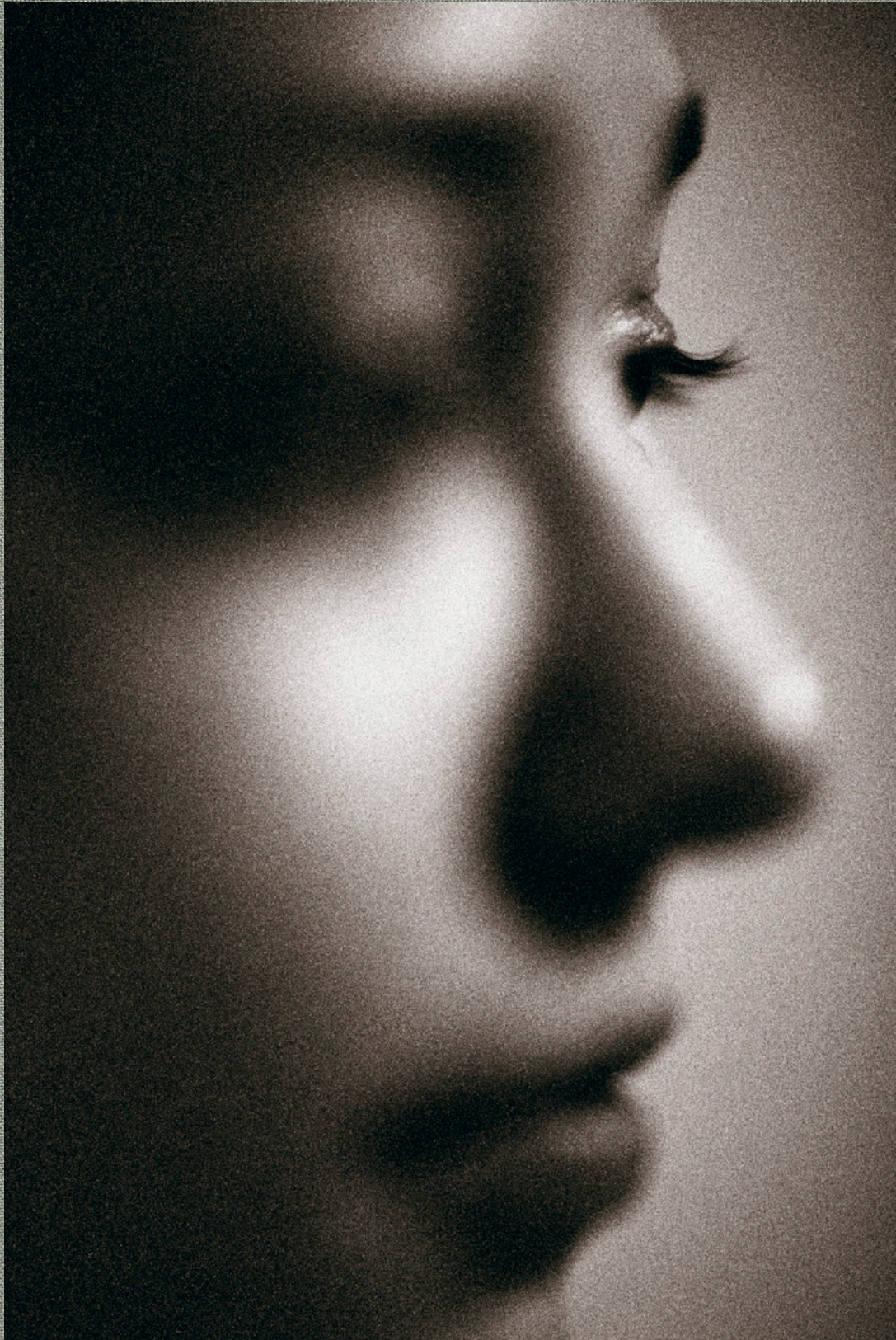


HENRY HORENSTEIN SELECTED WORKS



LIST GALLERY, SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

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September 12–October 27, 2019

LIST GALLERY, SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

Swarthmore, Pennsylvania

HENRY HORENSTEIN MOVING CLOSER

by Andrea Packard, List Gallery Director



Wet-plate Photograph , Malécon, Havana, Cuba, 2000

For more than four decades, Henry Horenstein's instructional books, from *Black & White Photography: A Basic Manual* (1974), to *Make Better Pictures* (2018), have introduced students to the principles of picture making and helped them navigate dramatic changes in society and technology. Although his manuals are used in numerous college and university courses throughout the United States and he has taught photography at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) since 1982, Horenstein's teaching and creative process are far from academic. The title of his recent memoir, *Shoot What You Love* (2016), celebrates the straightforward advice of his favorite teacher at RISD, the seminal photographer, Harry Callahan. Callahan, who nurtured other notable artists, including Emmett Gowin, Ray Metzger, and Jim Dow, did not advocate a particular style or technique. Instead, he encouraged students to pay attention to their individual passions, developing their personal approach through open-ended experimentation, hard work, and attention to craft. Distilling such advice over the course of his varied career, Horenstein has photographed the people and subjects that fascinate him most, be they family members, country musicians, jockeys, or burlesque performers. Whether documenting ephemeral performances or zooming in, exploring ineffable beauty, Horenstein's portfolios balance chutzpah with humor and empathy.

Born in 1947 in New Bedford, Massachusetts to a middle class Jewish family, Horenstein initially attended the University of Chicago, where he majored in history. He was especially drawn to progressive or “New Left” scholars, such as Howard Zinn, Jesse Lemisch, and Staughton Lynd, who argued that the discipline of history is inherently political and historians should do more to document the lives of ordinary people, such as factory workers and homemakers. Horenstein spent a semester at the University of Warwick in England studying with E. P. Thompson, author of *The Making of the English Working Class*. In his spare time, he attended blues and folk concerts and became immersed in the burgeoning counter-culture movement. In 1969, just as he was completing his senior year and falling in love with photography, Horenstein was among 42 students who were expelled for a sit-in—protesting the denial of tenure to Marlene Dixon, a leftist and feminist sociologist.

