Natural History

Photography by Traer Scott

Exhibition reflection essays by
Aaron S. Baker, Assistant Professor of Psychology
Kanya Godde, Assistant Professor of Anthropology

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography
February 3 through April 4, 2014
Reception 5:30 – 6:30 p.m. Thursday, February 20, 2014

On seeing in the museums…

During the summer of my ninth and tenth years, my mother, in lieu of hiring a babysitter, kept me captive in our hometown Natural History Museum where she was volunteer curator. I spent very long, solitary weeks communing with the museum's animals, both living and dead, as well as operating the manual elevator for employees and rummaging through the museum's disheveled collection of mite riddled, century old periodicals and books.

In 2008, during a long anticipated visit to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, I accidentally created an intriguing image while "snapshotting" their dioramas. A reflection of my husband, inadvertently rendered in the glass and framed behind a large ostrich, gave me pause. A few months later, I began to frequent diorama exhibits around the country furtively aiming at capturing these narratives. It is both exhilarating and humbling to be the catalyst for these truly alchemical images which are set against a century old stage and born of random timing and fractured light. Every image is like solving a mystery that I didn't know existed.

Natural History is a series of completely candid, in-camera single exposure images that merge the living and the dead, creating allegorical narratives of our troubled co-existence with nature. Ghost-like reflections of modern visitors viewing wildlife dioramas are juxtaposed against the taxidermied subjects themselves, housed behind the thick glass with their faces molded into permanent expressions of fear, aggression or fleeting passivity.

-Traer Scott
January, 2014

About Traer Scott…

I learned the alchemical secrets of photography when I was 10, standing under a red safe light, carefully processing pinhole prints made in the playground earlier that morning, watching wide-eyed as the images sprang to life in little trays of developer. My school had transformed a supply closet into a tiny darkroom and I found quiet and welcome solitude there. My grandfather had given me my first camera on my sixth birthday, a durable 110 film Kodak and I swiped my parents' Polaroid whenever possible. I slept with a box of Polaroids under my bed, a portfolio of snapshots memorializing a trip to Michigan which were fascinating simply because they were proof of a different day, a different dress, a different city, the fact that very briefly, we had lived a different life. They offered me a retreat from a very tedious and claustrophobic childhood.

I fell in love with the private moments of photography: the anxious anticipation of waiting for film to be developed at the Fotomat, the breathless 30 second wait as shapes and colors began to take form on the gelatinous surface of instant film. These moments were mine and they were delicious, full of private possibility, yet it was an acceptable habit that was in full view of everyone. Now, thirty years later, I am still smitten with the medium, though digital SLRs have replaced my Polaroid and my photos are now quite public.

Like many photographers, my professional accomplishments span many different niches of the industry. I am an exhibiting artist, a teacher, a freelancer and a bestselling author. In the past year, exhibitions of my *Natural History* series have taken me to Shanghai, Portland and Carmel. Articles on *Natural History* have been featured in *National Geographic*, Slate.com, *Popular Photography*, *The British Journal of Photography* and many other publications.

I have four commercially successful photography books, all focused on different aspects of modern animal welfare issues. My first book, *Shelter Dogs*, features 50 portraits of homeless dogs taken while they were living in an animal shelter. *Street Dogs* takes a look at the life of abandoned dogs living in the streets, deserts, allies and wastelands of Mexico and Puerto Rico. *Wild Horses; Endangered Beauty* focused on the modern crisis of the centuries-old American mustang. My most recent book, *Newborn Puppies; Dogs in Their First Three Weeks* examines puppies of many breeds and mixes at the ages of 1-21 days old.

-Traer Scott
January, 2014

Reflections on the Exhibition
Aaron S. Baker, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Psychology

It is difficult to miss the emotion that can be seen in the faces and body language of the museumgoers captured in Traer Scott's series *Natural History*. While they are only faint reflections of the true subjects of this series, the range of human feelings from awe to disinterest, joy to horror, and boldness to fear, all come through with stark clarity. While the exhibits these visitors are viewing are anything but natural, they depict natural phenomena that occur outside of modern human experience. Despite how normal and mundane these scenes may be to the animals that live in these environments, the window into their experience can drive powerful emotion in all of us.

I was most struck by the variation in the types of emotion displayed across the age ranges of the subjects. In the children you largely see excitement, wonder, and in the case of *Bald Eagle* a playful delight that only a toddler can show. You can see the shift in the young adults, as their faces reveal a greater depth of understanding of what they see. Some of their faces reveal concern, while others look on with an intensity seeking understanding. Finally in the adults you see a heaviness as they view the scenes, laden with sorrow, fear, and in some cases disgust. While not all the adults show this intensity of negative emotion, you can sense the additional complexity brought on by an increased understanding of what they are viewing and what it represents.

This shift in reaction across the ages seems to reflect the knowledge we carry as adults as we are touched by the delicate vulnerability of life. While we may be able to see the beauty of a hyena or a vulture, we associate them with the baggage of their relationship with scavenging and death. Even a harmless gazelle in the context of its environment is vulnerable prey, and witnessing this brings us into contact with our own fragility. The emotions brought on by these associations can be overwhelming and can easily overshadow the opportunity to appreciate all that is magnificent about the animals.

Still, I find inspiration in faces of the younger subjects. While we may not want to approach a posturing gorilla with our shirt rolled up, challenging him for supremacy, we can seek to increase our own sense of wonder as we view the world. It is easy to forget that all that we see was once new to us. There was a time when every animal was a strange and curious thing to be explored and understood. When we could look over a vast savannah and be overwhelmed and enthralled at once by this alien land's beauty and harshness. I walk away from this exhibit feeling challenged to approach the world with greater mindfulness for what can be awe inspiring, and wondering how many remarkable experiences go unrealized as we struggle with the burden of knowledge.

