

Endangered

<https://soundcloud.com/americanshortfiction/allegra-hyde-endangered>

The artists were kept in cages. This was for their own good. The world had gotten really ugly, really fast, and the artists, generally, did not have the skills to survive. Most did not know how to shoot guns, for instance. Or how to make bombs out of soda bottles. The artists were a dying breed, in all honesty, which is why the government, along with a few wealthy do-gooders, put them in cages—nice cages—that resembled the artists' natural habitats. One pen looked like a gallery opening, with wine, cheese, and water crackers restocked daily. Another featured dumpster couches paired with a threadbare oriental rug. Nude models were occasionally sent into the enclosures, which sometimes interested the artists, sometimes not. These habitats were all very thoughtful—top-of-the-line, really—and tailored to the artists' individual needs. In fact, one could argue the environments were identical replications of how the artists lived in the wild, other than the glass walls installed for spectating.

Criticism of the artist preservation program was scant. When criticism did come, it came from little girls, mostly—who visited the zoo as the daughters of government officials and high-level bureaucrats and pop stars—who said the artists looked unhappy.

“He looks unhappy,” the little girls told their parents. “Why isn't he painting? And why isn't she sculpting? And why are those ones over there lying motionless and staring vacantly into space?”

It's true, not all the artists took to art-making in captivity. Some, in fact, became quite ill. Of course, every effort was made to care for them. The artists were offered a spectrum of drugs, both medicinal and psychedelic. They were even issued awards, their names inked in bold letters across certificates and inscribed onto gold-plated plaques. Admittedly, there were still incidents involving paint fumes, belt buckles strapped to ceiling beams. But these incidents were considered normal artist behavior. In the wild, after all, the artists had often demonstrated melancholia.

“Hush,” the parents told their little daughters. “The artist is fine. Watch quietly now. Do not knock on the glass. Do not disturb the artist. The artist is sleeping, see? Oh, look, the artist is awake—look, honey, look, look, look—oh, wait, never mind. Let's go, honey, come quickly now.”

Did a few of the artists make strange faces at spectators? Did they masturbate in public view? Smear feces on the glass? Yes. But, again, this was considered normal artist behavior. The artists were naturally provocative, subject to unpredictable compulsions, chronic irrationality. This was why they required protection. This was why they needed further study. There was much about them we still didn't know. There was much from them we felt we might learn.

Once—though the precise details regarding *how* remain undisclosed—an artist escaped. She got

out of her enclosure, out into the streets, loose. She didn't get far, of course, not with the security cameras and the helicopters and the live broadcasts. It was quite a show, actually. The video became a viral sensation. I remember gathering with other citizens to watch on a public screen. We all laughed about it, I think. Or at least we paid close attention. The video showed the artist running down a street while mothers called their children inside, while children pressed their faces against windows. The video showed the artist swerving sporadically, running as if looking for something—maybe a place she used to know—knocking over trashcans, ducking under shrubbery, before collapsing at the base of a barbed wire fence. Beyond the artist's enclosure was, of course, another enclosure: the wall surrounding an upscale habitat for beautiful wives. And then beyond that wall, another wall. And beyond that another. Our world was a series of concentric pens. It was safer that way. It also meant there was nowhere for the artist to go.

And yet, how serene the artist looked, how ecstatic, flopped down onto her back and breathing heavily and gazing up at the sky. A satellite feed caught the moment—we could see her staring up, up at us, it seemed, as if we were gods—before the helicopters converged, the drones and the SWAT teams. Perhaps, in another life, it might have been her greatest work.

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