

Questionable Moral Geographies: The Human-Animal Landscapes of Gregory Colbert

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The most famous works of art, or perhaps the most notorious, are often marked by an origin story, rendering the artworks a-historical in their originality and daring. *Ashes and Snow*, produced during photographer Gregory Colbert's travels from his base in Paris to far-away lands, including India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Dominica, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tonga, Namibia, and Antarctica, offers the required elements of adventure and hardship. Begun in 1992, the photo and film based artworks present images of animals and humans paired together in what the artist refers to as "collaborations" between species. These photographs and films are steeped in the aesthetic values of nineteenth-century exploration, collection, and conquest. The space of spectacle in which these works are viewed, known as the Nomadic Museum, legitimizes the viewing of the Other in the form of art work and contributes to the exoticization of the images through its design and installation. Through an analysis of how the Nomadic Museum and the works therein function as complementing rhetorical tools, I demonstrate how each contributes to a specific understanding of the exhibition. I argue that Colbert's photographic and film works depict questionable ethical and moral geographies, which are rooted in their context of viewing and in their methods of circulation and consumption. Situating my argument within current interdisciplinary scholarship, my intent is to challenge the present-day viewing of human-animal relationships through the photographs of *Ashes and Snow*.

Site of Display: Nomadic Spaces and Places

The Nomadic Museum is funded by the Rolex Institute, a charitable arm of the watch company that supports various projects in both the arts and sciences, with a specific emphasis on ecological issues. The original Nomadic Museum, which toured the world between 2005 to 2007, was designed specifically for *Ashes and Snow* by the internationally renowned Japanese architect Shigeru Ban, who is known for his use of lightweight and temporary materials, particularly paper, to create a variety of structures, from exhibition spaces to refugee housing. In 2008, the Nomadic Museum was redesigned for its South American tour by the Colombian architect Simon Velez. Echoing the traditions of the travelling show, part circus, part evangelical tent, part exhibition hall, the Nomadic Museum occupies a location in the city, presents a spectacle for its viewers, and then is gone. Taking over prescribed locations in the cities it travels to—New York (2005), Santa Monica (2006), Tokyo (2007), and Mexico City (2008)—the Nomadic Museum can be adapted to each site, whether waterfront pier, fairground, or parking lot, depending on the surface area available. In a sense, the physical structure of the Nomadic Museum, deterritorialized and de-localized, parallels the works on display in its interior, which collect together subjects and places devoid of individuality and identity.

The exhibition is made up of 50 or more large scale photographic images, along with one hour-long film, two short films, referred to as "filmic haikus," and a book work written as a fictional account of an explorer writing letters home to his wife. The title, *Ashes and Snow*, is drawn from the main character's poetic phrasing, and reflects a complicated rhetorical position steeped in a nostalgic re-interpretation of the past brought forward into the present. The photographs represent a troubling fairy tale of man and animal, or man and nature, co-existing in utopian splendour, a Shangri-la of mythic proportions. From image to image, the photographer creates a romantic evocation of humans, primarily children and women, all shades of colour but white (except for the images of the photographer himself), engaged in activities with their animal "brothers" and "sisters." Reading, swimming, boating, dancing, lying in trees or crouched in silent prayer, the pseudo-human behaviour of the animals is meant to say, "see, we are not so different." Positioned in strangely passive and languid poses, often with their eyes closed, Colbert's subjects (human or animal) are never identified by name. Objectified in the picture plane, the animals and humans in these images act out a kind of neutralized anthropomorphized and anthropological vision, presented as art and blown up to near-human scale. Set in a landscape without any identifying features, the images further set their subjects in fantasy, reducing even locality to a generalized elsewhere.

The images are strongly stylized, bordering on kitsch, but visually appealing nonetheless in the way that they rely on strongly contrasting tonalities and textured forms, descending from granular to smooth surfaces. Fabric creases, glistening water pools, smooth and wrinkled skin, and sleek fur give a sense of luscious physicality to the works, while the texture of the handmade Japanese paper prints gives the photographic object an aesthetic preciousness not found with regular photo paper. Tinted in shades of umber and sepia, which lends an old-fashioned or timeless feel, these enormous images, at seven by twelve feet, have a dominating physical presence as they hang in the exhibition space.

