

ALPHA // FEMALE
28 & 29 SEPTEMBER
11.00 - 18.00 hr.
HET GLAZEN HUIS @ZONE2SOURCE
AMSTELPARK | AMSTERDAM
FLAT // LAND



[INTRO]

Divinely it sits calmly in its coat of white and grey downy feathers, overlooking with exceptional eyesight its surroundings; waiting for the moment to grab its hunt. The muscled legs and broad breast of this Broad-Winged Hawk, not to mention its sharp beak, leave us in no doubt. This is a bird of prey. In the blink of an eye, its mission will be complete.

Female hawks, like most birds of prey, are larger than males. In scientific language this phylogenetic phenomenon is called RSD, "Reversed" Sexual Dimorphism. The reason females are larger is because they have to defend "like a hawk" their eggs and offspring against ruthless predators, such as bigger birds. Their relatively greater body mass is thus an adaptation (what biologists refer to as "natural selection"). Though this Broad-Winged Hawk looks like an alpha, it is in fact a relatively smaller, male bird.

'Drifter no 1' was taken by Australian fine art photographer Leila Jeffreys, as part of her series 'Wounded Warriors'. Drifter was rescued by a conservation group after he was found wounded during his long-distance migratory journey from North to Central and South America. Since hawks are monogamous, the trauma is doubled: they often lose their partners and their homes. "These birds are the sovereigns of the skies but they are also at the mercy of misfortune." - Leila Jeffreys. Regarding the concept of alpha, she notes: "Boys tend to be more friendly than ladies; they are often easier to work with, as they seem more docile, whereas girls often come across a little sharper. That also means, they move around a lot."

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On Saturday 28th and Sunday 29th September, FLAT // LAND presents its new exhibition, ALPHA // FEMALE. The show invites us to exchange the old gendered frames we have used to look at animals for the glass walls of Amstelpark's Het Glazen Huis, and to celebrate the diversity of nature. Exhibited works invite us to consider: how do our own prejudices and (gender) stereotypes influence our understanding of the animal world? And further, how can rethinking animals help us to rethink ourselves, as part of nature at large?

Participating artists include Kim Boske, Marlene Dumas, Stelios Karamanolis, Minyoung Kim, Leila Jeffreys, Vincent Munier, Awoiska van der Molen, Anoek Steketee, and Paolo Ventura. Though working with different media – as photography, drawing, and tapestry - they share a gentle conviction, a poetic perspective on what constitutes nature, life, and the animal realm.

In awe of the sublime diversity of nature, they invite us to realise that changing how we think about nature changes how we relate to the world around us.

PRESS RELEASE

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The exhibition ALPHA // FEMALE explores the behaviour of individuals in natural social systems. Focussing on the socially dominant traits associated with “alphas” of different species, ALPHA // FEMALE questions our gendered stereotypes of dominance in the animal world. “Alpha” refers to the highest-ranking individual of a social group: the leader of the pack (Frans de Waal), who exerts what biologists refer to as “dominance hierarchy” over other group members. Alphas exert their authority in many different ways and, contrary to common belief, they often avoid fighting, unless it is to re-establish stability within their group.

Historically, the ways in which we have looked at other species have been shaped by our own gender stereotypes. Animals have been painted, scientifically researched, and written up as a confirmation of the idealised social position of the alpha male – man the hunter, the dominant, powerful, and competitive man, the list goes on – in contrast to much more passive female companions. The flock had always been protected by the alpha male, or so it seemed.



Leila Jeffreys, 'Dritter 1', Broad Wing Hawk, Wounded Warriors - serie, 2015, Photograph on archival fibre based cotton rag paper, 91 x 72 cm.

Looking at animals through time, we found our own gender stereotypes reflected back to us, as a sort of male-centred “mirror” in the animal world. We used this reflection, in turn, to deny women and female animals forms of behaviour reserved for alpha males – amongst them, the ability to be competitive, sexually, or physically aggressive. This gendered hierarchy was best captured in the title of Jane Goodall's groundbreaking 1971 study on primates: 'In the Shadow of Man'.

With Goodall's push, things began to change within science. Her research in Tanzania showed that the behaviour of chimpanzees could not be predicted by their “sex”, but needed to be explained within the context of their individual histories and personalities. Six years later, in 1977, the biologists Molly and George Hunt scandalised conservative America with a study on female-female seagull couples. Since, a growing literature in animal studies, ethology, and socio-biology began to focus on female animals, challenging the idea that females are always motherly, calm, and less sexually active than their male in-groups.

