



*Amur Leopard, 2007, by Ruth Marshall; 53" x 92", held in private collection (Knitted Knit Picks yarn, bamboo, string)
Photographer Maja Kihlstedt*

music that pulled Ruth through her HSC. She then went on to study sculpture and printmaking at the Phillip Institute of Technology (now known as RMIT). She felt a bit lost in Australia after qualifying. Whilst she'd received admirable training, she really had little idea about how to start her art. Two years after completing her BA, Ruth was awarded the inaugural Ann and Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship, along with 9 other young Australians. She headed off to America and, in 1993, commenced her Masters degree in sculpture at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Following graduation she began work as a sculptor at the Wildlife Conservation Society, which she continues to enjoy today. She feels she fits into the art environment better in New York, but will never discount returning to Australia at some time in the future.

Art with a conscience

If you take a look at Ruth's website (www.ruthmarshall.com) you'll find an extraordinarily diverse range of artworks in her galleries. Beautifully polished, moulded resin pieces, alongside hard-sculptured creations made from found articles, through to the knitted art that she has more recently developed. But all are drawn together by a common theme that her work exhibits: the natural world.

Ruth learnt to knit as a young child of 5 or 6, taught and encouraged by both her mother and an aunt. She used to knit jumpers, family clothing and such. After a lull in her knitting obsession, she rediscovered the craft on a journey back to Australia, and started introducing it into her work in 2005.

A glance at her resume and it becomes apparent that Ruth has focussed primarily on knitting snake skins and cat pelts. Very BIG cats, and particularly endangered species, for Ruth is determined to draw public attention to the plight of these rare and beautiful creatures. Their life is in the balance; poaching, deforestation and depletion of prey species have all taken their toll. When I spoke with Ruth she was brimming with the news of a recent sale... her knitted pelt of a rare Amur Leopard had sold from a major exhibition in Istanbul for a price greater than a real pelt would have brought. There are, reportedly, only about 30-35 Amur Leopards remaining in the Russian Far East, so Ruth is hoping that the sale of her art work will raise awareness of their plight. It wasn't until we talked some more, that Ruth suddenly appreciated that \$US14,000 (the price the piece sold for) is a very significant price for a piece of textile art! Being so immersed in the purpose of her work, she hadn't considered its value in those terms.

Working Directions on how to knit a Big Cat

As a knitter and designer myself, I was intrigued to learn of Ruth's processes, and whether knitting a life-size leopard pelt bears some similarities to garment design work.

- Ruth's first stage is extensive research of the animal concerned, particularly ecological and conservation research. Working at the Conservation Society she has been able to make detailed photographic studies of the animals to aid with her patternmaking.
- She then selects the yarns. Her first priority has been to replicate the exact colours of the animals, but she also needs to ensure the yarns knit to about the same tension, ie, that the yarns used are of similar weight. Some skins she's worked in sock yarns, others in more bulky varieties.
- Ruth then draws up a life-size chart on graph paper. Yes, full size! This chart can typically take a couple of weeks to complete, and Ruth will pin it onto her wall at home so that she can make assessments and adjustments any time she walks past it. She studies every tiny detail of the animal's markings in order to reproduce the pelt.
- When she's finally happy with her chart, the knitting commences. But first, the bane of every knitter's life, she works tension samples to ensure the pattern provides an accurate reproduction of pelt markings and size. As these pelts are pretty large pieces (the Amur Leopard pictured is about 233cm long and 135cm wide, or 92inches x 53inches) Ruth usually

