



COMMENTARY: For Peter Beard, a Career Devoted to Beauty and Beasts

July 2, 2016

by James Croak

Artists receive critiques when they are young and malleable and then later after they have passed, as historians sort their significance in the Brobdingnagian corpus of Western art history. But rarely do they suffer appraisal during their white mane years, when scribes marvel that they endured so long, survived in a trade that musters the crew every five years and then gives them the heave ho to the shoals below. It is a brutal and regular shucking that keeps the art world on the crest of thought.

One who has endured is photographer and environmental author [Peter Beard](#), who is having his first U.S. museum exhibition in 15 years at [Guild Hall](#) in East Hampton. The cleverly installed show, curated by Christina Mossaides Strassfield, was mobbed at the opening and promises to remain a major draw in New York. It is especially endearing as fully half the diaristic work on display was created nearby in Montauk.

Born with roguish good looks and an old-money pedigree, Beard acquired a Yale art history degree and easily moved among the glitterati in a hard partying life bilocated improbably between Montauk and Kenya. He married a supermodel and knew all the others, as evidenced by the prominent beauties who went topless for his lens and adorn the edges or center of many of his images.



“Janice Dickinson and a cheetah” by Peter Beard, 1983. Photograph. ©Peter Beard. (Not exhibited at Guild Hall).

James Beard lasted through a remarkable series of hegemonies that disposed of each other because he was never a part of any of them. Pete Seeger famously said he could read music “but not enough to hurt my playing.” I have similar thoughts when I hear of a degreed art historian setting off to make art; usually they perform slight variations of some shop-worn school. But, if they can, they spin the buggy around and they are now facing forward into the unplumbed mystery instead of backwards towards the familiar chronologies. A little less academia typically generates better work.

Beard avoided the modernist and post-modernist style parade that drifted by during his eight

decades by anchoring himself in two outsider themes: one being environmentalism, something brand new when he began it; and the second one of the [oldest themes](#) that can be identified: beauty and the beast.

For his first subject, he recorded African herds of stampeding animals running for their life in a miasma of despair as their aboriginal lands are destroyed and their body parts traded at market. This was mixed with overflowed shots of bone yards of large creatures who suffered a premature death.

The second thread are the magnetic images of beautiful young women, often nude, among these same large beasts, a juxtaposition that continues a long cultural thread of posing a beauty with a beast of some sort. One such is Beard's seminal photo of model Maureen Gallagher feeding a giraffe, a shot that seems to be more famous than he is and is having its own career.



"Maureen Gallagher feeding a giraffe at 2:00 am" by Peter Beard, 1987.
Photograph. ©Peter Beard. (Not exhibited at Guild Hall).

The modern version of the Beauty and the Beast tale was introduced by French novelist [Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve](#) in 1740, followed by endless variations in every imaginable medium, including a 1946 film by [Jean Cocteau](#), a 1994 opera by [Phillip Glass](#), "[La Belle et la Bête](#)," (based on Cocteau's film), and, of course, Disney's ubiquitous animation by the same name.

A contemporary of Beard, photographer [Richard Avedon](#), made good use of the beauty and beast imagery found in the Book of Genesis in the story of Eve and the serpent. He coiled a Burmese python around the voluptuous fashion model Nastassja Kinski for a sensuous Vogue Magazine shot later widely reproduced as a poster.



"Nastassja Kinski and the Serpent" by Richard Avedon, 1981.

But in visual art, Beard had environmentalism mostly to himself, witnessing the disaster befalling Africa as the rapidly expanding human population displaced the large mammals of Africa. His many popular books, such as "The End of the Game," contain dismal photographs of a declining elephant population in Tsavo Park and Lake Rudolf in the northern frontier of Kenya.

Historian James Diamond, in his Pulitzer winning "[Guns, Germs and Steel](#)," shows that the large mammals of Africa once also roamed the Americas, but were hunted into extinction by the native

populations long before the Europeans arrived. It's not a great leap to see it is repeating on another continent.

Beard's *Pink Elephant*, included in the Guild show is one of his better works, a complete and powerful delivery of a faraway experience, cleverly rendering the creatures' fright in abstract paint along the border. One singular advantage to abstract expression is quick emotions, here used to tell the story as if tense music was playing during a documentary.



"Pink Elephant" by Peter Beard, 1966/2009. Gelatin silver print with gelatin silver print collage, found objects, watercolor, sea salt, ink, 55 1/16 x 65 5/8 inches. ©Peter Beard, Courtesy of Peter Beard Studio, www.peterbeard.com. Image courtesy of Guild Hall.

Later Beard recycled these images into highly personal collages. Imagery is usually framed, or in many cases over-written, by a free flowing diary of whimsy, reflections, sketches, paint swirls, photo fragments and even his own blood, giving his assemblages a singular appearance. These pieces are easily recognizable as his work, even prior to scouting the wall tag at Guild Hall. An indication of how much the art market loves signature work can be seen in the \$662,500 price Peter Beard's *Orphan Cheetah Triptych*, 1968, fetched at Christie's in October 2012.

Much of Beard's work was produced in his Montauk home, where he is often shown hanging out with musicians and pop artists. Guild Hall used its two galleries to separate the American and African geographies to good effect. The work is diaristic and a bit of visual name dropping, especially since the attraction of Montauk when he made these works was as a place where somebodies could pretend to be nobodies.

One image of Beard's that seems to straddle both his themes is that of Danish writer [Karen Blixen](#) (1899-1962). Blixen published under at least four *noms de plume*, most famously using "Isak Dinesen" for her 1937 memoir of Kenya "Out of Africa." Blixen's book inspired Beard and he ultimately visited her in Denmark when he was a young man. Many of Beard's photos contain quotes from Blixen's book and they had a connection of their shared interest in Africa.



"Karen Blixen, Dec. 3rd, Ramses, Kikuyu Chief Dageretti" by Peter Beard, 1955 - 1961. Three gelatin silver prints with collage and ink, 16 x 30 inches. ©Peter Beard, Courtesy of Peter Beard Studio, www.peterbeard.com. Image courtesy of Guild Hall.

Here we see a late photograph of Blixen taken by Beard, a noble profile presented with that of a Kikuyu chief from six years earlier. Blixen was a baroness and moved among the European nobility, but found her soul and a life in Africa. The connection with the much younger Beard is tangible as he was embarked on a similar journey and found beauty among the beasts in the timeless savannah of Kenya.

BASIC FACTS: "Peter Beard: Last Word from Paradise" is on view June 18 through July 31, 2016 at Guild Hall Museum, 158 Main Street, East Hampton NY 11937. www.GuildHall.org.

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