

FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHER...

The series I call "Dog Run" began as an exercise following the completion of another long-term project. I wanted to challenge myself to try something new, and decided to experiment with photographing figure studies of Great Danes in motion. I had watched these giant dogs lope around the dog parks before, fascinated by their musculature and power. My first attempt at this exercise gave none of the elegant movement I was looking for but rather some very goofy shots of eyes, tongues and legs flying around. Subsequent efforts yielded more of the same. The interactions between dogs of all types and sizes caught in split seconds showed an amazing intensity not often seen by the naked eye, and the series soon took a turn I hadn't expected. For about three years I visited the Tompkins Square Park dog run in Manhattan's East Village, and the Lake of the Isles dog park in Minneapolis on overcast weekend days, when the light was right and the parks were filled to capacity with dogs quite willing to run and roll and wrestle. I have never owned a dog myself, and didn't grow up with dogs, and I wonder if this inexperience allowed me to see things in these creatures that those more familiar with canine behavior might not have. In any case, what a wonderful thing it was to process my film and laugh at the moments I had caught. With such a rapidly moving subject, it's quite a challenge to follow the action, compose and shoot at close quarters, and usually what is ultimately caught on film is not precisely what was in the view finder when the shutter was tripped, and is not what remains when the mirror drops back down. It's close, of course, but you never really know until you peer into the film, drying on a line (I'm never really able to wait for a loupe and light table). This mention of film and darkroom brings up another conversation all together. Why not shoot it digitally? I tell my students that how you speak is just as important as what you say. Applied to photography, this means that for those who consider making photographs self-expression, your decisions on how to make images is as important in determining your photographic voice as is the final image. For me shooting film and the process of realizing imagery in the darkroom is my craft. I have loved shooting film and printing it in the traditional darkroom for more than thirty-five years. The subjects that I am drawn to are often rough and dirty, timeless and traditional, and it simply feels correct to work in a tactile medium.

People that know, love and understand dogs tend to laugh at these pictures rather than see them as frightening. The Toronto Globe & Mail called Dog Run "perhaps the least sentimental dog book ever printed"...a review which pleased me a great deal, as finding a unique perspective on an age-old subject is a satisfying undertaking. I preferred to show the dogs I saw acting naturally rather than in some human-imposed ideal. Yes, dogs can be cute and dogs can be majestic, and there is no end of dog imagery that shows these truths. But dogs are also animals that interact as animals do when unleashed and allowed to run and roll and wrestle.

-MICHAEL CROUSER
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
MARCH 25, 2012

Michael Crouser
Dog Run

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography
April 9 through May 11, 2012

An exhibition of photographs

Miller Hall, University of La Verne

ABOUT MICHAEL CROUSER...

Michael Crouser was born in 1962 in Minneapolis, Minnesota and graduated from Saint John's University (Collegeville, MN) in 1985. He began making photographs in earnest at the age of fourteen, when he set up a darkroom in his parents' basement. After college he worked for several years in various Minneapolis commercial photography studios as an assistant, before setting out on his own. While working in the commercial world, Crouser began work on a personal project that would ultimately take fifteen years to complete and which would eventually become his first monograph, *Los Toros* (Twin Palms Publishers 2007). At the 2008 Lucie Awards *Los Toros*, an exploration of the bullfights in Spain, Mexico, South America and France, was awarded first prize in the category of Fine Art Book. Crouser's second book, *Dog Run* (Viking Studio 2008), a series on the intense play of dogs in urban dog parks, was equally well-received, and was listed as a top ten photography book of the year by the International Photography Awards, PhotoDistrict News and Communication Arts. Currently, Crouser is six years into work on a new book that explores the disappearing world of cattle ranching in the mountains of Colorado. In January of 2012 Leica Gallery of New York exhibited "Michael Crouser: A Mid-Career Retrospective" which featured four distinct series from twenty-five years of his photography. When not on the road, Crouser divides his time between Minneapolis and Brooklyn, New York.

A Dogged Reflection on Michael Crouser's "Dog Run"

By Ann K. Hills, Associate Professor of Spanish

Two border collies lie at my feet as I contemplate the impact of Michael Crouser's "Dog Run" series. The younger of the two is notably perturbed that his Frisbee-thrower and toy dispenser, a.k.a. "she of the opposable thumbs," has chosen instead to interact with this entity she calls DELL; the elder snoozes, quietly resigned but with ears periodically twitching, keen to capture the happy tones of a computer shut down or a chair pushed back for break-time.

