

ALLISON HUNTER

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*SLOWER STILL*



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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MAY 15 - JUNE 21, 2008

AUSTIN, TEXAS

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*Slower Still*

Whether owing to the photographs' manipulation in the virtual realm or because of the painterly undertones resonant throughout their expansive surfaces, Allison Hunter's series of photographs of single and amassed animals, seem to visually defy their medium. The animals in the images are seemingly uncontained. Their surroundings are uncertain, varyingly awash in great expanses of dark or light, punctuated by halos of bright light surrounding selected animals. The light, rather than seeming to fall upon the chosen animals, almost emanates from them; while the surrounding area speaks of an encroaching and undefined enclosure. Despite the painterliness of the expanses of dark in particular, Hunter's images unite photographic technique with subject matter to re-enact photography's essential functions of selection and isolation in the capturing and fixing of image.

From its origins, photography has been associated with the capturing of reality. Through acts of selection and isolation, photography physically transposes an object (photography's subject) from the temporal continuum to the fixed condition of the (art) image. Beginning

with the camera lens' framing, the subject of photography is defined, captured and fixed as image. This seemingly simple process of capturing and recording a photographic image has particular resonance with Hunter's work as her very subject-matter reinvestigates photography's relation to the capturing of subjects.

Framing, so central to photography, enters into Hunter's process in a critical way. As her photographs are all taken at zoos, the animals that Hunter photographs have already been enframed by humans. For the photographer, this is not a simple matter of availability, or stand-in for some preferred safari into the wilds. Rather, Hunter's subject matter makes the process of capturing an image and removing it from its temporal continuum more complex and intersubjective. Beginning by photographing animals in zoos, Hunter then scans the images and digitally edits them to remove the vast amount of the cultural trappings that surround the animals. This includes elements of their enclosures, signage, people, barriers and other aspects of their human-made environments. Although visibly removed from the photograph, these aspects combine to leave traces on the images, as when the now unseen zoo visitors attract the gaze of the animals.

Hunter's digital process allows her to combine animals from different original photographs into a single image, thereby further dislocating the animals from their environment on one hand, and from their natural habitats and associations on the other. The result amplifies, without literally depicting, the unnatural context, environments and encounters so commonplace in the zoo. In photographing animals in captivity, Hunter's images capture the reciprocity of viewing. This occurs, for example, when the animal being photographed returns the photographer's gaze as if to demand that he or she be recorded not solely as image, but fully as subject. Allison Hunter's images thus heighten photography's fundamental processes as their subject matter at once exaggerates and reverses the photographer's actions to capture the reciprocal and inter-subjective act of viewing.

In visually removing their enclosures, the animals are in some ways freed. Far from freedom, however, the images replace those physical barriers with the encroaching darkness or emptiness now surrounding the animals.<sup>1</sup> This produces an unknown situation or environment suggestive as much of an unclear and potentially contradictory social positioning than a physical enclosure. Instead of the zoo's physical barriers, the photographs introduce those unsettling surrounds, diminished at times to the point of near emptiness or marginal visibility. Without the typical enclosures and other signs of human structuring, the relation between human and animal is brought into question, leaving the viewer to ask: Where has the picture been taken? And what are the animals doing?

Hunter's exhibition at *Women & Their Work* plays out these acts of capturing and their reversal, a process that allows, demands really, that the viewer act out – or try on – various subject positions. The exhibition begins with a series of smaller, 20-inch square images of water animals, such as sharks and insects such as butterflies. Owing to their habitats,



*Untitled 14*, 2007, Digital c-print. 50" x 30".

these animals are photographed from behind glass. Furthering the play on enclosure so central to Hunter's work, many of the images are of animals at moments of emergence as when butterflies contained in glass enclosed breeding grounds emerge from their chrysalises, or turtles transition from water to ground.

Following this initial grouping, the viewer is confronted by a series of photographs of ground animals including elephants, a gazelle and a rhinoceros. Owing to their large scale, the images that are up to four by eight feet in size, place the human viewer in a diminished position. The resultant inter-relation between humans and animals that happens in the space between photographer and subject, viewer and image proves to be the propelling event crystallized in Hunter's work.<sup>2</sup> This is what emerges as the true subject-matter of Hunter's photographs: the dialog of freedom and capture, or object and subject, viewer and viewed, human and animal. The tension between these constructs summoned by her work, draws the viewer into a relation that they – if not consciously recognize – can not help but inherently feel. Most strongly perhaps, the exhibition demands that we understand that animals present another form of subjectivity – one subject not simply to our gaze, but to our actions. This understanding ultimately questions our humanity and our place or situating within the “animal kingdom.”

