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GALLERY

Philadelphia
Museum of Art

Q&A WITH MICHAEL NICHOLS



On the eve of his first-ever art museum exhibition, Michael Nichols shares how he photographed some of the wildest creatures and places on Earth.

You've photographed a charging elephant in the Central African Republic, a mama lion protecting her cubs in the Serengeti, and grizzlies taking a bath at a water hole in Yellowstone. How did you get so close?

The critical thing about the way I've worked is to do a lot of research and to partner with a scientist or an anthropologist or someone that is completely obsessed with the subject. That allows you some proximity. But each of the three things you asked me about had different circumstances.

I knew that elephants went to that creek at night because they didn't feel safe in the daytime. I was sleeping a few hundred yards from it at the research scientist's camp. I would go to bed with my cameras prepared, on the floor next to my little hut. I would wake up before dawn, pick my cameras up, and go see who was at the creek. If the wind was right, I could get very close.

"As soon as I made a flash, that elephant started charging. That's when I made my favorite picture of my life, just about." That particular morning—like a half-light of dawn—I haven't had coffee, I'm still groggy but I'm ready to take the picture. The camera is ready to do what it's got to do. As soon as I made a flash, that elephant started charging. That's when I made my favorite picture of my life, just about. I start to run because I'm not conscious enough to see that she's putting on the brakes. In the picture, you can see that she's planted her foot, she's throwing water with her trunk at me. You can feel the dusk and the energy. The purple color of the photograph was pretty much from the time of day. I had a tree picked out behind me that I would run to. That's your safety with an elephant so they can't just blast through you and kill you. You get behind a tree and maybe you've got a chance.

How close were you to the elephant?

Oh, it's just enough. That's about what it is—it's just enough not to die. And I chose the lens just enough not to die. Because the bigger the lens you use, the more technically difficult it is and the more heavy. I chose a slightly telephoto lens that I could carry easily. A 200-millimeter lens. It's not like the elephant is more than fifty feet.

Your approach with lions was different?

The lions were comfortable with me being in the car. You find them while they're still asleep in the daytime. You move to a distance that's very respectful, sit there for fifteen minutes, then move a little closer. You get closer until you're at the area where you want to work, but that's not nearly as close as you need for the kind of photographs that I was making. We would put the robot camera out the other side of the car away from the lions, drive it around the car and right up to the pride, and then let it go to sleep. And they would go like, "Well, it didn't do anything to us yesterday," and go back to sleep.

One thing I never wanted in my photographs, after a certain period of time, was I didn't want the subject to be about me. That elephant charging, that's all about me but that was early. I didn't want the lions interacting with me in any way. That's called habituation. Habituation is always to a certain distance that the animal is comfortable with. And the distance is usually a distance that's healthy for the animal.

There are all kinds of ways to get close and you use research and science ahead of you. Technology can help but you've got to really know your subject. By the time I got to lions, I knew that this is the king of the beasts, it's not going to care about a robot. That's exactly what it turned out to be.

"A biologist says to me, 'There are four big trails leading to this pool in the middle of nowhere. I think it's a place that bears like to go to. Let's find out.'"

And the bears at the water hole?

The bears never saw anybody. The camera was there for two seasons during the months that we knew the bears would use that pool. The first bear that came over to the camera knocked it down. That's what we dealt with for a long time. I talked to the biologist and we both agreed: let's let them do that and they'll get bored with it. That's how we ended up with a camera down at the edge of the pool that got the mother and cubs. All I'm after really is a still photograph that "ties a room together" or resonates. A mother and two cubs—grizzly—and she's swimming right in front of the lens.

Did the bears set off a motion sensor on the camera?

The only time a human was there was to fix the cameras, reload them, check them, clean them after the bears had knocked them over. Three people at a time. They had to have bear spray and report when they were going and when they were coming out. It was serious because grizzly bears are dangerous. That's the concept of me not being there, and that's the most ultimate of that genre because no one's ever there. The camera was a complete stranger as well.

In 1990 you partnered with scientist J. Michael Fay on a project about a vast, largely uninhabited corridor in Central Africa. It resulted in the book *The Last Place on Earth*. What was the goal?

