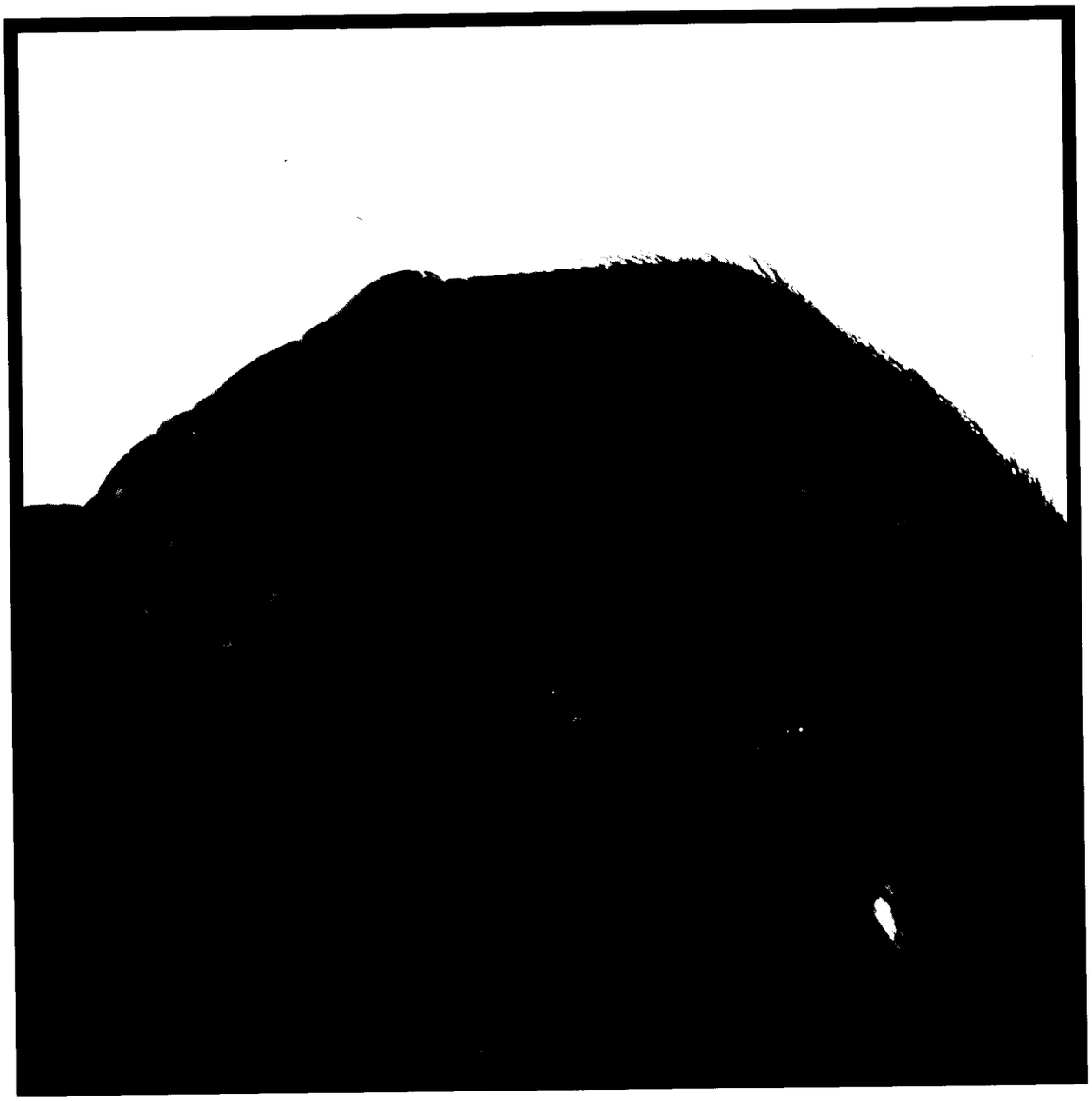


ANIMALS IN EXILE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES BALOG

In primeval times, said philosopher Joseph Campbell, man was the newcomer in a world of unexplored plains and forests. Our immediate neighbors, the wild beasts, were our guides. But according to Campbell, animal envoys "no longer serve to teach and guide mankind." Instead, "bears, lions, elephants, ibexes, and gazelles are in cages in our zoos."

