

Captive Splendor

A photograph of a museum exhibit. The room has blue walls with murals of a tropical landscape and a city. A staircase with a wooden railing is on the right. A taxidermied lemur is perched on the stairs. A chandelier hangs from the ceiling. In the foreground, several taxidermied zebras are arranged on a wooden floor. A red and white patterned rug is on the floor. A wooden bench and chairs are on the left.

Photography and Text by
Lisa A. Frank



Captive Splendor



English Entrance Hall of the Georgian Period, c. 1775

INTRODUCTION

In November 2020, I began a project photographing animals living in zoos and wildlife sanctuaries in the United States. My intention was to stage these animals within images of the Thorne Miniature Rooms that are on permanent exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) to create updated natural history dioramas that juxtaposed the wild with the cultivated.

“Captive Splendor,” however, was created during a specific period in American history when a global pandemic, environmental disasters, and social unrest forever altered our sense of home, health, and safety. This added unexpected layers of meaning to the project. We were at least partially “locked-down” as a country during the period that this artwork was made. Although get-out-of-jail-free cards were given to some animals during the pandemic (such as the lucky penguins allowed to stroll through the Shedd Aquarium), life did not change much for animals in captivity who are always “locked-down.”

What follows is a history of “Captive Splendor’s” references as well as a summary of the creative opportunities and lifestyle restraints that shaped it.

I. BACKGROUND

This project was funded by a **Sony Alpha+ Female** grant. During the initial month of November 2020 and throughout the following year I visited 15 zoos, aquariums, and animal sanctuaries. Because 2020-2021 was a challenging time to travel, I chose to car camp between destinations to protect my own health and the health of those I came in contact with. I powered my equipment from a small generator and ate dehydrated food warmed on a propane cookstove.

Most of the zoos were crowded despite public health concerns, and timed reservations were always required. Consequently, in order to minimize exposure, I chose to only photograph animals that were in outdoor exhibits. I took photos of whatever animals were available during the window of time I was present for, then moved on.

As a social observer, I noticed the people as well as the animals; it seemed zoos were functioning as alternative classrooms, allowing caregivers’ opportunities for kids to be transported somewhere fascinating—an uplifting distraction. I was clearly not the only one who found a certain grandeur through the zoo’s portals. Even in captivity, the raw beauty of wild animals transcends artificial barriers. Even in a pandemic, their splendor persists. The visitor is offered a chance to rediscover that we are not the largest animal on the planet, nor the strongest, nor the fastest. We are one amongst many.

Why the THORNE ROOMS?

II. THE THORNE ROOMS COLLECTION

BETWEEN 1932 AND 1940 IN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, **NARCISSA NIBLACK THORNE** DIRECTED THE CONSTRUCTION OF OVER 160 INTRICATELY CONSTRUCTED DOMESTIC INTERIORS SPANNING THE 13TH CENTURY TO CIRCA 1940. THESE MINIATURE REPRODUCTIONS WERE BUILT AT A SCALE OF 1:12 (ONE INCH EQUALS ONE FOOT). THE ROOMS WERE SCRUPULOUSLY FINISHED USING THE SAME MATERIALS AS THE FULL-SIZED ORIGINALS. UNDER HER AUSPICES, AT LEAST THREE DOZEN HIGHLY-SKILLED ARTISANS, ARCHITECTS, AND INTERIOR DESIGNERS WORKED TO ACHIEVE HER VISION.

Ninety-nine of the Thorne Rooms currently exist in museums. Each of the 68 Thorne Rooms in the AIC's collection glow wondrously as part dollhouse, part stage set, and part tiny tableaux. Every skillfully detailed recreation of European, American, and Asian decorative and architectural style represents a fully fixed, lavishly furnished atmosphere that seems to await characters and plot.

For me, the allure of their design is not just their exacting verisimilitude to a period's style. It is those glimpses of space just beyond the main rooms that deepens my curiosity—those doors left ajar to partial sight lines beyond; the winding staircases leading to unseen possibilities above. For all her scrupulous ingenuity, the rooms are quietly uninhabited.

Mrs. Thorne used familiar conventions of the theatre in designing her floor plans. At the AIC, the models are framed in wood and set into the wall—with the front, or fourth wall, made of glass. The effect highlights their connection to a proscenium theatre arch. In the darkened gallery we stand as an audience would, peering

into the warmly lit but unpopulated environments. Mrs. Thorne leaves the audience a dominant open space—center stage. The rooms become intimate performance settings waiting for a narrative to unspool. Now—even for an instant—we can breathe life into them with a story and characters of our own making.

