

FELIX HELM
DESIGN ARTS THESIS / Oral Defense

Alright, welcome in, everybody! I just want to start by saying thank you all for coming and for making the time to be here. It means so much to me that each of you— for one reason or another— want to hear me talk about leopards for 30 minutes. Of course, if you made it here without knowing what this presentation is about or who I am, let me get everyone on the same page:

Hi! My name is Felix, I'm an illustration major with a focus on exploring the humanity of non-human creatures in my work. In this presentation I will introduce you to my project, give a little background on myself and my personal connection to the work, explain a bit about the process of making this whole thing come together— my artistic process & influences— and where I'm hoping this project will go after I graduate.

So, without further ado:

My thesis project, *Panthera: Pardus*, is a non-fiction picture book that teaches the reader about leopards. The book is 8×8", 40 pages long, self-ended and hardcover, bound with a soft spine. (You may have had a chance to look at the physical object over on the table

to your left before we began.) The contents of the book take you, the reader, through the major aspects of what makes leopards unique, their life cycle, and the results of human interest and interference in their lives.

Speaking of human interest in leopards, I'd love to quickly share a bit about myself and why I chose this subject matter and format for my project.

In many ways, this book feels like a long time coming for me and that many parts of my life have been leading me to this point. I grew up in the Pacific Northwest in Washington and spent a lot of my childhood in and around the nature there. This sparked my interest in ecology and conservation, and has stuck with me throughout my life.

As you may be able to guess, I love animals and I'm always eager to learn more about them. In particular, I have always had an affinity for felines, and this too dates back into my childhood. If you need proof, well, here's a real photo of me from over a decade ago. Speaks for itself I think. This kid definitely loved animals, and I still do. I love animals so much, in fact, that I very nearly went to school to be a zoologist or animal behaviorist instead of coming here. But I didn't,

and I think it was the right decision, since I enjoy art and creating too much to have done anything else, and I am a firm believer in the merits of art as a tool for connection and education.

In my work, my goal is always to create a connection with the viewer in some way. In cases like this, it's more explicit. I want to connect with you, by giving you a resource to learn something. In other works, it's more subtle— it's about the emotional connection to a piece, or even just the reaction that a work of art can provoke. This ability of art— to emotionally connect with people— is a key reason as to why I believe that it is an invaluable tool in educational contexts.

Now that you know a little more about me and why I'm invested in this whole thing, let's talk more about the project!

For this book, I really wanted to come at it from the lens of "what I would have wanted as a kid." Being such a big cat lover, as well as an art lover, I would have loved to see a book like this, filled to the brim with drawings of cats. However, I also wanted to put as much information in it as I could reasonably justify. In a perfect world, I would've had time to make this an 80-page book, which is more in line with the length of some educational picture books.

But, it is tragically an imperfect world, so I was limited to the 40 pages presented here. With that in mind, I did my best to not overwhelm the page with text, while still putting in as much information as I could. In particular, I tried to include information that I do not recall seeing in children's encyclopedias or picture-books as a child. As fun as it is to look at the pictures, if you're an avid fan of something, it's even nicer to see unique facts about the topic that don't always come up.

In my proposal, the pitch was for an even shorter book of only 32 pages. I extended it to help the sections breathe and not feel cramped, while still limiting myself to a reasonable number of pages.

The style has stayed in a general orbit of the original pitch, but within that orbit, it has changed position a number of times. A lot of the stylistic changes that occurred throughout the process came from exploring the balance of digital and analog mediums and the techniques implemented. For example, at one point I was heavily using watercolor and colored pencils on paper, then cutting them out and adding final details digitally, which you can see in the two subspecies spreads. I enjoyed the process, but something about the way I was making created a style that was much more realistic,

anatomically speaking. This isn't a bad thing, and I enjoy how the images look, but I realized I wanted to lean into a more geometric, stylized look. This was a lot easier for me to achieve when using primarily digital techniques. At this time, I'm still exploring why that is, and how I can merge the two techniques to find that sweet spot.

