

# TRANSPECIES BLANKET:

RHINO POACHING MONOLOGUES

A Thesis presented to  
The School of the Museum of Fine Arts  
at Tufts University

In partial fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

by Kim Wu

May 2020

Transpecies Blanket is a work that draws on drawing, writing, storytelling, illustration and digital tools to create an online platform for an art as activism campaign. It is a work that breaks down the complex tangle that is the world of rhino poaching and rhino horn trafficking through multiple, often contrasting perspectives. What began as an interest in wildlife conservation evolved into a realisation that the dwindling rhino population in South Africa is simply one of the many consequences of political corruption, maladaptive economic systems, and the ramifications of Apartheid that are still being played out in modern times. Transpecies Blanket has now become an effort to point out the flaws in certain political, historical and economic systems, with the issue of rhino poaching being the medium through which I investigated these flaws.

Many conservation issues go further than simply being about the environment. For example, there are many that believe that if one simply gets rid of the poacher, the issue of poaching will be solved. In actuality, poaching is a disguised form of the common narrative of supply-and-demand, where the syndicate groups provide the supply and China the demand. Trafficking groups serve as the middleman, and typically source the poachers they hire from various impoverished areas of South Africa. These are communities where the majority of people are unemployed, and for those that do have a job, they often work below minimum wage. These people also rarely have running water and electricity, and do not have access to government social services. Traffickers target members of these communities because they know how irresistible an offer of \$1500 per rhino horn poached would be to these people. For many, this kind of money could provide for their families for months, even years. It was thus that I realised that the poachers were, unfortunately, just as much a victim as the rhinos. However, it is equally important to note that oftentimes, rangers and poachers originate from the same communities.

---

Koen, Hildegard, J.P De Villiers, Henk Roodt, and Alta De Waal. "An Expert-driven Causal Model of the Rhino Poaching Problem." *Ecological Modelling* 347.C (2017): 29-39. Web.

Ellis, Richard, and ProQuest. *Tiger Bone & Rhino Horn : The Destruction of Wildlife for Traditional Chinese Medicine*. Washington: Island : Shearwater, 2005. Print.

Duffy, Rosaleen. *Nature Crime : How We're Getting Conservation Wrong*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 2010. Print.

Delving further into my research of understanding what the exact set of circumstances led to the existence of poaching itself, it was noticed that these impoverished communities from which the majority of poachers were coming from existed on the outskirts of many of South Africa's national parks (in particular the Kruger National Park). The reason why so many of these communities exist on the outskirts of the national parks is a consequence that stems from the aftermath of the Apartheid. Many of the families from these communities used to live on what was previously known as the ancestral lands, but were chased out during the Apartheid when the development of the national parks began. For many from those communities, there is an anger toward conservation efforts as a result of the loss of these ancestral lands; lands that they had claim to and were now taken away. Relocating to another location proved difficult as many of these people relied on resources on the land to live, but now had to acquire these resources through purchasing methods, of which many did not have the money to purchase. Thus, when a man becomes a poacher, he is viewed as a sort of hero amongst these communities because in the eyes of these people, the poachers are the ones who bring wealth to the community. In the eyes of the same communities, the rangers are seen as selfish and crazy for valuing the lives of a beast over that of their own people.

A large part of my practice exists outside of the studio. In early January of 2019, I began to work closely with an organization in South Africa called Rhino Rescue Project, specifically with the founder of the organization, Dr. Lorinda Hern. Rhino Rescue Project's solution to poaching lies in targeting the demand instead of the supply and does not believe in the claimed success of dehorning. Their methodology involves a "horn devaluation procedure" where the rhino horn is infused with an animal-friendly toxin that is toxic to humans. The toxin does not change the colour of the horn (for rhinos that horns aren't colourful are at risk for being easier

---

Potter, Gary R., Nurse, Angus, and Hall, Matthew. *The Geography of Environmental Crime : Conservation, Wildlife Crime and Environmental Activism*. 2016. Palgrave Studies in Green Criminology. Web.

Hübschle, Annette M. "The Social Economy of Rhino Poaching: Of Economic Freedom Fighters, Professional Hunters and Marginalized Local People." *Current Sociology* 65.3 (2017): 427-47. Web.

Kneser, Jakob, and Kanopy. *Gambling On Extinction*. 2016. Web.

targets if that were the case), but signs are placed in multiple areas around the properties warning poachers that the rhinos have been treated. Since poaching incidents usually occur under 30 minutes, the poachers are less inclined to risk their lives on areas where there were treated rhino populations, and would rather target areas where rhino populations are completely untreated. Rhino Rescue Project's approach to the rhino poaching was an intriguing one, as it was the one method that expanded further than the confines of the wild parks in which the rhinos lived. It expanded into two other areas which I explored in creating Transpecies Blanket: traditional Chinese medicine and the role of gifting in Asian, specifically Chinese culture.