These theatrical references were what first engaged my interest. I grew up in a family that ran a summer-stock theatre in rural Illinois. In an earlier part of my life I studied set design and scenic art at Juilliard and the Yale School of Drama—meaning, many years building set design models and painting oversized facsimiles that also awaited lighting, a story, and players to bring to life. Not surprisingly, I have found the Thorne Rooms' theatrical potential compelling.

The Thorne Rooms' connection to dollhouses may be the most significant reason they remain perennially popular. Dollhouses, or cabinet houses (as they were called in 17th century Northern Europe), were originally displayed in cultured homes behind glass and were not intended for child's play. Instead they were a way to display the family's



New Hampshire Dining Room, 1760

wealth and pedagogy. It wasn't until the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century that dollhouses became affordable objects of fantasy and play for children.

During childhood we may have become familiar with miniatures. We may have played with electric trains, collected Matchbox cars, or nursed stuffed animals with pint-sized stethoscopes. We may have built forts with Lincoln Logs, hosted tea parties for our dolls, or accumulated a "glass menagerie."

Our first books may have encouraged us to imitate the sounds of animals. We may have played pretend and walked like an elephant, thumped our chests like a gorilla, and roared like a lion. And, at some point, we may have visited a zoo—just as 700 million folks around the globe did in 2019.

**AND, AT SOME POINT AS CHILDREN,
WE MAY HAVE VISITED A ZOO—
JUST AS 700 MILLION FOLKS AROUND THE GLOBE DID IN 2019.***

**American Humane Conservation White Paper, Robin Ganzert, PhD, 2021.*



Flamingo Chick at the Memphis Zoo



Sulawesi Crested Macaques at the Memphis Zoo



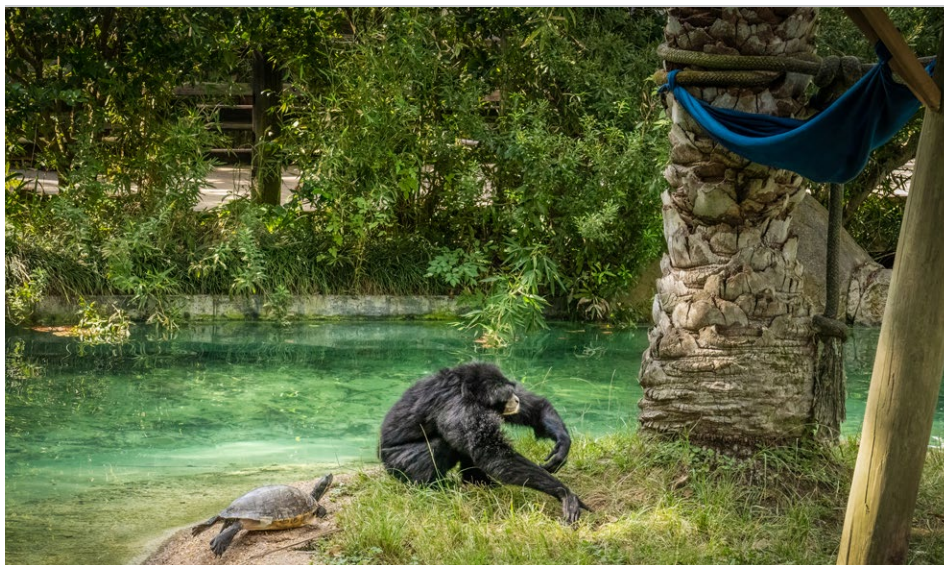
Lesser Kudu and Ostrich at the Saint Louis Zoo



Young Mandrills at the Ft. Worth Zoo

Life Behind Bars...

It's Complicated



Siamang and turtle at the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans

III. LIVING WITH ZOOS

I visited some of the most forward thinking zoos in the United States—Saint Louis, Fort Worth, Cincinnati, Brookfield, Henry Doorly in Omaha, Audubon in New Orleans—always with the question in the back of my mind of whether zoos should be relegated to a less enlightened era.

