

photograph

Domesticated: Photographs by Amy Stein

National Academy of Sciences, Washington



Amy Stein, from *Domesticated*. Courtesy the artist and the National Academy of Sciences

A first glimpse of *Domesticated: Photographs* by Amy Stein, at the National Academy of Sciences through October 20, led me to thoughts like these: How did she get that shot? Why was she taking pictures rather than running for help? For instance, there's a photo of a girl standing blankly on a low diving board, as if before a back dive, temporarily transfixed by a huge black bear on other side of a chain-link fence. And there's a photo of a raccoon cornered on a blacktop playground by two teenage boys, one wielding a skateboard, the other an acetylene torch. What luck! What grit!

Then I learned the truth. To get these photographs, Stein was not a hunter but a gatherer. That is, her photographs of humans and animals confronting one another are not chance shots but constructions based on stories that Stein heard in and around Matamoras, Pennsylvania.

This is Gregory Crewdson-type photography with animals tossed in. So the bear photo is based on this story: “It was the hottest day of summer and I was learning to do back-flips off the diving board. As the day was ending, I saw him staring at me next to the fence. My mom always said to stay still if I saw a bear.”



Amy Stein, *Howl*, 2007, from *Domesticated*. Courtesy the artist and the National Academy of Sciences

To be honest, some photos paled when I knew the truth. (Maybe I was miffed at being temporarily taken in.) My questions changed too: Is that a stuffed bear or a man in a bear suit? Why wasn't the girl told to look scared? Why is her mouth cut off? Why are Stein's skies so often bleached out? And why are a few of the most potent photographs – the cornered raccoon photo, for example – missing their stories?

Not all of Stein's pictures suffer for truth, though. At the center of *Howl*, you see the pole of a street lamp in a parking lot flanked by two small bare trees. A coyote howls at the light in the darkness. Who cares what's fake? It's still a haunting story of twisted nature: “The coyote walked straight up to the light and began to yip and howl. He stayed there for a couple of minutes and then moved on to the next light in the parking lot.”

— By Sarah Boxer 06/16/2014