

## **Making Art, Motivating Change**

### **A MAHB Dialogue with National Geographic Creative Conservationist Asher Jay**



Sharing our world | Image courtesy of the author

*“Art has a unique power to transcend differences and connect with people on a visceral level – and compel action.”*

Asher Jay

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**Geoff Holland - You began your work life as a designer/artist in the fashion industry. What motivated you to evolve to use your creative gifts in service to nature and the environment?**

*Asher Jay* - I strongly believe what you read in your formative years comes to shape you for the rest of your life. An impressionable mind should be nurtured to cultivate and harbor sensitivity for life, and thanks to David Attenborough’s “Life on Earth,” “Living Planet” and “Trials of Life,” I found myself falling helplessly in love with the wild world. These three tomes along with “Last Chance to See” by Douglas Adams and Gerald Durrell’s “The Garden of the Gods” and “Birds, Beasts and Relatives” transformed my understanding of my place in the world. I felt a sense of belonging, interdependence and awe for the natural world. This recognition of profound connection to life on earth stayed with me. It became a part of my core identity, and surfaced again when I was trying to find my place on Seventh Avenue. The BP oil spill catalyzed the

activation of this inherent part of me. I felt that my contribution would no longer be as a designer in the fashion industry but as a communicator of the truth of our times through interdisciplinary ideas, embedded in the visual arts. I felt inspired to help enhance the voice of the unheard. I wanted to hold those who prioritize the parts over the whole accountable to their sense of wholeness within. The reason our external world is in a state of disconnection, disharmony and destruction, is because we are lost within our own cores, oblivious of our place in this world, and our sense of connection to the richly intricate, interlaced tapestry of life. I had no choice but to answer my inner calling, to align whom I was and what I had to offer with the living planet and its inimitable, dynamic, orchestra of untamed, wondrously alien calls, that are getting silenced one instrument at a time due to human ignorance. I could not continue to be frivolously engaged from the sidelines when I could be in the field, confronting reality, addressing the concerns of our time, and empowering people to approach life from an inclusive perspective. It's like Albert Einstein said, "**Those Who Have The Privilege To Know Have The Duty To Act.**"

**GH - Humanity seems to be driving a perfect storm of unprecedented, existential threats to life on Earth. Which of these threats concerns you the most?**

*AJ* - The existential threat we pose most is to our own selves, due to a lack of evolution in our own awareness of consciousness. We keep circling the drain in cycles instead of shifting out of the very paradigm of consciousness that is simply not serving our individual and thus collective welfare. The book I would most recommend to everyone and their cousin is Eckhart Tolle's "A New Earth." As Albert Einstein said, "No **problem** can be **solved** from the **same level of consciousness** that created it."

We cannot be as we have self-servingly been doing business as usual and still expect for the external world to evidence something different from what it has been a downward spiral of denudation, and devastation. We need to matriculate past this paradigm of remorse and ruins.

Art and writing can breathe new life into a hackneyed narrative arc, while keeping the grey areas alive. The human mind has a way of separating situations and individuals into good and evil, vilifying those who commit a "wrong" and pitting them against the crusaders who fight the good fight, but more often than not, issues are more complicated than that. There are more variables to address and it is seldom a 'one off' incident. Take Cecil the Lion, everyone got riled up about him, but in a week he quickly got pushed to the backburners of public interest. Events tend to trend which trivializes their significance, but they are seldom truly assimilated deeply enough to catalyze the shift needed to prevent its recurrence. The Exxon Valdez spill is still a problem, the oil hasn't gone away in all these years, the animals in that ecosystem have forever been impacted, and friends of mine working on the ground in Alaska assert you can still smell the gasoline beneath the shore side rocks. The same is true of the BP Maconda spill, and Haiti's

reconstruction efforts. They earn a hashtag but fail to inspire radical and holistic change in our approach. People just like being entertained by sensationalized stories, and enjoy the feel good factor of doing a quick call to action, and moving on to the next thing. The engagement seldom results in the culmination of a long haul solution. We are all too distracted by the sheer volume of choices when it comes to causes and tragedies that we buy into based on PR, and not because they are a priority. Environmental degradation compromises our continued survival and health. It makes us vulnerable to the compounding impact of volatile externalities as a collective, but why think about that, when business as usual guarantees a pay-check that you can donate ten dollars from toward a charity of your choice as you check out at your local coffee shop or health food store? We are creatures of habit, and it is convenient to think, 'we have been okay thus far, we'll be okay going forward because innovative technology will take care of the rest.' We fail to recognize that our incomplete inner fabric can never innovate a complete system, process, product or service, because we fail to comprehend our "sense of place in the family of things. When we are a blatant mess within, everything we give rise to will result in messy outcomes as well.

