

Art 4

The power of art for change: an interview with artist Dana Ellyn

BY ZAHAVA KATZ-PERLISH · JUNE 30, 2016


I ♥ ANIMALS
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"Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others" by Dana Ellyn

Renowned vegan artist Dana Ellyn's paintings are thought provoking, norm challenging, and evocative on many levels. Her artwork conveys political and social ideas, including the plight of non-human animals; it also encourages viewers to carefully consider how their daily choices impact the lives of animals.

When I first saw her paintings on social media they struck a chord. Ideas such as, 'Why do we love some animals and eat others?' are presented in colorful, gripping pictures. I have used a few of Dana's deeply moving paintings in my blog posts and was eager to feature her in my blog. Here are the questions I asked Dana and her responses.



Dana Ellyn

Please tell me about how you arrived at focusing on animal rights in your work

I grew up in a small shoreline town in Connecticut in the 1980's. The prevalent food consumption culture at that time was a sort of "eat what comes to you on the plate and ask no questions". Not surprisingly, I was an American 80's child in a family that viewed meat eating as a way of life, a way to belong. In my childhood I felt uncomfortable being served plates of cooked corpse. Somehow I realized the "meat" served was nothing more than an excuse to conform, get along, and consume without thought.

As many of the people reading this can relate, I spent my childhood mealtimes picking through and around the flesh of dead animals to get to the grains and vegetables for my sustenance. I left the flesh behind to have my disapproving parents discard it needlessly into the rubbish.

I have always been a painter. I have always had an interest in art. I spent much of my childhood alone and I used that time to create. I went through periods when my paintings focused primarily on politics and religion. Paintings about animal rights and vegetarianism were always sprinkled in here and there. I say that I've been a vegetarian at heart my entire life. But in fact, I became a vegetarian in 2001 and a vegan in 2013. It was this shift from vegetarianism to veganism that influenced my art to start focusing primarily on the issues of animal rights.

In 1989, at the age of 18, I found myself in Washington, DC as a college student, free to explore, free to experiment, and free to be me. I fully committed myself to vegetarianism as a result, and upon my arrival in Washington, DC and shortly thereafter I became a proud vegan.

What led to your strong feelings about animal rights and veganism?

Recognition of the suffering in society is a reason to be a vegan. Watching YouTube videos of chickens being stepped on is a good start for anyone. The more people research where their food comes from, and become aware of the violence in the meat and dairy industries, the more they will tilt towards being a vegan. I like to consider myself an informed consumer, and an especially informed consumer regarding what I put in my mouth. Therefore, it only makes sense to be a vegan. There are no muffled screams of knock boxed cows, boiled-alive hens, throat sliced pigs, ground-up chicks, or bludgeoned fish coming on my conscience.

Was it a kind of awakening or had you always been feeling that way and utilizing your art for that purpose?

My awakening occurred when I realized that the food I was encouraged to put in my body for "living" was actually a choice; the food choices I had were up to me and that I could decide to be a 'non killer'. I was painting and creating art during my formative years and I have always been sensitive to the suffering of animals for food and other destructive purposes. My paintings have been influenced by my advocacy for the rights of animals since the beginning of my career as an artist. I feel awakened and powerful, being a vegan.

What are your goals and what do you aim to achieve through your work?

My primary goal as an artist is to make people happy. I pride myself on making my artworks affordable. I want everybody that wants to own one of my paintings to be able to afford one. As a vegan artist, I hope that vegans appreciate and understand my art. If non-vegans see my paintings and are confused or challenged, or changed by my paintings, then I am happy. I hope they tell their friends about my unique vegan art!

Have you created narrative art that combines a series of your pictures? If so, why did you select that particular subject and approach?

I have consistently been a champion of veganism through my art. I have always been a narrative painter and each painting has a story to tell. My underlying message throughout is 'Why do we love some animals and eat others?'. Visit danaellyn.com to browse through all of my paintings and see all the ways I've illustrated that and other vegan messages. One very affective triptych I created recently was "See No Evil. Hear No Evil. Speak No Evil".

