



ALPHA // FEMALE  
28 & 29 SEPTEMBER  
11.00 - 18.00 UUR  
@ZONE2SOURCE | HET GLAZEN HUIS  
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 Steketeer, 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.

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.

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 Anoek Steketeer 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.

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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."

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 kilometers, 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.

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.

Image: Leila Jeffreys, 'Drifter No. 1' Broad-winged Hawk, Wounded Warriors (2015)  
Photograph on archival fibre-based cotton rag paper, 91 x 72 cm, Courtesy FLAT // LAND, Amsterdam

*Not for publication:  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