Gift-giving in Chinese culture is more to do with hierarchy and societal prowess. It is a practice of giving an expensive gift as a way of showing respect to either someone you are trying to establish a business relationship with, or to someone older than you. Most recent reports of rhino horn consumers show that there are less people purchasing rhino horn for its medicinal properties, but more so for the association of "wealth" that comes with gifting the horn after it has been shaped into an ornate trinket. These are deep-rooted beliefs that have existed for thousands of years in Chinese culture, and what I believe is one of the more difficult challenges as deep-rooted customs and beliefs are ingrained into a community's overall behaviour and socialization behaviours.

Intrinsically different to Western medicine, traditional Chinese medicine is founded on the philosophy that all natural phenomena can be categorized into the opposite yet complementary forces of yin and yang, and diseases are treated by restoring balance and maintaining harmony in the body. TCM practitioners prescribe herbal medicine containing a combination of ingredients, of which over 10,000 plant, animal, and mineral

---

Felbab-Brown, Vanda. *The Extinction Market : Wildlife Trafficking and How to Counter It*. 2017. Print.

Ferreira, Sam M., Michele Pfab, and Mike Knight. "Management Strategies to Curb Rhino Poaching : Alternative Options Using a Cost-benefit Approach : Research Article." 110.5 (2014): 1-8. Web.

Ellis, Richard, and ProQuest. *Tiger Bone & Rhino Horn : The Destruction of Wildlife for Traditional Chinese Medicine*. Washington: Island : Shearwater, 2005. Print.

varieties exist, known as Chinese materia medica. The distinction between the use of Chinese materia medica for food and for medicinal purposes is not always clear due to their dual uses — medicinal ingredients are often consumed just as food items or in herbal products. As a medicinal ingredient used in TCM treatment, rhino horn is used to dispel heat and clear toxins trapped deep in the body, but its use — often in isolation by the general public — has evolved in recent times to include treating cancer, curing hangovers, and social consumption, even though consumption for such purposes is not grounded in TCM literature. Although concepts and practices in TCM can seem foreign to a non-Eastern person, it remains an internally consistent, researched discipline where it is as respected and valued as Western medicine practices.

Transpecies Blanket consists of two parts: one that exists in the digital world and the other in the gallery space. The part that is physical and tangible is a 14.5 x 14.5 foot knitted blanket that forms the image of a QR code. It is comprised of varying shades of red, white and black, as well as slight textural differences in the knitting stitches and thickness of wool. This is the artwork that exists in the gallery, but is also what I describe as a “portal” to the digital world where the true content and meaning behind its existence lives. The QR code, upon being scanned with your phone, takes you to a website specifically designed (but not limited to) for mobile viewing. Here houses the second part of Transpecies Blanket.

The website is the platform on which I choose to tell the complex interwoven story of poaching as an issue. It comprises five perspectives: the poacher, the rhino, the ranger, the consumer and the sanctuary. My goal was to take advantage of the modern world’s newfound habit of scrolling, and thus for each perspective, I created a scrolling illustrated poem from the first person perspective of each narrator. The illustration style

---

Litchfield, Carla A. “Rhino Poaching: Apply Conservation Psychology.” *Science* (New York, N.Y.) 340.6137 (2013): 1168. Web.

Ellis, Richard, and ProQuest. *Tiger Bone & Rhino Horn : The Destruction of Wildlife for Traditional Chinese Medicine*. Washington: Island : Shearwater, 2005. Print.

was greatly inspired by woodblock prints from before and during the Apartheid era in South Africa, where there is an emphasis on bold, primary colours and stark revolutionary illustrative shapes. Each illustrated “scroll” was designed purposefully - each element existed for a reason. I was careful to not overembellish without intention as I wanted the illustrations to dance with the words, and not overpower.

Much poetic license was taken with each perspective, but at the end of each poem is a link to the intensive research and field work that I had conducted in understanding the various facets of the poaching issue. The research was best described as a creeping snowball. What started out as purely a passion for the welfare of the rhinos themselves eventually became a deep fascination as I realised that this issue is one with tendrils that reach into the realms of the black market, flawed economics, and maladaptive political agendas across the globe. It is about international relations where loopholes are discovered through conflicting laws in the countries involved, and also a reevaluation of the role of culture in environmental, economic and political corruption.