In discussing photography's operations between the aesthetic and the social-political realms, Walter Benjamin, an early theorist of photography, compared photography's acts of selection and isolation to a hunter and his/her trophy animals. In his *A Short History of Photography* from 1931, Benjamin wrote that “the effect of photographic reproduction of works of art is of much greater importance for the function of art than the more or less artistic figuration of an event which falls prey to the camera. Indeed the amateur returning home with his mess of artistic photographs is more gratified than the hunter

who comes back from his encounters with masses of animals which are useful only to the trader.”<sup>3</sup> The aptness of this association between hunting and photography (unintended pun to Hunter's name aside) is at once achieved and turned on its head by Hunter's images that confront both photographer and gallery visitor to reverse the position of viewer and viewed. Her photographs achieve this by producing images that subjectify (I am tempted to say humanize, for lack of a more appropriate word) her subject matter so as to question the collection of image/animal trophies.

Animals have regularly been used to define the dialectics of capturing and freeing that play out in the realm of visual representation. In her aptly titled essay, *Why all these Birds? Birds in the Sky, Birds in the Hand*, Catherine Ingraham describes what she calls the “bird in the sky, bird in the hand problem” central not just to photography, but more broadly to representation. The title describes the paradoxical desire of representation to both apprehend the motion of the bird in flight and to still or fix that object as representation.<sup>4</sup> Rather than using them to depict motion, however, Hunter's photography aims to reveal our complex relationship to animals. Her recent venture into short (approximately 3 minute) video pieces are interesting in this regard in their selection and depiction of a single movement slowed down to the just perceptible. These videos make it clear that Hunter's aim is not to capture movement, but to slow down movement itself, something more on par with photography's fundamental removal of the subject from the succession of temporality. The capture involved, then, is not one of the hunter's skill against a moving animal, nor even of the artist's in depicting motion; instead it is the self-reflective one of depicting the act of being (visually) ensnared or mutually defined by another. It is as much the animal's point of view as the photographer's.

Allison Hunter's work thus begins with the moment of viewing. But it is not just the one of the photographer hidden behind the camera, but of the photographer herself being caught in the view of her (animal) subject. This is the case whether the animal is looking directly at her or observing the other human entrants into their arena of activity. The animals, in seeming to almost struggle to emerge from the areas surrounding them, reiterate the dual acts of isolation and selection by the camera as the animal breaks the surface to be bathed in a small area of light. This tension is exemplified by the halos that define the central subject in each photograph and demand that we consider what space a subject – either human or animal – creates around itself. What is an encroachment upon that space or that subjectivity – either visually or literally? These are the questions with which Allison Hunter's work engages in its staging of human-animal associations. The images draw the viewer, unaware, into that halo, that arena – with the viewer herself caught as if in the headlights.

Nana Last, Ph.D.

