

# wild at art

*Lions and tigers and paintings? Oh my!*



The first time an artist named Tafari was offered a color-laden canvas scented with lavender oil from France, he was in sensory heaven. Sure, he had painted plenty of times before, but never quite like this.

“He just planted his face directly into the paint and started moaning, aahhh,” recalls Columbus-based artist Sharon Dickerson, who helped to facilitate the experience. “It relaxed him. Then he rolled over on his back, and his arms and his legs just flung out. It was amazing.”

Tafari, of course, is no ordinary painter; he is a 5-year-old lion and one of the 270-plus animal residents of Cedarhill Animal Sanctuary in Caledonia, one of the oldest animal sanctuaries in the country. The big cat’s colorful adventure that day was part of a creative initiative aimed at providing mental stimulation to the animals while also helping to raise funds to support the sanctuary’s operations.

As a crowning moment of the past year’s efforts by the kings of the jungle and their tiger and other big cat counterparts, art and animal lovers will come together on

December 1 at the Rosenzweig Arts Center in Columbus for a special opening event kicking off a monthlong exhibition of the cats’ unique creations.

Painting with paws was something that had been happening at Cedarhill on a simplified basis for several years before Dickerson became involved with the program. She first learned about Cedarhill and its big-cat painting activities during the Caledonia Days festival in October of 2021, when a person in a lion costume drew her interest to a booth where the animals’ artwork was on display.

“I’m a blind artist, and I only have a small window of vision in my right eye,” Dickerson explains. “The way I perceive anything is through that window. When I saw those paintings, I put those images together in my mind, and it just fascinated me, how interesting they looked. I immediately wanted to somehow be granted the opportunity and privilege to participate in one of their painting enrichment activities.”

writer **KELLI BOZEMAN**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Artwork by Jala shows bite marks that add to the uniqueness of the piece. Jala creates three pieces of art. The artwork is sold to raise money for the animal sanctuary. OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Nombi, a lioness, created a beautiful copper painting that has been framed. Jala proudly displays one of her pieces.



A conversation with Cedarhill executive director Nancy Gschwendtner that day eventually led to Dickerson being invited out to the facility, which is otherwise closed to the public. “The first time I went out there, I was struck by how peaceful it was,” Dickerson says. “It’s such a special place.”

Dickerson was also struck with inspiration. “I realized that they had a lack of supplies, and I immediately knew I could make it better,” she says. “I wanted to help them expand their offerings and provide different colored paints to the animals that they’ve never seen in nature.”

The artist’s creativity soon resulted in new ideas for the sanctuary’s art projects. She provided larger panels that the big cats could roll around on, and she loaded them with plenty of non-toxic paint in complementary colors. Scents, including Tafari’s soon-to-be-favorite lavender oil, were added to the canvases to attract the cats to stay and play for a while.

“They really get moving in there, and it’s so exciting to see them have so much fun,” Dickerson says. “They jump up, and they make loud noises. It’s such a feel-good thing to watch.”





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A rescued tiger bears the side effects of creating art. Maya shows off her pink paws after working on a piece of art. A framed piece of Jala's is ready to be sold. Jala creates another masterpiece.

The painting activity is a tactile experience that engages the animals' bodies and minds all at once. "They feel the paint on the pads of their paws, and they swipe at it with their faces and their tails," Dickerson explains. "Their bodies are rolling. And I've been told that it stimulates their brains and keeps their senses sharp."

Jala, one of the young lionesses, has even been known to try out her sense of taste during the painting activities. "She will take chunks out of them—and those are some of my favorite paintings," Dickerson says. "The edges are kind of destroyed by teeth marks and giant holes from where she chewed on them."

After witnessing the animals in action, Dickerson knew this was something she wanted to share with others. Over many months as the big cats kept painting, Dickerson began bringing her vision for a public exhibition of their work to life. Soon, plans for the Columbus show and sale started taking shape.

"It's going to be a multimedia experience," Dickerson explains. "My vision and goal was to have something that would be interactive for all people—very family friendly."

The exhibition will offer keepsakes for kids and adults along with some 75 paintings that will be available for purchase. Young lion enthusiasts might pick up a T-shirt or a stuffed animal resembling Tafari. A video will play throughout the show, explaining the sanctuary's history—from its 1990 founding to today—and giving a closer look at the animals in action painting. And each descriptive panel featuring details on the animals will also contain a QR code that will allow visitors to hear the text, accompanied by the sounds of lions roaring or tigers chuffing.

The opening reception will also feature live African music. Later that evening, a ticketed event will take place upstairs with a full concert by the band. Even after the opening, recorded African music will play throughout the month as a soundtrack to the art viewing experience.

As Dickerson's plans for the exhibition solidified, she also kept working on getting the animals' paintings ready for display. After the cats' paint swirls are dry, she applies several layers of varnish. Each painting is then set in a custom frame, the first several of which were created by Dickerson's husband David. Recently, a major sponsor came on board in the form of Columbus frame shop The Grapevine, which offered to frame all of the remaining pictures.

Proceeds from the art sales will help provide additional enrichment activities and overall care for the animal residents at this 25-acre hidden gem in the Golden Triangle region. Though its work may not be as well known among the general public in Mississippi, Cedarhill is held in high esteem in the animal world, having been named one of the best tiger sanctuaries in the country by the nonprofit Tigers in America. In addition to lions and tigers, the animal population here includes cougars, bobcats, horses, dogs, domestic cats, pigs, turtles, exotic birds, and even a donkey.



“We have a little bit of everything,” says sanctuary director Nancy Gschwendtner, who adds that she hopes this exhibition helps to give Cedarhill a moment in the spotlight that results in a meaningful increase in financial support. “What I’d really like to see is Cedarhill’s 15 minutes of fame—just to get our mission out further, to make people more aware that we are here in Mississippi. That’s something to be proud of—having a 30-year-old sanctuary in your community.”

Gschwendtner also notes that she hopes the public comes to realize that all of the sanctuary’s residents are there because of human neglect or human error. “These animals don’t have a voice, and they can’t do anything to change their situation. So we as human beings have to take up their cause,” she says. “I also want people to understand that exotic animals are not pets, because you cannot breed wild out of an animal.”

Though caring for these dangerous animals requires many serious precautions, it has great rewards for the staff members who work here. “They all have their own personalities,” says Dawn Brock, Cedarhill’s general manager. “We have absolutely no contact with the big cats, but they’re our babies. We try to do everything we can to raise awareness and funds to care for them. The most rewarding thing is just being able to give them a better life.”

The exhibition’s opening night celebration will take place December 1 at the Rosenzweig Arts Center, 501 Main St. in Columbus. M



For more details, see [columbus-arts.org](http://columbus-arts.org). For more information on Cedarhill Animal Sanctuary and how to contribute to its work caring for neglected and abandoned animals, visit [cedarhillanimalsanctuary.org](http://cedarhillanimalsanctuary.org).



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