

# ACADEMY

THE BIG PHOTO E-ZINE

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TRAFER  
*Scott*



T R A E R   S C O T T

ANIMALS MAKE ME  
*human*





Since the day I got my first camera at age 6, I have been utterly fixated with fighting impermanence. A photo is where time and sound stop, when light and shadow and movement and subject all align to create something otherworldly and permanent. That is why photography bewitched me, but it is also one of many reasons that I love photographing animals. Their time on this planet is generally much shorter than ours.

I am fond of saying that ‘animals make me human’ because it’s the simplest, most compact way of describing a lifelong love and reverence that defies words. Sometimes I explain that I have always viewed animals as being much more dependable and appealing company than people, or that I first saw the shabby, sad cages of a notoriously horrific dog pound at age 8, or that I turned vegetarian at 13 in a southern town where everyone worshipped the almighty barbeque - but often that is too much information.

I actually didn’t start out photographing animals. In fact, it never really occurred to me in the beginning. Pursuing art photography in 1995 already put me on the fringe of the fine art world. Were photographs even art? That was the question on every gallerist’s lips. I wanted to be a serious artist, and I knew that serious artists focused on serious, unsentimental things. Animals were not viewed as suitable, serious artistic subjects. Oh, it was fine to have them as a prop or a secondary character but not as your main subject.

After several years of making moody, grainy black and white narrative portraits, I found myself desperately unsatisfied with my work. Follow your passion, that’s what we are always told. I started making portraits of people with animals and attended my first major portfolio review with a series of 16x20 silver gelatin prints featuring elaborately styled subjects, mostly women with their cats, rats, dogs. One reviewer, a cocky Manhattan gallery owner took one look at my work and told me that I should “give up”. When I look back on the portraits now, I cringe a bit. They are staged, verging more on fashion shoots than insightful portraiture; they communicated absolutely nothing genuine about the human or the animal, only a glossy aesthetic, but that series led me to what would eventually come next.

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In 2005 I began volunteering at an animal shelter and one aspect of my job was to photograph every dog that came in. Film was too expensive for this type of work, so I used the only digital camera I had at the time, a 5MP Olympus point and shoot that I had bought from a friend for fifty bucks. I soon amassed huge numbers of images. So many dogs. One night, I realized how many of those dogs never made it out alive. What followed was a profound sadness, the kind that swallows you whole and will only be assuaged by action. I needed to memorialize those faces, those lives. I realized that in many cases my photo was the only record of their short existence.

I started photographing with intention, making portraits against a black backdrop, focusing only on the dog, only on the face, letting the light of each animal shine, letting them tell their story through my photos. Those portraits became my first book, Shelter Dogs.

When the book came out in 2006, nothing like it had ever been published. Here were 50 simple black and white portraits of dogs taken while they were living in an animal shelter, a pretty straightforward concept, but what made it different was the text or lack of it- or both. There was almost no text until you turned to the back where brief bios of each dog were listed.

This was where the gut punch of the book was. Not in the introduction where I pleaded for people to choose adoption or explained how shelters were full of pit bulls that were dying by the thousands every day, or how hard it was to watch good dogs die because there wasn't enough space for them. The photographs coupled with the simple lines at the end that explained whether the dog lived or died did people in. Such is the power of images and words when they are thoughtfully combined. The book became a national bestseller.

I was lucky that a VP and editor of a publishing house, who would eventually become my agent, had taken a chance on "my dogs". It changed my life forever. With my foot now firmly planted in the publishing world, I went on to make five more books about dogs as well 4 about other animals: wild horses, nocturnal animals, wild baby animals, raptors. I learned that above all, to make a great photo of an animal, you have to first understand it's needs and fears. Dogs needs are usually blissfully simple: love and/or food, comfort. Their fears can be much more complex but are often overruled by the love/food combo. But what motivates a vulture or an orphaned kangaroo or a mustang? I found out that cows are equally terrified and fascinated by sheets that ripple in the wind, who knew? These were all things I had to learn as I went along and many times I stumbled.

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In 2015, 10 years after Shelter Dogs, I made Finding Home; Shelter Dogs and Their Stories which was a companion book, a sequel of sorts, to the now out of print Shelter Dogs. Making Finding Home was such a different experience than making Shelter Dogs. To start with, I was a different person, a mother, photographer who had now made 8 books, had traveled the world, had seen a lot of beauty and a lot of suffering. I was no longer a powerless volunteer in a municipal shelter overrun with unwanted animals.

