

Marni Shindelman

MARNISHINDELMAN.COM

STATEMENT

In 2000, over 7,000 people attended the memorial for Willie B., the famed lowland gorilla of the Atlanta Zoo who, decades before, had been the poster animal for the zoo's major rehabilitation and renovation. After public debate, 80 percent of his remains were placed in a bronze memorial at the zoo while 20 percent were flown courtesy of Delta Airlines and Air France to his native country in West Africa. Willie B. lived his last decade in a brand new habitat, fathered five children and after over 30 years in a solitary cage, was able to socialize himself into a large family of silverback gorillas.

I spent my youth pressing my nose against Willie B.'s enclosure in Atlanta, as he watched the black and white television placed in his cage for his companionship, paced and masturbated on his tire swing to the daily soaps. As an adult, I cried at the news of his death.

Zoo animals have become mascots for cities, gifts of international relations, and smiling diplomats. These animals serve these cities, as specimens of education, objects of entertainment and sources of collective pride. They are named through city wide contests, cared for through generous donations, voted on in tax referendums. Citizens commune in front of these enclosures, in awe, in melancholy, captivated by a simultaneous attraction and fear of these animals. We press ourselves as close to these celebrated animals as the enclosures allow, hoping to be the one it recognizes as compassionate, the one capable of touching the fur, brushing up against the hide; separate from the circle surrounding it.

We collect souvenirs of these encounters, of our attraction to a specific animal. One may become an avid collector of bears, tigers, wolves. We cannot articulate the attraction to these animals and their subsequent object memoirs. Why do we collectively gather in front of these animals? Why are some more popular than others? What educational function do they provide? A lesson in domesticity? Lessons in animal keeping? In the attraction of anxiety? The containment of fear? Community architecture?

SOUVENIRS FROM HUMAN, MY MAMMAL is a series of twelve color photographs, 20" x 16", depicting various animals in hand sewn, tulle, geometric habitats. It investigates famous zoo animals and the cities and citizens who adore them. Each photograph is based on and named for the famous animal depicted.