One image in particular epitomizes Colbert's aesthetic and conceptual intentions. In a striking photograph of a small boy reading to an elephant, the two figures are united in their contemplation of the word. Framed in profile by the camera, the two forms face one another, on their knees as if in prayer. The child, who is looking down at the book as if unaware of the photographer or the elephant, allows the viewer to gaze upon his simple form. The elephant is centred to fit its whole body within the frame and looms over the child; the powerful beast rendered attentive, some might say obeisant, offers a touching contrast to the small figure of the boy, while its leathery skin contrasts to the smooth texture of the landscape. The blatant anthropomorphization of the elephant expresses a double message, both universal—that humans and animals can share and be as one—and cynical—that animals must behave a certain way to coexist with humans. Employing visual elements, such as composition, texture, and juxtaposition in a repetitive aesthetic framework, the image makes the photographer's position visible, rendered with touching romanticism and aesthetic superficiality. These visual and conceptual strategies, consistently repeated throughout the exhibition, reinforce Colbert's vision, uniting both image and idea.

The response to Colbert's *Ashes and Snow* has been mixed. Next to nothing has come from the academic art historical realm; instead, it has been art reviewers and critics, everyday viewers and bloggers, who have filled the void in interpreting and analysing these works. While there have been mixed reactions across the spectrum of sources, all indicate a kind of emotional, visceral response in their admiration or rejection of the work. In a *New York Times* review of the 2005 exhibition, Roberta Smith scathingly describes *Ashes and Snow* as a "vanity project" full of clichés (Smith 2). Writing in *Modern Painter*, on the other hand, Joseph Giovannini congratulates the artist for rejecting the cerebral and distancing techniques of contemporary art in favour of a more populist appeal. Attempting to situate (some might say intellectually legitimize) the work, Giovannini writes:

Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss are not the muses here. Instead the writings of Joseph Campbell, Claude Levi-Strauss and Carl Jung are the touchstones behind a mythopoetics that crosses image and text. Using the visual language associated with dreams—darkness, tonal values, atmosphere—he reels back in time to a pre-mechanical age, intentionally creating an aura in the photographs that he has extended into the display environment by commissioning a shadowy hall that becomes a cavern of collective dreaming. (Giovannini 81)

Edward Goldman on KCRW radio, NPR's affiliate in southern California, reacts against this avowed emotional sensibility, referring to *Ashes and Snow* as "Snake Oil from a Travelling Art Salesman," while nevertheless complimenting the structure and design of Ban's Nomadic Museum (Goldman). In all these reviews it is the building that receives consistently positive reactions, denoting that, of the two creators, it is Ban who has achieved the most wide spread critical success.

The interior of the Nomadic Museum, reflective of the artworks, is designed to encourage an emotional response in the viewer by eschewing the traditional white cube, a supposedly "neutral" space wherein art works can be displayed objectively without any additional meaning brought about by the specific context of viewing (O'Doherty 14-15). The images are evenly placed throughout the interior, suspended by wires between pillars to create the illusion that they are floating in space. Elements such as river stone floors and wooden planked pathways add to the site's naturalistic feel. Complementing the space's atmospheric design, the arched roof opens the exhibition to the sky, creating a cathedral-like environment that belies the exhibition's more earthly state. Together, the interior detailing and spatial design decisions offer the viewer something more than a single art exhibition: the Nomadic Museum offers a complete and total work of art, a contemporary *gesamtkunstwerk*, an installation which uses every element available to support the ideological position of the photographer, his sponsors, and his work.

The Nomadic Museum reinforces the exhibition's rhetorical position through the use of a vocabulary of nomadism, mobility, and ecology. The structure is meant to be ecologically friendly and easily re-constructed in each city with locally-resourced, basic materials. As the architectural historian Robert Kronenburg has written of Ban's design, "[t]his monumental structure belies its mobile status in form; however, the existing 'used' character of the containers remains to remind visitors of the structure's main building block" (35). Self-supported by the steel shipping containers that are also used to ship the works around the world, the building has a raw materiality to it, meant to reference its temporary and rustic nature. The Nomadic Museum uses paper tubes and steel cable trusses to support a PVC roof membrane, which also provides end walls to weatherproof the structure. In this contemporary form of travelling show, mobility and nomadism are presented as a kind of moral legitimization through the show's materiality and aesthetic presentation: as a monument to nature the Nomadic Museum offers a visual reference to environmentalism through the trope of recycling.