Campbell's sad observation about the plight of animals has special meaning for photographer James Balog, whose pictures of disenfranchised wildlife appear here. Disturbed by what he terms an animal "hólocaust," Balog has set out to capture endangered species in their new and stifling habitats—the twilight zones of preserves, animal amusement parks, and zoos.

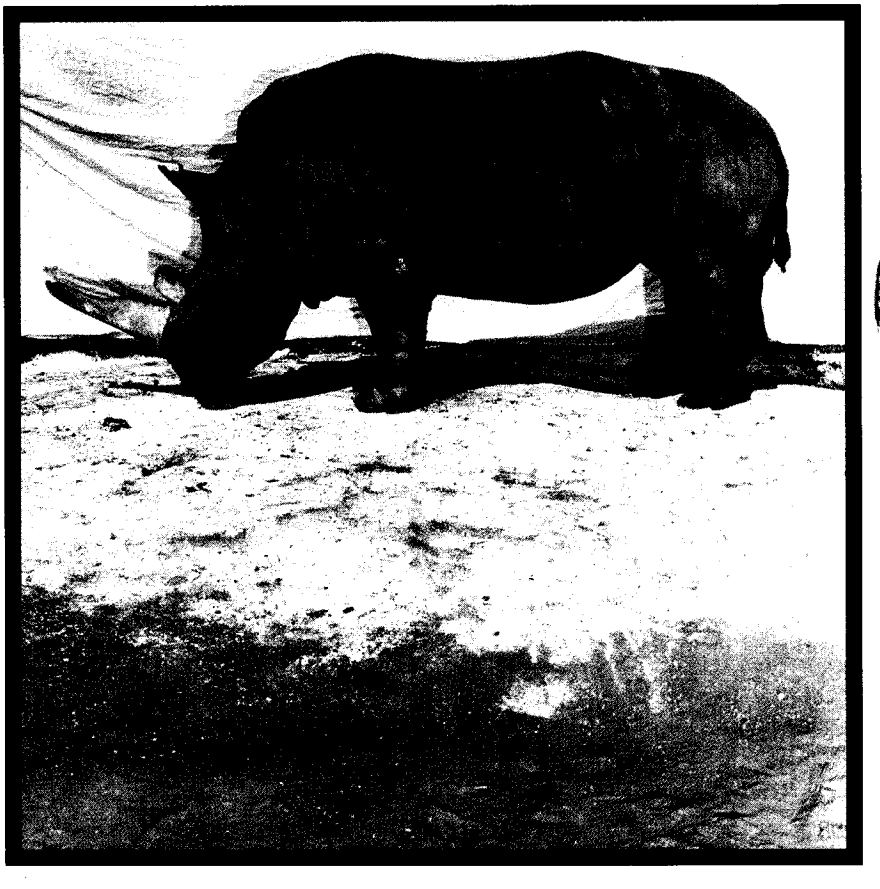
Balog sensed the glimmering of his photographic vision as a boy growing up in the burgeoning bedroom community of Watchung, New Jersey. As civilization encroached upon nature, young Balog watched bulldozers mangle oak trees and learned to recognize the peculiar scent of fresh earth mixed with diesel fuel. Harboring these powerful early impressions, Balog set out to record his relationship to the planet and its creatures on film.

