

Call of the wild

“I became uncomfortable with the idea of museum dioramas as being a depiction of wildlife in any way. Yes, they are beautiful, and extraordinary-looking, but they also give you that sense that this isn't wildlife at all – these animals have been removed, and so I am as uncomfortable with that as I am with, say, the idea of zoos. They are slightly disturbing because they show our disconnect.”

– Jim Naughten on his 2023 exhibition *Eremozoic*, which was exhibited at the Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery in March this year.

www.rebeccahossack.com

Jaguar, 2021 © Jim Naughten



The age of loneliness

The biologist E.O. Wilson coined the term ‘Ereozoic’ to describe the coming age where the only species left on the planet is *Homo sapiens*. Susan Clark meets photographer/artist Jim Naughten, whose latest works explore the consequences of this disturbing notion

Most wildlife photographers spend their time out in the field trying to capture fleeting scenes of animals we may know the names of but in truth have no real connection with. So we are already in unfamiliar terrain. Jim Naughten and I meet for tea, and I discover that he took his camera out behind the scenes (and after hours) at the UK’s top natural history museums.

There, over a period of years, he scrutinised and studied skeletons and stuffed specimens, developing a fascination with dioramas, which he used as a jumping-off point for a new exhibition whose name – *Ereozoic* – is as disturbing an idea as the backdrops of his mixed media canvases.

Coined by the biologist E.O. Wilson, ‘Ereozoic’ means, simply, ‘the age of loneliness’ and is the word used to describe where we are heading if we don’t stop squeezing those we share the planet with off into extinction.

I feel indescribably sad looking at the giant canvases in this exhibition. And guilt, too. But when I tell the artist this, he seems surprised and asks me why.

“I think because these images in some way are accusatory,” I reply. “You have had to place your animals in fantasy landscapes because we have destroyed the ones where they should be living and thriving. And when I look these animals directly in the eye, I can hear them asking, somewhere far away, ‘What have you done?’”

This exchange makes the point that what you see when you look at any piece of art will depend in large part on what you yourself bring into the gallery. And if you go back now and study any of these works, including Naughten’s extraordinarily disturbing image called simply ‘Bear’, then it may be that you too feel a similar overwhelming sense of sadness – and guilt.

Naughten tells me how he won a scholarship to school based on his artistic talents, threatened his parents with wanting to be a musician and so won their blessing when he changed his mind and went to art college in Bournemouth instead, and how, once there, he soon swapped fine art for photography.

After a very successful career as a commercial photographer, he returned to a childhood love of natural history – “I would collect fossils and also bring home sheep skulls from Dartmoor” – to try and capture that elusive sense of childhood wonder again.

This quest brought him not only behind the scenes (literally) in multiple museums, but also into close contact with zoologists and others who were already starting to despair about the world we will be leaving behind.

Describing the hallowed hush of museum life after the crowds have gone home as being akin to finding yourself alone “in a cathedral to the natural world”, he once spent hours photographing the skeleton of a chimpanzee. “It looked like the skeleton of an old man and made me realise just how closely connected we really are,” he says.

“These images in some way are accusatory. You have had to place your animals in fantasy landscapes because we have destroyed the ones where they should be living and thriving”

A contributor to Vital Impacts, a non-profit founded by National Geographic photographer and film-maker Ami Vitale, he tells me just how shocking it was to witness for himself recently how so many of those who do work in the field are utterly devastated by the decline in wildlife and their habits. “We were all on a Zoom call with Jane Goodall, and so many of these wildlife photographers were asking, ‘But how do we keep up hope?’” he recalls.

Naughten is a prolific reader of history, of anthropology, of environmental writers and thinkers, and in his own way he is using his art to tell the same stories of our collective need to wake up and start taking the warning signs seriously.

And a percentage of the sales of his work is donated to the Jane Goodall Foundation. **R**

Jim Naughten’s *Ereozoic: The Age of Loneliness* is published by Hatje Cantz and features the digital paintings that made up his *Ereozoic* exhibition. You can learn more about him at www.jimnaughten.com www.vitalimpacts.org



Cephalopod, 2021 © Jim Naughten

The Q & A Interview

What gets you up in the morning?

I live on a houseboat on the Thames by Kew Gardens. It’s usually the geese or herons making an unholy racket in the early hours that wakes me up. Then I am compelled to make my work to raise awareness of the damage we are doing to the planet. It’s a full-time job!

What keeps you awake at night?

The foxes, especially if they are troubling the geese. I do spend a lot of time thinking and reading about biodiversity loss, climate change, industrial farming, the runaway train that is modern state society, and wondering how to change people’s minds and create positive change.

Where do you want to wake up on your 80th birthday?

By the sea. If I make it to 80, that’s where I will be. Actually, I would like to wake up by the sea on every birthday.

Who or what has made you a better person?

I read a huge amount – books on history, deep time, dinosaurs, evolution, anthropology, climate change, wildlife, rewilding, and so on. I don’t know if they make me a better person, but they certainly give me a better perspective on

the issues facing the planet and what we need to do about it, if we choose. Although I come from a relatively comfortable background, I’ve been through some turbulent times that have taught me to be empathetic to others, and I’ve learnt the importance of community, kindness to everyone and everything, all animals and the Earth itself.

What’s your next project?

I’m dying to paint again and have some ideas brewing, but for my photographic work I have a lovely project involving Scottish landscapes, where I plan to put the animals back in that we have destroyed and driven from our land: wolves, bears, lynx, reindeer, bison, beavers, and so on. It’s partly inspired by a couple of fascinating, brilliant books: *The Missing Lynx* by Ross Barnett, and *Cornerstones* by Benedict Macdonald.

How do you plan to leave the world a better place?

I hope my work raises awareness of the biodiversity crisis, and I hope I can continue to raise funds for conservation charities (currently the Jane Goodall Institute). I’d love the work to reach a wider audience, too. I have a bit of a pipe dream to rewild some land to help wildlife directly. I need to make that happen!