Both physically and literally situated outside of the traditional art institution, the Nomadic Museum nevertheless relies on the economic and institutional structure of the "museum" format through its formal shape, its advertising methods,

and its admission fees (twelve dollars US at its American showings). While offering a challenge to the traditional art museum, through its contrast to the white neutrality of the gallery space, the Nomadic Museum maintains a common thread with the contemporary art museum: through its relationship with the globalization of cultures and economies, the Nomadic Museum functions as a “non-place,” circulating just as the contemporary art market circulates the works of international art stars throughout the global network of museums.

As the anthropologist Marc Augé has written, the contemporary art museum, a product of the increasingly cosmopolitan world and of growing urbanization, travel, and tourism, must be understood as a “space of circulation, consumption and communication” (viii). Empirical “non-places,” Augé explains, develop as a result of the de-centering impact of “supermodernity,” a state caused by the excess of time in our globalized culture and the resulting rapprochement of places, cultures and people. In a sense, the roles of international tourism and the global art market have rendered the museum a part of supermodernity, which “makes the old (history) into a specific spectacle, as it does with all exoticism and all local particularity” (Augé 89). Augé qualifies his definition of “non-place” as a spectrum, with “anthropological place” at one end and “non-place” at the other. “Anthropological place,” Augé defines as “any space in which inscriptions of the social bond (for example, places where strict rules of residence are imposed on everyone) or collective history (for example, places of worship) can be seen” (viii).

What is striking about Colbert’s artworks is how they promote and generalize an “anthropological place”—in Augé’s nomenclature, a space of ritual and social interaction—as an idealized state while, at the same time, reducing the landscapes to “non-places” devoid of particular meaning, romanticized visions of a lost time that can only be re-created in a simulacra form. Colbert’s exhibition circulates through the wider world as a site of globalized culture, both literally, through its resource-consuming modes of transportation, and figuratively, in its representation of peoples, species, and places united as one. The Nomadic Museum brings images of the universalized Other to a global audience, dramatized through their dress and actions and circulating as a kind of exotic show. Embodying Augé’s description of “non-place,” the Nomadic Museum conflates locality with globalization, tradition with spectacle, people and animals with nature, and a social activist message with consumption.

The Human Animal

Throughout the Western intellectual tradition that we continue to build on today, animals and humans have been defined in contrast to one another, as if different sides of the same coin. Giorgio Agamben, in *The Open: Man and Animal*, examines how this dialectic is rooted in the values of Western and Christian philosophy where the boundary between humankind’s animality (the physical life) and the animals’ psychological life (the contemplative life) became sharply defined. Agamben situates the importance of this difference when he writes, “If animal life and human life could be superimposed perfectly, then neither man nor animal—and, perhaps, not even the divine—would any longer be thinkable” (21). Agamben argues that human existence and life are traditionally understood not by categorizing what we are but by defining ourselves against what we are not.

Through his representation of human and animal behaviour, Colbert attempts to dissolve the barrier between human and animal. On his website, Colbert refers to his project as a 21st century bestiary. A common form of illuminated manuscript in the Middle Ages, a bestiary was illustrated with images of animals, sometimes mythical and strange, and accompanied by a text meant to both entertain and moralize, using animals as symbolic stand-ins for human actions and behaviours. The categorization of *Ashes and Snow* as a bestiary reveals that Colbert has a deeper purpose in creating this project. His purpose is to moralize about the relationship between humans and animals, in the tradition of preservationists and environmentalists who promote a vision of nature steeped in the concept of pristine wilderness and the trope of primitive man existing “at one with nature.” In the case of *Ashes and Snow*, we are given a vision of nature returned to a time before the impact of modernity, metaphorically before the fall, a vision of species uncontaminated by global capitalism, even as the works themselves circulate as a result of the social and economic forces engendered by global capital.

While Colbert’s contribution to the picturing of this philosophical boundary is significant, I argue that these images function in opposition to the way that he envisions. The photographer writes that “[h]ow *Ashes and Snow* unfolds will be decided in large part by my animal collaborators. I hope to see the world through the eyes of a whale, an elephant, a manatee, a meerkat, a cheetah. I have tried to leave the windows and doors open so that others can enter and feel that same amazement that I felt during each work’s creation” (Colbert). Colbert’s intention, based on his clearly stated goal, is to conflate the experience of humans and animals and thereby to offer us, the human viewers, greater insight into the animals that surround us. Rather than depicting a close relationship between species, or a view of the world through the eyes of another species, the exhibition, in fact, renders the subjects, both animal and human, as romanticized Others, universalizing their subjectivities and experiences for the pleasure of the viewer. In attempting to circumvent the traditional boundary between human and animal, which is so deeply embedded in Euro-Western

cultural thought, Colbert's exhibition fails, offering nothing more than a performed narrative of the Other, similar to the exotic shows of the past.

