

Great Ape TRUST OF IOWA

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The bonobo Kanzi titles his paintings, giving researchers more insight into his intelligence

Des Moines, Iowa – November 13, 2008 – A prolific participant in the 2008 *Apes Helping Apes* art exhibit, the bonobo (*Pan paniscus*) Kanzi gave a special distinction to his four paintings in the Nov. 14-29 event to raise money for wild great ape conservation: titles.

Naming the paintings suggests to Great Ape Trust researchers that Kanzi, a 28-year-old bonobo whose spontaneous lexigram utterances as an infant pushed the boundaries of ape language research, uses art-making as a way to communicate ideas too complex to convey in the limited vocabulary offered by lexigrams. Kanzi is one of four language-competent bonobos at Great Ape Trust using the lexigrams, which contain nearly 400 abstract symbols representing words, to communicate with humans.

The complex cognitive abilities of Kanzi, the undisputed superstar of bonobo language and other cognitive research, and members of his family have intrigued scientists for years, first at the Language Research Center at Georgia State University and now at Great Ape Trust.

Kanzi demonstrates receptive competence for hundreds of words that are not listed on his lexigram keyboard, and he appears to understand concepts of time such as past, present and future by the nature of his communications, interaction and behavior with humans, said Great Ape Trust Director of Bonobo Research William M. Fields.

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Kanzi also has an understanding of turn-taking as a mechanism that guides human conversation, and participates in give-and-take discourse to achieve what he wants, such as food, but also to make informative statements about seemingly small things that matter to him, Fields said.

He said that to fully understand Kanzi's decision to title his paintings – *Cheese*, *Riding in the Car to Get Cherries*, *Pillow Picture* and *Watermelon* – requires looking at the complex nature of bonobo society and the special role that Kanzi plays in the local bonobo society because of his star status.

“Kanzi understood early on in his life about performance and ability,” Fields said, “and he often jealously guards an area of expertise, such as [stone tool making](#), or flint knapping. We have seen many examples of this when Panbanisha (Kanzi's half-sister) or Nyota (Panbanisha's son) are making stone tools, and Kanzi can often be expected to express concern through displays of protest.”

However, when painting with the other bonobos, Kanzi is as congenial and cooperative as he is protective of his flint-knapping prowess.

“He appears to be interested in the paintings of other bonobos and enjoys painting while everyone else is painting,” Fields said. “While Panbanisha seems to be as good at painting as Kanzi is at stone-tool manufacturing, she often is not disposed to say as much about her paintings as Kanzi, as we suppose she feels her paintings speak for themselves.

“Kanzi, on the other hand, seems to feel he is able to express complicated ideas with the assistance of a painting, in which he is able to illuminate his message through the question-and-answer moment, using the painting as a point of reference or as an illustration. He seems to use the paintings to complete the dialogue informing those matters on his mind that are difficult to communicate merely through lexigrams.”

The process involved in the creation of *Watermelon*, a Kanzi original offered in this year's *Apes Helping Apes* exhibit, seems to reinforce that, said Susannah Maisel, a bonobo caretaker and trusted friend of Kanzi's.

The painting was created over two days, Nov. 5-6. Kanzi used his lexigram to ask Maisel if he could paint, and as she readied the supplies, he made another request: He wanted to eat watermelon during the activity. In her creative documentation, Maisel

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noted that the colors Kanzi selected – light red, dark red and white – were the same as the colors found in a slice of watermelon.

“He started with two shades of red, mixing white into the darker shade to make pink,” Maisel wrote. “He took his time with this painting, pausing between brush strokes to snack on watermelon.”

Kanzi left the painting unfinished on Nov. 5. The next morning, the bonobo pointed to lexigram symbols for “watermelon” and “paint,” indicating his desire to continue work on the painting. He added orange to some areas of the canvas that he had previously painted red, and then mixed white and green, which Maisel said could be interpreted to represent the color of watermelon rind. Last, he added more touches of pure red.

Maisel said it would be “easy to interpret this painting as a literal representation of watermelon, given the colors that Kanzi chose.”

However, researchers say that viewing *Watermelon* through the rich social situation in which the painting was completed – over slices of watermelon shared with his mother, Matata; siblings Elikya and Maisha; and nephew Nyota – the art may suggest something more.

GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). To learn more about Great Ape Trust of Iowa, go to www.GreatApeTrust.org.

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Insights Through Collaborations with Apes