

L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

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Night wild: Photograms of Animals made in the Wild

For over 35 years, I have traveled alone to remote wild places, photographing animals from the smallest insect to the largest whale. Each encounter leaves me in wonder and awe. I seek to transmit the same sense of wonder and awe to my audience through my artwork.

I create one-of-a-kind, life-sized photograms of wild animals directly onto light-sensitive photographic paper at night in the field. A photogram is a photographic print made without a camera or negative. Working without a camera for the past decade has opened an entirely new creative world, deepening my connection to and collaboration with wild animals. These works are not digital prints and they are never manipulated; each exists as a singular, unrepeatable object.

The photogram has a long lineage in the history of photography. William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the medium's pioneers, created some of the first photographs in the 1840's by placing plants on light-sensitized paper and exposing them to daylight, producing a direct impression. He described his experiments as "drawings made with the forces of nature" – a description that continues to resonate in my own practice.

Inspired by Talbot's early techniques of camera-less photography, I created my own methods, through months of long nights spent in trial and error, first with insects in the rainforests of Borneo, and then with a community of striped skunks in the forests of New York. Once I had perfected the technique, I spent three years working with American black bears. Most recently I have worked with a rescued critically endangered black rhino in South Africa, and African elephants in Kenya. These works are 9 x 14 ft, the limit of what is possible with silver gelatin photographic paper.

This is my process: working patiently on moonless nights, I lay out large sheets of light-sensitive silver gelatin photographic paper. When I am working with American black bears, these sheets are 3 meters in length. Once the paper is in position, I sit in the dark just a few feet from the paper and wait for an animal to pass by. I wait all night. I often wait night after night. I do not use a hide and I am fully visible to the animals. This takes tremendous trust, awareness, openness and stillness. I must be alone.

When an animal appears and passes in front of the photographic paper, I make a quick exposure with a small handheld flash, minimal enough to go unnoticed. After the animal disappears into the forest, I collect the paper, store it in a lightproof box, and later develop the print in a traditional darkroom.

Only then does the image reveal itself.

The animal leaves a 'white shadow' where the paper remains unexposed. Exposed areas turn black or shades of gray depending on the light exposure. Plants, rocks, insects and even raindrops are recorded in unpredictable ways. Occasionally an animal will leave footprints or chew the paper.

After selecting the best photograms, I return to the darkroom to tone the prints with pure gold to affect coloration and to ensure archival stability. The result is a one-of-a-kind photographic artwork, a direct life-sized impression of a wild animal onto photographic paper. Each piece is a ghostly gift which reflects the fragility and majesty of the natural world.

To my knowledge, I am the only photographic artist working with wild animals to create photograms in the field. While I am on nature's time, I also feel urgency to communicate my vision of the natural world as I watch species after species rapidly disappear from the planet by human hand.

When wild animals reveal themselves in moments of grace, that revelation moves from life to paper, from paper to viewer. Unlike digital photography of wildlife, often made with zoom lenses from far away, the viewer feels the presence of the animal on the paper. The effect is visceral and profound. Every choice I make is meant to honor my extraordinary experience with animals in the wild and to encourage a world in which all creatures and their habitats are revered, respected, and protected.

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