

DART DesignArtsDaily

Domesticated by Amy Stein

By Peggy Roalf Wednesday September 30, 2009

Since America's colonial settlement days, the idea of wilderness has cast a long shadow over rational thought. From church pulpits across the Massachusetts Bay Colony during the early 17th century, Puritan ministers argued that it was the settlers' God-ordained duty to transform this "hideous howling wilderness" in which they had been plunged into the earthly paradise envisioned in the Bible.

Not until Henry David Thoreau came along in the 1840s, with his then-radical ideas about living with nature instead of conquering it, was the Puritan concept of "hell on earth" finally tempered, and Wilderness [Thoreau's cap W] appreciated as a desirable stage for human interactions. The dichotomy between these two points of view still exists and has, if anything, become harder to decipher as the complexities of everyday life increase.

Photographer Amy Stein, whose work is currently on view at ClampArt Gallery, has taken up the ambiguous question of human and non-human interaction on the edge of wilderness in her series *Domesticated*. Over the last several years she has created allegorical tableaux in which people and animals meet in suburban backyards. Or so it seems.



Left to right: *Howl*, 2007. *Watering Hole*, 2005. Copyright Amy Stein, courtesy ClampArt Gallery.

In *Watering Hole*, a chubby pre-pubescent girl, who has just turned around backwards on a diving board, takes in a large black bear staring at her from the other side of the chain link fence. You sense the apprehension in her rigid pose, her eyes locked on the creature standing tall on hind legs just a few yards away. In *Trasheaters*, two foxes make a picnic out of the contents of a garbage can at dusk; lights are on in the adjacent tract house, but the feast goes unnoticed. In *Riverside*, a fox rests catlike on a log projecting over a calm river; auto lights from a nearby bridge are all that interrupt this seemingly idyllic evening scene.

Each of the images in this series raises a question about the intersection of nature and culture; the ways in which we perceive - and manage - wild creatures who turn up in suburban neighborhoods; the disparity between human and animal rights - here represented in a hilariously unbalanced meeting between a macho-man hunter, resting his rifle on a backyard chain link fence, and a male turkey, tail feathers aloft and chest puffed out, standing a few yards from his executioner on the snow; and more.

I caught up with Amy for an email interview yesterday. Here is what transpired:

Peggy Roalf: How did you come upon the idea of making narrative photographs of human-animal interactions?

Amy Stein: An earlier series of mine, *Women and Guns*, had introduced me to the hunting culture and I wanted to explore it further. I began to spend time with hunters and asked them about their motivation and the appeal of their pursuit. What struck me was that a majority of them expressed a reverence for animals; I also found that they felt an intense romanticism for the wild. This seeming contradiction fired my imagination and I knew I wanted to create something more fertile than straight environmental portraits.

PR: How did the town of Matamoras figure into your *Domesticated* project?

AS: It was quite the perfect accident. My fascination with the inconsistency of killing what you revere led me to explore taxidermy, taxidermy schools, and taxidermists. This world introduced me to another layer in the hunters' strange relationship with the hunted. Not only do people take great pleasure in being among the wild with the intent of dispatching life from creatures great and small, but there is also a community of people who drag the carcass from woods, to their car, to the taxidermy shop, and then to their front room with their TV, sofa chair, and family photos.

PR: How did taxidermized critters as subjects in the series evolve?

AS: From the early stages of this project, taxidermy was an important part of the story I wanted to tell. To me, taxidermy is the ultimate totem to the duality of our relationship to the wild. I made several attempts to tell this story through narrative, but was not happy with the results. I knew what aspect of the story I wanted to tell and spent a great deal of time in Dave Clark's [taxidermy shop](#) trying to figure it out. I see Dave as a collaborator on this project. He's a true artist in his own right and a really wonderful person.

PR: How did you find the people who ultimately told you stories about their animal interactions?

AS: I spent the better part of two months in town before I took a single shot. Dave Clark also happened to be the unofficial mayor of Matamoras and his shop was the equivalent of the town square. While waiting for inspiration, I would talk with the locals about their relationship to the wild around them. The conversations would inevitably turn towards stories of their backyards, swimming pools, and trash cans. The light bulb went off and I knew the story was right there in front of me. Right there in Matamoras.

I also canvassed parks and playgrounds, walked the neighborhoods, and read the local papers. I got to know every inch of the town. When people would tell me their stories I could see the photos play out in my head well ahead of scouting, casting, and shooting the image.

PR: Is there anything about dioramas in natural history museums that inspired your thinking for *Domesticated*?

AS: Absolutely. Because *Domesticated* deals with the collision of the built and natural worlds I looked extensively at natural history dioramas in the early stages of conceptualizing and making the work. Many images in the series reference the human and animal stances and spatial relationships depicted in dioramas I studied at the [American Museum of Natural History](#) in New York. While these dioramas depict life hundreds if not thousands of years ago and often in remote locations, I love their realism and the way they can immerse a viewer into a world apart. I wanted to create photographic equivalents of these environments but set them in and contemporary and familiar environment where these modern small dramas are taking place.

PR: Did you find that people living near wildlife sanctuaries want to keep wild creatures as remote as possible from their own activities?

AS: This is the essential paradox I am exploring. We are drawn close to the wild, but find quick inconvenience with its externalities. Remember, we are only a few hundred years removed from a more life-and-death relationship with nature. We still have those fight and flight impulses with predators. The hairs on the back of our necks still stand at attention when we see a creature that - minus gun or modern contrivance - could easily have us for brunch.

I think we find ourselves at an interesting moment in our evolutionary development. We have managed to mostly position ourselves beyond the ebbs and flows of the natural world and yet we are still close enough to our primal past as to be confused by our more base impulses.

PR: Are any of the animals you photographed actually alive?

AS: Some of the animals are alive, some are dead, and some are dead and taxidermied. Early on I learned that working with a dead rabbit was much easier than wrangling a bunch of hyperactive live ones. Nobody told me that rabbits scratch like a cat and wail like a baby!

I am not a wildlife photographer and I make no attempt to fool people into believing these are real moments. I do appreciate that people have multiple relationships with the images. Sometimes they get angry, but they always come back and question what drew them to the image in the first place.

PR: Were there any stories about interactions so bizarre that you did not want to create a tableau around them?

AS: There were a number of stories I didn't shoot for a variety of reasons. Some of images presented logistical problems (how do you begin to get permission to stage a deer running loose in a K-Mart?), some were too whimsical (lots of tales of dog and skunk dustups), and some I knew I couldn't do justice.

***Domesticated*, by Amy Stein**, continues at [ClampArt Gallery](#) through October 31, 2009. 521-531 West 25th Street, Ground Floor. 646-230-0020. A monograph of the series (Photolucida 2008) is available at the gallery. A selection of images from the series also appears in [American Photography 25](#).

Domesticated can next be seen at the [Harvard Museum of Natural History](#), Cambridge, Massachusetts, starting in January 2010.