Fay's Megatransect was 1990 to 2000. The physical part was 456 days. We planned it for two years. He was like, "It's unbroken forest and we're going to make that into a national park and I'm going to walk it." In the part of Africa that we worked, there are no cars, there are no roads. It's all done on foot. Animals are all much, much more frightened by legs. They can get totally habituated to wheels, to you being in a tree, to you being on top of an elephant. But what animals get when they see two legs is "human." And that means fear.

He literally documented every single tree that was along his path, every leopard footprint, every gorilla dung, gorilla footprints. When you do a transect, that's how you get population dynamics.

Any unexpected outcomes?

The Megatransect was published as three articles and Mike was still walking. I got really sick after the first leg and was in bed for three months with hepatitis. But the world started following it, and then after it was over we realized that we could make a parks system. We continued publishing. We just kept pounding it and somewhere in that process he showed my photographs to the president of Gabon in a hotel in New York City. The president—president for life—says, "These things are in my country? Make the parks. Draw up the boundaries, and I'll sign the decree." You could only get that from a dictator, by the way.

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Nobody was displaced by anything that we did there because there were no people. In the end, we made thirteen national parks in Gabon, a couple in Congo, and one in the Central African Republic. And that's not me doing that, it's Mike Fay and my pictures and the conservationists.

You've photographed two of the most complex trees in the world: A 1,500-year-old, 300-foot-tall redwood and a 3,200-year-old, 247-foot-tall sequoia. For the exhibition, these photographs have been re-created as supersized tapestries (essentially fine-art prints) in the Great Stair Hall. Can you describe the process of photographing these beautiful giants?

I think the most important thing I could tell the audience is neither one of these trees can you see when you're on the ground. If I'm on the ground, all I see is the bottom branches. I'm not seeing the tree, I'm in the forest. But if you drop a cable down through mid-air, now the cameras can see the tree. We started up high and we dropped two meters at a time. There were three cameras on this thing, and they're making a panorama. The cameras are making a horizontal panorama and they're coming down and painting the tree. I'm on a computer changing the exposure.

Nineteen straight days, 3:00 a.m., and I'm just the same maniac that I always am. On the thirteenth day, there was a moment where the sky got thin—we were doing these at dawn—and that's what you're looking for in the forest, where you still have some clouds to make the light soft. If it's really cloudy, it's just dead. It's when—we call it cloudy bright—and the tree started glowing. I can't see it, I'm looking through a computer on the ground, but the guys up in the tree are saying, "Nick, the tree, it's glowing, it's alive, we can feel it." That's when we made the set of pictures that became the composite we're putting in the Great Stair Hall.

It was a five-page fold out in National Geographic. That's what's so cool about what we're doing in Philadelphia. They've already served all these purposes in the world that I grew up in, telling stories. Now they're serving more artistic purposes but still conservation purposes. It's still a mind-changing purpose. I don't see this mission that we're doing in Philadelphia any different than the other one.

When I made those pictures, I made them to be life-size. They're made with enough detail. When people are standing at the bottom of the Great Stair Hall, they can go up to biologist Jim Spickler, the guy in the red, and they see how tall they are in relation to him.

Tree Banner Great Stair Hall

To have the tree tapestries be sixty-five feet tall in the Great Stair Hall, it's like one of the great places on Earth. And to have them be with Calder and Diana? I mean, I am over the moon.

Wild is the first-ever art museum exhibition devoted to your work. What does it mean for you to have your photographs next to a Picasso, a Brancusi, a Duchamp?

Okay, for me, it's Tommy Dale Palmore. When my wife Reba and I ran away from home to go to California, we had a hundred dollars in our pocket when we crossed the bridge. We were living hand to mouth. She got a job at a frame shop—my wife's an artist and a really great artist. Reba brought that Palmore poster home from the frame shop; it is famous throughout the world.

In Philadelphia, the poster that we bought 35 years ago is in our son's apartment in Drexel, sitting on the radiator, all bent up. When I went to see him recently, I started crying because I knew that we were going to place one of my photos with Palmore's painting here.

So putting my photographs with great works of art? It's actually not a dream I had, I didn't think I could have that dream. Exhibition curators Melissa Harris and Peter Barberie brought me the dream and I just gave it all I had. But I'm thrilled to death.