper care, they should be surrounded by educated zoologists. Conservations and zoos that are AZA-accredited follow strict regulations to give their tigers proper care. The AZA is the association of zoos and aquariums which regulates many zoos across the US. Proper zoos led by educated zoologists help to conserve tiger species, specifically the Sumatran tigers, who are critically endangered. Tigers at the G.W. zoo are seen being given medical attention from uneducated staff. Joe Exotic allowed just about anyone to give their tigers medicine which is very dangerous to the animals.

A huge difference between roadside zoos and nonprofits is their contributions to conservation. Many animals at ethical zoos are a part of breeding programs where the goal is not to domesticate the cubs. Purposeful breeding takes place that is supported by thorough research.

Ethical zoos will match up their animals based on genetic history and compatibility. Animals are often transported to other zoos where they can be introduced to their possible mate. Zoologists have agreed that taking animals out of the wild is unacceptable unless it is an animal that is in great need of rehabilitation. Zoologists have been working on reintroduction programs in order to help integrate animals back into the wild. The mission of an ethical zoo is to benefit the animals and help their species prosper.

Tigers who live at accredited zoos are not treated like pets. A good zoo has a no-contact policy that prohibits people from coming in contact with the animals including the zookeepers. There are some exceptions to this rule. Petting zoos filled with goats and sheep are a safer way for people to come in contact with animals. Many zoos often have reptile showings in which a zookeeper is handling the animal. Under supervision turtles and snakes are able to be pet by guests. The keepers will direct guests to use a “2 finger touch” and direct them to where the animal can be pet. These are all safe examples of contact between the public and animals. At many roadside zoos, there is no policy against contact with animals. Staff members will cuddle and play with large cats as if they were pets. This is harmful to the animal as well as very dangerous for humans.

Research plays a huge role in ethical zoos. Although still in captivity these tigers can be researched and studied by professionals. Zoos help to spread awareness for the conservation of big cat species. Zoos are established not just for entertainment but for public education. They allow for people to reconnect with nature and learn more about conservation efforts and how they can contribute. Joe Exotic claims that his zoo is educating the public and getting people to care about the animals. His methods of education include handing a baby tiger to them. While this will make people more sympathetic towards the animals they are probably going to be more inclined to keep one as a pet. Exotic is encouraging abusive behavior towards animals and is not qualified to

educate the public. The best way for a guest at a zoo to be educated about the animals and conservation is to speak to a zoologist who has experience with conservation efforts.

Additional aspects of ethical zoos include barriers between the public and the animals. These barriers are put in place for the safety of people and animals. Big cats are not treated like pets and are not expected to do tricks. Animals are handled by zoologists, scientists, and veterinarians. Ethical zoos prioritize the wellbeing of their animals, education, and conservation. It is also important to look at who is running these zoos. Most ethical zoos are non-profits that are run by a board of directors or are government-run. Road side zoos encourage unethical exploitation of animals for profit.

Finally, Big cats are not appropriate companions for humans. Having a pet should not only benefit humans but be beneficial and healthy to the animal. Wild animals are exactly what they are named: wild, not pets. If companionship is truly what a person is looking for they can find it in a domesticated animal like a dog or cat.

Big cat conservation is incredibly important for our ecosystem but that does not mean it is okay to keep them in the backyard. Bringing awareness to this cause is crucial to getting the Big Cat Safety Act passed and preventing abuse of these animals. While people like Joe Exotic make for captivating TV, they cannot be allowed to mistreat animals and their behavior should not be allowed without consequence. Tigers and other big cats should not be subjected to domestication as it is unhealthy for the animal and could be fatally dangerous for humans. Big cats are not your pets.

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