

No trophy

Michael Günzburger

Michael Günzburger is an artist based in Zurich, Switzerland, with a longstanding interest in drawing practices, which are developed through projects involving graphic investigation, and spatial body and installation proposals. In the past few years, he has started making prints of various animals, from dogs to beavers, pheasants to wild boars. The particular printing technique required the artist to be in physical contact with wild creatures. The project would end with a polar bear. In the following text, Günzburger reflects on the process that brought him to the edge of human territory, where sea and land merge into an indistinct border, and on the issues of representation that underly human societies' relationships with the animal world in the twenty-first century.

It still makes me laugh to think I spent more than six years planning to get a polar bear, just so I could lay it down in a film of greasy matter.

The 'Bear of the Ocean', *Ursus maritimus* in Latin, hunts on the arctic ice, preferably for young and fat baby seals at the edge of the water. Edges are always a source of life. It proved to be a great matrix for producing many rich forms of work, and for developing questions, as well as for providing plenty of pleasure while seeking answers. It took me from my Swiss harbour to places at the fringes of human civilisation, where the question of whether the predators or the humans should wear senders, so as not to disturb one another, is not rhetorical.

At the heart of the project was a form of laziness: coming from a practice of drawing, I found it more practical to produce prints of animals so precise that eventually, every hair would be visible. The genre of prints stretches from petroglyphs and touch relics like the *Shroud of Turin*, to the Japanese fishprinting technique *Gyotaku*, all the way to Yves Klein's *Anthropométries*,

among others. All of these prints were done in the blink of an eye. The moment the person or the animal transfers the colour onto the flat matter is short.

It started with the print of a lambskin at Thomi Wolfensberger's lithography workshop in Zurich, followed by the print of a hare on display in a show assembled around Markus Raetz's *Metamorphose 2*. This is a small sculpture that looks on one side like a bust of Joseph Beuys, and on the other side like a hare. Raetz's piece is related to Beuys' performance in which he explained art to a dead hare. Beuys is himself referring to Albrecht Dürer, who showed his mastery as a painter and draughtsman by painting and drawing fur. So the obvious thing to do now was to let the hare print itself.

At the opening of this show, at which I was asked multiple times to print other visitors' pets, it became clear how utterly important it was to decide on an end to the series. I could have printed Noah's Ark Bestiary, but I promised (without really knowing what I was promising): 'it will end with a polar bear', adding a bit later that night that 'all animals necessary for developing the technique, exploring other facets of the projects, or convincing possible collaborators to be part of the project would complete the series'.

I wanted to work slowly. The territory of work staked out by this idea was too tempting to just pass by for the goal. At this point, I had no clue I would be printing a calf, a wolf, a brown bear, a lynx, a pheasant, a beaver and a wild boar with woolfat, metal pigment and transparent plastic film.

What would you do to get hold of a polar bear and make a print of it? Would you open a web browser and type something like 'Polar Bear Printing Safari'? Would you reach out to a Zoo? Call through the main line and ask the desk if you could print one of their polar bears? Or would you use your connections to reach an arctic hunter? Buy an expensive seat on an arctic hunting expedition that includes a tag, which allows you to shoot a bear in the substantial harvesting quota for polar bears in the Nunavut Territories? Would you travel to Churchill in Canada to see the 'Polar Bear Jail'? Maybe you have a connection to the Russian Arctic? Any options in Alaska, or Norway?

This would be a good moment to reflect on how you, in fact, work. What do you allow yourself to do to other living beings for your purposes? What are your purposes? What is your position in the *cycle of nature*? Did you ever think about selling the fur coat you inherited from your grandmother? Will you buy chicken wings for your kids? Is it OK to fly to the arctic?

Or will you do things just because you can, even with little knowledge? This would explain why the polar bear is so often used for something it is actually not: its whiteness (it actually has colourless hair) is a great projection space. It triggers our fantasy. It's an 'easy myth-making tool'. It is only its symbolic value that constructs what could be considered 'something strong and exotic out of the cold wilderness'. Eventually, it makes you talk about things you don't know.

The number of representations of polar bears is quite amazing, which indicates that we are in the realm of powerful symbolism. The polar bear is at the top of the food chain. Living in remote, vast, cold, and wild areas, it looks like a human when it is stripped of its skin, endangered by the receding ice sheets that result from climate change, which is invisible but still can be felt, From my vantage point, in a country with good internet access, what becomes clear is how unimportant the bear's actual physicality is. What is crucial is what it represents. It is the monster under your bed. And it can't be touched, which leads us to the field of the arts.

Few people have actually touched a polar bear, though many have used its image and symbolic value. Therefore, to go and touch a polar bear is an enlightening journey: one has to understand how the animals behave, but even more importantly, how somebody behaves, who could give you access to a bear. You don't get far without a recommendation. Most of the people recommended do not pick up the phone, as there are usually half a dozen phone calls a day from all over the world, from someone who wants to cuddle a polar bear.

You really don't want to cuddle a polar bear. You are not going to stay alive for long in the same room with a living polar bear. Few people can predict its behaviour. It doesn't expect to meet anybody stronger (some bears try to attack flying helicopters). And you would have to start to think of yourself as prey, as meat, as a juicy steak. And if you have a tool with which to kill it, then you have to start thinking about doing it quickly. It's unpleasant either way.

So a polar bear has preferably to be dead if you want to make that print. Would you really kill? To make art? Or would you be a scavenger, waiting for someone else to do the job? Or waiting for starvation – how else can you die at the top of the food chain? Would this make a polar bear accessible to you? Would you go where the bear is? And would you not go if an animal doesn't meet your expectations in terms of size and weight?

The polar bear I finally printed was an absolutely average polar bear. It was dead. Getting to the place where it was found was pretty easy: there are three regular flights a day to Longyearbyen, which is not far from the pole. The teenage polar bear was neither large nor small, and it died at an age when polar bears have the highest mortality rate. It was found dead by a group of arctic tourists. Some people who have seen the print think it is the trace of a big dog. It doesn't necessarily look like what you might imagine a polar bear looks like. But I can guarantee you it was one.

Printing a polar bear created that moment for me when your work and ideas circle around the thought of an object. Your mindset changes radically once you've touched it. It appeared that the whole process of getting the bear was the most rewarding part of the project. Printing was easy once I held the polar bear in my hands. It was the moment when my expectations flipped to experience. It was not what I imagined. It was temptation.

Fig. 1: Photo: Gerry Amstutz



Fig. 2: Video still: Michelle Ettlin



Fig. 3: Photo: Michael Günzburger



Fig. 4: Photo: Francesco Origgi



Fig. 5: Photo: Thomi Wolfensberger

