

artspace



Recent Animals

Allison Hunter

Exhibition Sponsor: **Northwestern Mutual Financial Network**

January 17–March 7, 2009
Gallery 1

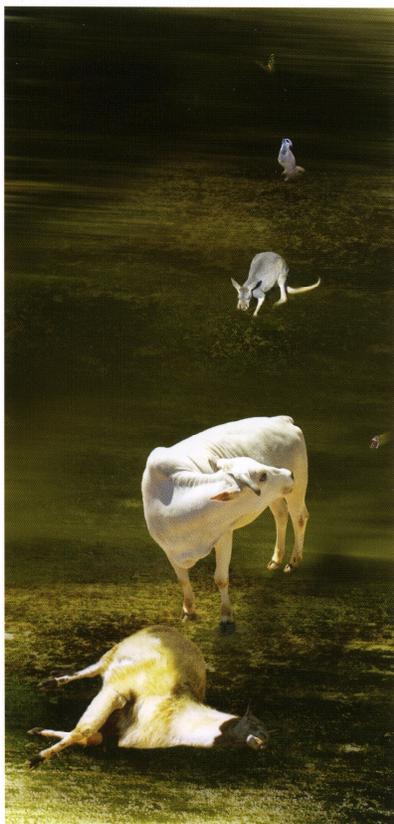
Recent Animals

Allison Hunter explores the relationship between non-human animals and humans through photography and video. She begins her art making process by capturing still and video images of animals in captivity, primarily photographing at zoos. She scans or digitizes the film and then manipulates the images on the computer. The resulting digital files are printed as large-scale photographs or videos in small editions.

An interview with Lia Newman (LN), Artspace's Director of Programs & Exhibitions, and Allison Hunter (AH) follows.

LN: *Although you initially photograph animals in captivity, you ultimately remove much of the evidence of human interaction from the final images. By removing the animals from their pens, you risk making people unaware that the animals are actually in captivity. Why do you remove the human elements from the original images and how do you feel it contributes to your overall intent?*

AH: I digitally remove the human elements from my photographs in order to create a sense of mystery and an open-ended narrative. In my earlier work from 2002, I removed less, but as I continued to work on this theme, I found that the more I removed, the more compelling the animal subjects appeared. The animals became more important than the backgrounds, which were the human built "stages" of the zoo habitat. By digitally deleting the built environment, I liberate the animals into a virtual space devoid of humans. When I photograph I feel an obligation to the captive animals to show their uniqueness and their beauty and grace. We are inundated by



Allison Hunter, *Untitled (zebu and others)*, 2008

reproductions of animals in our popular culture. When we see an actual flamingo we have a hard time truly seeing the bird before us. By digitally displacing the animal from the zoo context, I hope to illuminate the animal more clearly, showing the viewer what she or he might have missed due to a particular setting.

LN: *While you might remove most of the commercial feeling one would experience if actually at the petting zoo, the animals are still not necessarily portrayed in natural settings. For example, sheep, goats, and horses often appear to be floating, in isolation, in large expanses of grassy or sandy terrain. You seem to be evoking the surreal through these nonspecific landscapes.*

AH: I digitally alter the landscape to look unreal — in some cases troubled or ominous — to reflect my belief that animals are never free from human endangerment. Even though I only photograph in reputable zoos and wildlife sanctuaries (such as the Fossil Rim wildlife center in Glen Rose, Texas, where I photographed the gazelle in *Untitled (gazelle)*, 2007), I feel upset over the fact that the reason the gazelle needs protecting is our fault. That feeling goes into the creation of the work. In another example, *Untitled 12*, 2007, you see two sheep standing in what looks like an unpaved road, possibly on a rural farm. The sheep actually are standing in a children's petting zoo area in the Houston zoo. They were on that very ground in front of the fence you see in the photograph. I did not remove the background from the photo. I darkened it by cropping and digitally removing details like the Houston skyline to create a sense of mystery and vulnerability. By removing elements like the skyline, I leave the viewer with more questions than answers, more mystery than documentary. I like to leave a sense of ambiguity in my work so that multiple issues can emerge, including the ethical treatment of all beings. In contrast, the work of Sue Coe, who depicts the cruelty to animals in factory farming, addresses this specific issue through graphic drawings. You can't look at her work and miss the point. I think with my work you can find multiple entry points that address issues ranging from the captive animals' condition to the human condition, all of which I hope appeal to a wide audience.

