



When Elephants Paint: The Quest of Two Russian Artists to Save the Elephants of Thailand

Komar & Melamid, Mia Fineman

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For centuries elephants in Thailand have been revered as a national symbol, worshiped as living gods and employed as beasts of burden in the nation's thriving timber industry. But when logging was banned in Thailand in 1990, these noble animals fell on hard times. Reduced to performing tricks for tourists by day and illegal heavy labor by night, Thailand's elephants were exhausted, malnourished, and dying in alarming numbers.

Hearing of their plight, a pair of unlikely heroes came to the rescue, Wildly eccentric Russian emigre artists Vitally Komar and Alexander Melamid devised a brilliant scheme: to create the world's first quadruped occupational retraining program—a network of art schools for unemployed elephants. Taking a cue from elephant trainers in a number of American zoos, Komar and Melamid taught the animals to hold brushes in their trunks and apply paint to canvas. And the results were astonishing: Not only did the elephants' paintings closely resemble the expansive gestural work of such Abstract Expressionist artists as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline, but the pachyderm painters also began to develop clearly distinct regional styles—lyrical and expressive in the northern Thai school, subtle and atmospheric in the east, dynamic and angst ridden in the central school.

Sanctioned by the World Wildlife Fund, the Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project has been a remarkable success; paintings by some of the most talented elephant artists have been auctioned at Christie's for thousands of dollars, generating funds to provide proper care for the elephants and support for their trainers.

When Elephants Paint follows Komar and Melamid and their eclectic entourage through Thailand's lush jungles and steaming cities, describing the odd encounters and creative cajoling that helped turn this seemingly whimsical idea into a concrete, beneficial reality. Illustrated with more than 100 photographs, including actual elephant paintings, this riotously funny and provocative book offers a valuable lesson in wildlife conservation and startling revelations about the nature of art itself.

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