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As the frames of our male-centred animal mirror began to break, we found that in many species, females have important roles in protecting their group. Wolves (*Canis Lupus*), for example, are now known to include an alpha female in their pack. She governs with the alpha male in a rigid manner. They form the dominant alpha-pair, the only adults in the pack that are allowed to reproduce. The siblings help raise, feed, and teach their pups.

In Norway, research has shown that it is the young females - the future alpha females - who dare to leave the safety of the natal pack in search for a new territory. When they find it, they mark it with their scent to lure a young alpha male in and start a new dynasty. In her new series, "The Wanderer (and the Act of Disappearing)", Dutch photographer Anoeek Steketee follows the true story of such a young female wolf ('Naya'), whose journey in search of a new territory ended in her death, believed to have been caused by poachers. This young female wolf was on track to become alpha.

Alpha behaviour in females is also present in female African elephants since these herds are led by a matriarchal organisation, governed by an older female. She owns social knowledge of years of experience. She guides the herd towards watering holes, remembers places of food, and recognizes poachers for life.

And amongst female primates, cognitive abilities are evident. These females even dictate social strategies of a group, face important group-maintenance tasks such as obtaining food, moving the group to resting areas, protecting them, and maintaining group cohesion. Female primates, it is thus discovered, take up roles as peace keepers, bringing back stability to the group.

But, according to Sandra Swart (Stellenbosch University), it is unrealistic to equate female alphas solely with the role of peacekeepers: "...to assume that female means 'natural pacifiers' is to turn 'female' into a caricature, denying females the gamut of drives open to males – including the 'bad ones' (pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth). They [females, ed.] can be as competitive, sexually or physically aggressive and, importantly, also impel evolutionary change at species level."



Paolo Ventura, Long Read (Vogue), 2020, Collage, acrylic paint and photograph on Fedrigoni quadrex paper, 50 x 40 cm

In 1976, Jane Goodall wrote of a female chimpanzee who, together with her daughter, had seized a three-week old chimpanzee from his mother's arms, "bitten through his skull, and feasted on the bloody remains". Until that moment only cases of male-killers of baby chimpanzees were known. Though female chimpanzees do not show overtly competition for rank, increased conflict over resources can result in high-like levels of aggression among them.

40 years after Goodall's groundbreaking observations, studies indeed affirm that female aggression is employed strategically, and that females can compete as intensively as males in the appropriate circumstances. These female primates seem to be fierce, ferocious, and highly efficient predators.

A similar trek for survival to pass on genes is also noted in African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*). For them, staying home is not an option in their quest to become an alpha and have pups. The young females are considered as elite predators of the sub-Saharan region (and the most endangered mammals therein). They do not howl or bark like wolves or domestic dogs; they hoot, twitter and squeak like birds. In their journeys that can cover over 2.000 kilometres, navigating woodlands, scrublands, dodging traffic and poachers, and crossing roaring rivers while avoiding crocodiles, they will try to find a bachelor or try to overthrow an alpha female of a different pack to brutally take her seat.

Yet, in Swart's words: "it seems foolish to stereotype the 'female of the species' as one thing or other – not only does it vary wildly between species, but also (and this is only beginning to be understood) within species". Although female African elephants are known as part of a "gentle species", they can indeed be aggressive and kill humans. As a consequence of extractivism and climate change, their natural habitat is decreasing in size, and females can act out to protect their younger, older, or sick family members.

It is equally important to remember that sexist stereotyping cuts both ways. Alpha males do not always claim the first female, apple, or nicest sleeping-sofa. As Frans de Waal stated: "Someone who is big and strong and intimidates and insults everyone is not necessarily an alpha male". The so-called alpha male should be reconsidered and merited as a wild life individual, with his own history, learning process, and experiences derived from varying encounters and circumstances.



Awoiska van der Molen, 'The Great Unconformity', Inkjet print op Dibond, eco epoxy laag ø 195cm

In short, nature is more diverse than we have often realised and, to understand it, we must be open to let go of our own preconceptions. Changing how we think about nature changes how we relate to the world around us.

