

# M+B

## **Human dynamics; For every action there's an interaction with photographer Anthony Lepore and his subjects. By Alice Thorson**

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Human relationships are the bedrock of Anthony Lepore's photography, as seen in a new exhibit at the Kemper Museum. The 13 large color photographs in "Anthony Lepore: Restoration" include a radiant shot of a mother and child and the moving "Billy and Cal," an image of two elderly men in a church pew. Clearly they're a couple. Although one is stronger physically -- he props up his weaker partner, who clutches him from behind -- the expressions on their faces convey an emotional interdependence that bears the stamp of years.

The Los Angeles-based Lepore has exhibited widely in the United States and abroad, but his exhibit at the Kemper is his first solo museum show. Kemper curator Chris Cook was attracted to Lepore's work for its "emotional sincerity." The images "illuminate something profound," Cook notes in the accompanying brochure, "a desire, a hope, to restore a connection with others and the natural world."

"Untitled (Morrow Bay, CA)" (2005) shows a woman at the water's edge feeding seagulls. Her expression is ecstatic as the birds swoop and flutter around her. The woman is Lepore's grandmother, who at his request, agreed to enact her strongest childhood memory.

A native of Burbank, Calif., Lepore grew up "on a plain suburban street right next to Disney Studios." He didn't think about nature much until he moved to New York in the late 1990s to attend Fordham University. "The nature deprivation in New York made me need it more," said Lepore, who went on to earn his master's at Yale. "I started filling my apartment with plants from the Amazon."

To support himself, Lepore worked in an exotic bird store, where at one point he traded a woman a photograph in exchange for an egg of an endangered species bird from Peru. "Raising (such birds) in captivity extends the species' life," he said, "but they can't

# M + B

be released."

Lepore is intrigued by such human acts of restoration while being attuned to their attendant ironies. His images of an urban falconer, a western wolf sanctuary and a skin cancer surgery on a baboon are emblematic of our relationship with wild animals at a time when pollution, development, poaching and global warming threaten their survival.

The baboon appears, post-op, recovering under a blanket at the Auckland Zoo in New Zealand. A zookeeper told Lepore it was one of a dozen baboons in Australia and New Zealand that had undergone surgery for skin cancer, attributed to the deterioration of the Earth's protective ozone layer.

The wolf sanctuary takes in wolves, but also wolf-canine hybrids, adopted by people who thought the baby animals were cute but were unprepared to cope with their needs and temperament as they matured. Lepore's shot shows the woman who founded the sanctuary nuzzling one of the animals. "She's the head of the pack," Lepore said. "I get to enter these worlds that are unbelievable."

Lepore doesn't stage his shots but lets them evolve out of contact with his subjects. "For me they're a collaboration," he said. "I'm working with these people, and we're having this exchange."

The falconer appears in her Brooklyn apartment with a bird she trained to scare pigeons off the runways at JFK International Airport. "How should I dress?" she asked when he was setting up the appointment for a Sunday morning. "Just wear what you usually do," he said. In Lepore's image she appears in underwear and socks, wearing a falconer's glove on her hand, which she extends to the attentive bird. Lepore loved the contrast that emerged from this unplanned scenario, between the woman's soft flesh and the falcon's sharp talons and beak. It electrifies the image, embodying the coexistence of trust and danger on both sides of the relationship.

Lepore's landscape images also focus on human intervention. "Painted Rock" (2008) shows a boulder that is a frequent target for graffiti. The graffiti doesn't show in the photograph thanks to the senior citizens who regularly cover it with silver and gray spray paint. Lepore compares it to a "new skin."

"View," a shot of a New Zealand hillside dotted with park benches and plots of greenery,

# M+B

attests to similar good intentions. But the unnatural arrangement seems better suited to stadium seating than contemplation. The image exemplifies the rare balance of generosity and critique that may be Lepore's signature contribution to the photography of our age. He never points a finger, but we can see what's going on. To reach Alice Thorson, art critic, call 816-234-4763 or send e-mail to [athorson@kcstar.com](mailto:athorson@kcstar.com).

## ON EXHIBIT

The show: 'Anthony Lepore: Restoration'

Where: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 4420 Warwick Blvd.

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Mondays. The exhibit continues through Jan 4.

How much: Free

For more information: 816-753-5784 or [www.kemperart.org](http://www.kemperart.org)