As I expected I found myself mesmerized by many animals at all locations. There were the Modigliani-like faces of the Sulawesi Crested Black Macaques in Memphis. There were baby flamingos that looked like grubby, adorable puffballs next to their elegant, scolding elders, also in Memphis; an ostrich that noisily reprimanded a curious gazelle in Saint Louis; a Siamang ape pursued by an extroverted turtle in New Orleans. There was the dramatic kettle of vultures airing their outstretched wings amidst a pair of white rhinos in Waco; the troop of Bonobos with their little one somersaulting clumsily while telegraphing a toothy grin in Ft. Worth. They all easily won my affection.



Mandrill at the Memphis Zoo



Polar Bear at ABQ Zoo Park, Albuquerque, NM



Elephant Environment, Caldwell Zoo, Tyler, TX



English Drawing Room of the Early Georgian Period, 1730s

Although zoos ideally exist to educate and preserve, even the best ones are based on coercion and captivity. I know that my wonderment comes at the expense of the animals' confinement. Although fully alive, they are partitioned off, living half-wild, half-domesticated lives. I walk quickly by the animals that are confined in small, old-school cages. I grow uncomfortable observing Koluk and Kiska, two polar bear brothers that pace determinedly at the ABQ Biopark in New Mexico—a few steps to the left, turn; a few steps to the right, turn—month after month, bobbing and flicking their tongues. I returned to Albuquerque some months later and there the brothers remained, caught up in some Groundhog Day version of a life. This type of stereotypical behavior, or “looping,” is an expression of suffering and environmental stress stemming from the fact that their basic needs aren't being met. It seems impossible to offer them the kind of diversion or activities that could replace the lost challenges of life in the Arctic, hunting for food, and defending their territory. I don't want to be complicit in lives reduced to a metaphoric treadmill. I don't want to promote their suffering; but looking ahead, as their native habitat diminishes due to climate change, polar bears, among other species, may require intervention and protection—but what kind is best?

Had I read about Tanya, the African elephant, before visiting her at the Caldwell Zoo in Tyler, Texas, I might have felt differently about my experience. To my uncritical eye, the elephant exhibit—with its deep, expansive pond for swimming and bathing—seemed especially large when compared to others I'd seen. Because Tanya, the matriarch and resident painter, had lost her partner and had been clearly grieving, the Caldwell Zoo brought in two 8-year old elephants, half-brothers eMacembe and Emanti, to boost her mood. It's considered inhumane to keep a single elephant in captivity. During my visit I couldn't help but be entertained by the youngsters as they rough-housed in the aqua water while Tanya showered on a sandy beach. I didn't give a thought to their ultimate well-being or question how they came to now reside at this zoo. It was uncomplicated, wide-eyed fun to witness their grand, splashing size, to notice their wiry hair, to hear their bellowing snorts from mere feet away. When I later stopped to consider that wild herds can roam up to 50 miles a day and form intense, life-long familial and social bonds, living 60-70 years, I questioned the pleasure I received from the experience. The exhibit shrank in size.



Adult whooping cranes with colt, Horicon National Wildlife Area, WI

I'm aware that creating a rich life for zoo animals is a complex and enormously expensive task. The breathtaking diversity of life on display is undeniable and zoos do appear to be engaged in the deep need to help preserve life. The Arabian Oryx was hunted to extinction in 1972, but was later reintroduced to the wild from a San Diego wildlife park. There are now more than 1000 in the wild. This function may become increasingly critical to species' survival as climate conditions change.



Here in Wisconsin, the International Crane Foundation has helped to bring back the whooping crane from a critically low number of 21 birds in the 1940's. Currently, the estimated population size is 808 (captive and wild). I have had the good fortune of seeing tall Whoopers in the wild on two occasions, both unforgettable experiences.

As a non-professional visitor, I wrestle with my ambivalence and lack of educated wisdom. I rise above these feelings because my larger goal is to endow the "captives" with a life beyond their cages where power and independence have been returned to them and a new narrative is written.



South Carolina Ballroom, 1775-1835



Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, Illinois

The Perils of Isolation



IV. ALONE, TOGETHER

Collectively and globally we have been thrown into a disorienting situation unlike any other known in our lifetimes. These images reflect common feelings of dissociation while also expressing my growing anxiety over our planet’s future. The end result reveals several thematic interests.