Taking part in this changing environment, FLAT // LAND's new exhibition, ALPHA // FEMALE, provocatively invites us to exchange the old gendered frames we have used to look at animals for the glass walls of Amstelpark's Het Glazen Huis, and to celebrate the diversity of nature.

*Not for publication:
For more information, images and high res of participating artists,
please contact Mariana Gusso Nickel, info@flatlandgallery.com*

THE ARTISTS:

Leila Jeffreys (1972, Papua New Guinea)

Drifter no 1 is a Broad-Winged Hawk photographed by renowned contemporary artist Leila Jeffreys, as part of her series 'Wounded Warriors'. Drifter was rescued by a conservation group after he was found wounded during his long-distance migratory journey from North to Central and South America. In this photograph the hawk sits divinely in its coat of white and grey downy feathers, overlooking with its exceptional eyesight the surroundings. The muscled legs and broad breast of the broad-winged hawk, let alone its sharp beak, leave us in no doubt. This is a bird of prey.

Female hawks, like most birds of prey, are larger than the males. This phylogenetic phenomenon is called RSD, "Reversed" Sexual Dimorphism. The reason why females are larger is because, 'as a hawk', they have to defend their eggs and young against ruthless predators like bigger birds. Their relatively greater body mass is a result of adaptation, what biologists call as "natural selection". Though this broad-winged hawk looks like a female alpha, Drifter is a relatively smaller, male bird.

Jeffreys, who is known for her photographs of birds that explore and subvert the traditions of portraiture, sees her avian subjects as living beings who, as Drifter, bring their personal traits and histories into the images. Each photograph is a result of a long process of fieldwork in collaboration with conservationists, ornithologists and sanctuaries, which often propel the creation of programs to protect endangered habitats. Her work draws attention to the interdependence between species, and its impact on each bird, as a concrete individual.

Leila Jeffreys, 'Drifter No.1' Broad-winged hawk, Wounded Warriors, 2015
Photograph on archival fibre-based cotton rag paper
in ash wooden grey painted frame with artglass
91 x 72 cm
Edition of 25 + 2AP
Courtesy of FLAT // LAND, Amsterdam

Minyoung Kim (1989, South Korea)

Flying with the fish. The poetic rug by Korean artist Minyoung Kim, a nocturnal scene of a wild cat and moon titled Night Flight, reminds us of Van Gogh's The Starry Night (1889). Departing from her inner self, Minyoung Kim employs her canvases to catch her feelings, dreams, and visions. Her paintings reflect on past memories, dreams, or actions that could not be performed in real life, but which take a life of their own in her canvasses. Fish or cats, eyes or fruit: her drawings, tapestries, and paintings resonate beyond our cognitive abilities.

Kim reads as poetry. Her imagery is attractive and playful, while soaked with unsuspected elements of suspense. Using unstretched raw canvases, she portrays ironic scenes in a soft manner that combines what she believes to be strange yet cute elements. Cats play a large role in her imagery. In daily settings, they seem to outwit their human caretakers. Plates are emptied, windows broken for escape, floors scored open, trees set on fire in the garden. As viewers, we are invited to become accomplices in a secret animal world that suddenly unfolds before our eyes.



Minyoung Kim
Night Flight, 2023
Jacquard woven soft tapestry
158 × 158 × 3 cm
Edition of 100 + 5AP
Courtesy of FLAT // LAND, Amsterdam

Anoek Steketee (1974, The Netherlands)

In Anoek Steketee's new project *The Wanderer* (and the *Act of Disappearing*), a central role is reserved for the challenges faced by nature and wildlife in a human-dominated world. The project follows the true story of a young wild tagged wolf, whose traced journey in search of a new territory ended in a sudden disappearance, most likely killed by poachers. In her migratory travels to find safe and continuous habitats, Naya demonstrated incredible instincts and survival skills. She had to overcome, oversee and endeavour heavily cultivated landscapes created by roads, fences, bridges, industries, and agricultural fields.

Documenting Naya's migration through photographs, film, and music, Steketee subtly and subversively explores the darker side of human interactions with nature, and the urge to control unpredictable elements.

Steketee's harsh photographic documentation includes a wildlife camera, a deserted park bench set against the backdrop of an empty industrial framing landscape, and the headlights of an approaching car in the evening light.