-Aaron Baker
January 31, 2014

Reflections on the Exhibition
Kanya Godde, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Anthropology

In *Natural History*, we see Traer Scott's blending of human and animal habitat, where human expression is highlighted through spectral images of people in their natural habitat juxtaposed against reconstructed animal ecology. Because the animals are frozen in time, we can focus our observations on a one-way interaction of human-animal contact. What makes this set of photographs unique is the way human behavior is captured; the animals are unaware of their presence.

The haunting images depict more than emotion; they also portray human behavior. A wide-range of emotions are represented, responses to the exhibit and to some other unseen cultural force. The camera has captured the museumgoers as a biologist would in the wild: raw and unknowing. We, as the observers, get to see the reaction of humans meeting creatures usually only observed in wildlife preserves, zoos, and national parks.

The most striking observation these images purvey is the curiosity of the museum patrons to the exotic animals. Nowhere in the wild would we see such an interaction of untrained human and animal. It allows the museumgoers to become novice biologists and primatologists, studying animal habitat and anatomy, unaware their reflections allow art enthusiasts to, in turn, observe their behavior. We interpret these pictures through our own cultural lens, applying our beliefs, social norms and boundaries to the images echoed in the glass.

Although we think of our human selves as unique, we see animal, and more specifically non-human primate behavior, in our young. In the foreground of print number 12, *Gorilla*, a boy stands, pulling his shirt up, while placing his fists against his chest. He is studying a male gorilla, who is displaying his dominance by standing and pounding his chest. Play teaches juvenile primates societal rules and boundaries. Dominance structure is instilled in non-human primate young through role-playing between lower and higher ranking infants and children. Is this play emulating the role of an adult? Perhaps it is mimicry of a male silverback defending his harem of females.

An ostrich exhibit provides a glimpse of a common event from two times steeped in human evolution: archaic *Homo sapiens* and modern *H. sapiens*. Archaics are the earliest ancestors of our species. They evolved from *H. erectus*, an earlier species of the human lineage that was the first to leave Africa, the first to build fire, and probably the first to practice food sharing along kinship lines. Archaics extended these firsts to diet; the archaics were the first to include new staples such as seafood and eggs. The ostrich exhibit promotes a feeling of antiquity, which extends to the human images captured. A synthesis of modern and archaic lifeways is depicted. Two girls sit eating something that looks like the eggs on display. A man is walking nearby with a plastic bag, appearing to be toting ostrich eggs. Could this be a father bringing his children food? This touching scene is common to archaics and moderns, only separated by contemporary tools and clothing.

These museum patrons seem to be outwardly cognizant they will not encounter the animals on display in the wilds of industrial America. We see two reactions to this: 1) wonder and interest, and 2) casual disinterest. A group of school children gaze in awe at a pair of rhinos, while another group's interest is drawn by a replicated safari. A woman mirrors the curiosity of hunting dogs that have alerted to a sound or a sight in the distance. A man strolls by a mountain goat, traversing a rocky cliff, oblivious to the skill of the mountain goat recreated behind the glass. If we focus on the creatures, we wonder how they would react to us watching them. Would it be with wonder and interest, or would they even bother?

-Kanya Godde
January 28, 2014

Pandas, 2010, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”

Savannah, 2009, archival inkjet print, 20 x 16”

Mountain Goat, 2009, archival inkjet print, 20 x 16”

High Plains, 2010, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”

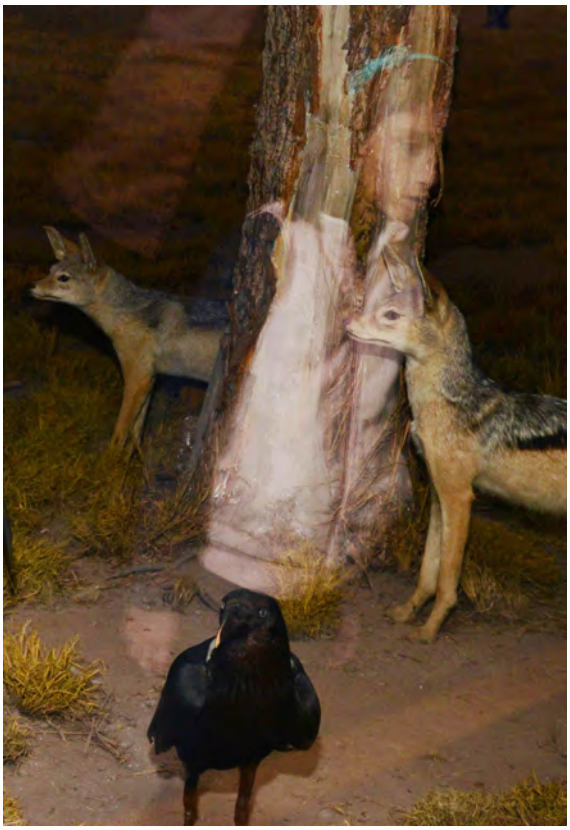
Ostrich, 2009, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”

Bald Eagle, 2013, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”

Horns, 2010, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”

Doe, 2010, archival inkjet print, 20 x 16”

Kudoo, 2010, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”



Coyotes, 2013, archival inkjet print, 20 x 16”

Rhino, 2009, archival inkjet print, 16 x 20”

Gorilla, 2009, archival inkjet print, 16 x 20”

Bears, 2009, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”

Sable Antelope, 2010, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”

Safari, 2010, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”

Hunting Dogs, 2009, archival inkjet print, 16 x 20”

Moose, 2010, archival inkjet print, 16 x 20”

Hyenas, 2009, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”

Gazelle, 2009, archival inkjet print, 20 x 20”