I simply have to recite Mary Oliver's poem entitled *Wild Geese* here. It is a favorite of mine, and it stirs my soul deeply every time I immerse myself into its luscious depths.

*You do not have to be good.*

*You do not have to walk on your knees*

*For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.*

*You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.*

*Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.*

*Meanwhile the world goes on.*

*Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.*

*Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.*

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

**GH - The 19<sup>th</sup> Century playwright/raconteur Oscar Wilde's most enduring quote is "Life imitates art, much more than art imitates life." Why are artists so critical to the process of cultural advancement?**

*AJ* - Not to disparage his sentiment, but I disagree with Oscar Wilde entirely. I think human constructs such as social norms and culture imitate art more than art imitates them, because the artist's effort to break out of or challenge the status quo, but life itself does not imitate art. To believe that underscores human hubris. 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 harbors. In this vein, I have two T.S. Elliot quotes 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; wild is where we come from, wild is who we are, and wild 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 its magic with passionate conviction. If 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 the individuals who comprise society accountable. 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 unshakeable need to recognize 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 a viewers 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, bleak or bright, what we can do is take responsibility for the moment at hand, and do better than we have in moments past.

Artists should also take it upon themselves to encourage people to inhabit the place and time that is unfolding "NOW." Our collective experience of the world through our digital portals, inhibits us from ever being present. No one wants to be a part of what is happening here and

now; everyone is desperate to escape it, one way or another, through emotional opiates, indulging experiences or by constantly anticipating what comes next. No one wants to enjoy the breath being drawn because it's far too boring to simply "be". The dissonance arises because, while we have the illusion of the future tense to project and cling to, the reality of life, of existence, is that it is happening in the moment at hand, and 99% of life on earth falls victim to the state of time that we abandon and sacrifice consistently, which is "now."

*For last year's words belong to last year's language... and next year's words await another voice – T.S. Eliot.*

Trying to 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 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 have 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 mobilize. 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 strategize 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 oriented. I effort 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.

**GH - Is the creative use of art an important element in educating and inspiring children?**

AJ - It can imbue us with hope and fuel our imagination. When I first began illustrating for conservation, Her Deepness, Sylvia Earle told me, "A picture may be worth a thousand words,

but an artwork like yours is worth a thousand pictures. This is your talent and path, don't give it up." In light of what she said, I let my work speak for itself. Art can condense and simplify complex narratives into timeless dynamic snapshot insights into both the illuminated and shadowed aspects of being human.

Art, to me, is the nexus between truth, emotion and thought expressed in its rawest, purest, most vulnerable form. It is sensual, sensorial, and subjective, a medium you just dive in to and experience for yourself, rather like a poem. Art does not need to be figured out, it just needs to be consumed in its entirety, so it can reach you as only it can. Let your cerebral palate be tickled by the myriad flavors it sprinkles across your mind, heart and soul. I find art offers the unworked fragments of my subconscious freedom of articulation and like a decanter it helps my innermost workings find the space to breathe and be. It incites lateral associations and interwoven, multifaceted problem solving. Art should be an imperative part of a child's education, and it will undoubtedly shape their incipient minds, hearts and souls. I don't think art is taught in a manner that empowers children. I don't think people who teach art, often understand its greater impacts and nuances. There is a lot that can be imparted through its conduit, it should be filter through which all information is imparted to the youth, not a silo, fringe subject that only those predisposed to 'drawing realistic representations or interpretations of the world' are cheered on to pursue. It's not a talent, or a skill; it is a medium through which all messaging can and should be relayed as it makes things more compelling, intrinsic and relatable. Science, policy, law, and business everything can and should be taught through the medium of art and design. It would result in a better world where things are more emotionally, spiritually, physically and intellectually intuitive, harmoniously resolved and multi-dimensionally considered.

**GH - How did you become associated with National Geographic and how has this association impacted your career and life?**

*AJ* - I gave a talk at the Wild 10 congress. I was raw, passionate, and utterly unraveled by the material I was conveying. I basically cried through my own talk while speaking about the apathy and avarice that resulting in the continual slaughter of forest elephants in western Africa. I didn't mean to come undone, but the material was still new to me and I was deeply affected by it. I ended the talk with [this poem I wrote](#), which resonated profoundly with the audience. To date, I cannot say these words without welling up, because they poured through from the deepest recesses of my being.

In the end it was my authenticity and vulnerability that brought the crowd to their feet in applause, and encouraged the VP of National Geographic back then to approach me after my talk to come and give a similar presentation to their staff in Washington. Right after I did so, I had the head of public speaking events come up to me and tell me they were going to make me

a part of the family. Shortly thereafter I received an email that initially felt like it was from a Nigerian Prince, claiming I was inducted as an Emerging Explorer. Being associated with fellow explorers and with this legacy brand has given a massive media platform to amplify my outreach and impact.