The expulsion hastened his transition from academic scholarship to photography. Returning to the East Coast, Horenstein enrolled at RISD, where he earned both a B.F.A. and M.F.A. Guided by Harry Callahan's precept, “shoot what you love,” he saw photography as practicing history with a camera—a way to record both remarkable and unremarkable performances, places, and characters that might otherwise be forgotten.

At first, Horenstein was shy about photographing strangers, so he began by making portraits of extended family, friends, and acquaintances in his hometown of New Bedford. His book, *Close Relations*, collects the many successful pictures he made between 1971 and 1976 through what he termed a “random” approach. Other early subjects reflect his most enduring passions: horse

racing and music. One of his first portfolios, *Speedway* (1972), grew out of his job as program photographer for Thompson Speedway, a stock-car track in Connecticut. *Racing Days* (1987), a collection of photographs Horenstein took between 1976 and 1987, reflects his love of racing, crowds, and remarkable characters, both rich and poor, and provides an immersive study of horse tracks in the United States and abroad.

Increasingly, as Horenstein grew more confident and well-connected, he also traveled throughout the country photographing music performers at varied venues. *Honky Tonk: Portraits of Country Music* (2012) offers a behind-the-scenes glimpse of musicians in varied venues ranging from the Grand Ole Opry to dive bars. He captures Jerry Lee Lewis taking a break at the piano at a Ramada Inn in East Boston; Dolly Parton at Symphony Hall, Boston; and anonymous characters at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, in Nashville. Sometimes, as in *TJ's Lounge in Marksville, Louisiana* (2008), he offers an homage to a remote music venue that might soon disappear.

When selecting work for Horenstein's List Gallery exhibition at Swarthmore College, co-curator Ron Tarver and I took a slightly contrarian path. The obvious approach might have been to select signature works from the contextually-rich narrative portfolios mentioned above—the works that established his reputation. However, we were also interested in the way Horenstein's photography changed when he began *Animalia* (1995–2001), the first of three bodies of work that he jokingly refers to as his “midlife crisis works.”

Horenstein began his *Animalia* series at a time when he felt he had exhausted the narrative subjects that previously captivated him. One day, while he was at a zoo completing an assignment for a children's book, he began taking photographs “for himself.” While rediscovering his lifelong enjoyment of aquariums and zoos, he was well aware of the long history of animal images, from the masterful to the cliché. Eschewing the color film and detailed habitats associated with popular wildlife photography, he began to zoom in on his subjects, taking hundreds of pictures in search of compelling viewpoints. In doing so, he was also mindful of the fashion photography and portraiture of Irving Penn and Richard Avedon, who eliminated surrounding contexts to focus attention on their subjects. Back when he was a student at RISD, Horenstein was less interested in such photographers; nor was he drawn to the formal and compositional principles emphasized by his notable teachers, Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, and Minor White. But in 1995, well established in his career, Horenstein felt free to explore strategies that might be disparaged as too formal, commercial, or beautiful.

One of his most striking *Animalia* images, *Brown Sea Nettles, chrysaora fuscescens* (pages 36–37), demonstrates a dramatic shift in approach as well as subject matter. Although he took such pictures at institutions where he had to side-step prohibitions against professional photography,

he avoids documentary contexts, such as references to guards, cages, or enclosures. Instead, as he zooms in, the sea nettles' dark and calligraphic outlines fill the rectangular composition. Their parachute-like forms variously float upward, downward, and to the side in the abstracted space. Their delicate tendrils stand out against a light and uniform backdrop, gracefully trailing in an ethereal dance.

In contrast to photographers such as Avedon, Horenstein used processed Agfa Scala film, which produces positive slides. Over-processing the film to create a grainy atmosphere, he printed his images in sepia—suggesting a timeless quality. Taking such pictures required patience, as he had to wait for animals to move closer and assume compelling positions. The resulting images convey a sense of serendipity and calm.

The titles of works such as *Cownose Ray, Rhinoptera bonasus* (page 27), suggest a quasi-scientific approach, but the images suggest metaphysical ideas more than rigid taxonomies. *Cownose Ray* captures the animal directly facing the camera so that its long tail aligns vertically with the composition's central axis and its wing-like fins touch the left and right edges. The haunting symmetry and simplicity suggest varied associations, from a soaring kite to a Byzantine icon. The ray's mouth seems slightly curved and parts like a *Mona Lisa* smile. Brightly illuminated against an inky black background, the surrounding darkness does not suggest water so much as infinite space.

In 2000, a year before Horenstein completed his *Animalia* series, he traveled to Havana, Cuba—a favorite destination for contemporary photographers because of its hybrid culture, restricted status for Americans, dazzling light, and colorful but decaying architecture. Through an easing of travel regulations by the Clinton Administration, Horenstein stayed with friends at the famed Hotel Nacional de Cuba and thought about how to create photographs that might seem fresh or surprising. Although the city is extraordinarily colorful, he chose to use locally-purchased black-and-white Kodak Plus X film. To compensate for the film's low light sensitivity (ISO 125), he sought out bright light (and familiar subjects) at Havana's zoo and aquarium. Ultimately, he focused most of his attention on *El Malecón*, the famed Havana seawall that offers people of all ages a place to relax in solitude or small groups. Surveying the scene, he took hundreds of photographs of swimmers, couples, clusters of friends, and solitary figures.

Although he set aside the macro lenses used in his *Animalia* series and often selected more distant viewpoints, Horenstein's *Malecón* photographs continue to emphasize close cropping, abstracted spaces, and taut, geometric compositions. Works such as *Boy on Basketball Court, Malecón, Havana, Cuba* (page 47) include few narrative details about the setting or subject. In this case, a bent basketball hoop with a tattered net hovers like a broken halo above a young man.