I also wanted to reference natural history dioramas, such as the ones from the American Museum of Natural History so beautifully photographed by Hiroshi Sugimoto. There is terrific irony in that these displays were originally created to promote conservation of the species that was killed in order to make the display. Around the turn of the 20th century, a shocking number of animals around the world were hunted and killed for museum collections. Strangely, the rationalization for these expedition “kills” was one based on a

conservation idea that the resulting exhibit would inform the public of the animal’s endangerment and would survive beyond an animal’s extinction as evidence that it had existed.

Historically, the consensus among natural history museums was that a successful diorama must depict an animal in action. It was also believed that in order to make the animals realistic the diorama needed to be imbued with “natural accessories” in the foreground and illusionistic scenery in the background. An obsessive dedication went into the collection of plant “props” that would make early dioramas both credible and artistic (such as those found at the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Chicago Field Museum, the National Museum of Natural History, and many others).



Left: Taxidermy Display at the Milwaukee Public Museum
 Above: Middletown Parlor, 1875-1890
 Right: Dioramas at the Milwaukee Public Museum.

Here I am reminded of Mrs. Thorne who hired many skilled, out-of-work artists to thoroughly populate her rooms with realistically rendered accessories, all while the Great Depression raged. Similarly theatrical, habitat dioramas also lose their fourth wall and can be viewed as proscenium sets. Furthermore, the taxidermy has had their native environments “miniaturized” to the point that they are now contained for view within a museum exhibit. Posed within imaginary scenes, animals in habitat dioramas convey drama that is easily understood by humans. What’s more, we see our own reflections in the glass fronted displays, intermingling like apparitions.

The Thorne Miniature Rooms have been reimagined as a gallery of natural history dioramas, all populated with digital taxidermy. They have been newly anointed with contemporary discomfort.







South Carolina Drawing Room, 1775-1800



English Library of the Queen Anne Period, c.1702-50

Mrs. Thorne didn't leave instructions on how a viewer might imagine human activity in her settings. Similarly, I have not wanted to insist on one reading of this project. The narrative might be that the humans have fled their homes and disappeared into apocalyptic dust with the zoo gates blown wide open, leaving the animals to repossess an empty world. No longer "cooped up" in steel-barred cages or behind concrete moats, they have broken free and moved in.

Are they performing for our pleasure or have they turned against us? Are they sheltering in place? Is this an insurrection? Payback—a long time coming—for abuses too numerous to mention? Whatever the reason, I wanted to convey the inherent complexities that exist between humans and the wild animal world. Whether or not wild animals are capable of reasoning, of sharing their views of us with us, my images invite the viewer into interiors that foreground that relationship, insist on paradox, and reveal the captivity we share.



English Drawing Room, c.1800

During the early phases of the pandemic, our lives became "miniaturized." We lived with a disorienting narrowness not unlike the imposed barriers that challenge wild animals' quality of life in captivity. We were all held captive and yet persisted splendidly, minus 5.5 million people, and counting.

"Captive Splendor" reflects the strange exigency of COVID-era containments and curtailments. The pandemic has forced humans to recognize the power of non-human life forms (animals, viruses), and the inescapable interconnectedness we share.



Massachusetts Bedroom, c. 1801



English Reception Room of the Jacobean Period, c.1625-55

Insurrection!

“As if they were a species that released puffs of poison, or black ink in a cloud on the ocean floor. I mean, have you read that article about octopus intelligence?”

Have you read how octopuses are marching out of the sea and onto dry land, in slick and obedient armies?”

-Patricia Lockwood, “No One Is Talking About This”



