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WILD: MICHAEL NICHOLS EXHIBIT AT THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

By Emily Matzinger, September 18, 2017



Michael Nichols is an award-winning photographer and wildlife advocate who has traveled to some of the most remote places around the world. In 1996, he became a photographer for National Geographic and then became an Editor-at-Large for the magazine in 2008. Nichols has been photographing wildlife for forty years. We are fortunate enough to have the chance to see some of his work showcased in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Museum of Art is currently featuring an exhibition of many of Nichols' world-renowned photographs of wildlife. His photographs include pictures of wild animals like gorillas and tigers, along with the national parks and prominent scientific conservationists like Jane Goodall. Nichols' images give viewers the chance to engage with the grandeur and power of these wild animals and yet catch a glimpse of their fragility as well. Nichols calls this dynamic a reflection of our own humanity. His photographs seem to call us to look deeper at humanity's complex relationship to wildlife.

In an interview with the New York Times, Nichols says he made the decision to be intimate and intense in his photojournalism. His passion for capturing this intensity and intimacy of the natural world is certainly reflected in the up-close and detailed photographs he has of silverback mountain gorillas, lions, elephants, and other animals. In the same interview with the New York Times, Nichols goes on to say that when he is photographing animals like gorillas, he has to show with his body language that they are king and he is the servant. He explains, "If you're on a safari in Africa, most people get impatient after five minutes. Well, the elephants don't calm down for 45 minutes. So it's only in the second hour sitting with a group of elephants that you start to see into their world, and you start to see they're doing all these sentient things that we reserve for ourselves." Nichols sees much of the world as tame, and he believes most people actually want the world to be this way: comfortable, calm, controllable. Yet, he seeks out the wildness and the beauty in their natural states.

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I had the chance to see the Wild exhibit recently and the photographs were incredible. There was one image of Jou Jou the chimpanzee reaching out and gently touching Dr. Jane Goodall's forehead. The photograph is from a book co-authored by Dr. Goodall and Nichols, entitled Brutal Kinship. The photograph and book both encapsulate the idea that, just as we depend on wildlife, wildlife depends on us, and yet we continue to exploit it. Again, we see this tension between humankind and the natural world. This beautiful picture is accompanied by many more in the chimpanzees exhibit they visited while writing the book. The exhibition will be open until Sept. 17 and students can receive discounted admission for fourteen dollars a ticket with their student I.D. On the first Sunday of the month and Wednesday night, there is Pay as You Wish admission. Michael Nichol's Wild exhibit is not only a beautiful display of the land and animals, but it is a call to be more intentional in how we interact with the natural world.