Shown in three-quarter view, the youth stares intently at some point of interest to our left, away from the camera. Strong vertical and horizontal forms tightly frame the figure, and a bar of shadow bisects his chest, implying restraint. The basketball hoop, with its potential for play, stands in contrast to the youth's somber vigilance.

Many of Horenstein's more closely-cropped *Malecón* portraits and figure studies further eliminate contextual details. *Girls on the Wall, Malecón, Havana, Cuba* (pages 54-55), shows three adolescent girls sitting together in a row, touching each other in a familiar, dynamic, and reciprocal way. Their outstretched arms align in the shape of an arrow that coincides with the horizon. Silhouetted and isolated against a generalized wall and sky, their interconnected gestures provide us with an emblem of intimacy.

Similarly, in *Three Boys, Malecón, Havana, Cuba* (pages 40-41), a group of friends sit on the sea wall, forming an interconnected group. In this case, the mood is more somber and tender. Were they responding to an event in their lives or to the camera, aimed so directly at them? Whether they were sorrowful, exhausted, or shyly reserved, Horenstein captures the boys looking down, covering their faces with their hands, and putting their arms around each other. The resulting image conveys tremendous compassion and interconnection.

From 2004 through 2008, Horenstein continued the approach he developed with *Animalia* to more closely investigate that most daunting and often-studied subject, the human nude. In the resulting series, *Humans*, he zooms in on the bodies of both men and women, producing tightly-cropped and softly-lit images of eyelashes, breasts, underarms, bottoms, ears, teeth, genitals, and more. Using lenses that opened as wide as f/1 and f/1.2, he produced a shallow depth of field, bringing some parts of the composition into focus, while other areas blur. For example, in a close-up of a woman's face, *Untitled*, (page 12), we can only view the distance between her eyebrows to her lower lip. Inverting ordinary experience and representations, Horenstein blurs the side of her face that is closest to us and only brings the far side of her face, the remotest eye, into focus. Such an image both teases and subtly resists any voyeuristic desire to possess the subject.

Such variability of focus also implies a sense of contingency, reminding us that our perspective is never fixed—our gaze never satisfied. Overdeveloping his film again to create a grainy atmosphere, Horenstein creates an otherworldly space, where both forms and shadows can read as geometric essences. As he moves in closer, Horenstein portrays the body as both erotic and imperfect. He brings the camera—and our own viewpoint—intimately close, yet individual subjects remain partially glimpsed, remote, beyond comprehension. As he eliminates surrounding contexts, identifying traits, and other narrative details, Horenstein's underlying subject emerges: the desire to look more closely. At first, the abstracted and metaphysical space of Horenstein's

Humans, Animalia, and *Malecón* photographs seems at odds with the gritty contexts, rich detail, and anecdotal references of his signature portfolios. However, the process of zooming in and moving closer to such subjects informed other concurrent and subsequent series, particularly *Show* (2001-2009), which includes many close-up views of burlesque and circus performers and self-styled outsiders.



Film still from *Partners*, full-length documentary by Henry Horenstein, (2018)

Horenstein's feature-length documentary, *Partners* (2018), synthesizes his love of storytelling with his more recent practice of simplifying contexts and focusing on universal aspects of human experience. *Partners* interweaves statements by numerous couples who volunteered to speak openly and spontaneously about their relationships. The featured partners include a polyamorous threesome, a man and woman whose arranged marriage led to a loving commitment, couples with significant health differences, and a man who considers his significant other to be a cat. Filming all of the participants sitting or standing against the same simple backdrop, Horenstein gives equivalent light, space, and authority to all speakers and emphasizes commonalities among diverse loving unions.

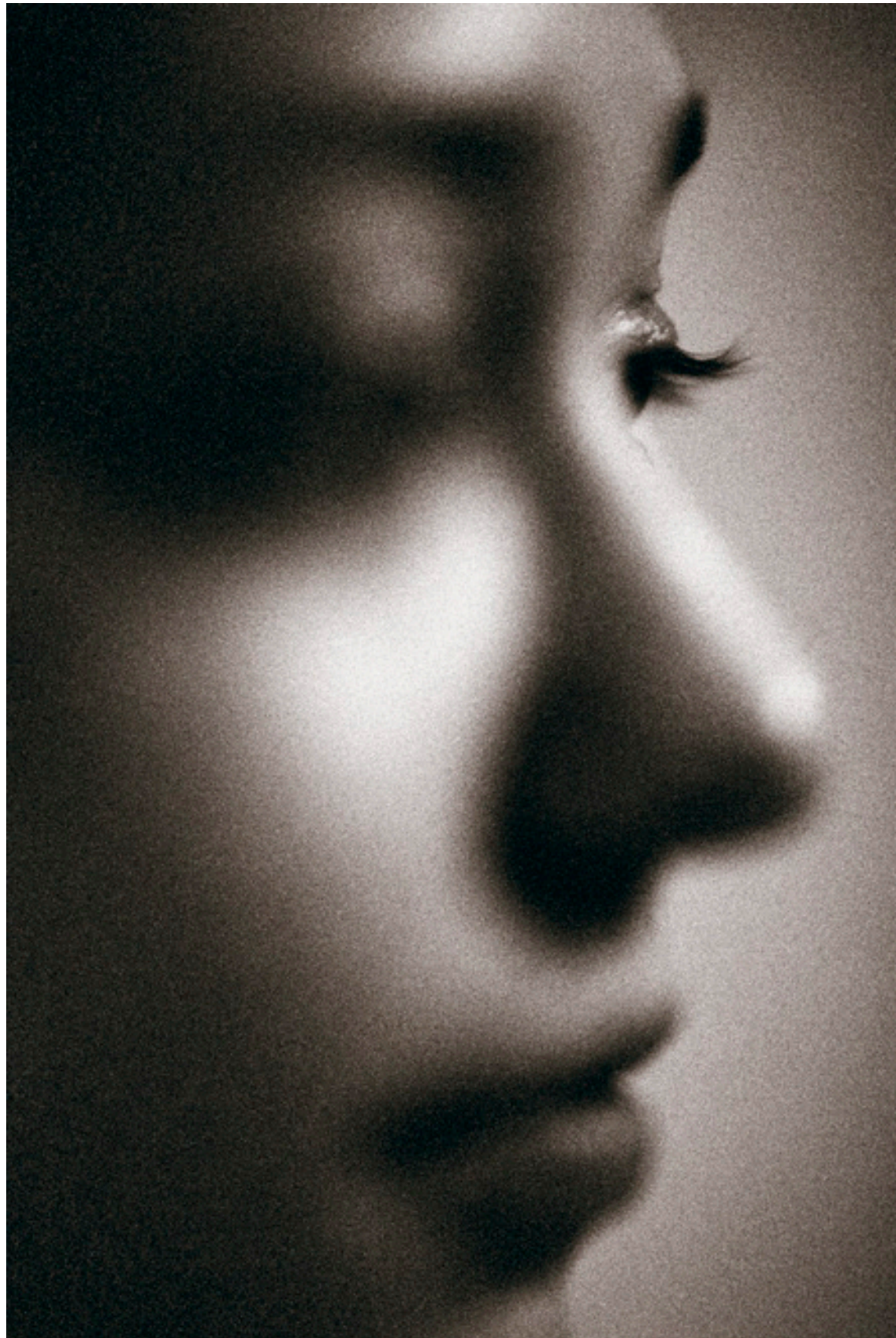
I am grateful to Ron Tarver, who partnered with me in curating *Henry Horenstein: Selected Works* for the List Gallery, Swarthmore College. We appreciate Horenstein's fearless eye, easygoing manner, and generous loan of more than 30 photographs for exhibition. Together with our colleagues in the Department of Art and Art History and the Department of Film and Media Studies, we are especially pleased to be able to screen *Partners* in conjunction with his exhibition. Like his photographs, the film prompts viewers to explore values and experiences that may be unfamiliar or even unsettling. Moving closer to his subjects and then looking and listening attentively, Horenstein invites us all to be more open and versatile as we consider what it means to be human.

