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Meet... Renhui Zhao

AOP Student Photographer of the Year 2007



How did it feel when your name was called out at the Student Awards Prize Giving?

It had never occurred to me that I would win because there was no tell-tale signs of who the winner was in the placement of the photographs in the gallery. I would say it was really unbelievable for me because I was actually receiving another award the night before. That was the Chelsea Arts Club Travel/Research Grant for my next coming project in which part of it is to travel round the zoos of Spain.

Tell me about your winning series?

Every country in which I visit, I'll definitely go to the zoo or circus. Once I was backpacking down North Thailand and all I charted on my route was the zoos, circuses and animal farms on the way. I soon realize the zoos reflect upon the society that erected them.

This exhibition of wildlife in a zoo amidst civilized societies has been a constant of human history because it has helped people to place themselves in relation to the world. Wild animals clearly fascinate people and human beings need the wild to completely seek it out. But why are people also attracted by animals in captivity? Is it because they symbolize the intentions of a society that wants to master and exploit nature or is this behavior reflecting something more of us as humans?



Was the series a personal project or part of something you're working on for college?

This is an on-going series of work that started out 4 years ago.

They're quite documentary in style is that the area you think you'd like to follow?

For my next project, it definitely looks documentary. But I hope to be more critical in my approach for my upcoming projects.

Have you found your style yet?

No, but my interest has always been on the subject of animals & humans.



How old were you when you realised you had an interest in photography that you wanted to pursue?

I realised photography as a medium of truth at the age of 10. Its capabilities to narrate are unlike any medium. I only seriously considered taking up photography as a medium of expression after secondary school when I got involved with animal conservation work. There was so much I wanted to say and I felt photography did it best.

How are you finding college?

I have learnt to be much more sensitive and critical in my approach to my subject in college. The lecturers are constantly reminding me of different approaches, perspectives and objectives to approach my work.

Who are your favorite photographers?

I realized I like photographers who had worked with animals before in one way or another. I like the series of the Hyena Man by Pieter Hugo. I felt his work crosses the boundary of traditional documentary and fine-art. The same series that won him the world press awards is exhibited in fine-art galleries as well. Another photographer whose work I like is Johan Simen and his series, 'till the kingdom comes' and Tim Flach's latest series of bats. All these photographers I felt has portrayed the relationship of humans and animals in a very highly sensitive way.



How do you feel about the prospect of working with Tim Flach?

(As part of the prize Renhui has the opportunity of working on a shoot with the AOP photographer of his choice)

I first saw Tim Flach's work in this year AOP's awards book. I really loved the way he shot the bat in mid-air because I've worked with bats myself, only difference was that I was working with a dead bat. I would really like to talk with a photographer who worked with animals most of the time in his work. I am really quite excited that this is actually happening. I am just constantly amazed by the opportunities this award has given me. Just the other day I was being interviewed by Creative Review on the phone, that was the first real interview I've ever had and I really appreciate all this.



What's next for you when you graduate next year any future projects lined up?

I am in the midst of planning a project on the Tiger in Asia for summer. I have gotten a travel/

research grant to document the current state of the tiger in Asia. My projects will be based on the controversial push for the legalization of the trade in tiger parts by China (as a solution to save tigers from extinction), comparing that with the crocodile farms in Singapore/Thailand, will be visiting one wildlife reserve in India which has over-declared its tiger numbers by more than 600%, and hopefully to a park in Africa where the Chinese government has been trying to re-introduce the tigers into the wild but without much success.

This all started out when I read that the Chinese government was trying to uplift the ban on tiger parts trading. As I researched more into this, I realized that there is so much more which photography can portray than all the reports out there can. I do hope my photography can promote social change, not always in the activist sort of way but in an unbiased and informed way as well.

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