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Arts & Entertainment: Gallery (museums)

“Domesticated” At the National Academy of Sciences to October 20

The call of the wild hits small-town Pennsylvania in staged documentary photos.

By Louis Jacobson • May 30, 2014



“Return” by Amy Stein (2005)

Amy Stein, a Los Angeles–based artist who grew up partly in D.C., is known for the piercing documentary photography series she’s produced in the past decade.

In “Halloween in Harlem,” she recorded the tradition of children trick-or-treating at “liquor marts, dollar stores, beauty shops, and bodegas” rather than at neighbors’ residences. In “Tall Poppy Syndrome,” she explored how Australia’s egalitarian principle of that name plays out visually throughout its countryside. Perhaps most viscerally, Stein photographed Americans in the midst of automobile breakdowns, leaving them literally and figuratively “Stranded.”

It is a bit odd, then, to see one of Stein’s earliest series—“Domesticated”—take the spotlight in her first solo show in D.C., at the National Academy of Sciences. These images, made

primarily between 2005 and 2008, were photographed in and around Matamoras, a small town in northeastern Pennsylvania that borders a state forest.

Stein constructed these tableaux based on “real stories from local newspapers and oral histories of intentional and random interactions between humans and animals.” This approach sounds promising, but the end result underwhelms.

The idea of photographing set pieces in small-town America using local residents immediately brings to mind the work of Gregory Crewdson, who has been using that approach for well over a decade, often with the assistance of lighting and soundstage crews costing as much as a small independent film. Crewdson’s images—primarily of haunted, twilight locations in western Massachusetts—runs deep with psychological complexity and enigmatic meaning.

One expects something similar from Stein, who frames her works as “modern dioramas of our new natural history” that explore how “we at once seek connection with the mystery and freedom of the natural world, yet we continually strive to tame the wild around us and compulsively control the wild within our own nature.”

It’s no surprise, then, that Stein, via email, calls Crewdson “a big early influence” on her work, despite the thematic differences in their approaches. The problem with “Domesticated” is that too many of Stein’s images recount the banal.

This is nowhere clearer than in one image of a woman and a fox in a backyard that illustrates this bit of dialogue: “Last summer when I was hanging the laundry out back I would see a fox. He would watch me, then run away through the high grass.” So let’s get this straight: Woman enters backyard; woman sees animal; animal runs away. This kind of encounter happens all the time, and not just in rustic settings like Matamoras. Why the artistic treatment?

Another image, titled “Groceries,” features a woman emptying her car of foodstuffs, then turning to find a bear eyeing her loot. Granted, this is more dramatic than the fox encounter, but the scenario is common enough in rural areas to inspire countless Smokey

the Bear–style public service announcements about how to keep bears from getting your grub.

Similarly, “Trasheaters” features a pair of what appear to be wolves chowing down at knocked-over garbage cans. What homeowner hasn’t had the unpleasant experience of finding that wildlife has gotten into the trash? (For the record, the animals in the images are a mix of a mix of live, dead and taxidermied creatures.)

Stein does find some scenarios of greater interest—a deer kneeling with eerie serenity amid greenhouse plants; a small mammal lying on a branch over a river as cars whizz by on a bridge at dusk; and a girl and a bear engaged in a half-menacing, half-comic stare-off at a swimming pool. There’s also a disturbing image of two boys cornering a raccoon, one holding a lit flare and the other a raised skateboard—a concise snapshot of budding sociopathy.

More often, though, the less drama, the better. In one image, Stein presents a birdhouse on a pole that’s been bent over to the point of uselessness. And in another, “Howl,” she photographs a wolf at night amid the perfectly symmetrical backdrop of a snow-covered parking lot. The animal’s head is raised, howling at a street light that’s serving as a stand-in for the moon. In this image, Stein has achieved her goal: capturing for posterity a fleeting oddity that says something important about our blended world of nature and humankind.