As a *bone-a-fide* "dog person" who trains, competes with and, most importantly, shares her life with canine companions, I was excited to hear that the subject (and objects) of the upcoming photography exhibition would be dogs. My initial reaction to Crouser's photographs, however, was one of surprise and slight dismay: stark images in black and white, displays of dominance and of submission, fence fighting and grappling, eyes bulging, ears flattened and muscles tensed... and teeth, teeth...everywhere. Had I expected coiffed pups in an Easter basket or eerily posed Weimaraners? No. But the unbridled (unleashed?) intensity of these dogs, interacting with each other in seemingly spontaneous but likely very ritualistic ways, is impressive and potentially shocking to some. More shocking, perhaps, precisely because it is common: merely pet dogs at play in an urban dog park on any day of the week. *Would my Fluffy look like that if my naked eye could see it?* one might muse. Most likely, yes.

One of the goals of this series, as Crouser identifies it, is to reveal "truths," to expose the multi-dimensional nature of canine behavior by showing dogs in their own world, "acting naturally." If the visual representation of their natural interactions are surprising or shocking, it is arguably because in many cultures today, we increasingly tend to gloss over the differences between the human and canine species in an effort to justify the tremendous bond we might feel with our canine companions, as cultural critic (and fellow professor and canine agility competitor) Donna Haraway has pointed out. A counterpoint to this tendency—which Haraway sees as deluded, disrespectful and detrimental to canine wellbeing, if not human wellbeing—is the philosophy of dog breeder and fancier Linda Weisser, who insists that her love of dogs is rooted in "... the deep pleasure, even joy, of sharing life with a different being, one whose thoughts, feelings, reactions, and probably survival skills are different from ours. And somehow in order for all the species in this 'band' to thrive, we have to learn to understand and respect those things" (Weisser qtd. in *The Companion Species Manifesto* 37).

When I look at Crouser's photographs, then, I see a celebration of difference, of authenticity and of truth, an opportunity to "understand and respect those things." I am also reminded of the incredible flexibility of dogs, a species able to adapt and conform to the rules of the human world (or if not, pay a price), while retaining its instinctual, "native" culture. Dogs seem to glide effortlessly between the two worlds, offering both (acquired) canine-appropriate and (learned) human-appropriate behavior. They are, to a language and culture teacher's mind, socioculturally bilingual, both assimilated to the dominant culture and not. If I let my mind wander further, I see the dogs in these photos as "native informants," speaking wordlessly to us about their cultural values and practices. But lest we think their play is at *our* pleasure or in service to our learning about the world and its inhabitants, we need only turn our gaze to these photos to remember that— to completely pervert the Bard of Avon's meaning—"The play is the thing."

Musings on “Dog Run”

By Jeffery Burkhart, Fletcher Jones Professor of Biology

Perusing these photos led me to reflect on what it is about the “familiar dog” (aka *Canis familiaris*) that’s so compelling, and why so many of us find life with “man’s best friend” to be so enriching. What is it about dogs that meet so many of our social cravings? Some of the reasons I think can be gleaned from a careful viewing of Michael Crouser’s photo exposé.

Humans everywhere have pets – or at least animals with which they share some part of their lives, and though each culture has its favorites, the domesticated dog seems to be present in nearly all societies. In many countries dogs are feral or kept only as house guards and it’s primarily in the developed world that dogs enjoy their very special status as full-fledged family members. Is this a result of family connections having become more tenuous in western cultures, with dogs supplanting deficient family interactions? Of course this may sometimes be the case, but having had dogs continually since I was a boy, I’ve always found them to greatly embellish and enrich such family relationships.

Hints to why dogs fit so capably into our social framework are revealed in Crouser’s photos, which introduce a portion of the complex behavioral repertoire possessed by these animals both for communicating with other dogs (the receivers in these photos), and also to us, their “masters”. Why are dogs so expressive? And, why can we as humans interpret and communicate so easily with this, another species, whose ancestry differs so greatly from ours?

