

When a Discarded Cat's Whisker Becomes a Prized Possession

The artist Xylor Jane has spent more than a decade saving some of the hairs her pets leave behind. As told to Emily Spivack.



The artist Xylor Jane in her Greenfield, Mass., garden.
Credit: Julie Bidwell

In this series for T, Emily Spivack, the author of “Worn Stories,” interviews creative types about their most prized possessions. The artist Xylor Jane combines color theory, science and math in her paintings; the resulting works are made up of elaborate grids and dots. Here, Jane, who is based in Greenfield, Mass., explains why she has been saving the discarded whiskers from her beloved cats for over a decade.

I had this idea that every year I was still alive, I was going to get another cat. I was into the idea of cats, who I call superior beings, outnumbering people in a household. After we had four cats, my partner was like, “This has to stop.” She put the kibosh on that in 2007. Our current cats are Omar, Monroe, Hortense, who I call Hortey. The newest member, who’s only been here two weeks, is Prince Sascha.

I would find my cats' whiskers when I would clean the house. I started saving them in 2006, first in a cardboard box, but I couldn't see them, so now I put them in a tall, narrow pearl onion jar. I used my Dymo label maker to label the jar "Cat Whiskers." They're all arranged in the same configuration so that the part that's in their face, the base, is at the bottom of the jar. They make this very beautiful shape because all the points are together.

It's occasional that I'll find a whisker — maybe once a month, or less these days with my aging eyes — on the sheepskin, on the sofa, on the floor. Over 13 years of collecting them, I have about 300. I've never actually seen one fall off. I do like watching the whiskers flatten against the cat's face when it eats. Or when the cat's curious about something, it'll bring all of its whiskers forward.

I always imagined I would eventually make a paintbrush with my collection of whiskers. I could probably make a few at this point. The whiskers could be put in a bamboo tube and the length of the whiskers would be adjusted. I'd have someone who knows about making things like that make the brushes — I wouldn't really want to try it myself. And then it might be weird to use them. Maybe with ink that's water-based, that would wash out and wouldn't mess up the color of the whiskers.

For now, I keep the jar of cat whiskers in my bedroom, in view. It's on top of a very old, red digital clock that hangs on the wall. I'm an insomniac, and sleep has always been tricky. I have to see the clock and know what time it is whenever I wake up. The clock and the whiskers are linked together for me, part of my desire for deep sleep, providing protection or a spell. This is just magical thinking, of course, but what else are you going to believe in?

Xylor Jane's show "3Lakes" will be on view from Sept. 6 through Oct. 19, 2019, at Canada gallery, 60 Lispenard Street, New York, canadanewyork.com.



Jane's 13-year collection of about 300 cat whiskers. Credit Julie Bidwell