How do your ideas and feelings about animal rights manifest in your daily life? Has that changed over time?

I started out as a vegetarian, then I became a vegan after researching the facts on egg and dairy production. I paint every day and it is my main source of income. Veganism inspires my art, it is my passion. I find myself talking about it a lot, partly because people ask me a lot of questions. They want to hear more about why I created certain paintings and they want to discuss them. I'm always very happy to talk about my art. I love that people are engaged with my paintings.

Have you found that any particular approach to your subject matter of animal rights has been especially effective in presenting your message? Are there any that you felt did not work as well? Why?

I have found that people that are meat eaters like to deny the advantages of veganism. They like to joke and make fun of being a vegan. They act like I'm extreme for making the choice to be a vegan. They act like I'm the strange or wrong one.

Can you talk about your recent collaborative projects and their purpose/s?

On several occasions I have collaborated with COK (Compassion Over Killing) by making my art available for sale during their fundraising events. COK has also used my art to help promote their events including the annual "Vegfest" here in Washington, DC. And, in 2015, they used my painting as the cover of their holiday card which was mailed out to the thousands of folks on their mailing list.

I recently collaborated with Lucy Tammam, award winning creative director of London's cult couture fashion atelier, who has been an innovator in ethical and sustainable fashion for over a decade. For this collaboration, Tammam and I combined our intrinsic love of animals and sustainability to create three thought provoking pieces of work to showcase in Washington, DC and Los Angeles, CA, in April 2016. Initially inspired by the collaboration between iconic artist and fashion designer Dali and Schiapparelli

almost 80 years ago – the Lobster Dress – which saw the two great artists combine their talents. Their dress adorned the infamous Wallis Simpson. We used the concept of the inhabitants of the sea as our starting point to create their own pieces, focusing on the modern disastrous phenomenon of by-catch and its devastating effect on the planet. You can see photos of our collaborative dresses here.

Assuming that you have received feedback from folks who are not part of the animal rights movement but find themselves sensitive to the issues, have their impressions influenced your work in any way?

On more than a few occasions meat-eaters have told me that they have thought of my paintings while making food choices. Occasionally the meat-eaters have told me that they chose not to eat meat and instead choose the vegetarian option as a result of my painting and advocacy. One woman bought one of my pig paintings and 'outed' herself as a lover of bacon. My happiest moment is when she told me weeks later that she has a harder time eating bacon now with that cute piggy on the wall looking at her, making her feel guilty. Good. That means I'm doing something right.

Have you received any surprising, unexpected responses, impressions or thoughts about your work?

On a rare occasion a meat-eater will post on social media a snarky response to one of my paintings, something like, "delicious", in reaction to a portrait of a pig or cow. I wonder if I did a pet-portrait of their dog or cat, would they respond with the same insensitivity?

Is there anything you would like to say about your work that we haven't covered?

My love and advocacy for all animals drives my work and inspiration. It makes me happy and proud to turn people on to veganism. It will make me happier if one day the world adopts the more humane and environmentally conscience vegan lifestyle.

You can view Dana Ellyn's work and purchase her paintings on her website, and follow her on Facebook.

Tags: animal rights Art Dana Ellyn vegan food veganism

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Rita Anderson July 1, 2016 at 8:41 pm



Dana is definitely in her element. Painting the animals the way she does appears to be her true path in this life. I find her work to be extremely thought-provoking and disturbingly real. There is no doubt her work will be life-changing for many who chance to see it!

Reply



Mitzie Eien July 2, 2016 at 11:52 am

Very moving! Every time I look at my loving little dog I think of people who eat animals without considering their "humanity", If humanity means thinking and feeling, animals certainly fit that category.

Reply



Rita Anderson July 2, 2016 at 1:54 pm

Sometimes, Mitzie Eien, they fit that category more than humans do!

Reply

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