Parallel to these photographs, a more metaphysical video work features Naya's traces, a suggestive interpretation of the wolf's point of view. For the film Steketee collaborated with singer/songwriter Roald van Oosten. The interaction between the image and the music and vocals reflects the strength and vulnerability of the individual in a grim, by human dominated environment. Tension builds as the wolf crosses more and more landscapes, speeding up, increasingly agitated. The viewer becomes her, the wolf; then the film becomes silent. Though captivated by Naya's resilience, Steketee explains that the project is about the complicated relationship between wild animals and humans; placing in sharp contrast the adaptive qualities of species and the human need for control and dominance.

Anoek Steketee
The Wanderer (and the *Act of Disappearing*) 2024 - Short film, try-out
video, music, photography

Kim Boske (1978, Netherlands)

The multiple layers in Kim Boske's photographic images seem to be holding, one layer upon the other, merging and intertwining, different moments in time, revealing hallucinating phenomena that are impossible witness with the naked eye. By going beyond the photographic media, which captures the "moment", Boske collects fragments of reality that are then layered into intricate and mesmerizing compositions which pay tribute to the incredible complexity of the natural world. This multitude of layers can be interpreted as a play with ecological ideas of diversity and symbiosis, embracing the character of the environment as a non-hierarchical, continuously changing complexity.

In Kim Boske's latest project Ensō no photographic lens was used. Boske worked only with washi paper and layers of her own handmade recycled indigo dots from pieces of prior photographic indigos. These tiny works of art depict streaming rivers and invisible micro-organisms. Working with natural materials reflects both literally and figuratively the importance of biological diversity through the presence of the many soil micro-organisms in her work.

Boske found her approach towards nature in Asiatic Shinto, in Japan. Shinto is an old nature religion, which recognizes nature as all-encompassing, and sees humans as equal parts to all other bio-organisms and matter.

Kim Boske

Untitled #4 (Flower), 2024, Inkjet in artist frame, 100 x 150 cm, Courtesy of FLAT // LAND, Amsterdam

Ensō, 2024, Multiple layers handmade washpaper with recycled indigo dyed washi photo dots, 28 x 19 cm, Courtesy of FLAT // LAND, Amsterdam

Awoiska van der Molen (Netherlands, 1972)

Awoiska van der Molen's dark photographic works are more than a registration of the physical characteristics of a landscape. During her solitary wanderings in remote natural areas, Van der Molen tries to enfold the essence of a spot. Her photographs invite us to experience a return to the core of our existence – a profound sustained engagement with the earth, its cyclical rhythm, and the cosmos we are part of. The physical experience of being in nature can be felt.

(Un)earth is an installation of images made by Awoiska van der Molen in the province of Groningen, where she was born and raised, as a homage to the power, silence, and solace provided by the Groninger nature. In her black and white photos, the force and comfort of nature seem to clinch together in this earthquake zone. With this typical sensory approach to the troubled landscape, she returns to the original territory of man: the untouched nature, far away from the influence of the modern world.

(Un)earth is a silent witness of Van der Molen's touch. The Groningen soil is reflected in a large circle of endlessness that unfolds at the centre of the installation, drawing us in to experience the force of nature in silent awe. In Van der Molen words: "When you spend a long time alone in a quiet landscape, far away from the hectic modern world, our deepest intuition recognizes our original territory: unspoiled nature, with its rhythms on which the bodily system is built".

Awoiska van der Molen

'The Great Unconformity'
Inkjet print op Dibond, eco epoxy ø 195 cm

'Un-earth'
#648-5 / 2021
Silver gelatine print, 120 x 100 cm

Stelios Karamanolis (1977, Greece)

A world full of strange figures and things to which we are not fully attuned unfolds before our eyes. Greek artist Stelios Karamanolis (1977, Athens) meticulously constructs a scenery where every piece of the raw canvas is well thought-out, process and thought inextricably intertwined. His work explores constant symbolic reference and anthropological states, rendering a feeling of mysticism, history and spirituality.

Karamanolis' subjects take the form of the living and the non-living, blending as trees, a Capricorn, columns or houses. Karamanolis' choice in imagery and the meaning they evoke are to prove the presence of a consciousness, ideas and mind activity. These entities show that living and non-living beings often **blend** in our psyche. The artist sees these entities as neutral souls that are more flexible than humans. They can deploy visions of an unseen world, and present landscapes of ideas derived from a hybrid between natural elements and human-made objects, beyond the surface of everyday life.

