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REBECCA TAYLOR:

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The Cat's Meow

By Cheryl Krementz

The knitted wildcat pelts of textile artist Ruth Marshall are a big-game changer.



Knitter and cat, inextricably linked by a bat-tle ball of yarn. But the feline friends that most interest Ruth Marshall are decidedly bigger than housecats.

Marshall, a textile artist with a fine-arts back-ground, creates life-size knitted wildcat pelts—ocelots, jaguars, leopards, and her current focus, tigers—meticulously charting out each spot, stripe and marking so that every piece of art is as individual as every wild animal. Her affinity for and interest in these majestic crea-tures were piqued during her fourteen-year stint as an exhibit sculptor and fabricator at

the Wildlife Conservation Society park better known as the Bronx Zoo.

“For many years I’d struggled with ways to represent the animals that wasn’t kitschy,” explains Marshall. “A lot of animal art out there is romantic and nostalgic and doesn’t quite have that fine-art edge I was looking for.” After rendering sculptural antlers and gorilla hands in resin, she turned to cat pelts. “As I started studying the pelts, I realized that their multicolored spots and geometry could be interpreted in knitting,” a craft she had

recently rediscovered, having learned it—and dropped it— as a child growing up in Melbourne, Australia.

Marshall begins her peltmaking process with the animals’ markings, recording spots and stripes straight from the source whenever possible, as was the case with a snow leopard at the zoo, “a pretty diva” who would retreat to her den every time she saw Marshall coming. More recently, Marshall had the opportunity to go backstage at New York’s famed American Museum of Natural History, which has an extensive pelt collection, and study up close a male tiger pelt that measures 10 feet long and 6 feet wide. “It took me a solid week of drawing to make sure all of his stripes were correct, in proportion to other marks around them,” she says. After completing her drawings, Marshall begins charting, which can take three weeks or more. And then the knitting starts.

Knitting a full-size pelt can be a months-long process; the female tiger known as Renee spent eight weeks on the needles. Marshall employs intarsia and Fair Isle techniques to get the effect of the marking variations just right. “I’ve always approached artwork from a craft point of view,” she explains. “I’m interested in the process, the hand, the artmaking, and in

having that show somehow.” Smaller cats, like those in her ocelot series, were knit with sock yarn on size 2 needles. Lion Brand is currently sponsoring Marshall’s tiger series, providing her with worsted-weight wool that she knits on size 7 metal circulars. While she takes a bit of artistic license with color—“nature can be very hard to match”—the lifelike results catch many viewers by surprise.

“From a distance, people think they’re real; then they get closer and realize, ‘Oh, they’re hand-knit!’” Marshall says. “People relate to the knitting through fashion and they immediately relate to the animal—‘They look so real; these cats are beautiful.’ That leads them to thinking about what happens to these animals when they are poached for their skin, which is cut off their bodies and stretched out on sticks to dry. It’s completely unacceptable to treat an endangered species like that. So one of the mes-sages behind my work is to show the struggle to conserve these species. I want to make people understand that it’s not cool to display parts of an animal in their homes. These animals need land and habitat and to be left alone to survive.”

Keep up with Marshall’s latest work at RuthMarshall.com.

Marshall’s jaguar, leopard, snow leopard and tiger cub “pelts” (from left). Before tackling wildcats, Marshall knit every type of coral snake (69 in all; 3 shown below) over the course of six months.

PHOTOGRAPH OF RUTH MARSHALL BY MAJIA KIHLESTEDT. ALL OTHERS COURTESY OF RUTH MARSHALL



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