Cloning a Bad Idea

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There are always plenty of strange sights at a major cat show: strange cats, strange owners, strange spectators. But the strangest sights at this weekend’s cat show at Madison Square Garden will look perfectly ordinary. They are a pair of cloned Bengal kittens, called Tabouli and Baba Ganoush.

They also happen to be corporate cats, the property of Genetic Savings & Clone, a California company that is working with the Cat Fanciers' Association, the host of the cat show, to set up a feline gene bank. Tabouli and Baba Ganoush are, in fact, purring advertisements for cat cloning -- a procedure that costs some $50,000 per cat at the moment.

Adorable as these kittens may be, they are also a truly terrible idea, one that the Cat Fanciers' Association should, by rights, have opposed. The very variety of cats on display at Madison Square Garden this weekend has been created by breeders over time out of genetic diversity itself. Even the most successful genetic crossings -- pairings designed to produce a preferred characteristic -- occur within the natural matrix of genetic chance. In a sense, cloning represents the end of the breeding line, the end of diversity. Well-heeled cat lovers can now pretend to have the same cat over and over again.

The Cat Fanciers' Association invited these kittens to Madison Square Garden partly to prove "that we were not so stuffy and fuddy-duddy -- that we were aware of what technology has presented the animal world."

Cloned kittens may sound like a technological marvel, but you could hardly ask for a better example of the overweening sentimentality that some pet owners lavish upon their pets. The idea of cloning a kitten may somehow seem to be about the cat, but it's really only about the owner.