Amy Stein’s images serve as modern dioramas of our new natural history. Within these scenes, she explores our paradoxical relationship with the "wild" and how our conflicting impulses continue to evolve and alter the behavior of both humans and animals.

Question by Giovanni Aloi
Amy Stein is a photographer and teacher based in New York City. Her work explores our evolving isolation from community, culture and the environment. She has been exhibited nationally and internationally and her photographs are featured in many private and public collections such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, the Nevada Museum of Art, SMoCA and the West Collection.

We met with Amy to discuss Domesticated. Of the series she has said: “My photographs serve as modern dioramas of our new natural history. Within these scenes, I explore our paradoxical relationship with the “wild” and how our conflicting impulses continue to evolve and alter the behaviour of both humans and animals. We at once seek connection with the mystery and freedom of the natural world, yet we continually strive to tame the wild around us and compulsively control the wild within our own nature. Within my work I examine the primal issues of comfort and fear, dependence and determination, submission and dominance that play out in the physical and psychological encounters between man and the natural world. Increasingly, these encounters take place within the artificial eco-tones we have constructed that act as both passage and barrier between domestic space and the wild.”

The photographs in ‘Domesticated’ are constructed on real stories from local newspapers and oral histories of intentional and random interactions between humans and animals. The narratives are set in and around Matamoras, a small town in Northeast Pennsylvania that borders a state forest. Why this setting?

I was at a very curious stage with my photography, exploring a variety of paths from my Women and Guns series. The interest in hunting culture led me to discover the world of taxidermy. I became really interested in the people who lived with it and the people who created it and the psychology behind their pursuit. I knew I wanted to do a project that explored this world, but it had to move beyond the typical images of a deer head hanging in a living room.

Why did you want the stories to be factual rather than fictional?

Through my process of discover I met with a lot of taxidermists and visited quite a few taxidermy schools, most of which happen to be in more rural environments. As a consequence I came in contact with a wealth of stories about these small and wonderful moments of human and animal interaction. Most taxidermied animals are posed to recreate a false of moment of life or death drama between hunter and hunter when in reality the animal was probably shot from distance as she was going about her day. I become obsessed with these real stories that in my mind were far more tense and painted a much truer picture of the connection we share with the wild.

Your images bear the unmistakable freshness typical of the snapshot combined to a glossy and more staged approach that brings to mind the artistic language of Jeff Wall. Has his photographic approach influenced yours in any way? Which other artists have informed your practice?

Jeff Wall’s work is largely based on art historical references. My work is based on everyday moments in a small semi-rural town. The strange part is that the paintings referenced by Wall represent mostly banal, everyday moments and domestic scenes. In referencing them he would seem to commenting more on the painter than the scenes depicted. I like to think I am more in the tradition of the painters who tried to capture those original moments.

Having said that, I must mention I love Jeff Wall’s work. I also find inspiration in the work of Gregory Crewdson and Alec Soth.

In accordance with the stylistic balance between snapshot and staged photography achieved by your images; the animals featured in your work are real but taxidermised. Why?

Not all of the images in the Domesticated series use taxidermied images, but I find taxidermy adds a layer of artifice that I am interested in exploring. The space where these encounters take place is a kind of artificial boundary between the domestic and the wild. In staging these images I want the viewer to recognize the scene and react to the surface before they slowly uncover the many “unnatural” layers and elements that make up this space.

Are you interested in taxidermy in itself, or is it more of a practical tool that allows you to capture wild animals in ‘easier to photograph’ conditions?

Both. I am interested in the psychology behind taxidermy and use it as both tool and statement in my work.
Where do the animals featured in Domesticated come from?

They are all local to the area surrounding Matamoras. I think it is important that the image create a level of realism and try to stay as true to the original story as possible.

How did you choose which animals were going to be featured in the series?

The individual stories drove the narratives in the images. I would be making a completely different statement if I showed two polar bears digging through garbage cans in Pennsylvania.

What precautions did you take to make these animals look as alive as they do in your images?

Most of the credit goes to the taxidermist. There is a huge difference between great taxidermy and bad taxidermy. Dave, the taxidermist I work with, is an amazing artist in his own right.

Is taxidermy back in fashion?

I don’t seem to remember a time when it was in fashion. Certainly, a rural and naturalistic aesthetic is does seem to be in fashion now. Taxidermy is a prop that helps convey that aesthetic and because of that I think you are seeing more of it these days.
What do you think of Damien Hirst’s use of taxidermy?

I love Damien Hirst’s work. I think he is a really brave artist that takes a much more direct approach to confronting the human versus wild dynamic. I think his work is more about human dominance and control than my work.

How have you technically produced the images included in Domesticated?

Everything I shoot is in front of the camera. There is no Photoshop trickery involved. I shoot with a medium format camera and mostly use available light.

Do you scout for locations?

Sometimes the scouting can be the longest part of the process. My husband and I drove block by block over many weeks looking for just the right house for “Trasheaters.” The process can be very involved or it can happen right away.

In ‘Backyard’, we see a man aiming a shotgun at a turkey and in ‘Watering Hole’, a bear surprising a little girl standing on the trampoline of her swimming pool; in both images humans seem to be on the ‘wrong side of the enclosure’. Is this a coincidence?

I am very much exploring a transition space between the domestic and the wild and encounters like this happen all the time. I find it interesting that humans choose to live on this border to experience that connection, but
then practicality demands they build barriers to keep the wild away. In building these barriers and fences they do keep the animals out, but they also pen themselves in. I am definitely trying to show this in my work.

You have studied political science. How much does your background inform your work?

There is a political layer to everything I do because I am motivated by the issues that matter to me. What I love most is starting with a hard and fast conviction about an issue and then using photography to explore and challenge my belief system.

What are currently working on?

I still have a few more Domesticated images in me and my Stranded project is ongoing. I plan on creating several limited run photography books based on a few ideas I have in my head. After that I am going to start on my next big project on migration.

In 2006, Amy Stein was a winner of the Saatchi Gallery/Guardian Prize for her Domesticated series. In 2007, she was named one of the top fifteen emerging photographers in the world by American Photo magazine and she won the Critical Mass Book Award. A monograph of her series Domesticated will be published in fall 2008. This forthcoming book won the best book award at the 2008 New York Photo Festival. Amy was raised in Washington, DC, and Karachi, Pakistan. She holds a BSc in Political Science from James Madison University and a MSc in Political Science from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. In 2006, Amy received her MFA in photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York. Currently, Amy teaches photography at Parsons The New School for Design and the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

For more information please visit www.amysteinphoto.com

Amy Stein was interviewed by Antenna in Spring 2008 ©