Andrea Packard has directed the List Gallery, Swarthmore College since 1995. She has curated more than 75 exhibitions for Swarthmore and other venues, including Joy Pratt Markham Gallery, Walton Arts Center, and the Painting Center, New York. Her own mixed media artworks can be viewed at AndreaPackard.net.



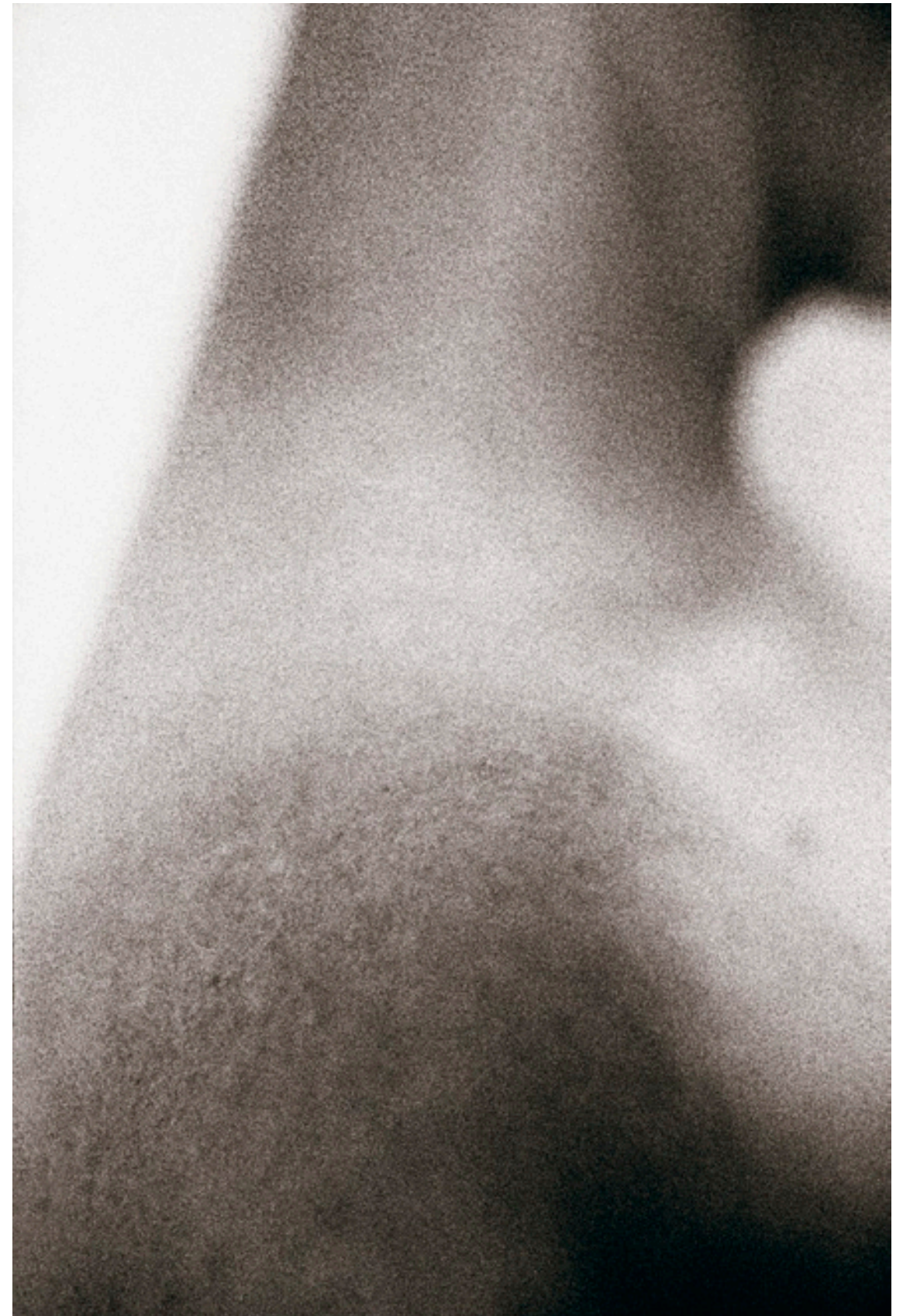
