

Meet the Artist Panbanisha



Apes Helping Apes

Comparative researchers have over the past several years analyzed from many angles the question of whether great apes are capable of artistic expression – that is, are complementary color choices, control over brush strokes and mimetic features random, insignificant marks on a canvas, or are they intentional and purposeful?

Sue Buck, a Pennsylvania artist who collaborated with the bonobo (*Pan paniscus*) Panbanisha in a pair of paintings offered as a set in this year's *Apes Helping Apes* exhibit, sees undeniable parallels between her art and that of Panbanisha, whose name means "cleave together for the purpose of contrast." The human and bonobo artists were on opposite sides of the glass-faced observation room when the collaboration occurred.

"Panbanisha is very tactile with the brush. She knows what she is doing – 'I need this color; I need that different brush.' She is clearly making those decisions," Buck said after her painting session with the bonobo in early 2008. "You could see her going into that mode, forgetting [observers] were there and just enjoying it and getting lost in the motion. I knew what that felt like.

"Non-artists might not recognize that parallel, but for most artists, it's about materials, the physical movement, the sounds. ... It's a very physical and sensual experience; sensual, as in the senses in terms of smelling it, hearing it, feeling it," she said. "For artists, it's about the mark. Every mark indicates where



my hand has been, where my arm has been. We can tell how fast or how slow.

"So it's a little record of someone's presence, where they were. It's a history, a mark of that, so in that respect, I think that anyone's artwork is the same."

An ape language superstar like her half-brother Kanzi, Panbanisha is the most prolific of the bonobo artists featured in this year's *Apes Helping Apes* exhibit. One of the techniques that distinguishes her paintings from those created by other bonobos is her preference to hold the canvas with one hand while painting with the other – instead of placing the canvas flat on the floor.

One of the paintings, No. B17, was created in an area of Great Ape Trust's bonobo home that is commonly called "Panbanisha's kitchen" after she and researcher Liz Rubert-Pugh prepared a snack of tea and soup. Known to the bonobo staff for her domesticity, Panbanisha washed the paintbrushes in a tub when her painting session concluded.



This pair of paintings will be offered as a set. Panbanisha painted the one on the left at the same time Sue Buck painted the one on the right. Buck used some strokes similar to the long, flowing strokes typical in Panbanisha's paintings.



Panbanisha, supervised by research assistant Liz Rubert-Pugh, paints her half of a pair of paintings produced with artist Sue Buck, observing from the other side of the glass-faced observation room.

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