**GH - You write that your singular purpose is to incite global action on behalf of wildlife conservation. Should nature and animals have rights, and what kind of rights should they have?**

*AJ* - Yes. Absolutely. Without a doubt or further consideration. When we wake up to the truth that we are 'a part of' not 'apart from' nature, we will afford life the same rights, value, understanding, awareness and truth that we afford ourselves. This cannot be intellectualized but born of a genuine rise in our consciousness. The monkey mind that gave rise to the current flawed, cradle to grave, disconnected paradigm can never give rise to anything more productive and closed loop. We need to first get over our egos, our anthropocentric view of life (which frankly is as outdated as thinking the sun revolves around the earth), and come to terms with our insignificance. We are not the rulers of the universe or the masters of our world. We need to learn a massive lesson in humility about what it means to belong and be, before we are each able to contribute more effectively to the whole. We do not apprehend participation, because we exert ignorant control. We coerce, we take, we exploit, and we are exclusive, entirely motivated by divisions, hierarchies and separations. We cannot just skip over from that sort of aggressive, animalistic, instinctive mentality to a more intuitive, ascended modality of peace, prosperity and harmonious coexistence, something has to give. Something has to give within our highly conflicted inner landscape.

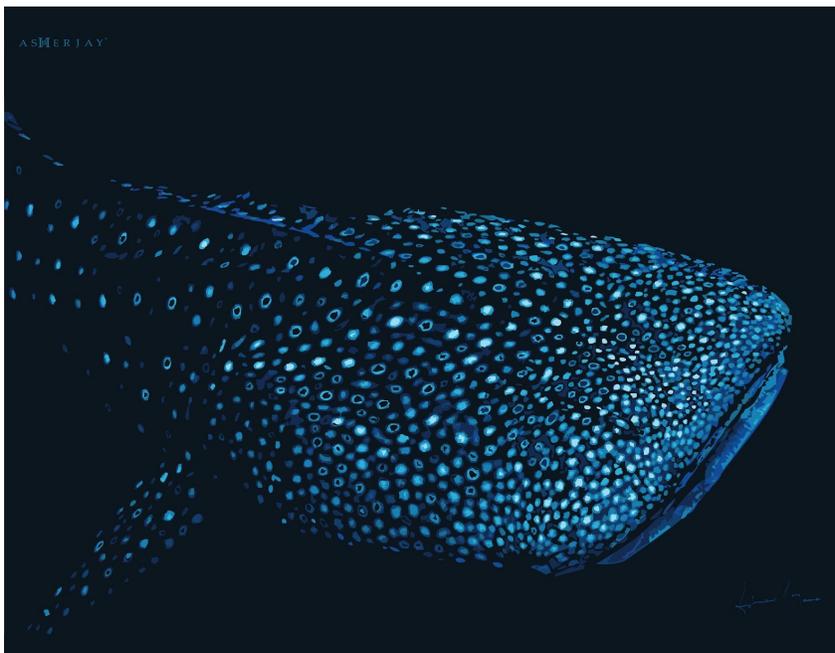
We can barely even come together as a species, caught up ignorantly in endless feuds over differences instead of unity. We squabble antagonistically over skin tone, abstract concepts like borders, the type of anthropomorphized deity or entity we salute, or the way in which we want to be governed, at the cost of our humanity and enlightenment. Look at bipartisan politics, even that is utterly mindless drivel. We are so caught up in exerting our myopia over everyone who disagrees with us, that we fail to consider the obvious- when only one of us wins none of us win. I have come to concede we may be too stupid a species to save, in our cerebrally glorified, spiritually impoverished state of consciousness. Unfortunately the fate of those in the know is tethered to those who are oblivious, so we are all bound to the same end, for better or worse, in sickness and health, richer or poorer, until death claims us all.

**GH - Your graphic art is at the heart of a number of successful media campaigns. Your ['Ivory is NOT Art'](#) campaign decrying elephant poaching is a wonderful example. How was that campaign conceived and what kind of impact has it had on public awareness and the ivory trade?**



AJ - This work builds on the previous effort to [install a billboard in Times Square for a month](#). I created it for a presentation I was doing at the State Department in DC for World Wildlife Day. It had more impact in stirring policy makers to vote in favor of the trophy ban than my getting up there and pontificating facts or statistics they already had access to. Showing an image saves having to say a lot of words. It gets people to the heart of the matter without having to convince them of the ethics, numbers or science around it. At the end, we are creatures of emotion not reason, and what drives our decision-making is how we feel, not what we think. How we feel about an issue or topic is what persuades us to assiduously rally for it. It's not because we think it matters, but we feel it matters.