Not only had I changed but the animal welfare landscape had too. Adoption had gone up exponentially, euthanasia was down by almost half, in short, things were getting better. When I made Finding Home, I went in as a photographer, not a wounded warrior in the trenches. The emotional distance allowed me to make better pictures, be more objective, take a step back, and see the forest not just the trees.

In following industry trends, it became clear that people wanted stories and that the stark, simple approach I had taken for Shelter Dogs wouldn't really work again without adding a little something. My publisher and I came up with the concept of adding 'feature stories' which followed dogs from when they landed in a shelter until after they were placed into their new homes. The bios were longer, more complex, because I had more information about these dogs.

Now I am working on the third and probably final book in the series, Forever Home which takes the concept a bit further and focuses much more space on stories, really spectacular ones that together, form a portrait of the biggest hot button issues in animal welfare right now.

I have been fortunate to find a global audience who buy my books, who share my love of dogs and other animals. But there was one topic that kept lurking in the back of my mind. My entire adult life I had wanted to do a book about farm animals. Or I should say, farmed animals: livestock, not the happy little cartoon versions you see in children's books, but commodities. Approximately 70 billion, (that's billion with a B) animals are raised for food every year around the world. Of these, 2 out of 3 are in factory farms. In the US, 99% of all meat comes from animals in factory farms.

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It never felt like the right time to make this book- until one night in 2016, scrolling through Instagram, it suddenly did and Radiant; Farm Animals Up Close and Personal was born. It was originally titled "You Had Me at Moo" because I wanted to approach this with buoyancy. I did not want to make a preachy book, a book that berated the reader for eating meat or consuming animal products. When you tell people what to think, they get angry, and even if what you're saying makes sense, they will deliberately rebel and do the opposite. But when you let them discover a truth on their own, that's when the magic happens. That's why Shelter Dogs worked. I didn't show pictures of sad, skinny dogs shivering in cages, because no one would have bought that book and my message would have sat dusty and forgotten on a bookstore shelf. Instead, I made honest portraits of dogs that had miles of stories in their eyes. I let the reader go on their own journey simply by turning the pages.

That philosophy guided my approach to Radiant, but this time it was a much finer line to walk. Ironically eating (certain) animals is a much more polarizing issue than whether dogs should be saved. I settled on the approach of simply showing a beautiful farm animal up close. I wanted Radiant to speak to all people, all animal lovers at least. I can't tell you how many times someone has gushed to me about how much they love animals and then 10 minutes later I see them eating a hamburger. That hamburger had a face, a body, a personality I think to myself. It was the face and the personality that I decided to focus on.

I wanted to make a book that showcased these animals, our food animals, up close and personal and talked not about their past trauma or how many of their kind is slaughtered in the time it takes you to read this article, but about their personality. But who were my subjects? I didn't want to make yet another sanctuary story book, but my publisher said that if I used actual farm animals, meaning ones that would actually end up on someone's plate, my readers would be heartbroken and feel betrayed.

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In the end, I decided to use animals that would have ended up on someone's plate if it wasn't for the intervention of a kind-hearted person, an organization or a sanctuary. These were the lucky few, the ones that got to live their lives out in peace being loved and cared for. I am neither the first nor the last photographer to make a series about farm animals, but hopefully mine did more than preach to the choir.

Like many things in life, being a successful photographer/author/artist is all about timing. It often comes down to who had the idea first but sometimes many people have the same idea and so it comes down to who executed it better or who had the biggest platform to get it seen first. The photo community has this amazing collective subconscious that I have marvelled at for decades now. There are trends, ebbs and flows of style of course, but also an annual clot of strikingly similar subject matter amongst completely unconnected people with seemingly unique, isolated influences; a synthesis of thought.

Throughout my career I have been fortunate to have most of the ideas first or maybe sometimes to have the biggest platform. On occasion, I can claim to have been the one to do it best not just first. I always fear that each book will be my last; that the inspiration will be as fleeting as the light we chase. Most days I get to spend a lot of time with animals who trust me enough to let me capture their image. Almost every shoot I make mistakes. The same mistakes over and over again. Ones that I shake my head at, and later scold myself over, but that's how it goes when you work without an assistant and have to think about lighting and f stops and ISOs and posing and focusing and not falling over- all at the same time. It's messy and beautiful, and those transcendent moments that I capture still manage to surprise me.

**Traer Scott is a photographer and bestselling author of 11 books. She lives in Providence, Rhode Island with her husband, daughter, dogs and a very amiable hamster. Her latest book is Goodbye Salad Days; Kevin Faces Adulthood from Chronicle Books. Available April 27, 2021.**



Radiant

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Salad Days

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