Humans

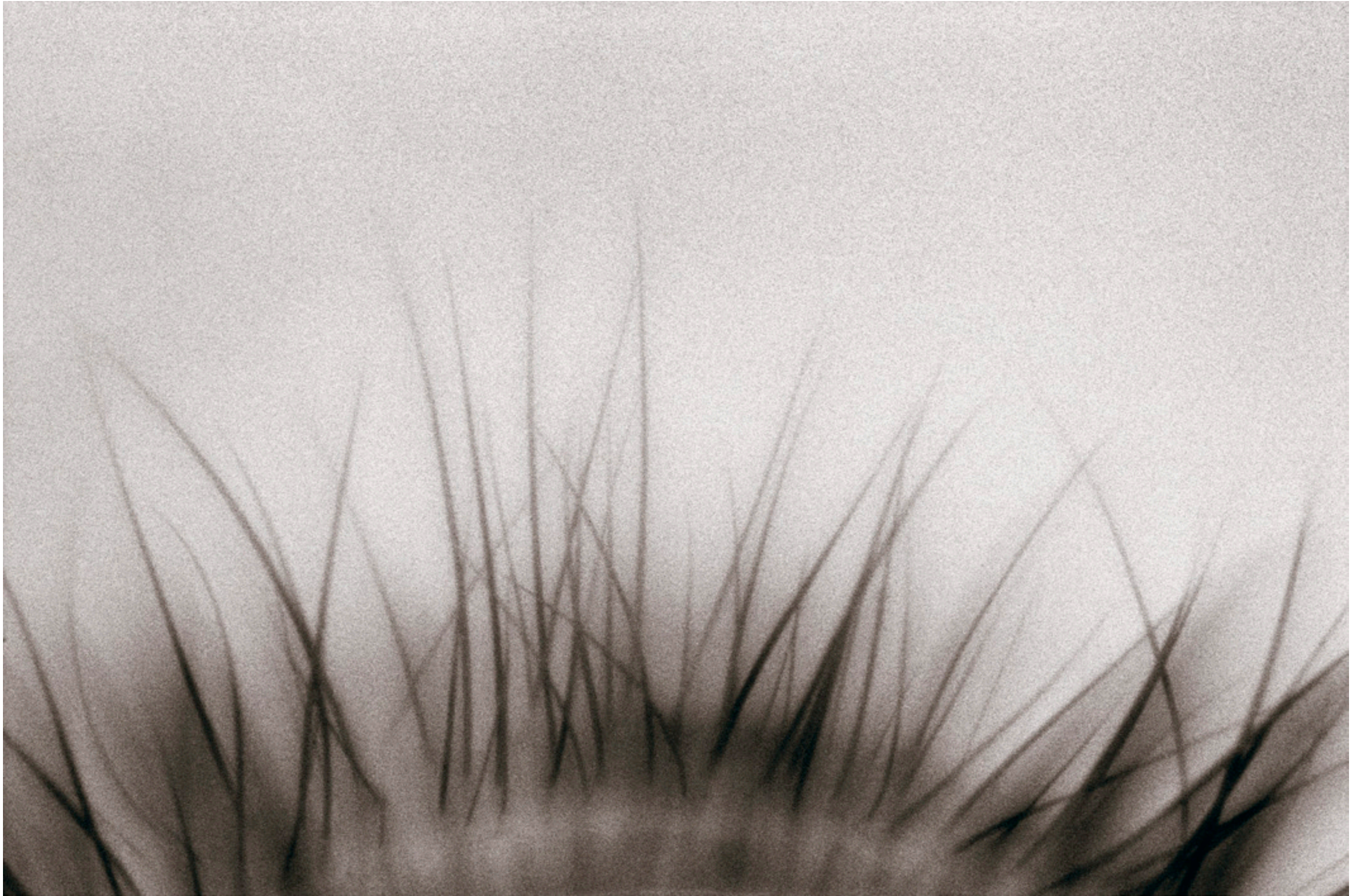
Untitled, Plate #45, 2003







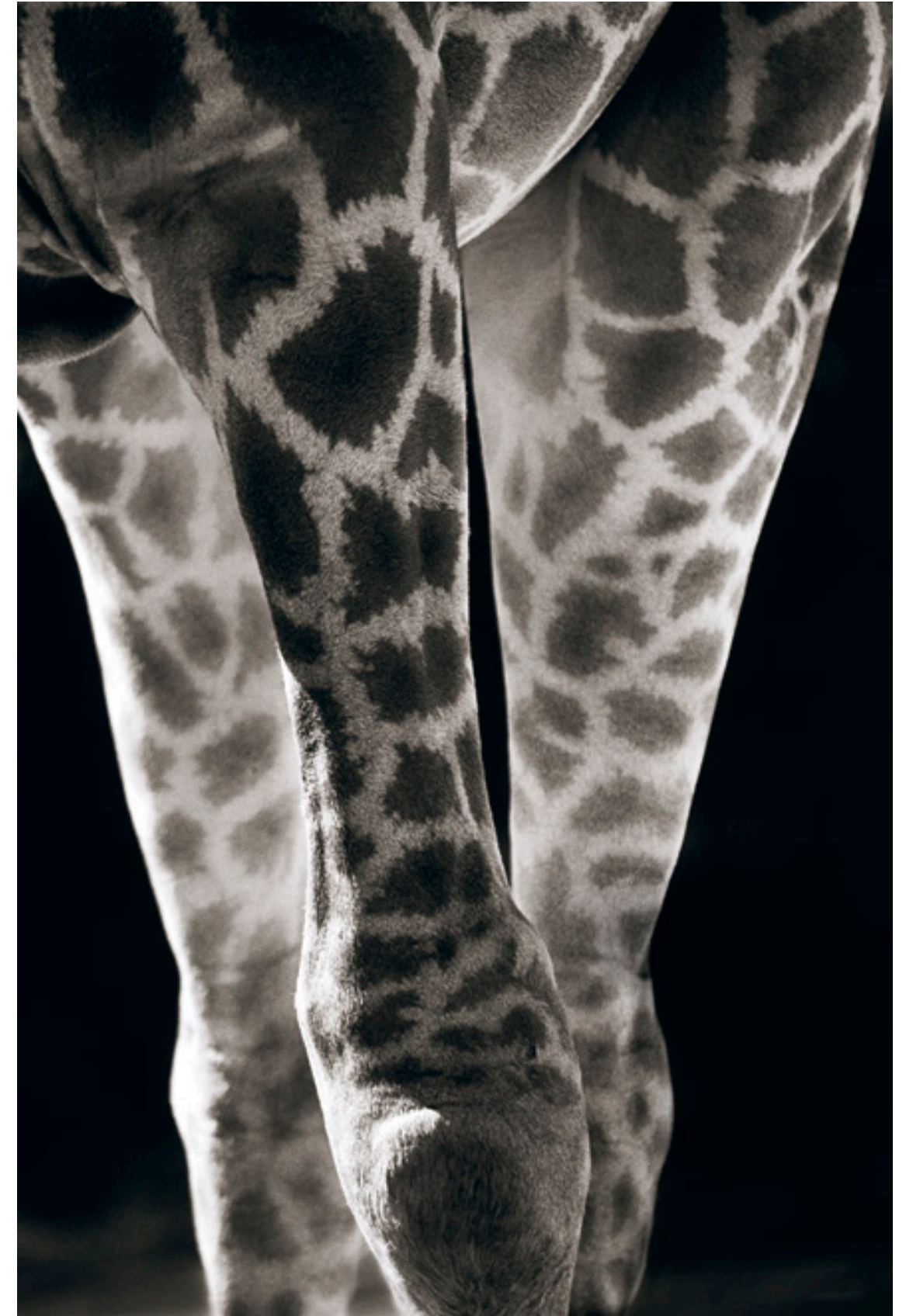




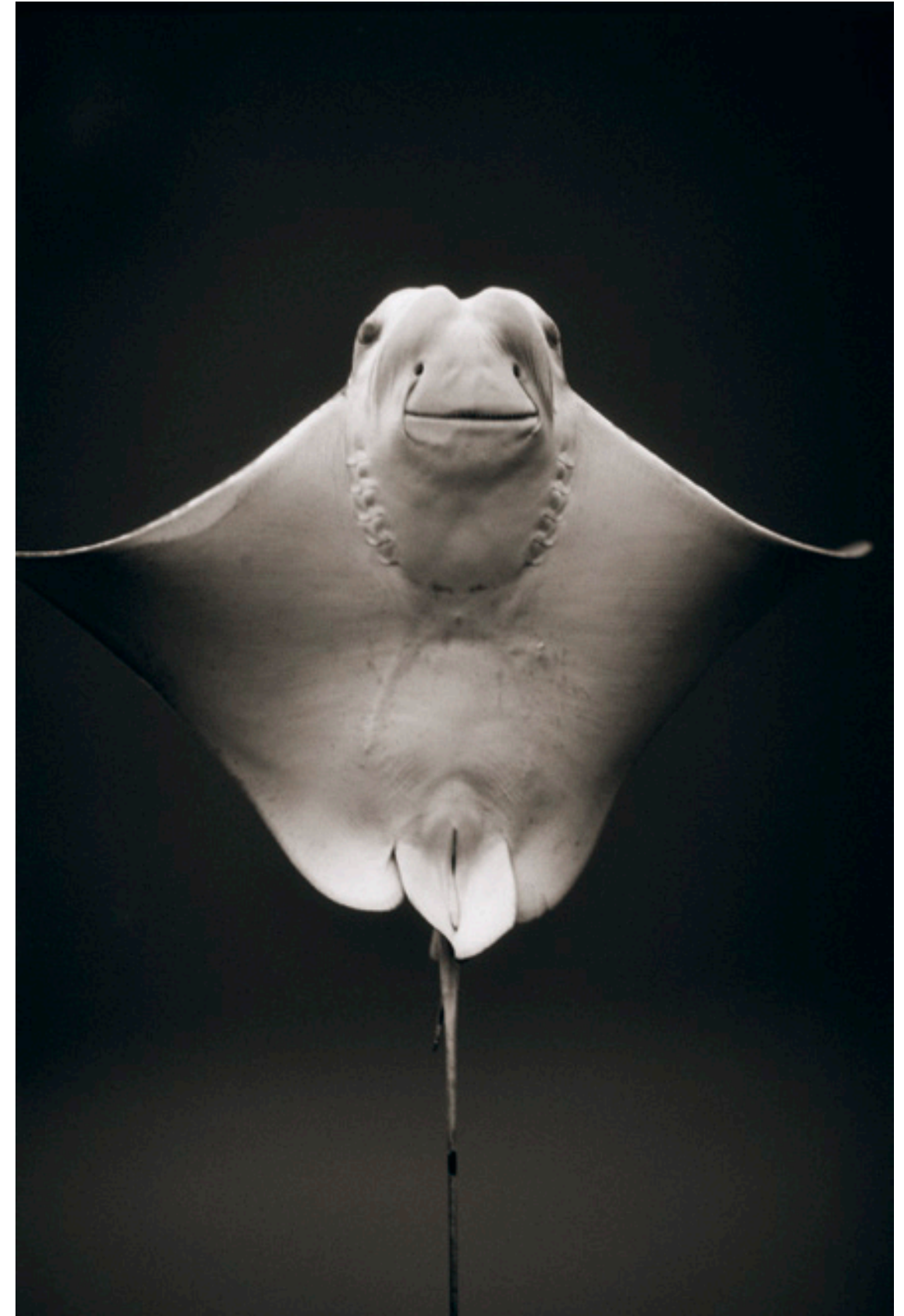