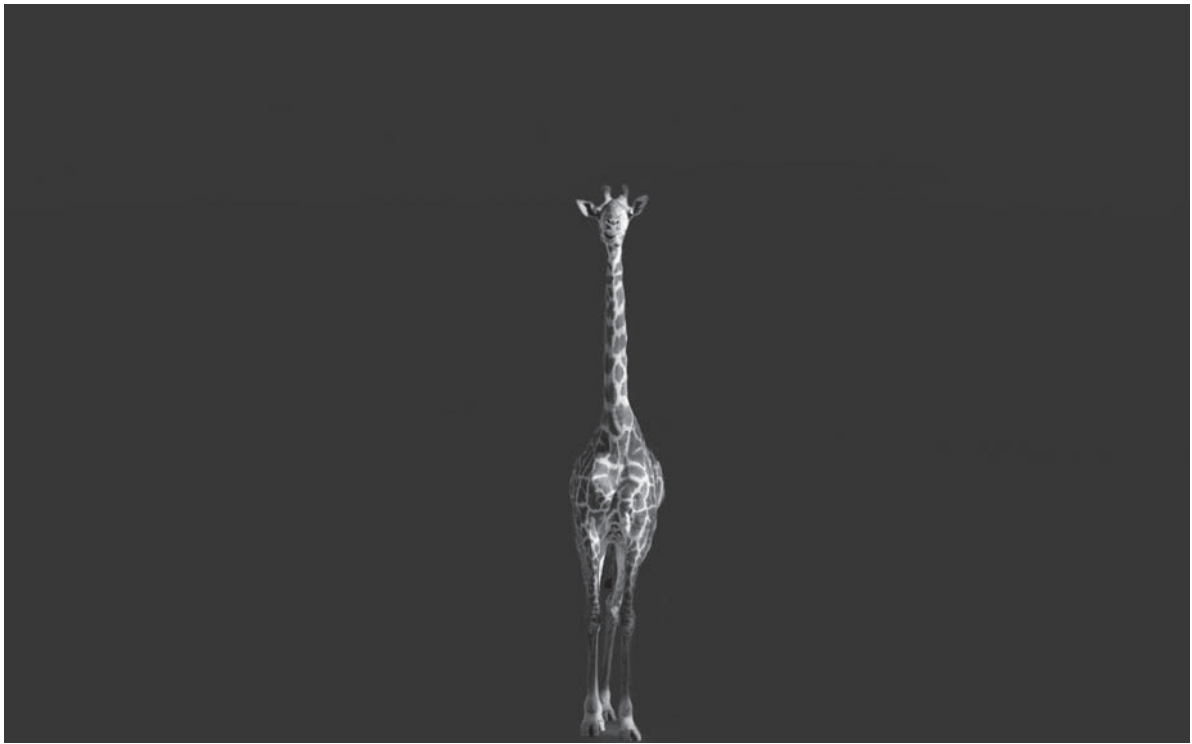
Assistant Professor, Rice University

<sup>1</sup> Initially, in Hunter's early images that surround was largely light, it then became dark and, most recently, that darkness has slowly allowed more elements within it to be visible.

<sup>2</sup> The art critic and historian, Rosalind Krauss, in her well-known essay, *Notes on the Index*, has described photography as an indexical process. Indexes are signs that mark or trace a particular image to its physical origins. Interestingly, Krauss' description arose in relation to the widespread use of photography and video in self-reflective and repetitive acts of self-definition of the human subject.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography*, 1931, in Trachtenberg, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography*, (New Haven, CN: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 211-212.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Ingraham, *Why All These Birds? Birds in the Sky, Birds in the Hand*, in Antoine Picon and Alessandra Ponte, eds., *Architecture and the Sciences: Exchanging Metaphors*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press: 2003), 230.



*Untitled 5*, 2005, Digital c-print. 50" x 30".

## ALLISON HUNTER

*Born in Summit, NJ. Lives and works in Houston, TX.*

### EDUCATION

- 1995-97 Master of Fine Arts, Department of Art,  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY.  
1987-90 *Diplôme, Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne*, Lausanne, Switzerland.  
1986-87 Undergraduate Studies, Maryland Institute, College of Art, Maryland.

### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 *Slower Still*, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX.  
2007 *Allison Hunter: New Animals*, Marty Walker Gallery, Dallas, TX.  
*Allison Hunter: New Animals*, MKG Art Management, LLC,  
Houston, TX.  
2006 *Simply Stunning*, 511 Gallery, New York, NY.  
*Allison Hunter*, Kinzelman Art Consulting in conjunction  
with *FotoFest 2006*, Houston, TX.  
2004 *Allison Hunter: New Work*, 511 Gallery, New York, NY.

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 *Stretching the Truth*, John Michael Kohler Arts Center,  
Sheboygan, WI. Curated by Jennifer Jankauskas.  
*Subject to Change*, in conjunction with *FotoFest 2008*,  
Naü-haus Gallery, Houston, TX.  
2007 *Harvest Moon Rising: Donna Durbin and Allison Hunter*,  
Space 125 Gallery, Houston, TX.  
*Cold Cuts*, Rudolph Projects/Artscan Gallery, Houston, TX.  
*Photography Now: 2007*, Center for Photography at  
Woodstock, NY. Juried by Alison D. Nordström,  
Curator of Photographs, George Eastman House.

*New American Talent 22*, Arthouse, Austin, TX.

Juried by Anne Ellegood, Associate Curator,  
Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.  
*Expo 2007*, 500X Gallery, Dallas, TX, juried by Francis Colpitt,  
corresponding editor to *Art in America*.

*Assistance League of Houston Celebrates Texas Art 2007*,  
juried by Carter Foster, curator of drawings, Whitney Museum.

2005 *Extreme: International Photography and Video Art*,  
*Künstlerhaus Mousonturm*, Frankfurt, Germany.

*The Material Image: Surface and Substance in Photography*,  
Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, New Paltz, NY.

