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Department of English
University of Houston
Houston, TX 77204-3013

editors@gulfcoastmag.org
713.743.3223

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HOUSTON INDIE BOOK FESTIVAL



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Back and Forth in Time: Diane Barber on the Work of Allison Hunter

Early cave paintings include elaborate scenes illustrating how intertwined man and beast were at a time when humans depended upon animals for sustenance, mobility, protection from the elements, and work. But that relationship has changed. In his essay "Why Look at Animals?," John Berger posits that the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of a major shift in the human/animal relationship. Advances in technology and the arrival of zoos relocated beasts from the center of our world to marginal spaces such as laboratories, factories, homes, and circuses.

Houston-based artist Allison Hunter upends that dynamic with mysterious and powerful depictions of captive animals once again assuming a position at the center of our attention. In so doing, she asks us to consider how and why we control, display, and interact with nature in modern society and what that portends for the future of our world. Hunter, whose artwork spans photography, video, installation, and now painting, does not approach her subject matter with a heavy hand. Instead, she forges an intimacy with her subjects, one in which they return her gaze with a directness and calm that is all but impossible to capture in natural habitats. From the initial encounter registered with her camera, Hunter strips the scene to its essence, removing all of the "noise" from the frame. Nowhere do we see the bars of cages, the fixed perimeters of zoo environments, or the encroaching line of strollers and people filing past in anticipation of the next wild encounter. The animals in Hunter's work occupy the center of the universe—hers and ours—providing us with insight into and awareness of these mysterious creatures that inhabit the planet alongside us. The resulting works are delicate, poetic, and undeniably beautiful.

Hunter's practice is rooted in research but the outcome is not intended to be a dissertation based in scientific fact. Instead, she remains true to the art of it all, deftly blending science with a sort of visual poetry that quietly prods her audience toward a higher consciousness. In her video installation *Zoosphere*, presented at DiverseWorks (Houston) in 2010, Hunter maximized the impact of the artwork/audience encounter using scale, sound, and a disarming balance of sensory overload and deprivation. The gallery environment was completely dark. Every inch of the wall space that was not occupied by a video projection was painted black, effectively removing all sense of the outside world. People moved through the space beckoned by sounds of trumpeting elephants, splashing sea lions, and chittering frogs, and lured by mammoth and minute projections of living creatures strategically positioned on the floor, around corners, and in the narrow recesses and hollows of the room. The space was truly alive, the encounters with the animals active, dynamic, and oddly personal in a way that even the best zoos struggle to provide.

When Hunter speaks of the exhibition at DiverseWorks, it becomes clear that her move from photography to installation in this ongoing investigation of the animal kingdom was a watershed moment in her creative practice. While her photographs remain places of quiet contemplation of the world around us, her installations prompt a more visceral response. We are catapulted back in time and place, reconnecting with the primal world we all once knew so well as inhabitants of this earth. How is it that as we have evolved as a species, in an era where we have more access to information than ever before, our sense of *connection* to the things that surround us is more and more in question? Perhaps this is what makes Allison Hunter's work so magical. Somehow she manages to bridge a divide, to reconstitute a long-neglected relationship with the natural world. In doing so, Hunter reminds us all of how magnificent the world truly is if we can actually manage to see beyond all of the clutter.

From New Animals by Allison Hunter

Untitled #5, 2005 (detail) | digital c-print, 30" x 50"

Untitled #8, 2006 | digital c-print, 30" x 50"

Untitled #10, 2006 | digital c-print, 30" x 50"

Untitled (elephants 1), 2007 | digital c-print, 32" x 89"

Untitled (zebu and others), 2008 | digital c-print, 44" x 92"

All images courtesy of the artist.