Exploring a stream of influences from remote antiquity to contemporary life, Karamanolis' work invites us to see the randomness through which the separation between species, materials, and times are established in our minds, and just how easily we can see beyond these categorisations, if we allow ourselves to be inspired by the multiplicity of the universe.

Stelios Karamanolis
Untitled, 2022, 150 x 150 cm, Colored pencil and acrylic on raw canvas

Marlene Dumas (South Africa, 1953)

In her work, Marlene Dumas confronts themes of politics, identity, love, and shame in her haunting oil and watercolor paintings. She's often inspired by her experiences growing up in apartheid-era South Africa; Dumas has based compositions on photographs of friends and family, mass-media imagery of current events and celebrities, and art historical references. Her ghostly palette comprises mostly grays, browns, blues, and pinks, and her style features blurred brushstrokes and thin washes of color. Nude bodies are a frequent motif—sometimes they're engaged in amorous acts that highlight the figures' expression, contact, and emotion.

What does it mean to be an alpha female? While animals often become alphas by having children, Dumas equates her entry into her artistic career with her defiant act of getting birth control pills and denying "Motherhood" for a while. In her early texts and drawings, Dumas' figures seem to emerge through a constant search for artistic expression, that similarly, also led her to be recognized as one of the "alpha" artists of her generation – a profession traditionally reserved for men, who painted woman.

Dumas' work responds to this traditionally male gaze by presenting figures who, amidst vulnerable scenes, stare back at the viewers with determination. In Motherhood, whether Dumas' figure is pushing a child or some sort of artistic expression out of her body seems irrelevant. What is most striking is the determination through which she seems to embrace the task of becoming something bigger than herself and emerging as a predator.

Motherhood,
Lithograph on wove paper,
26 x 28,5 cm,
ed. 19/40

Vincent Munier (1976, France)

Wildlife photographer Vincent Munier (1976, Vosges, France) has been awarded many times as one of best Wild life photographers in the world. What distinguishes is not so much just the recording of nature but finding constructed compositions that include the atmosphere of the environment that these animals live in. The emptiness that surrounds the animals. These compositions consist of the tranquillity of their surroundings as well as the linear construction and sensibility of the force of nature.

To be able to approach physically as well as mentally the animals in their own habitat, one needs to know a myriad of behavioural, physiological and psychological traits and how the species adapts to seasonal changes and lights. Munier's images are also proof of this phenomenon.

Since these creatures are the true legitimate inhabitants of nature, it is adamant we as humans have to pay them more respect.

Since 2011 Munier looked for highly cryptic and elusive 'ghost' cat, the snow leopard, for which he traveled many years to the rugged terrain of mountainous regions of Tibet to encounter it for the first time in 2016. It was a female with her cub, that surrounded him. It made it possible to capture her in her own surroundings.

Vincent Munier
Col de Fourrure (Tibet), 2016
Inkjet print on Arches cotton paper
100 x 150 cm
Edition of 30

Paolo Ventura (Italy, 1968)

The comical tone reminiscent of *comedia dell'arte* in Paolo Ventura's stunning absurdist work appears to search for an inventive and personal language of photography.

Experiments with paint on photographs, cut-outs of paper, building maquettes and backdrops are just a few of the artistic measurements used by Ventura to weave an unspecified, ambiguous atmosphere.

In January 2020, Ventura was invited to create the first illustrated cover of *Vogue Italy*. By producing its January issue without photographs, Italian *Vogue's* editor-in-chief Emanuele Farneti made a statement about sustainability in fashion, featuring illustrated stories and a series of hand-drawn covers created "without traveling, shipping clothes or polluting in any way." During this collaboration, Ventura created the photograph 'LongRead', where we see his wife Kim dressed in green fur adorned with a green giant emerald. The image sensually explores the Italian imaginary traditionally associated with the fashion industry, while provocatively questioning the use of fur and diamonds, both products derived from the natural world. Wearing them as humans may give a hint of primal feel.

Paolo Ventura
(LongRead), *Vogue Italy*, 2020
Acrylic paints on photograph in walnut frame, museum art glass

62 x 40 cm
Edition of 3 +2 AP

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