2004 *Industrial/Landscape*, The Arts Center Gallery,  
Saratoga County Arts Council, Saratoga Springs, NY.

2003 *Kingston Sculpture Biennial 5*, ASK (Art Society of Kingston),  
Kingston, NY.

*Photography Now 2003*, Center for Photography at Woodstock,  
Woodstock, NY.

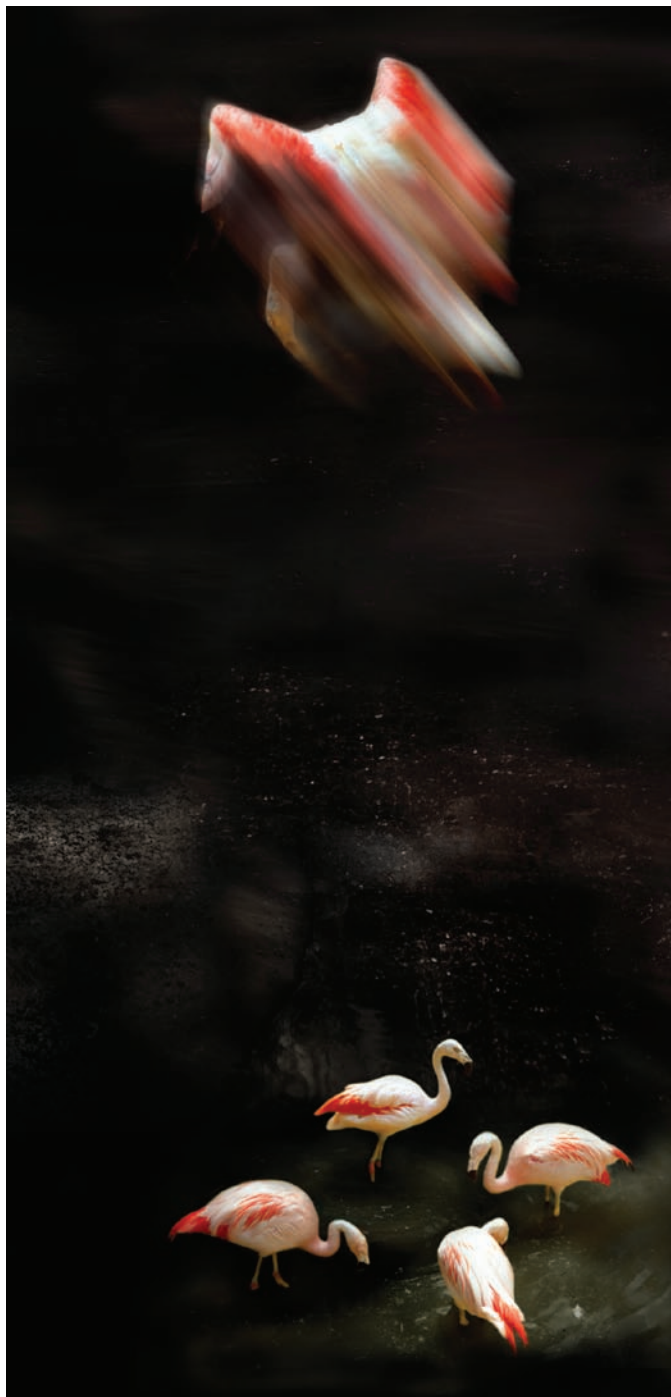
*Americana*, School of Visual Arts Westside Gallery, New York, NY.

1999 *Gathering Information: Photography and the Media*,  
Photographic Resource Center, Boston, Massachusetts.

### COLLECTIONS

Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, NY.  
Center for Photography at Woodstock, Woodstock, NY.  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, TX.  
University Art Museum, University at Albany, Albany, NY.  
Pirkkala Sculpture Park, Pirkkala, Finland.  
Europos Parkas (Museum of the Center of Europe), Vilnius, Lithuania.  
Open-Air Art Museum, Pedvale, Latvia.





Left: *Untitled (flamingos)*, 2008. Digital c-print, laminated and mounted, ed. of 3. 44" x 92".

Right: *Untitled (zebu and others)*, 2008. Digital c-print, laminated and mounted, ed. of 3. 44" x 92".

Cover Panel: *Untitled (butterfly 2)*, 2007, Chromogenic photograph, ed. of 8. 17" x 20".



*Untitled (shark)*, 2008. Digital c-print, laminated and mounted, ed. of 5. 50" x 30".

## Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 30th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,796 artists in 252 visual art exhibitions, 109 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 20 literary readings, and 355 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



women and  
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