LN: *I never would have paralleled your work with Coe's because of the difference in approach. Both are certainly useful but your approach and the resulting images seem more accessible to the general public. Even though these animals are in captivity, the manipulation of the images*

and particularly the use of light serve to present the individual animals as majestic, graceful, and beautiful. Do you worry that the beauty of the images overall might downplay the conditions of animals in captivity?

AH: I am concerned with exposing a more deeply embedded side of our culture — something less obvious than our cruel living conditions for animals, which is an issue I take seriously. I look for institutions where you see a reciprocal benefit between the captive animal and the human captor. The sheep in *Untitled 12*, 2007 were photographed in a children's petting zoo within the Houston Zoo. Soft bristle brushes are provided to brush the goats and sheep. A zoo staff person observes and informs visitors. The two sheep I photographed seemed to be well taken care of, and the toddlers and teenagers trying to pet them seemed to be caring and respectful. Their enclosure was about forty feet square, with a carpet of soft earth and an open-air roof. Given that optimal setting, I ask, "Is this the best we can do, and why or why not?"

LN: I am interested in the fact that you consider the locations carefully. You have probably experienced an array of conditions and environments. Personally, as a vegan and someone with an interest in animal rights, I avoid zoos altogether just because of the overall implications. It's tricky though. Once the damage has been done, generally as a result of human interaction to begin with (extinction or endangering populations, captivity, etc.), it's hard to go back. You can't free these animals, so I suppose the best we can do is make their conditions the best they can be and take advantage of the situation for educational

purposes. However, it's hard not to wonder what's next for this complicated relationship.

You have mentioned that your interest in non-human animals stems in part from your background in feminist art and theory. You parallel women and animals, as they have historically both been overlooked and marginalized. Throughout the history of art, the female nude has been viewed as an object to be gazed upon. Beginning in the 1970s, many women artists acted in counterpoint to this idea by actually using their own bodies in their work. They found that this was often the best way to elucidate issues regarding gender. I find it really interesting that, in a sense, you have taken this idea to a new level, using animal bodies in captivity as your starting point for creating a dialogue about speciesism. Can you talk about the idea of animals as subject/object a bit?

AH: As a feminist working in representational art, I am sensitive to the possible exploitation of my subjects and of my medium. Photography is not a transparent medium that tells the truth. In fact, it can expose our cultural assumptions, if we pay attention. I try to pay attention in order to become a better human being. Hopefully, I show others what I have learned through my work.

For example, I "catch the eye" of the animal subject, as in *Untitled (gazelle)*, 2007, where a gazelle stands in the middle of a dark forest staring at the viewer. The gazelle seems to pose; yet it is captive in a setting where it is exposed to humans on a daily basis. The complicity of the animal in my work is undermined by the fact that it does not have a lot of choices in that setting except to be photographed. My intention is to learn



Allison Hunter, *Untitled (gazelle)*, 2007



Allison Hunter, *Untitled (elephants 1)*, 2007

from this myself, as well as to show the viewer this false human-context at play. In this way, I find making art can be an epistemological process whereby artists learn about themselves through the very act of making art.



Allison Hunter, *Untitled (turtle)*, video still, 2008

LN: *That makes a lot of sense to me. I view art-making as an inherent need within an artist — if you weren't learning through your process it would seem pointless. It can't all be about what you have to say and show other people. There has to*

be some payoff — something that motivates the artist to act.

More recently, you have forayed into video. Can you talk about this interest?