Animalia

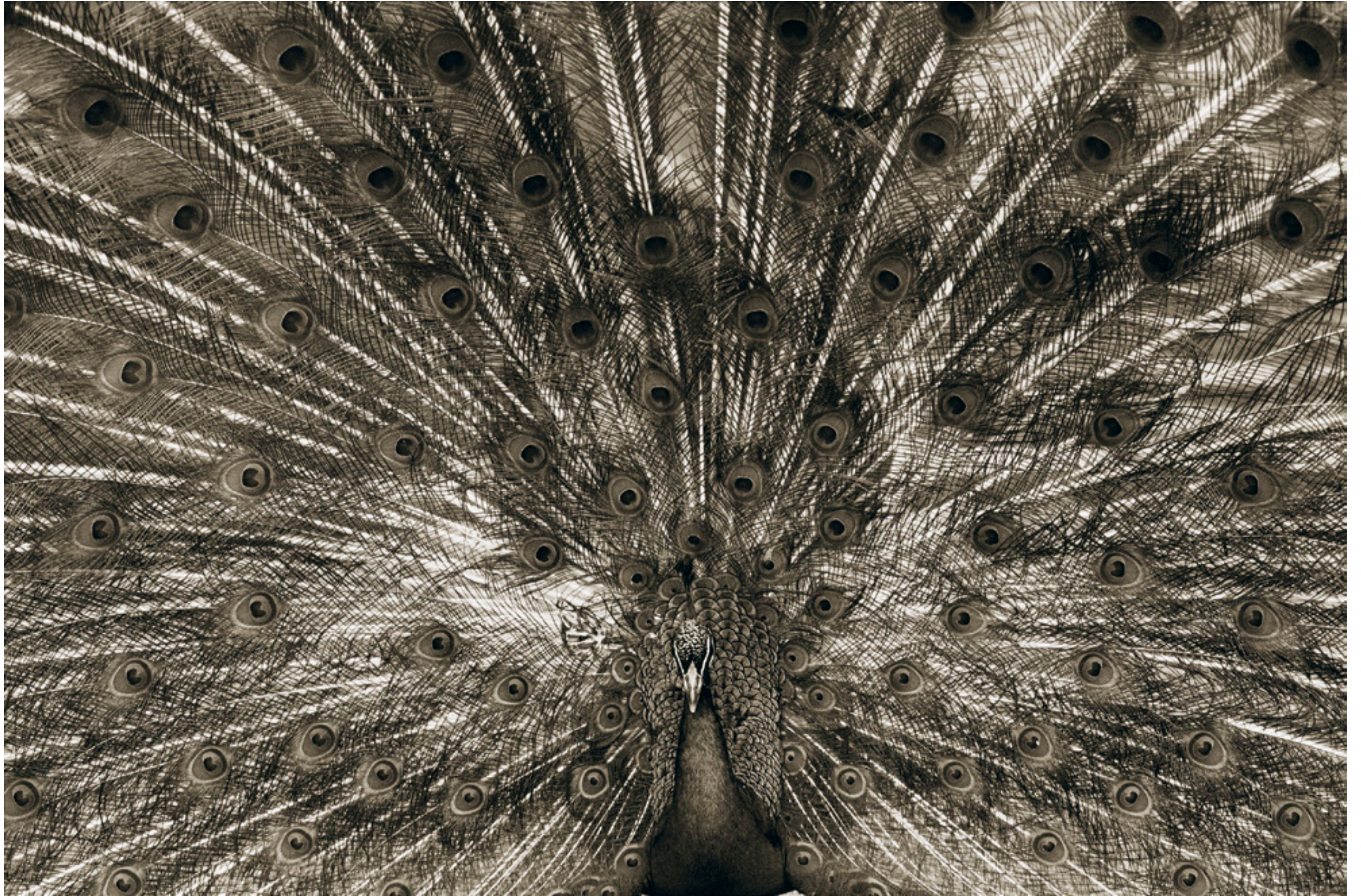


White-cheeked Spider Monkey—Ateles marginatus, 1999



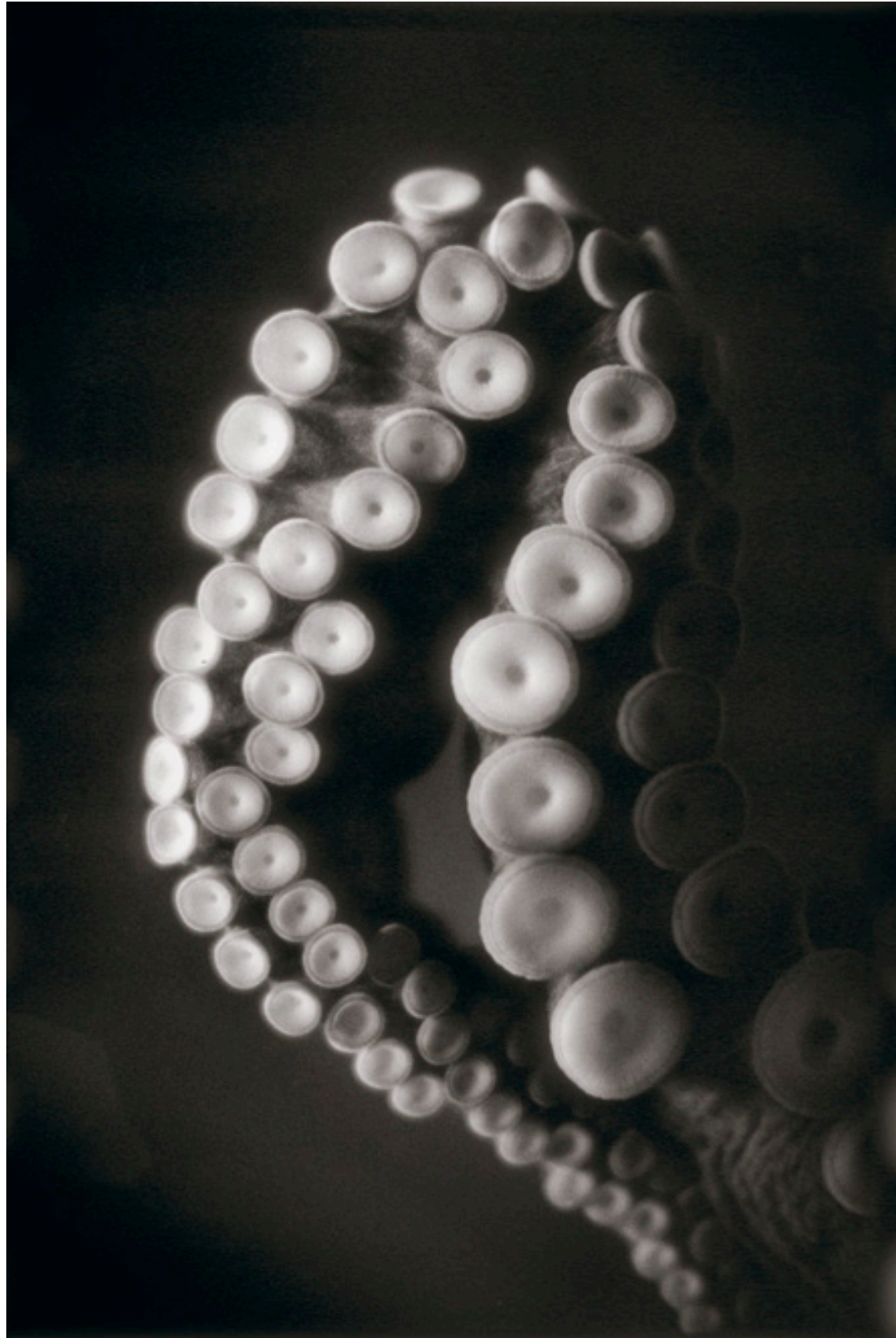