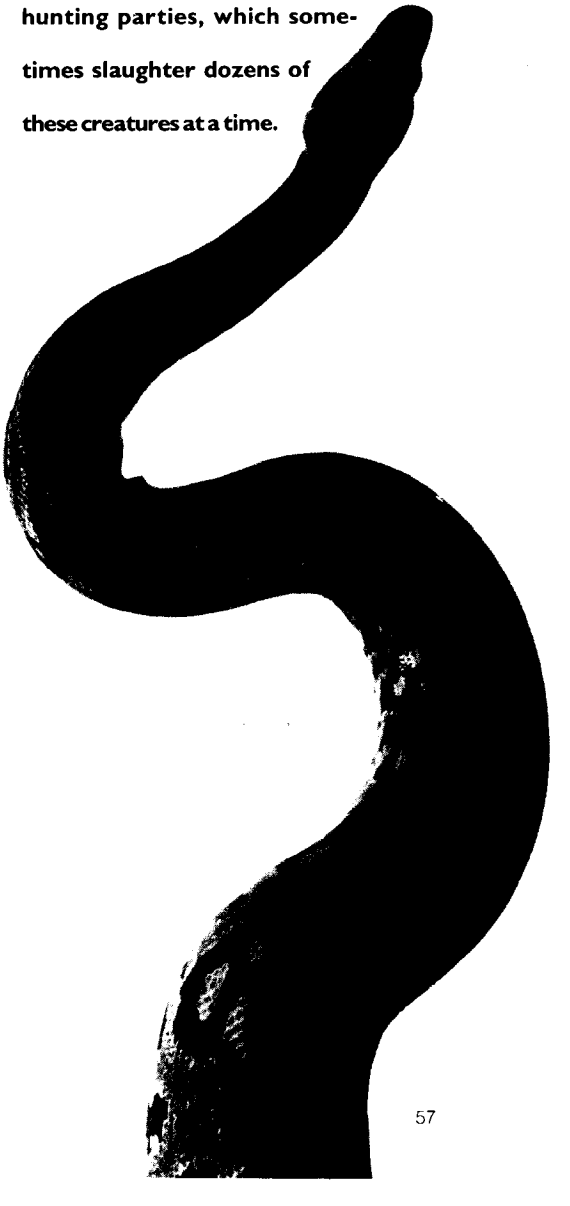
In an early body of work, he captured images of people from Mud Lake, Idaho, controlling a jackrabbit population by clubbing thousands of the creatures to death. Later he produced a book on big game hunting.

Then, in 1986, while photographing an Indian rhinoceros at the San Diego Zoo, he was, he says, "hit with a lightning bolt out of the sky." Why not photograph these endangered animals as they really are—"adrift in the ether of a planet made alien to them, a place they must now call home"?

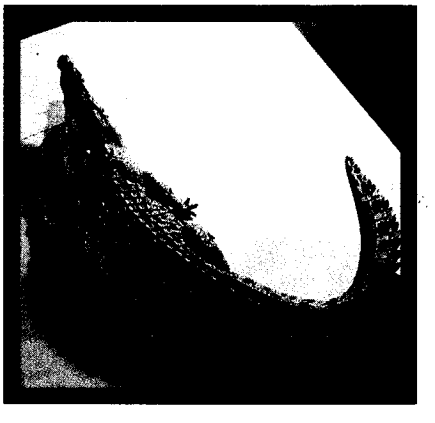
"One of the cherished illusions of our culture," Balog says, "is that animals will always live contentedly in idyllic wilderness. Through television, magazines, books, and calendars, we feed ourselves an endless stream of imagery, showing wildlife surrounded by glorious vistas, exquisite plant life, and Technicolor sunsets. Such romantic imagery creates the sense that all is right with the world, that Eden is still out there, that the idyll will exist forever.

"But the reality of the present, not to mention the future, is radically different from this vision. In the temperate and tropical zones of the earth, humans have destroyed much of the world's original habitat in a relentless search for farmland, living space, and materials.





The chimpanzee named Beau (opening page) was born in Florida's Busch Gardens; his brethren in Africa have been decimated by habitat loss and poaching. On this spread, counterclockwise from top left are the Dama gazelle, the golden lion tamarin, the Madagascar ground boa, the white rhinoceros, and the gray wolf. The gazelle, a full-grown adult male, was photographed at the Fossil Rim Wildlife Ranch in Glen Rose, Texas. Two of the five subspecies of this gazelle are already extinct; the rest are regularly stressed by large sport-hunting parties, which sometimes slaughter dozens of these creatures at a time.