“Exotic” Spectacle

The Nomadic Museum offers a contemporary parallel to the travelling exotic shows and human zoos that became popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the editors of the seminal collection *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires* have described, starting in the 1850s world fairs began to offer “anthropozoological exhibitions” at a time when the exhibition of colonial collections and spoils demonstrated the power and status of the modern nation (Blanchard et al. 6-7, 8). As dramatic changes took place across the world, fuelled by fast-paced scientific discoveries and enormous social transformations, human zoos offered a logical dialectic through which to position the European above the rest of the world. Fuelled by colonial travels, interest in exotic discoveries led to the formation of travelling shows and human zoos, ethnographic villages where the Other could be observed in their so-called authentic habitat, reconstructed for the visitor. The editors of *Human Zoos* write that “scientific positivism and faith in progress can be understood only against the backdrop of the profound anthropological concerns which permeated the social fabric, undoing the collective psyche and obscuring the future from view. Human zoos were part of a larger attempt to provide reassurance concerning identity” (Blanchard et al. 9). As such, exotic shows acted to stabilize a disrupted Euro-Western worldview by contrasting an “us” with a “them.”

These travelling shows traded on the excitement of the new and the exotic but also on their own impermanence to attract an audience. Regarding the physical structures of exotic shows, the historian John MacKenzie states that the exhibitions were “marvels that were ephemeral, constructed for a season, invariably dismantled and scattered at the end. That very transience heightened the sense of urgency to attend, and the need to capture them in leaflets, programmes and photographs” (259). With the development and popularization of photography and cheap printing methods and formats, postcard souvenirs became hot commodities and the circulation of images of the exotic became an important aspect of the travelling exotic shows.

While it was commonly understood that these shows and their images were not factual, per se, and while photographs were produced and circulated differently in scientific and entertainment circles, generating variable interpretations and meanings, photography nevertheless offered a unique vision of the Other. As Elizabeth Edwards has commented, the photographs of this period provide “the appearance of an unmediated reality, [but] those realities are culturally constituted; we photograph what we already 'know.' The imagined Other could thus be realized through the act of photographing” (240). Through the circulation of the Other, photography allowed Euro-Western viewers to define their own understanding of the Primitive, whether as an ethnographic throwback, a civilization from out of times past, or an idealized Noble Savage existing at one with nature.

In terms of technological development, it was an easy leap to the production of ethnographic films as a means to disseminate representations of exoticism more cheaply and quickly than the live shows themselves. What is particularly interesting about the exotic film industry, whether understood as documentary or fictional, was their truck in the stereotypical image of the primitive man and reliance on the theatrical codes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to promote an ideological reading of the Other. As Éric Deroo describes in his essay, “The Cinema as Zoo-keeper,” filmmakers controlled the scenes, employing:

a minimum of scenery (where emptiness expresses anticipation and danger); a minimum of costumes (reduced to loincloths and, even better, to nakedness in Africa, Polynesia and Indochina); a minimum of action, which can be summarized as the survival relationships between man, fauna, and flora (the breastfeeding of children, meals, hunting); a minimum of religious material (magic, sorcery); a minimum, again, in the expression of joy (dance) or pain (brutal and violent death). (128-129)

Ultimately, as Deroo argues, the image of the Other becomes a historical document. Through the action of capturing a disappearing primitive world, exotic films helped to foster nostalgia for a lost world, one which modern man could only observe, as if it were suspended in time, preserved in formaldehyde.

The understanding of the uncivilized world as out of time and space, constructed by the Euro-Western interpretation of culture and place, is equally prominent today in the work of Colbert. This so-called past, represented here as the timeless present, is often referred to in anthropological circles as the “ethnographic present,” defined by Charlotte Auell Davies as “the deliberate attempt to reconstruct a society or culture as it was in some imagined pristine state prior to Western contact” (157). Colbert's work, articulating a kind of nostalgia for the lost time when humans and animals (read: nature) coexisted as one, is a paradox, reflecting what the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has called

“imperialist nostalgia” (108): as the environment becomes further threatened by the developments of technological modernity and the expansion of global capitalism, Colbert seeks to represent and glorify a reverential nature that is threatened by the very actions that fostered the conditions under which his works of art were created.