AH: I first began working in video twenty years ago. At that time, I was making experimental single-channel video using my body as the subject, in the style of feminist video artists such as Martha Rosler, who used the medium as a mouthpiece. These artists filmed themselves directly addressing the audience. I stopped working in video seven years ago to pursue more collaborative projects such as my public art installation I worked on between 1999 and 2003 in Eastern Europe.

I began to work in video again this year in order to capture the graceful movement of the animals and their interactions in groups of elephants, for example. I also wanted to emphasize their “real time” existence as living beings rather than have them mistaken for taxidermy models in my

photographs. Some viewers thought the llama in the foreground of *Untitled (zebu and others)*, 2008, was dead. In contrast, the turtle in *Untitled (turtle)* is never mistaken for a dead animal. However, I emphasize its life as a captive creature (not dead, but not free) by looping the video sequence of the animal endlessly swimming up for air in the enclosed space.

LN: *Do you envision continuing to work with video in conjunction with the still images?*

AH: Yes, as long as both digitally manipulated photography and video help me explore my work. For example, while making my most recent video, *Untitled (butterflies)*, 2008, I discovered a new way to render light in motion, which I translated into my most recent digital photograph *Untitled (cocoons)*, 2008. Through experimentation, I learned a new approach in both mediums. I first used Adobe Photoshop and Premiere thirteen years ago when they were fairly basic. The more recent technical advances of these software programs and their accessibility to the public have opened up new possibilities to be explored and exploited by artists.

LN: *Can you talk a little bit about what's next within this series and how you see your work developing overall?*

AH: I want to continue to explore my interest in non-human animals within compositions that I will construct, using dramatic lighting and unusual environments such as seascapes and even outer space. I imagine these new works possibly manifested as videos, photographs, even objects, within an installation environment. I would like my future work to respond to that of other artists, such as Bill Viola and Diana Thater, who incorporate video in large-scale installations.



Allison Hunter, *Untitled 12*, 2007, above

Allison Hunter, *Untitled 4*, 2005, below

Artist biography

Allison Hunter is an international visual artist who, over the past twenty years, has worked in photography, performance, video, painting, drawing, and installation. She earned her first MFA at the Regional Art School of Lausanne (Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne), Switzerland (1990), and her second MFA at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York (1997). She currently lives and works in Houston, Texas. Her photographs have been included in numerous exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe. Hunter has participated in international video and sculpture art residencies at institutions such as the Banff Centre for the Arts, Calgary, Canada and the Hermit Center for Metamedia, Plasy, Czech Republic. Her installation project, *SIGNMAKERS* (1998–2003), was commissioned by three European sculpture centers in Lithuania, Latvia, and Finland, and by the 2003 Kingston Sculpture Biennial in NY. Hunter's work is part of numerous public and private collections including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX., and in NY at the University Art Museum at Albany (SUNY), the Albany Institute of History and Art, and the Center for Photography at Woodstock.

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Exhibition Sponsor



on the cover:

Allison Hunter, *Untitled 14*, 2007



Allison Hunter, *Untitled (flamingos)*, 2008

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Artspace inspires creative energy! A non-profit visual art center, Artspace presents award-winning exhibitions, educational programs, and artist studios open to the public. Approximately 100 artists are professional members of the Artspace Artists Association with 35 artists maintaining studios at Artspace. Artspace is open to the public Tues.–Sat., from 10 AM–6 PM and on the first Friday of each month for the First Friday Gallery Walk until 10 PM. Studio hours vary.

Admission is free; donations appreciated. Guided tours of exhibitions and artist studios are available for groups of 10 or more. Located in Historic City Market in Raleigh at the corner of Blount and Davie Streets. Artspace is supported by the North Carolina Arts Council; by the United Arts Council of Raleigh and Wake County; by the Raleigh Arts Commission; and by individual members, corporate donors, and private foundations.

For more information, please visit www.artspacenc.org