The answer, I believe, lies partly in the long history dogs and humans have shared. Some authorities suggest that we’ve lived together for as long as a million (!) years. The earliest human-dog interactions may have simply been scavenging wolves that followed bands of hunters (or maybe humans scavenging from wolf kills...) feeding on leftovers. Over time, the bond between humans and modern dog ancestors became one of mutual benefit (food for the canines, protection/warning for humans), and wolf-dogs gradually became domesticated. In time, selective breeding created variants that were enough different from the wolf ancestors that they could be recognized as a novel species (were any biologists around to identify them as such!). Outcomes comparable to this have been chronicled in enumerable other domesticated animals and plants in mere 1000’s of years, so there was ample time for great selective divergence and creativity.

With regard to their interactive behaviors, it may well be that dogs have actually changed rather little because other members of the dog family (coyotes and wolves for example) share many of the patterns captured in Michael Crouser’s photos. I’ll never forget an incident I witnessed some 40 years ago while on a solo desert hike north of Phoenix. Just at dusk, as I came over a ridge, I witnessed two coyotes greeting each other. They were so ecstatic and engrossed in their reconnecting that they didn’t see me, and I crouched down to watch. They rolled over and over like two puppies, yipping and barking. It was as though they were long lost friends and expressed such a depth of joy that the memory is still vivid. I also remember even feeling a bit envious of their rapturous connection – wondering if I could exhibit such emotion at the reconnecting of a long lost friend. It was something very special to experience, and an example of the richness of behavior exhibited by another member of the dog family.

The breadth of such “doggy emotions” do help one to better understand why dogs make such wonderful companions. Crouser’s photos are a window not only into dog-dog relationships, but also into their relationships to us, in expressing playfulness, aggression, intimidation, joy, and yes, fence fighting. Unlike us humans, they are unfettered by social constraints, expressing precisely the emotions they feel at the moment. We humans have learned to hide and cover up so many of ours. For the dog, what you see is completely honest, which can be very refreshing.

Finally, no other animal, save man, possesses the breadth of facial expression and body language expressed by dogs. Nearly all of Michael’s photos capture “dispatches” elicited for receipt by another dog, but which we humans interpret with ease. Were some of these behaviors bred-in by eons of selective breeding? Very possibly. An even more interesting question might be to explore whether any human behaviors have been influenced by our long history of living with dogs. Our lives are definitely enriched by living with these most social of domesticated beings. So much so that it even seems a bit of an insult to refer to them as “animals”. Perhaps another name should be proposed ... one reserved only for such very special human-animal connections...



Dog Run #46



Dog Run #84



Dog Run #88



Dog Run #114



Dog Run #34



Dog Run #9



Dog Run #117



Dog Run #32



Dog Run #3



Dog Run #23



Dog Run #28



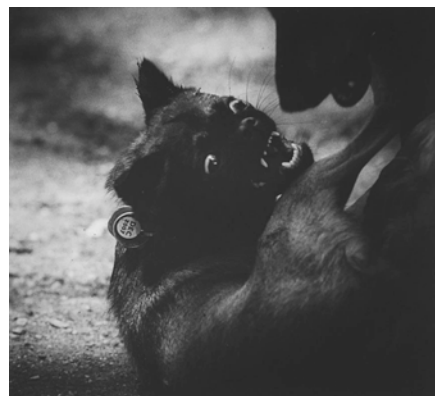
Dog Run #22



Dog Run #80



Dog Run #6



Dog Run #81



Dog Run #19



Dog Run #60



Dog Run #75



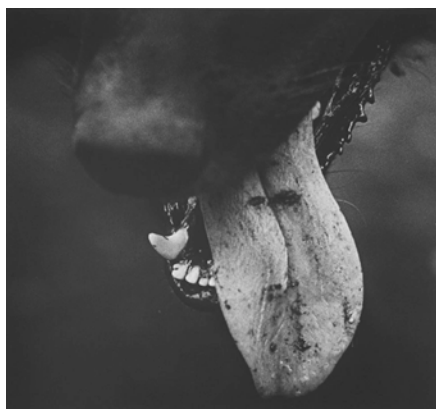
Dog Run #74



Dog Run #1



Dog Run #61



Dog Run #98



Dog Run #53