Colbert describes his approach to photographing his subjects through the lens of universalism and cultural sublimation: “Throughout history, our relationship and understanding of animals has been rooted in myths and legends. Until now these narratives have been specific to cultures, regions or tribes.... *Ashes and Snow*... [bridges] geographical and cultural boundaries, connecting modern man with the totemic animals that touch our spirit” (Colbert). But where is the so-called modern man in these photographs? Where are the signs of modern spaces, of cities, the objects of modern material culture? In fact, Colbert's human subjects are treated in the same way as the “totemic animals” depicted, objectified and universalized as symbolic subjects of a recreated ethnographic present. In the work of Colbert, modern man is not represented by the human subjects in the photographs. Rather, “he” is implicated in these works as their viewer, gazing on the timeless and free Other, the symbolic primitive man of Colbert's imaginings.

The concept of “primitive art” has a dubious place in art history, suspect in both its intentions and its methodological practice. Primitive art, introduced through anthropological displays and the exhibition of newly discovered artefacts beginning in the nineteenth century, was appropriated by the Modernists, who saw so-called primitive peoples as more in touch with their inner artist, and linked it to the psycho-analytic turn in art which privileged the unconscious in creation. In this context, primitivism flourished through the introduction of world art into large museums around the world. Concerning the interpretation of primitive art, Daniel Miller writes that, “western societies have, it has been argued, increasingly conflated mythical images with real peoples living on their geographic—and increasingly economic—periphery” (39-40). Colbert can be seen as trading in the visual imagery of primitivism, conflating his myth-making images of the Other with those peoples and species living outside of his Euro-Western understanding of modernity. In doing this, he relies on the photographic tradition of anthropology and ethnography to give his images cultural legitimacy.

The Photographic Other

Early photography was seen by its supporters as an ideal tool with which to capture the “reality” of a place or a people. As Joan M. Schwartz and James Ryan argue in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination*, photography helped to create an “imagined geography,” a vision of the world in scientific terms through which the values of colonialism, expansion and institutionalized racism were brought to a larger Euro-Western population (2). Within nineteenth-century anthropological circles, photography became an extremely useful tool with which to record, study and interpret the actions and behaviours of diverse peoples. Blinded by a belief in scientific objectivity, “all too frequently ... anthropologists and photographers were influenced by their own preconceptions and prejudices, presenting in their images stereotypical attitudes and portraying societies or individuals as depersonalized cultural artifacts” (Banta et al. 11).

The use of photography to document and collect images of the animal Other was equally important to the development of the medium. James R. Ryan, in his essay “Hunting with the Camera,” demonstrates how, with the development of photographic technologies, the camera became important to, and in some cases replaced, the practice of big game hunting in exotic places such as Africa. The support for “camera hunting,” a sport primarily dominated by white European men, was driven by preservationists who argued positively that camera hunting was more dangerous, exciting and required more skill than regular hunting, with the added benefit of protecting the pristine wilderness (Ryan 215). The preservationist ethos of the colonial period, which sought to “reinforce ideas that Africa was a primeval wilderness,” was equally at work in the photographic representation of the exotic other, whether human or beast. Ryan writes,

This colonial vision of preserving the pristine wilderness of Africa, coupled with an underlying faith in scientific theories of racial evolution and the “struggle for existence,” also support the characterization of Africans as closer to the animal ancestry of the human race than Europeans... indeed, for many hunters and naturalists Africans were “savage” peoples seen as a form of “wildlife” to be managed, controlled and even hunted by Europeans. (216)

The objectification of both animals and humans in early photographic representations is steeped in the discourses of race, colonialism and nature. Looking at the contemporary works of *Ashes and Snow*, this pattern continues to find resonance in current photographic practise as Colbert uses his camera to construct his vision of pristine wilderness and to capture his fantasy of the Other.

The notion of the camera as a tool of violence and exploitation has been taken up by many theorists of photography, most notably Susan Sontag who wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that “photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed” (81). One of the most troubling aspects of Colbert’s objectification of his subjects is the way he reduces their power of individuality and identity. None of the images are accompanied by captions, thereby presenting the individuals without names or cultural context. Colbert states that, “the artworks... are mounted without explanatory text so as to encourage an open-ended interaction with the images” (Colbert). The very notion that these discursively-charged and contextually-controlled images could in any way allow for an “open-ended interaction” is an attempt to disguise how strongly ideological these works are. None of the people pictured are represented as themselves, allowed to show their personalities or control their own depictions; rather, they are shown as symbolic subjects, neutralized by the absence of identity.

