



FULL COMMENT

George Jonas: Lessons in Ikea primate care, courtesy of a surrealist Rosedale ocelot



[George Jonas](#) | Jan 4, 2013 12:01 AM ET | Last Updated: Jan 3, 2013 4:35 PM ET



LENNART PREISS/AFP/Getty ImagesA young ocelot.

The only ocelot I ever knew lived in Rosedale. The toney Toronto neighborhood was more than a thousand miles north of her usual range, but she seemed content to leave the gullies and ravines to the resident cats, and experience Canada at room temperature. It was just as well, for she would have spooked the local felines during nocturnal patrols.

She certainly startled me when a painter I had just met, Endre Szasz, invited me to see his studio. Szasz was gifted and fashionable. At exhibitions in the early 1970s, his paintings collected little red dots, each signifying a sale, faster and in greater numbers than just about anyone's. He was a surrealist who seemed to have modeled himself on Salvador Dali in his persona, but reminded me of Hyeronimus Bosch as a painter. (Well, maybe a Bosch fast-forwarded from the 15th to the 20th century.)

I was eager to see his studio, and found his request to come around midnight only mildly eccentric. He lived in a handsome house opposite the eastern end of the Grosvenor Bridge. He opened the door himself, and told me to go right through after I entered. I was just crossing the spacious foyer, dimly lit, when a shape emerged from the shadows and made a noise I didn't like. It was a jungle noise, midway between a snort and a cough. It stopped me in my tracks.

"Endre," I said, without turning my eyes away from the menace, "you may or may not be aware of this, but there's a tiger in your living room."

"Have you ever seen a tan tiger with red spots?" My host was flicking on the lights as we spoke. "Not very tiger-looking, is she?"

The ocelot looked exactly like a tiger, albeit one wearing a circus clown's costume. It was a small tiger, to be sure, about three times the size of a domestic cat. She stood on her hind legs to greet her master from her apartment, a kind of walk-in cage that took up about half the available space in the foyer.

"Do you know what it is?" Szasz asked me from inside the cage, with the creature's head resting on his chest.

Test me on my high-school zoology — my high-school anything — and I'll fail. The painter's pet was obviously some kind of a wild cat. It seemed too small for a South American jaguar, but was it perhaps the North American edition, a bobcat, or even a native Canadian lynx, de-tufted? I dismissed the thought. People defang and declaw cats; they even bell them in a schizophrenic social engineer's mixture of kindness and cruelty, but surely no one would de-tuft a lynx.

The feline's spacious "cage" was decorated to resemble a space-age version of the Amazonian jungle. It was surreal — but then Szasz was a surrealist painter. There was no reason why surrealist painters shouldn't have surrealist pets. After all, Dali himself had an ocelot ...

Ocelot! Of course!

“It’s an ocelot, isn’t it?” I said, speaking with all the casualness I could muster. One-upmanship forever.

Szasz seemed miffed. “Good show — or was it just a lucky guess?” he asked. “Yes, it’s an ocelot. She’s nocturnal, like me. We become energized just around this time — midnight — so we wrestle in her cage. Then I retire to my studio and work. Do you want to see us go a round or two?”

I went for the jugular. “Did you know that Dali had a pet ocelot?”

There was a tiny pause before Szasz answered. “Yes, I read something somewhere,” he said, “but I didn’t get the idea from Dali. Look.”

He rolled on the floor of the cage, grabbing and raising the 40-pound feline above his head, though not before she delivered a couple of slaps to his face. “How is that for hand speed?” the painter asked. There was no blood on his face, so the ocelot was either declawed or had kept her claws retracted. The speed with which she moved her paws was indeed remarkable. Mohammed Ali in his heyday may have matched it, but only just.

Her expression of joy was also noteworthy. I know nothing about wild cats, but can recognize a happy ocelot when I see one. Animals smile. She did. Roughhousing with a surrealist painter and fellow insomniac made one Rosedale ocelot happy.

Szasz and his wife left Toronto in the mid-’70s, well before municipal martinets promoted themselves from janitors to jail guards. They left before they would have been forced to choose between leaving or surrendering a family member to a zoo.

The painter himself died years ago. Presumably, so did his ocelot. I told this anecdote because we rightly talk about the rewards we get from our pets or service animals, but rarely mention our not inconsiderable ability to give our feline, canine, equine, piscine, avian, and sometimes simian and bovine companions, in addition to food and shelter, genuine comfort, entertainment, pride and even status.

It’s not a competition, and pets would win if it were, but it is a two-way street. And I’m not sure the officious souls who recently confiscated the “Ikea monkey” from its owner’s home to live in some enclosure with a bunch of other monkeys, did the monkey any favours.

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