Currently, I gravitate towards a mix of realism and stylization increasingly leaning into stylization, with a mix of flat, graphic shapes and rendered, textured work. But it wasn't always like this.

When I started here at PNCA, I was confident in my technical abilities, but I didn't feel like I had a "style" (whatever that is). I struggled to simplify contexts, and always took the most literal approach to projects. Over the course of my time here, I have begun to learn how to simplify (or stylize) my work, leaning into shape language and bending the rules of reality a bit more. I also like to think that I've improved in making less literal, straightforward work, and have gotten better at infusing it with story, symbolism and meaning.

Over the last few semesters in particular, I have been developing a penchant for creating more angular and shape-forward art,

although I am still exploring how far to push it and how to integrate a mix of digital and analog processes into that change. Because of this, the style in the book was continuously shifting subtly throughout the development process. I have also been increasingly interested in exploring negative space and how flat, graphic shapes play against volumetric and rendered work. I think that that exploration—particularly the exploration of negative space—comes through in the composition of the pages. The snow leopard page is one of my favorite examples. I know that I still have a lot to learn in that regard, and I will continue to improve with, but I am happy with my growth as an artist over the past 4 years.

Another big milestone in my development as an artist has been figuring out why I have to make art— And, to be clear, I do **have** to make art. It's not optional for me; my soul demands that I create. But you can make art without sharing it, without making it your profession. So *why* am I making art? Well, I alluded to it at the beginning of this speech: Connection.

This is going to seem like a bit of a tangent, but stick with me. Growing up as an autistic kid who moved schools (and sometimes states) every couple of years, it was really hard for me to connect with

other kids, and even when things settled down, it was still hard to make friends. Over time, I've found my people and I now have a wonderful spiderweb of friends, colleagues and mentors. All this to say, I deeply understand the importance of connection and connecting with other humans even if it's not face-to-face, and *that* is why I make art.

Art is such a powerful tool for connecting with people, with making them feel things and learn things and provoke thoughts in them. In every piece of art I make, I am always making it with the hope that someone will connect with it. Maybe they will recognize their favorite book, show or movie; or maybe it will make them laugh; or maybe— as I hope will be the case with this project— maybe they'll learn something.

Okay sentimental moment over; back to the book.

Drawing the same subject matter over and over and over again across a handful of months demands that you consider the visual language that you use. It demands that you really study the subject and understand it. For example, I learned a lot about the anatomy of

leopards, like the mouth and paws, and what visual shorthands can be used to allude to them.

Of course, it isn't just illustration. Given the sheer amount of information that I wanted to include in this book, balancing illustration with graphic design was also a major component. I'm not a graphic design major, so my interest in this area is mostly born out of curiosity to explore the space, rather than formal education. Turns out, it's a lot more complex to integrate large bodies of text and illustrations than you'd think. That said, I'm happy with where my explorations took me, and I look forward to developing that skill and pushing it further in future projects.

For the duration of this project, my intended audience has been oriented to children aged 7-11. When you're talking about kidlit, that's a pretty wide range, however, my research into the way non-fiction picture book publishers group the age ranges suggests that this is an acceptable range to consider. With that said, this is still an educational book and I didn't want to compromise on the language too much, and as a result it tends to skew towards the older end of that range. To help combat the language barrier, I've included a glossary at the back of the book with words that felt too specific and

important not to use, but which probably warrant an included definition. While this book is intended to be marketed to children, it is also my sincere hope and desire that anyone of any age can and will get something out of it.

I knew going into my first semester of thesis that I wanted to make a picture book. I'd taken David Hohn's class the year before, and I loved the process and thinking that goes into making one. The only thing I didn't know was what the book was going to be about. I settled on making a non-fiction book pretty quickly since I hadn't been able to come up with a story that I liked enough to spend 2 semesters working on it, and I didn't want to use a public domain story; I wanted this project to be my own. So, it felt very natural to lean in and frame it around one of my favorite activities: learning about animals!