French Provincial Bedroom of the Louis XV Period, 18th Century



English Dining Room of the Georgian Period, 1770-90

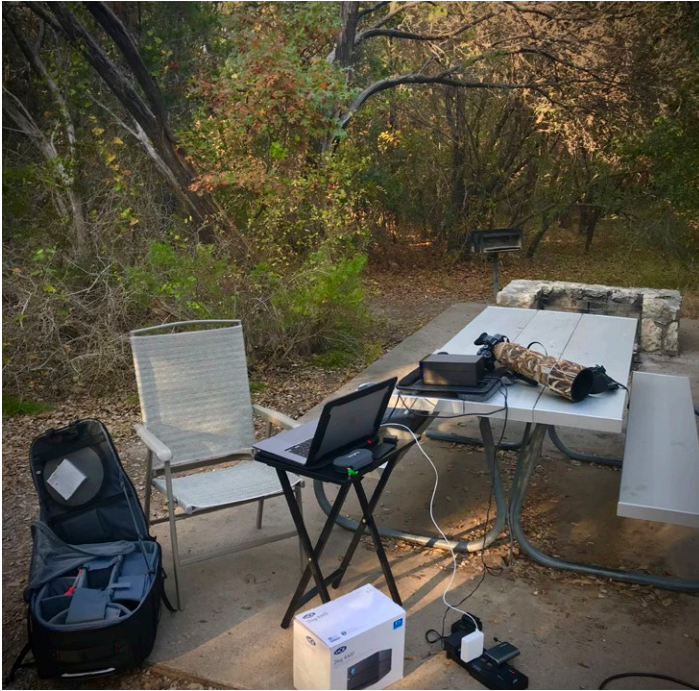


English Drawing Room of the Georgian Period, 1770-1800

“...natural history dioramas, all populated with digital taxidermy.”







1.



2.



3.



4.

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Simen Johan, *Untitled #181*, 2016.

George Stubbs, *Zebra*, 1762-63.

Tosh Chiang, *Cleaning Zebra Diorama*, American Museum of Natural History, 2015.

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1. Dinosaur Valley State Park, Glen Rose, Texas

2. Audubon Nature Institute, New Orleans, Louisiana

3. Photographing the Thorne Rooms, The Art Institute of Chicago

4. Mark Twain National Forest, Rollo, Missouri

Pandemic Captures

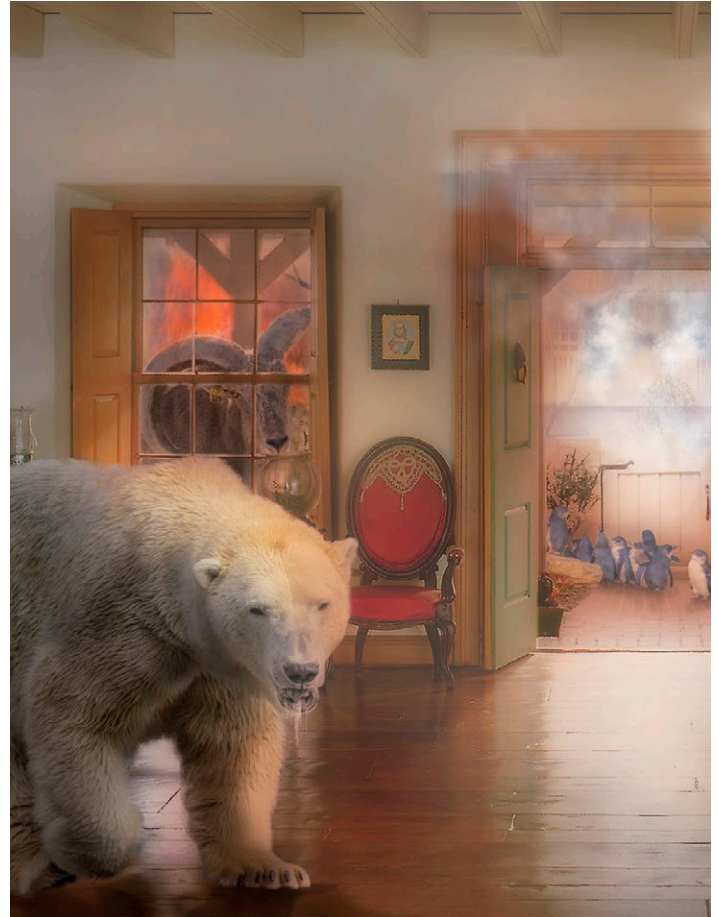
V. TECHNICAL NOTES

Due to COVID the AIC was closed for a period of time and justifiably short-staffed when it was open. These pandemic limitations dictated my ability to photograph the Thorne Rooms successfully.

They are located in the lower level of the museum in a low-light environment. The rooms are each framed in wood and fronted with highly reflective glass. Even though I was often first in the gallery, there were always other people circling through the shadows. I was informed on several occasions that tripods and monopods are not allowed in the museum. My plan B was to use a rubber lens hood and shoot directly against the glass but again, this too was now forbidden. Needless to say, my hand-held results in an environment awash with reflections were not what I had hoped for. I reached out several times, describing the project and asking for permission to bring a tripod. Not surprisingly, special allowances could not be made during this time.