Historically, a parallel can be drawn with what is arguably the most famous photographic exhibition of all time: *The Family of Man*. Organized by the Museum of Modern Art in 1955 under the curatorial direction of the modern photographer Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man* was produced to respond to the horrors of the Second World War and the ensuing global tensions. Viewed by over nine million people in thirty-eight countries between 1955 and 1962, the touring version of *The Family of Man* was an enormous success (Sandeen 95). Steichen sought to represent, through the power of pictures, the overwhelming similarity of people the world over, whatever their local place, race, or culture, as a way to bring people together across cultural and national boundaries. Images were mounted without identifying information to allow the viewer to connect with the subjects in a generalized way. United, as the art historian John O’Brian has noted, around the themes of humanism and nuclear violence, *The Family of Man* tour was funded entirely by the United States Information Agency in an effort to achieve diplomatic rapprochement and to promote a specifically American vision of the world (O’Brian n.p.). *Ashes and Snow*, steeped in its own values of humanism and the threat of *ecological* violence, has, according to its website, surpassed *The Family of Man* with over ten million viewers. This incredible feat, funded and organized without the help or authorization of any official museum, though with substantial corporate funding, demonstrates its popular success as an art spectacle. Relying on a universalizing vision of humans and animals that is deeply essentializing, *Ashes and Snow* and the Nomadic Museum reflect back on the viewer a complex and paradoxical view of human/nature, one which privileges a symbolic relationship of aesthetic and artistic vision.

While I have argued that the form of the Nomadic Museum is inseparable from its content and functions to support the rhetorical and ideological position of the photographer and his vision, there is another important context in which *Ashes and Snow* is viewed: the internet. As a virtual version of the Nomadic Museum, *AshesandSnow.org* circulates in a much freer and less circumscribed form, entering the home, the office, the classroom. The visitor to *AshesandSnow.org* is given the option to enter the “basic experience” or the more “enhanced” version which offers “the fully immersive experience of Ashes and Snow” where images and film clips are interspersed in a space that is accompanied by music and oral storytelling by Colbert and a series of actors. While these offerings are not markedly different from the Nomadic Museum, which also includes a soundtrack and the voice of Colbert reciting from his book work, what is different is the viewer’s ability to point and click through the “exhibition,” skipping over elements that do not hold their attention. Even more divorced from place or geographical location, *AshesandSnow.org* displays its artwork as a virtual museum, but at the same time as a kind virtual zoo or exotic show. Gail Davies, discussing the implications of the internet for the future of zoological display, concludes that, “electronic media do not determine a new way of looking at nature, but enable the continued expansion and culmination of a subject-object relationship” (260). Just as exhibitions of animals and humans have always been mediated, the virtual “Nomadic Museum” takes this mediation further into the realm of the spectacle by giving control of the images and subject-objects completely to the viewer. No longer directed by the site of the exhibition, or faced with the physical presence of the subject-object (or the physicality of the art object), the viewer is freed from the proscribed trajectory of the place itself. In the case of *AshesandSnow.org*, the reduction of the scale of the works, the absence of other visitors, and the controllable interface free the viewer from the responsibility to look and question in any sort of ethical way. The internet, as a sight of un-curated mediation, offers the most complete fulfillment of Colbert’s vision: the total work of art as exotic spectacle, rendered virtual into the hands of the admiring public.

Framed by their origin story, the artist’s vision, their place of display, and their roots in the history of anthropological and ethnographic photography, the photographs in *Ashes and Snow* must be understood from within the Nomadic Museum’s context of creation, circulation and display. By spectacularizing the consumption of globalized culture, in a continuation of colonialist and imperialist values, through its structure and representation of a “non-place” in the ethnographic present, the Nomadic Museum and Colbert’s photographs deny their subjects’ identity in favour of artistic vision. Equally, their reliance on the rhetoric of ecology and the noble savage of nineteenth century preservationist discourses does disservice to both the subjects represented and the subject of human-animal relations. This also raises many questions concerning the production of meaning in photography, foremost among these being the questionable moral position of the photographer himself.

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