

Where the wild things are

Words by **Kate Mikhail** Photos by **Greg Williams** Downloaded from www.ollysuzi.com

What would an anaconda paint given a blank canvas?

And what are the artistic sensibilities of a Great White Shark? Art duo Olly & Suzi's unique animal 'collaborations' show we are all wild at art



Croc body print, Australia 1999

'You have to drug crocs,' Olly is explaining matter-of-factly, as someone who's been there done that, 'as the only way you can tell their sex is through a slit on the underside. You have to put your hand in there and if you pull something out it's a boy, and if you don't it's a girl.' It's at this point that Olly & Suzi are able to get their paintbrushes out, dab on a bit of paint and press the said croc belly on to a piece of paper: *Croc Body Print*, Australia, 1999.

Olly Williams and Suzi Winstanley have been working together for 14 years, ever since they met at St Martins School of Art on a printmaking course. Artistically, they come as a package: you can't get Olly without Suzi. What's more, they paint 'hand over hand' as they call it, on the same canvas at the same time. One of them might start with an eye and that will dictate the scale. 'It does sometimes go horribly wrong,' says Suzi, 'and then we'll have an argument, but

that doesn't happen very often.'

Wild animals are their thing: they've painted polar bears at the North Pole, tigers in Nepal and white sharks in South Africa. For the sharks, they were lowered into freezing water in a small metal and chain cage, pushing paints into the paper with their fingers, sticks and brushes, while the sharks circled them, occasionally sticking inquisitive noses through the chains at the top of the cages or charging at them, only to swerve away at the last moment.

'The most authentic form of interaction we have with the animals is where we aim to just coexist with them on their terms and in their environment,' says Olly. 'A tiger in a zoo moves in a very different way to one in the wild, and what we wanted to capture was the essence of the wild animal. Respecting the animals is critical to what we are about as artists,'

he stresses, 'and when we do have physical contact with them we always work very closely with field conservationists who are there to save an endangered species and its habitat.'

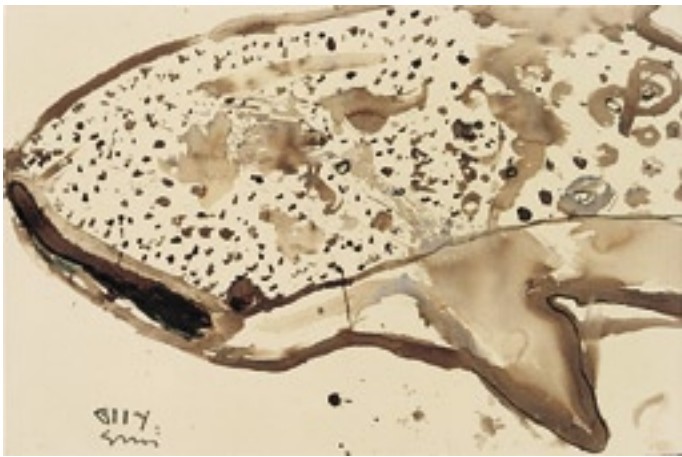
The idea is also to get the animals to interact with the work, ideally leaving some kind of mark, and the end 'performance' is recorded on film by Olly's brother, Greg, who photographed the sharks from an adjacent cage. 'This was one of the hardest shoots to do,' Greg says, 'as it was under water while the sharks were literally attacking the cages. The swell is knocking you all over the place, it is very cold, and you are petrified.'

Some animals are easy to work with. Cheetahs, for example, are naturally inquisitive and couldn't resist circling a picture of themselves. Others have to be tempted: a mixture of bait and blood was used to lure one shark to the surface

to inspect a canvas. *Shark Bite*, 1997, by Greg Williams, captures the moment when a white shark bit the corner off a work which it mistook for a wounded seal. It spat it out soon after.

But sometimes the animals don't play ball. 'One rhino ate the whole thing,' recalls Olly, 'but then they can eat anything, including Coke cans.' And another time a leopard dragged the picture away and tore it to pieces.

Trackers, scientists and other experts are invaluable, as it is only through their projects that Olly & Suzi get access to the animals, particularly those which have to be temporarily trapped or drugged. The salt-water crocs in northern Australia are a highly endangered species and were drugged while scientists carried out genetic and gender tests, and checked for disease before translocating them in a massive programme to conserve the species.



Whale shark painting, Galapagos 2000



Anaconda, Venezuela, 2000



Red croc, Green croc, Northern Australia, 1999



Olly & Suzi painting a white wolf on Ellesmere Island, 1998

'The key element in our work is the relationship between the art and the science,' stresses Olly. For their anaconda paintings, they worked closely with local conservationists at a water table in Venezuelan marshland where anacondas were being relocated from muddy

areas to those with lots of water. 'They would grab them and put a v-shaped stick over the head,' explains Olly, 'then put a sock over it, test it and put a chip in it to track it. While they were doing that and the head was safe, we managed to paint the underbelly in a green

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water-based non-toxic paint.' Olly & Suzi then released the anacondas into their new watery home, making sure they slithered across their canvases on the way.

When they first started out, they would travel for up to eight months a year. But they

have slowed the pace in the past few years due to family commitments. Olly has a young baby and Suzi has a 20-month-old daughter by Damon Albarn called Missy, who travelled with them on their most recent trip to Nepal in search of giant ants and elephants.



They use all manner of 'paint' materials such as ink, blood and water to 'heighten the chance element'

Olly & Suzi, who share a passion for the work of David Hockney and Joseph Beuys, use cream paper for their paintings because of its ability to 'take an imprint' from what they call a 'predatory' environment, unlike canvas, which Olly describes as 'more resilient' and unable to 'take a trace'. They use all manner of 'paint' materials, including acrylic, natural pigments, ink and blood, and often a generous dousing of water to 'heighten the chance element'.

They work fast out of necessity, wild animals being so unpredictable, and the end results can have that rushed, energised feel of capturing a moment in time. 'They are very quick and simple,' says Suzi. 'A lot of them are just lines, so we tend to call them drawings rather than paintings.' Their brush strokes are so intertwined that after a few days they can't tell their own work apart. 'It doesn't matter who did what,' insists Suzi, 'we're just trying to cre-

ate a really strong image. I have an ego, but I don't care if he did the pink bit, which is the nice bit.'

They've had surprisingly few hair-raising moments. There was the time under water with the sharks when Olly's weight belt got caught in the top of the cage, leaving him 'teetering on the brink of falling into the water' as the sharks advanced, which he describes merely as 'quite frightening'. And then there was the time when a polar bear charged, forcing them to set off a flash to scare it off. But generally, as Suzi says, they are not 'gung ho' and don't take unnecessary risks.

On a three-week trip, they expect to knock out about five large paintings, five medium-sized ones and 10 drawings, which they will edit down to about 10 works once they get home. In the early days, they had to rely on cash from odd jobs to subsidise sponsorship deals, but now with drawings selling for

£800 and paintings anything from £2,000 to £10,000, they are making a decent return.

Olly gets annoyed when people ask him if he doesn't think they are 'limiting themselves' by only working with animals. He says he can't imagine a life without regular trips to the most untouched corners of the earth, as there's always more to see and learn.

'We went to the Amazon in search of these tarantulas which are up to 12in in diameter,' he recalls. 'We

thought we've come all this way just to see a tarantula, but we tracked them and it was amazing. This guy had long bits of twig which he put into holes in the ground and kept feeding in and out, and then the tarantulas would come flying out after it. At night they sit in the entrance of the holes, like Mediterranean old ladies sitting on their front doorsteps. There were thousands and thousands and thousands of spiders. We were bored with them on about day two, there were so many of them.'