This was challenging news since I needed to turn in preliminary work to Sony by the end of 2020. I then discovered that the AIC has downloadable database images of many of the rooms on their website, taken without the glass in place. These images are available for public use under the Creative Commons Zero (CC0) designation (<https://www.artic.edu/image-licensing>). The .jpgs are small, averaging around 2.3 MB. Although perfect for website use, they were not remotely at home with composited photos taken with a high resolution camera. What I appreciated about them was that they were all taken straight-on, emphasizing the connection to a theatrical set. I decided to adapt the pre-existing .jpgs even though this was not the intended plan I had submitted to Sony. I used Topaz Gigapixel AI, DeNoise AI and DXO Color Efex Pro to enlarge the .jpgs, soften their digital noise, and create painterly atmosphere.

There are currently 31 rooms that have been newly occupied by over 150 species.



California Living Room, 1850-1875

IUCN* Classifications for Endangered Species

NT	Near Threatened
VU	Vulnerable
EN	Endangered
CR	Critically Endangered
EW	Extinct in the Wild
EX	Extinct

Animals listed without classification are designated: "LC," or "Least Concern".

*International Union for Conservation of Nature



English Entrance Hall of the Georgian Period, c. 1775, c.1932. Addax (CE), Arabian Oryx (VU), Blackbuck (NT), Axis Deer, Timber Wolf, Dama Gazelle (CR), Gemsbok, Addax (CE), Nile Lechwe (EN), Common Waterbuck, European Red Deer, Fallow Deer, Crow, Guinea Hens



English Drawing Room of the Early Georgian Period, 1730s, c. 1937. Alaskan Brown Bear, African Painted Dog (EN), Bar Headed Goose



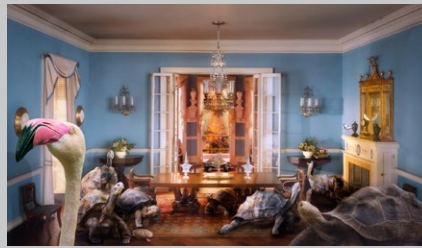
English Library of the Queen Anne Period, 1702-50, c. 1937. Wildebeest, Capybara, Giant Anteater (VU)



Pennsylvania Drawing Room, c. 1834-36, c. 1940. Mountain Bongo (NT), Geronok (NT), Lesser Kudu (NT), Okapi (EN)



English Reception Room of the Jacobean Period, c.1625-55, c.1937. Black Rhinoceros (CR), Wattled Crane (VU), Ruppell's Griffon Vulture (CR), Lappet-faced Vulture (VU)



Virginia Dining Room, c.1800, c. 1940. Galapagos Tortoise (CR), Aldabra Tortoise (VU), Pancake Tortoise (VU), Mr. Pickles, a 90 year old Radiated Tortoise (CR), Blue Morpha Butterfly (TH), Greater Flamingo



Virginia Dining Room, 1758, c. 1940. Sulawesi Crested Black Macaque (CR), Mandrill (VU); Black Crowned Crane (VU)



French Bathroom and Boudoir of the Revolutionary Period, 1793-1804, c. 1937. Mallard Duck, Humboldt Penguin (VU), California Sea Lion, Mallard Duck, Ibis



English Drawing Room of the Georgian Period, 1770-1800, c. 1937. Bactrian Camel, Ostrich, Ring-tailed Lemur (EN), Macaw



German Sitting Room of the Biedermeier Period, 1815-50. Whale Shark (EN), Alligator Snapping Turtle, Sandbar Shark (VU), Cognose Ray (VU), Green Sea Turtle (EN), Giant Pacific Octopus, Ring-necked Duck, Common Merganser Duck



French Anteroom of the Empire Period, c. 1810. Red-crowned Crane (EN), Bali Myna (CR), Inca Tern (NT), Laughing Kookaburra, Alaska Brown Bear, Macaw (Hyacinth and Great Green), Burrowing Owl, Roadrunner, King Vulture, Roseate Spoonbill, Brown Pelican, and others



English Drawing Room of the Georgian Period, c. 1800, c. 1937. Spider Monkey (EN), Lowland Gorilla (CR), Black-and-Gold Howler Monkey (NT), Grey Crowned Crane (EN), American White Pelican



English Dining Room of the Georgian Period, 1770-90, c.1937. Ankole Cattle, Somale Wild Ass (CR), Sandhill Crane



New Hampshire Dining Room, 1760, c. 1940. Sumatran Orangutan (CR), Babirusa (VU), Mandrill (VU)



Georgia Double Parlor, c.1850, c.1940. Grey Crowned Crane (EN), Steller's Sea Eagle (VU), King Penguin, Ostrich, Scarlet Ibis, Crested Screamer, Peacock, Masked Lapwing, Fairy Bluebird, Emu, Pink-backed Pelican, Red-capped Cardinal, Vulture,



French Salon of the Louis XIV Period, 1660-1700, c. 1937. Cheetah (VU), Angolan Colobus Monkey (VU), White-handed Gibbon (NT), Alaskan Brown Bear, Macaw.



