



Rama finishing one of his "finger paints."

20s I painted and drew only endangered species."

Rama, son of Rosy and Packy (first elephant born in the Western Hemisphere, according to the Oregon Zoo), was born April 1, 1983. He was injured at a young age, which caused him to be somewhat slow and aimless. Four years ago, Barsh administered a routine TB test — an inhaled sterile saline solution — to Rama via his trunk. Rama apparently thought it was a game, and started following Barsh around, eagerly blowing air from his trunk. An idea was born and Rama found a purpose.

Barsh introduced Rama to nontoxic children's paints, which he seemed to enjoy spraying from his trunk, and soon afterward he learned to use a brush. Eventually he developed other techniques, including broad trunk strokes,

drip, breath and "finger-painting" with the tip of his trunk.

In 2006, O'Neill watched Rama paint for the first time. One year and many letters later, she returned to Oregon as a full-time summer volunteer, working in the elephant barns.

"It was a fantasy I never knew I had," she said. "Even at the outset, it was the most exciting and meaningful creative experience I have ever had. During our first two summers, Rama painted 36 of the most extraordinary abstract expressionist paintings I have ever seen. Everyone who sees these strikingly beautiful works is deeply moved and quite simply — amazed."

Although Barsh and O'Neill help, Rama essentially makes the decision to paint or not to paint, and actively participates with excited, happy behaviors,

according to Barsh and other keepers. (Videos of Rama painting are available on YouTube.) The Zoo sells his paintings to raise funds for their conservation programs.

There are other elephant artists elsewhere around the world. Chang Mai, Thailand hosts "schools" such as the National Elephant Institute, purportedly dedicated to preserving elephants and their natural habitat. According to O'Neill, however, Rama is the only male elephant artist in the genre.

And Rama is helping with a conservation effort of his own, the Rama Exhibition — "Rama: Ambassador for the Endangered Ones" — scheduled for completion in 2011. Organized by O'Neill, Barsh, photographer Michael Durham and others, the exhibit promises to be a "multi-sensory journey,"

designed for travel to important art, science and natural history museums worldwide. It incorporates film of Rama at work, music, performances, stories and educational information.

The main exhibit will contain 50 paintings (by Rama and O'Neill separately and together) displayed with small gardens and a Tibetan prayer wheel for each animal portrayed. According to O'Neill the wheels contain millions of prayers for the animals, and are activated, or set in motion, when someone spins the wheel while holding a good thought. The prayer wheels are hand crafted by master wood turners from around the world.

In its October 2008 "Red List of Threatened Species," the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources "confirmed an extinction crisis, with almost one in four (mammals) at risk of disappearing forever," along with numerous other species.

According to a May 25 article by New Yorker environmental

writer Elizabeth Kolbert, the earth may be experiencing now what scientists refer to as the sixth "mass extinction" in the planet's history. The fifth, 65 million years ago, resulted in loss of the dinosaurs. The article states, "Currently, a third of all amphibian species, nearly a third of reef-building corals, a quarter of all mammals and an eighth of all birds are classified as 'threatened with extinction.' These estimates do not include the species that humans have already wiped out... Nor do the figures take into account the projected effects of global warming or ocean acidification. Nor, of course, can they anticipate the kinds of sudden, terrible collapses that are becoming almost routine... Some estimates suggest that, if current trends continue, half the world's species may disappear by the end of the century."

O'Neill and Rama's work is dedicated to avoiding that fate.

"I want my children to know that I am doing everything I can every day to save them," said O'Neill.

Is she an activist?

"Absolutely," she said. That's my whole life. I don't go around calling myself an activist but I know my nature is to try and 'activate' making change at the heart level where powerful changes can take place."

"In this day, given the massive changes of the earth, art has to be more transformational. This is not the time for 'art for art's sake.' Instead of art for art's sake, we need art for the earth or art in the service of science, in the service of life on earth... The Renaissance was like that," she said. "Let's wake up to a more lofty and deeper aspect of ourselves."

One thing is for sure, whether Rama the elephant actually raises consciousness or not, his experience with Calley O'Neill is one he will never forget.

A fundraiser for the Rama Exhibition is planned for this summer. For more information, visit www.TheRamaExhibition.org, or e-mail Calley@CalleyONeill.com.



Another of Rama and Calley O'Neill's finished pieces.