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AT ART MUSEUM, AN INVITATION TO EMPATHIZE WITH WILD  
CREATURES

By Thomas Hine, August 4, 2017



For many years, one of the saddest sights in Philadelphia was Massa, a gorilla who was born in Ghana but who lived for 49 years at the Philadelphia Zoo, where he died in 1984 at age of 54.

His abode was a white-tile cubicle of the sort you might find in a bus station. Day after day, he sat there as we stared in, and he stared back.

When I stared in, I felt guilt in my complicity in keeping him there in his cage. I was pained by his humiliation, embarrassed by the racism of the name he had been given. The stare he offered in return did not offer forgiveness. I had learned in catechism class that animals don't have souls, but Massa's stare seemed soulful, an exchange of fellow feeling. It seemed to me to say that life is hard, that it's sad, and that our fate is beyond our control.

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What elicited my memory of Massa was a photograph, Mrithi, a slightly blurry extreme closeup portrait of a gorilla at Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda that is part of the exhibition "Wild: Michael Nichols," through Sept. 17 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Nichols is a nature photographer who has worked for National Geographic and other magazines. This is the first museum exhibition of his work.

Nichols' photographs are impressive and amazing in a way that has perhaps become all too familiar now that breathtaking nature films are available on several cable channels 24 hours a day. Nichols specializes in still images of creatures at their most dramatic. A tiger leaps toward us, caught in midair. A spotted owl, its wings spread wide, flies toward the camera. A hippopotamus, believe it or not, is found frolicking in the ocean surf, where a huge wave is about to break in the background.

What makes the photo of Mrithi stand out is that it is the only work in this show that is not technically superb. In a show that features super-sharp inkjet prints of redwood and sequoia trees that reach the full height of the Art Museum's grand staircase, this face is murky and indistinct. But it is alive, and responsive, and almost as soulful, if not as depressed, as Massa's was.

It turns out that this image, which was shot in 1980, was an important turning point for Nichols. Though he had done photographs of caves and natural landscapes, this was his first time dealing with animals. As he recounts in *Michael Nichols: A Wild Life* by Melissa Harris — who organized the exhibition along with Peter Barberie, the Art Museum's chief curator of photography — the technically faulty photo was the product of his inexperience with animals. He was photographing a black animal in a dark jungle on unforgiving film, and he overexposed nearly all the images. Still, his ape speaks to us. And most of his work has dealt with animals ever since.

Nichols is advocating wildlife conservation, but he only obliquely addresses the terrible things people do to these animals, and he rarely shows people at all. (One exception is the explorer-researcher Mike Fay, photographed during a 15-month trek on foot through some of Africa's most remote regions. He is shown surveying the landscape, squatting like the ape that he is.)

Most often, as with Mrithi, Nichols invites us to empathize with the creatures he shows. Many of the animals he photographed have been studied and named by researchers, and he shows them both as individuals and as archetypes.

For example, we see a young elephant standing beneath a much larger one, as though in a garage, their trunks intertwined in a gesture of parental affection. This contrasts with a group of orphan elephants at a refuge in Kenya. The young elephants actually organize new substitute families for themselves, but the somewhat random composition suggests these young elephants are unmoored.

About a dozen works from the Art Museum's collection are scattered through the exhibition. Not far from the elephants is an ivory-encrusted chair made in India IN about 1800 for the British market. It invites us to reflect on the horror of sacrificing such magnificent creatures in order to create something so ridiculous.

At the start of the exhibition, a Netherlandish painting of the virgin and child is paired with a photo of a tigress and a cub, setting a theme of parental care and training of offspring. This is obviously intended to be a family-friendly show, designed to appeal to children. One photo shows a young lioness caring for her first litter of cubs. She holds one by the neck, but the cub following behind, lively and mischievous, is the one the child in you will identify with.

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As films near the end of the show document, some of the most striking photographs were essentially designed in advance to make a point. Nichols uses elaborate setups and cameras triggered when an animal passes through an infrared beam. In these camera-trap shots, the photographer is not looking into the animals' eyes. Indeed, he is somewhere else entirely.

Some of Nichols' images are knockouts. You won't forget the one of the days-old Nile crocodile swimming in Gabon. The picture seems to have been taken in the water, from just beneath the crocodile. How in the world did he do that?

Nichols is essentially a journalist who collaborates on magazine stories. This show takes the images out of context and prints many of them very large to emphasize their vividness and fine detail. Still, many of them come across as illustrations from a story you did not get a chance to read.

I understand that the purpose of the show is, in large part, to draw new audiences of young people and those with little experience of seeing art. And, presumably, mixing in works from the permanent collection is a way to make a bridge between these images and most of what the Art Museum offers. There is little attempt to integrate them into the show. Despite their merit as art, they feel less like enrichment than filler.

I am not really sure that seeing Nichols' photos in a museum offers a better experience than seeing them in a book, magazine, or television program. Shouldn't what you find in a museum be very different, and way better, than what you can see at home?