I worked closely with a non-profit organization called Rhino Rescue Project, based in Johannesburg, South Africa. With them, I conducted two separate field trips. One to meet with the founder, and the other to accompany them on their devaluation procedure. It was important that in crafting the imagery and poems that I was crafting them from a source of research and not bias. I interviewed a former poacher (turned ranger), Dr. Lorinda Hern and her colleagues. In gathering this research it occurred to me that simply depicting a rhino in my imagery did not justify the true complexity of the issue itself.

---

Another aspect of Transpecies Blanket is in its reach. I wanted this piece to be one that worked with and against limitations, of which I will now describe. The limitations of illustration, digital or traditional, is that it exists in a confined 2D space. There is only so much you can say on a single sheet of digital and traditional paper. A website, however, is infinite and ever-changing. Content can be switched in and out, assets can be arranged and destroyed. I was fascinated with the way in which a website could be both permanent and impermanent. The only aspect in which a website lacked was that it is not grounded in something physical beyond the screen. This is how I reached the decision to create a sculpture that would exist in the physical space, but would open a “portal” to the viewer to take them out of that space. A visitor to the art gallery cannot take a piece of art home with them - but with Transpecies Blanket, everyone who interacts and views my piece gets to take home one half of the work. They can carry it with them in their pockets, and their purses wherever they go.

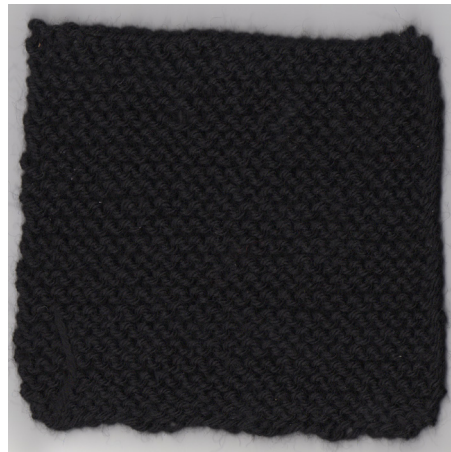




---

QR code blanket

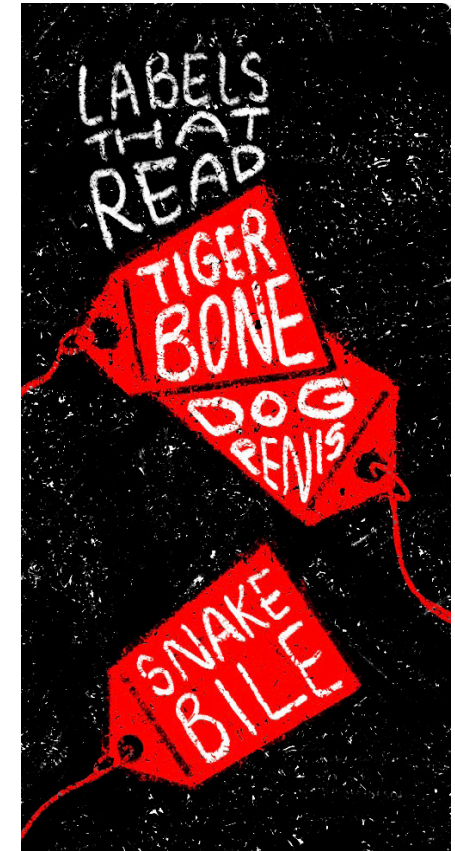
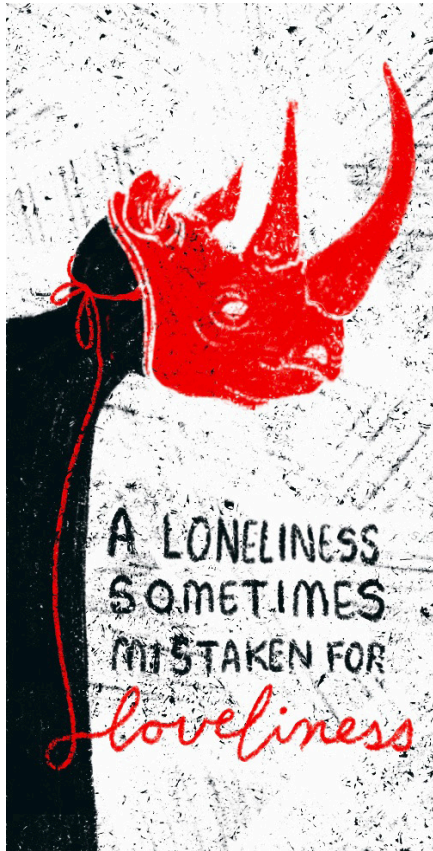
# knitted squares





---

homepage illustration



---

illustrated poems