WHITE FABRIC SIMPLIFIES THE WORLD, ENABLING THE PHOTOGRA-PHER TO FOCUS ON THE ANIMALS' INHERENT AESTHETIC QUALITIES.

As a result, the age of truly wild animals is nearly over. Unprecedented numbers of mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians *are* becoming extinct. Nearly nine hundred species and subspecies of animals are severely threatened; hundreds more require the protection of humans if they are to survive.

"Many of the species that survive this wave of extinction will see their original wilderness reduced to enclosures landscaped by foam rocks," Balog says. "Their home range will be surrounded by human dwellings and fast-food franchises. Their mates will be chosen by computer selection, and their sex acts will take place in petri dishes."

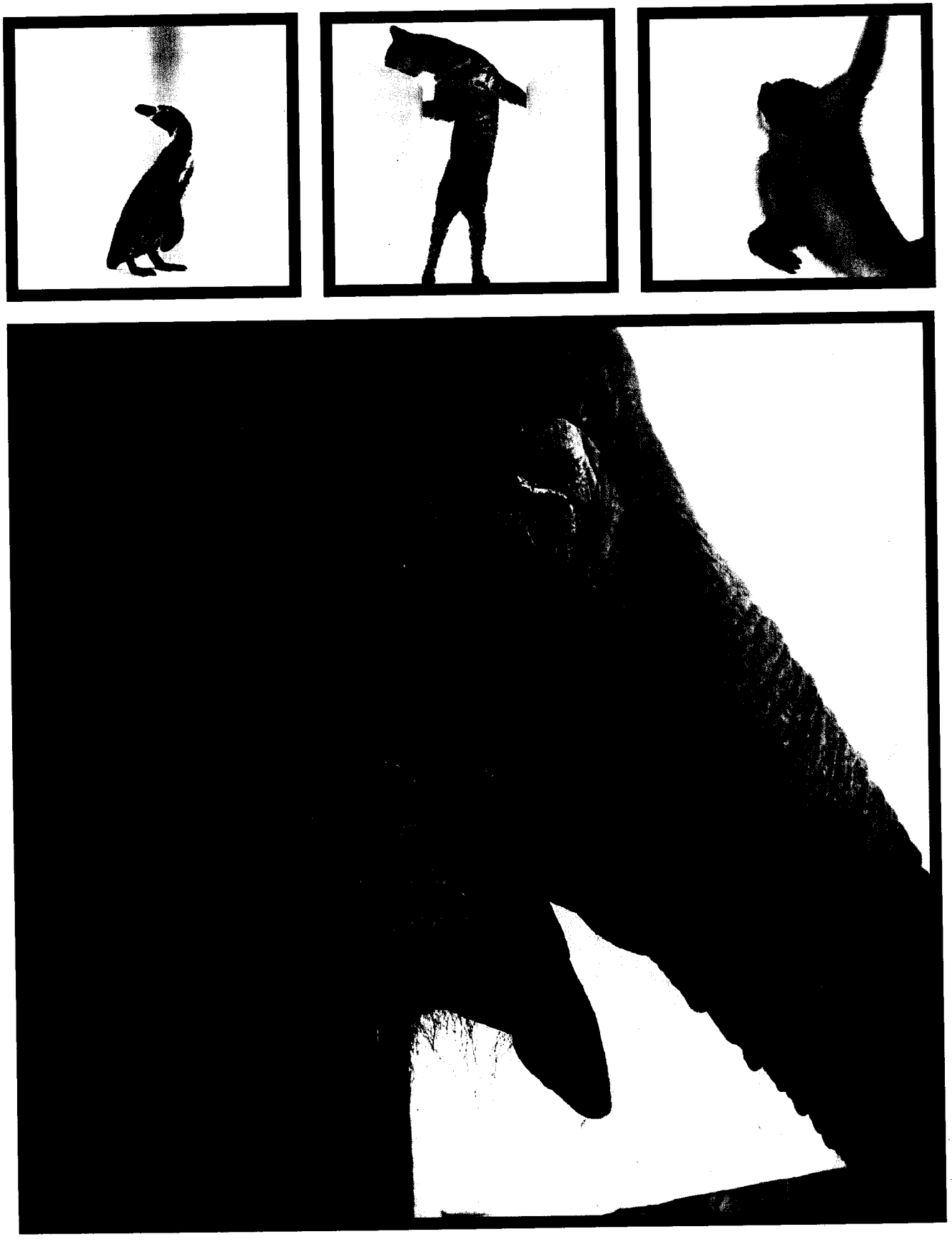
To capture the animals' grim and solitary fate, Balog traveled the world, visiting facilities from Gatorland in Orlando, Florida, to the Manila Zoo. He photographed species as diverse as the chimpanzee, the crocodile, the Asian elephant, and the pink pigeon.