For most of the first semester, however, my subject matter actually wasn't leopards. My first idea was a much broader one, pitching a book that showed one endangered animal from each continent. Then, about 2 weeks before I was supposed to present I realized I didn't want to do all 7 animals and that I'd really been having the most fun working on the leopards. So I changed my whole pitch at

the last minute (and I'll be honest it immediately pulled me out of the art-block funk I'd been in for months).

Then it came time to start actually working on the project. I spent December and the first half of January working on research and script writing. This part was pretty fun, and I learned some things about leopards that I didn't know before. Then, it was time to start working on the visuals.

At the beginning of my thesis year, I assumed the process would be pretty linear. Like I said, I'd taken David's class. I knew the process. I had a plan. Simple, right?

Wrong.

Turns out, when your whole book is facts, it takes a while to compile all of the information. And then you have to turn it into something legible. And then you have to make sure it's not so full of jargon that no one but you and like 10 other experts in the field can understand.

So, it's safe to say that, no, I did not have my manuscript finished by the end of January. Very reasonable goal, past Felix, but it

actually took us until the end of March to have the whole manuscript completed.

As you can imagine, this made the process of creating this book very non-linear. While I was researching, I was thumbnailing. While I was writing, I was... well I was still thumbnailing and doing rough sketches because as it turns out it's pretty hard to figure out what you need to draw when you don't have your text written yet. In the future, I will definitely be budgeting my time better to include more research & writing *before* I start working with imagery.

But eventually, I had most of my manuscript written, and I was able to start really putting in the work to get my spreads together. I met with my midterm review panel and got a bunch of really insightful feedback about my book. In particular, I got a lot of very helpful feedback about the graphic design work and how that could integrate into my illustrations. Admittedly, not all of that feedback made it's way into this version of the dummy due to time constraints, but believe me I have been thinking about it constantly. For about a month or two it was going really well.

Then, I had a style crisis.

I talked a bit about this earlier, but I've been going through a journey in recent months, exploring my art style and the different ways in which I can bend it. Because of this, the vision I'd had at the start of the project looked drastically different to what I now wanted. We're talking semi-realism becoming stylized, geometrical art. Nevertheless, I persisted. I did something that I would really not recommend to any of you, if you're someone going into your thesis project soon (but I know you'll probably not heed the warning. I sure didn't), and I spent an unreasonable amount of time in these last two weeks completely revamping the style of the book, and taking it all to to a highly refined stage. For a book dummy, I have absolutely gone above and beyond and honestly did a little bit much. However, as I was putting the final touch on the physical book dummy, I knew in my heart that I'd needed to do it this way. I am so happy with how it came out: and now, I'd love to share it with all of you!

I won't be reading it in full, because that would take too much time and I've already made this presentation very verbose, but I'll hit play on this video and just let past me flip through the book while I give you the leopard facts I'm sure you've all been waiting for.

play video

[...]

Well, I hope at least one of you learned something new about leopards just now. Of course, I wouldn't be able to tell you all of the facts that I did just now if it weren't for the media that I grew up with as a child that made me so eager to learn about these things.

Conceptually, I can credit all of the nature documentaries I have ever watched for sparking my interest in learning about animals, and doing so in a visually engaging way. Some of the pages in my book were inspired by documentaries like *Living With Leopards*, *Our Planet*, and *BBC Earth's: Kingdom*, which aired earlier this year. In fact, I watched episodes as they came out while working on this project. (Just a warning, if you watch it: you *will* cry on episode 4.)

I also highly credit the children's encyclopedias I read, as well as the TV show "Wild Kratts" for instilling that love of learning. Wild Kratts in particular (an animated show) filtered it through the lens of learning via art, and burned itself into my psyche permanently.

