

An Encounter with Dario Zucchi at the Natural History Museum

The exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History called “Nature’s Best Photography” explores 2013’s winners and honorable mentions of the Windland Smith Rice International Award, an annual equal opportunity natural photography contest.

My experience in the Natural History Museum was influenced mostly by the people in the gallery. Tourists, teenagers and the elderly gathered to examine the animals along with the countless numbers of moms and dads with toddlers. Most every person utilized the “selfie” to incorporate their face into a photograph with the animals. If I was not careful I would have surely bumped into another viewer or tripped over a stroller.

Among the bustle of the people an older man with a faint European accent approached me with a camera. I immediately thought that he wanted me to take a picture of him in front of an image. However, he said, “If you do not mind I would like to take a photograph of you, but not of your lovely face. Can you stand in front of that kangaroo for me?” I agreed asking few questions and I stood with my front facing an image of a kangaroo with an orange background. The animal’s hands crossed the front of its body in an oddly human manner. After the man took the image, I asked him questions about himself, his work and what he was going to do with the image of me in front of the kangaroo. He said he was originally from Italy but he and his wife had lived in the district for a few years now. He showed me images of his photography from his website. Unfortunately, my parking meter verged on expiration so I left, but with the promise that he would hear from me in the next couple of days. It was not until the end of the conversation that I got his name, Dario Zucchi.

Mr. Zucchi left me with questions. He seemed kind and unassuming, but serious about his work. He was quiet and appeared from nowhere just like he slipped back into the crowd after our talk. He enjoyed the exhibit like others in the room, but he could have been there for hours. Almost immediately when I returned home to Lexington I studied Mr. Zucchi’s website. On Monday morning I emailed Mr. Zucchi. He agreed to answer several of my inquiries about the day we talked and about his process as an artist. The relevant parts of our conversation are recorded below with my italicized reflection or elaboration when necessary.

When you saw me what made you think I would pair well with the Kangaroo?

“As I told you when I asked you to move in front of that picture, I never want to take the photograph of the face (I think that that would distract the viewer of my images from “my” work). At first, I was attracted by the sunglasses resting on your head, then I noticed that your hairdo could have been a very pleasant support of a composition showing the kangaroo ears sticking out from your sunglasses. It was one

of those special moments when everything comes together in my eyes and I can see the final result before triggering the shutter.”

When Mr. Zucchi asked me to take the picture he had me squat a little bit so I would align better with the kangaroo’s ear. He also had me push my sunglasses farther back on my head. I was not standing near the kangaroo at the time so Mr. Zucchi saw the image and me separately and thought we would go well together. It fascinates me that he could pick me out from across the room and place me so seamlessly with the kangaroo. I think that there would be less of an artistic quality to Mr. Zucchi’s work if they were mere accidents and I also think that they would be less artistic if he brought models into a gallery to fit with a piece of art.

Mr. Zucchi finds the perfect balance between having a “photographer’s eye” and constructing an image.

Why did you start taking this style of photograph?

“For more than 25 years my wife has been a Foreign Language Docent (Italian) at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. Very often I had to drive her there for her tours. Having to spend several hours at the Gallery, I used to take my camera with me. Little by little I started taking photographs of museum visitors, without having any idea of what I was looking for (maybe I was inspired by the art of Thomas Struth). When, by pure chance, I took a couple of photographs of visitors in front of a painting, and I realized that the combination of the visitor’s image with the art could create a surprising, different and pleasant picture, I decided to pursue that idea further.”

I like that Mr. Zucchi was inspired by his own work and experimentation. His works convey a sense of spontaneity at the same time they show years of experience. I find irony in the Thomas Struth inspiration because Mr. Zucchi and Struth both take pictures of the same thing, but in opposite ways. Struth focuses on the reaction of people where Mr. Zucchi takes the human face out of all of his pictures. Yet, they both focus on the human interaction with art.

Do you see a picture and try to find a matching person or do you find a person and try to find an image or do you see it all at once?

“Both. When I visit a new museum exhibition, I first inspect it and try to identify the pieces of art (regardless of their actual artistic value) that I think are more suitable for my purpose. Then I look around for visitors that, for their clothing, hair, special aspect, could somehow combine with the art in creating a new image. Sometimes the visitor’s look guides me to a specific work, other times the art makes me chose among the visitors.”

How often do people decline your offer to take photographs of them?

“Very seldom. Maybe because the first thing I say when approaching a visitor is ”I’m not going to take a picture if your face”, maybe because of my very obvious age that makes me look not particularly threatening, usually I find that people react to my

request of collaboration with surprise, curiosity, interest, fun. That makes my experience even more pleasant. In the few instances when the person that I approach shows signs of uneasiness and declines my request, I do not insist. I'm convinced that it should be a pleasant experience not only for me but for everybody involved."

True. Mr. Zucchi gave off a pleasant grandfatherly vibe in a way that made him impossible to decline.

How many of the pictures that you take would you consider successful?

"It depends. During the long hours that I spend in a museum when I go "hunting", I try to get as many images as I can, even though many times they turn out being uninteresting. In normal circumstances, in one day I end up with maybe 15/20 basic compositions. Of each one of those, I take several shots with very minimal variations, in order to increase the chances to get the "right one". In total, I'd say that in a good day I could count between 100 and 150 shots. Out of which, if my curator selects more than 5 images, I consider it a very successful expedition." *Again, Mr. Zucchi achieves a balance of a concept that we have talked about in class, the planned image versus the machine gun approach. He takes several quick shots of one image from slightly different angles that he has previsualized.*

How do you pick where you are going to photograph?

"I look for places where there are exhibitions featuring art that I consider promising for my purposes, that I never "used" before, and where and when I anticipate a large number of visitors. I consider the Museum of Modern Art in N.Y. by far the best place for my purposes. Also the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in Richmond VA, the Metropolitan Museum of N.Y., the Art Institute of Chicago. In Washington DC, the now temporarily closed East Wing of the National Gallery of Art, The Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Phillips Collection, the Hirshhorn Museum, and the now defunct Corcoran Gallery. Recently I have discovered the photo exhibitions at the National Museum of Natural History: the subjects, size, colors of those photographs have been an extraordinary, exciting opportunity to diversify my interests."

Mr. Zucchi's willingness to talk to me about his artistic process introduced me to a new way of looking at art in a gallery. I prefer going to a museum or gallery when it is empty. Mr. Zucchi disagrees. From now on, instead of feeling annoyed and agitated in a crowded museum, I hope to start looking for visual games to play with the art and the people. I appreciate the conversation I had with Mr. Zucchi and the follow up emails because it gave me a unique opportunity to think about the way people look at art and experience a gallery. He forced me to explore the idea that there are other reasons to go to a gallery besides simply viewing the art.

By Myers McGarry