**GH - You have had some remarkable experiences diving in our oceans, and have spoken with great concern about the millions of tons of human plastic waste that can now be found in even in the deepest, most remote parts of our oceans. What kind of impact is this having on the ocean food chain, and on filter feeders in particular?**



AJ - There is plastic in every living creature, including you. It is ubiquitous and omnipresent. In every fish, in every region of the ocean. In every animal, in every terrestrial habitat. I created a work called "Fallen Night Sky" of a whale shark to portray how it's primary diet as a filter feeder, every time it opened its enormous

mouth, was motor oil and synthetic marine debris. Our greatest legacy isn't going to be anything profound, it is going to be our trash. It's what every generation actually inherits, refuse, ruins and remains. We never saw it as valuable, only a small fraction of us considers how to create cradle to cradle models that hold waste as a valuable commodity. Instead of addressing it head on we found ways to hide it. Hiding the problem prevented us from solving for it. Even now landfills are our greatest cop out. We do not have a waste problem; we have a waste crisis. We have to find a way to value what we consider waste. This is our most pronounced way of being at odds with nature. Nature results in no waste, everything cycles back in to new beginnings. You would think the Lion King song "Circle of Life" would have spelled it out to us as kids so we retained this lesson as we grew up to be CEOs of various brands that result in copious amounts of waste. We fail the circle of life by thinking of it as a supply chain instead of living loop. Tell me, how is it that a whale knows how to poop at locations where the ocean's circulatory system results in upwellings so even its excrement is used to fertilize the next bloom of phytoplankton and we still don't know how to handle our shit?

**GH - How can humans better embody the responsibility we have for restoring and protecting wild, underdeveloped areas of land and oceans as part of any sustainable, life-affirming vision for the future?**



*AJ* – Yes, we are capable of modeling for a future based on hard facts and figures, especially when we have certain legislative controls in place. We make specific assumptions as our foundation, upon which we build the model, but time and again we have failed to be cognizant of the fact that we are limited, and as such incapable of comprehending the complexity of compounding consequences. It doesn't stop us from

trying, but life and nature have a rewarding way of putting us back in our place, and giving us the freedom of acceptance that comes from surrender.

I don't think projecting for a future that hasn't happened yet has ever prepared us for how things have actually unfolded at any given point in our collective history. I try to anchor myself in the realities of our world without impressing my interpretations upon them, which at times is extremely hard, but deep down I recognize that things are the way they are and choosing to

reject, accept, hope for a better tomorrow or surrender to a post-apocalyptic future, will not make this instant any different than it is. You see, how I perceive any aspect of reality only changes that aspect for me, not for others, so in truth, all that my perceptions, ideologies, aspirations and beliefs do, is isolate me from the rest of humanity and life, which honestly accomplishes nothing. It's hard to be in an objective, unified place continually though, but I guess that is at the crux of the human condition. Achieving this true inner balance would fabricate more than a mere vision, it would ensure a life affirming, sustainable way of life.

**GH - How important is it for the world's peoples to embrace their common humanity and see themselves as planetary citizens, as part of the process of shaping a sustainable future? How do you think we can do this?**

AJ - I think it's important to listen to each other and be inclusive of one another before we jump the gun and try to save the world. We are presently incapable of saving our own selves. We need to learn to be tolerant, and give every expressed perspective an unbiased moment of our time, to find ways to make each other feel respected and heard. We need to assimilate instead of destroy that which feels different from us. We need to shift out blame, shame, fear, hate, guilt, loss and victimhood to a more empowered perspective that assumes personal responsibility, acts with integrity, resolves all inner conflict, so it can enable coexistence from a space of peace, truth, honor, kindness, compassion, faith and joy. Also take a moment now to feel awe, go stare at a bird or a bug, look at its inimitable anatomy, colors, patterns, textures, be humble enough to feel awe toward its creative expression of self.

Isn't it extraordinary that we get to share time, space and a common lineage with beings that look so very different from us? We are all different, yet we are irreplaceable articulations of the same source — life.

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Asher Jay is globally celebrated artist and planetary citizen. She has dedicated her life to using her art to elevate wildlife, nature, and the environment. She has been an explorer and creative conservationist for National Geographic since 2011. Her website is [www.asherjay.com](http://www.asherjay.com).

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*The MAHB Dialogues are a monthly Q&A blog series focused on the need to embrace our common planetary citizenship. Each of these Q&As will feature a distinguished author, scientist, or leader offering perspective on how to take care of the only planetary home we have.*

*The [MAHB Blog](#) is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to [joan@mahbonline.org](mailto:joan@mahbonline.org).*