Virginia Entrance Hall, 1751-55, c.1940. Indian Rhinoceros (VU), Black-handed Spider Monkey (EN)



English Drawing Room of the Late Jacobean Period, 1680-1702, c. 1937. African Lion (VU), Bald Eagle



Virginia Parlor, 1758-87. Blue Crane (VU), Black-crowned Crane (VU), Kangaroo, Dama Gazelle (CR), Serval, Pale-headed Saki Monkey, Galah



French Provincial Bedroom of the Louis XV Period, 18th Century, c. 1937. Alaska Brown Bear, African Painted Dog (EN), Bar Headed Goose



New Hampshire Entrance Hall, 1799, c.1940. American Bison (NT), Banteng (EN), Siberian Crane (CR), Saddle-billed Stork, Black Vulture, Sand Hill Crane



French Boudoir of the Louis XV Period, c.1740-60, c.1937. White Lion (EW, DD), Malayan Tiger (CR), Masai Giraffe (EN), Ruppell's Griffon Vulture (CR)



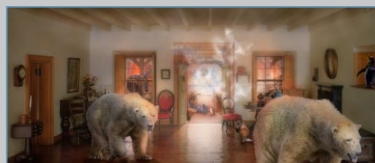
South Carolina Drawing Room, 1775-1800, c. 1940. Western Lowland Gorilla (CR), Gerenuk (NT), King Vulture



Massachusetts Bedroom, 1801, c. 1940. White-cheeked Gibbon (CR), Whooping Crane (EN), Chilean Flamingo



"Middletown Parlor," 1875-1890. Red Crowned Crane (EN), African Lion (VU), Japanese Macaque



California Living Room, 1850-1875, c. 1940. Polar Bear (VU), Aoudad (VU), Little Blue Penguin, Peacock, chickens



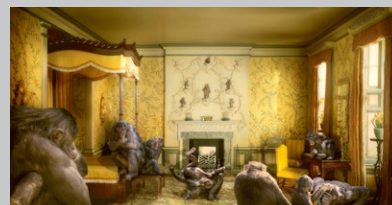
New England Bedroom, c. 1750-1850. American Alligator, Nile Crocodile, Thomson's Gazelle (NT), Spider Monkey (CR), Meercat



English Bedchamber of the Jacobean or Stuart Period, 1603-88, c. 1937. Asian Elephant (EN), Hippopotamus (VU), Siberian Crane (CR), Puffin (VU), Black Swan, American White Pelican



South Carolina Ballroom, 1775-1835, c.1943.c.1937. Reticulated Giraffe (EN), White Cheeked Gibbon (CE), Vulture, American White Pelican, Mourning Dove.



English Bedroom of the Georgian Period, 1760-75, c. 1937. Bonobo (EN)



Tennessee Entrance Hall, 1835, c. 1940. Grevy's Zebra (EN), Ring-tailed Lemur (EN), Cardinal, Rose-breasted Grosbeak







Lisa A. Frank

BIO

Lisa A. Frank is a Sony Alpha+ photographer and a MacDowell Colony fellow. She holds an MFA in Design Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she has taught computer generated design and digital photography as an adjunct professor.

Frank's journey to photography was a natural outgrowth of her childhood in the small north-western Illinois town of Mount Carroll where she participated in the summer stock theatre, Timber Lake Playhouse, that her father founded.

This love of theatre spurred Frank to get a graduate certificate in scene painting and design at the Yale School of Drama. She worked for many years at the Metropolitan Opera as a union scenic artist and at scene shops responsible for Broadway productions and film sets. Frank also designed textiles, wall-coverings and decorative surfaces for high-end interiors while in New York City. And then...she bought her first camera and began creating photographic composites of nature-based subject matter.

Lisa now lives in the driftless area of rural Wisconsin with her partner and a menagerie of wild and domesticated animals.

For future exhibitions and to buy limited edition prints, please contact:

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