But no matter what the species, Balog never took a picture without striving to tune in to the moods and feelings of the animals themselves.

"Though all the animals photographed for this work were in captivity," Balog explains, "the great majority had been neither handled nor trained, and their actions were unpredictable. It was thus critical to understand and accept the animal's wishes and emotions. Was he or she tired or energetic? Too hot or comfortable? Impatient, curious, or bored? Irritable or content? Skittish or placid? How long was the animal's attention span? Usually it was twenty to thirty minutes, but it ranged from no interest and cooperation at all to as long as an hour."

The drill on this page, a 13-year-old male, hails from Carmen Hall at the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in Rochester, New York. Drills, with native habitats in the tropical forests of Cameroon and Nigeria, are on the verge of extinction in the wild. Animals on the opposite page include the scimitar-horned oryx (top) and, on the bottom row from left to right, the bald eagle, the Galápagos tortoise, and the Asian crocodile. Animals in captivity on the next spread include the Humboldt penguin, the ocelot, and the hamadryas baboon (left page, top row, left to right); the Asian elephant (left page, bottom); and the Himalayan black bear (right page).

STARVING ASIAN ELEPHANTS OFTEN RAID BANANA, COFFEE, OR JUTE FIELDS. THEN THE ANIMALS ARE SUMMARILY KILLED AS PESTS BY NATIVES.



To get the most out of the animal images, Balog experimented with unconventional photographic techniques. In the end, he says, he decided to use artificial lighting and white backgrounds, created through the use of white fabric and transparent plastics. "White simplifies the world so that you focus on the animals' inherent aesthetic qualities—the lines, colors, and textures—without distraction. The white at once generates sculptural counterpoints that set the animals off, and creates a void in which the animals float."

Much of this photographic technique, Balog adds, was appropriated from contemporary advertising technology, "whose contrived 'look' is aimed at creating desire for superfluous consumer goods such as cosmetics, liquor, jewelry, and clothing." In one sense, he says, "the use of those techniques is an ironic commentary on our society, which is so adept at turning the meaningless into the priceless. In another sense, I use those techniques to separate the truly priceless from the meaningless. By changing the context in which animals are seen, we have a different basis from which to answer one crucial environmental question of our time: Are these 'objects' of exquisite formal beauty worth saving? I believe they are."

Balog, however, says the technique generates an alchemy that's hard to explain. "On the deepest level," he says, "the pictures should let you experience these animals in a far more direct way. The animals look vulnerable, lost, alienated, alone. As you look at them, you should see the shock of yourself in this weird, technological, disenfranchised world, where you may breathe recycled air and not even feel the sun for days."

The most important thing about these pictures, Balog believes, is the ancient connection they help to reestablish between the beasts of the earth and man. "These pictures are not a window into the lives of the animals," he says, "they are mirrors. Looking into one of these mirrors will reveal not only the animal, but also, ourselves transformed."—Pamela Weintraub