As for my visual influences, my personal touchstones for book design have been *The Great Barrier Reef* by Helen Scales and Lisk

Feng, and *Crazy About Cats* by Owen Davey. If you're interested in them, they're at the back of the room for you to take a peek at if you'd like after we're done here.

On the illustration side of things, it's been a weird mix of taking inspiration from artists like Coles Phillips— whose work with negative space has had a huge impact on the style direction of the book, and contemporary artists like these artists on social media:

Now that I've made it this far, I guess it's time to start thinking about what comes next, isn't it? After thesis, I will be taking some time to make sure that the book is stylistically consistent. I love where the book is at, but I know that I can make it even better by pushing the style to be the best it can be.

After I've done that, I would love to start pitching it to publishers. My number one dream publisher would be Flying Eye since it is very within the wheelhouse of non-fiction picture books that they publish. Both of the books I listed as inspirations came out of their publishing house. However, if that turns out to be a pipe dream, I'm not placing all of my bets on one horse. I would also love to work with publishers like Nosy Crow, or several of Quarto's imprints.

In the event that it does not get picked up, I'm unlikely to fund and self-publish since it is a non-fiction book, and I would feel uncomfortable putting work that has not been officially fact-checked out into the world. Maybe someday, if I managed to find an expert willing to collaborate or at least fact-check.

I really hope that I am able to get this book out into the world, though. When I was a kid, there were far less books like this, and it's something that I really would have loved to have had access to. Thankfully, a trip to Powell's will confirm that this is changing, and that accessible, engaging information is being made more available to kids every day, and I would be so honored to join that effort. I truly believe that art was and is made as a way of connecting with others, and whether it be this book or other projects, I am excited for my work to continue to serve that purpose, and hopefully inspire others to stay curious about the world around them.

This project sits comfortably within my portfolio as text-oriented illustration: my bread and butter. By working on this book I have strengthened not only my illustration capabilities, but also my graphic design skills, as well as my research and ideation process. It's also given me a lot of opportunity to study animal

anatomy— and not just leopards, I've also had the opportunity to spend this semester making near-weekly trips to the zoo in order to sketch the animals there (A pastime I have also been participating in since childhood). Tragically, they have no leopards, but they do have lions and tigers so, who knows? Maybe *Panthera: Leo or tigris* is in my future.

Earlier, I remarked that a lot of things in my life have been leading to this project, here and now. At the time, it was somewhat of an excuse to show you that picture of me, because I had to fit it in somewhere. I mean, come on, look at it.

But, really though, this project has, in a way, been in the works ever since my first year here. Maybe some of the illustration majors in the room remember something called the "Book Of" project? Well, you'll never guess what I made mine on... actually you definitely can— it's cats. Specifically, "Pantherinae" The sub-family above "Panthera" encompassing all of the big cats as well as the clouded leopard. I think the difference between the Book of Pantherinae and Panthera: Pardus really bookends my time here, showing just how much I've grown as an artist.

Now, we're just about done here, but before I end this I'd like to give quick thanks to some folks:

I'd like to thank Phoenix, for being my mentor, not just in an official capacity this past year but unofficially throughout my time at PNCA. I truly do not think I'd be where I am as an artist without your help.

And to David, who teaches the picture book class. Your class opened the door to picture books for me, and I'm so thankful I took it. Making picture books is one of the single most fulfilling ways of making art that I've had the pleasure to experience so far (and one of the most challenging, but I mean that in the best way).

I'd also like to thank all of my teachers, friends and peers, for making my time here so wonderful and full of experiences and lessons I'll always remember.

I'd like to thank my dad, for supporting my decision to go to art school, and moving across the state (*twice*) to facilitate that dream; and my mom, for instilling a love of art in me at a young age. I think if she could see where I've come in life and as an artist since I was a kid, she'd be proud of me.

And finally, I'd like to thank all of *you* again for taking the time to be here today, whether you're sitting here watching me live, or as a recording in the future.

I am so, so pleased with how this project has turned out, and I can't wait to see where it takes me in the future.

Thank you.