Smoky Giraffe—*Giraffa camelopardalis angolensis*, 2005











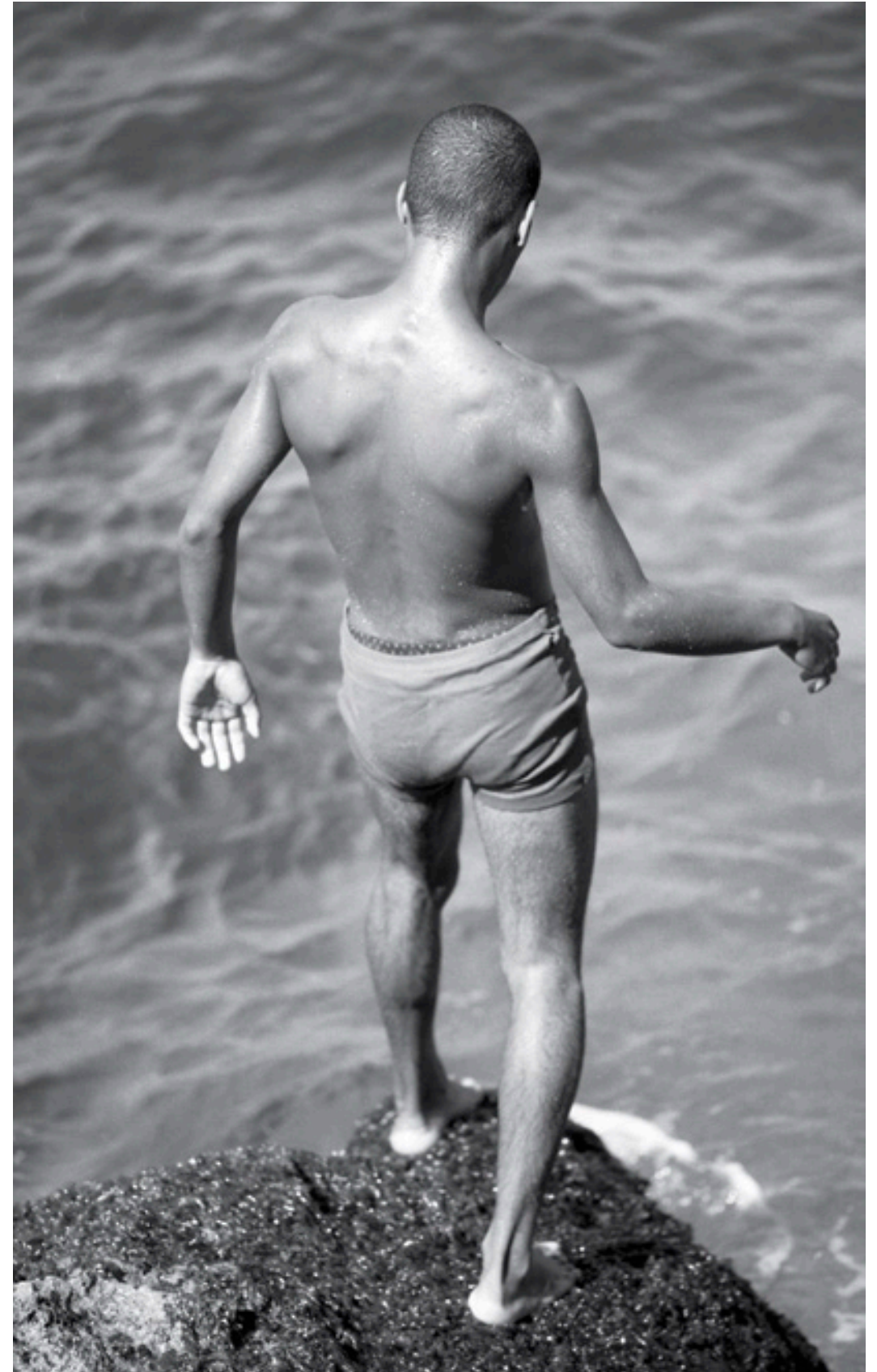




Cuba

Boy Smiling, Malécon, Havana, Cuba, 2000





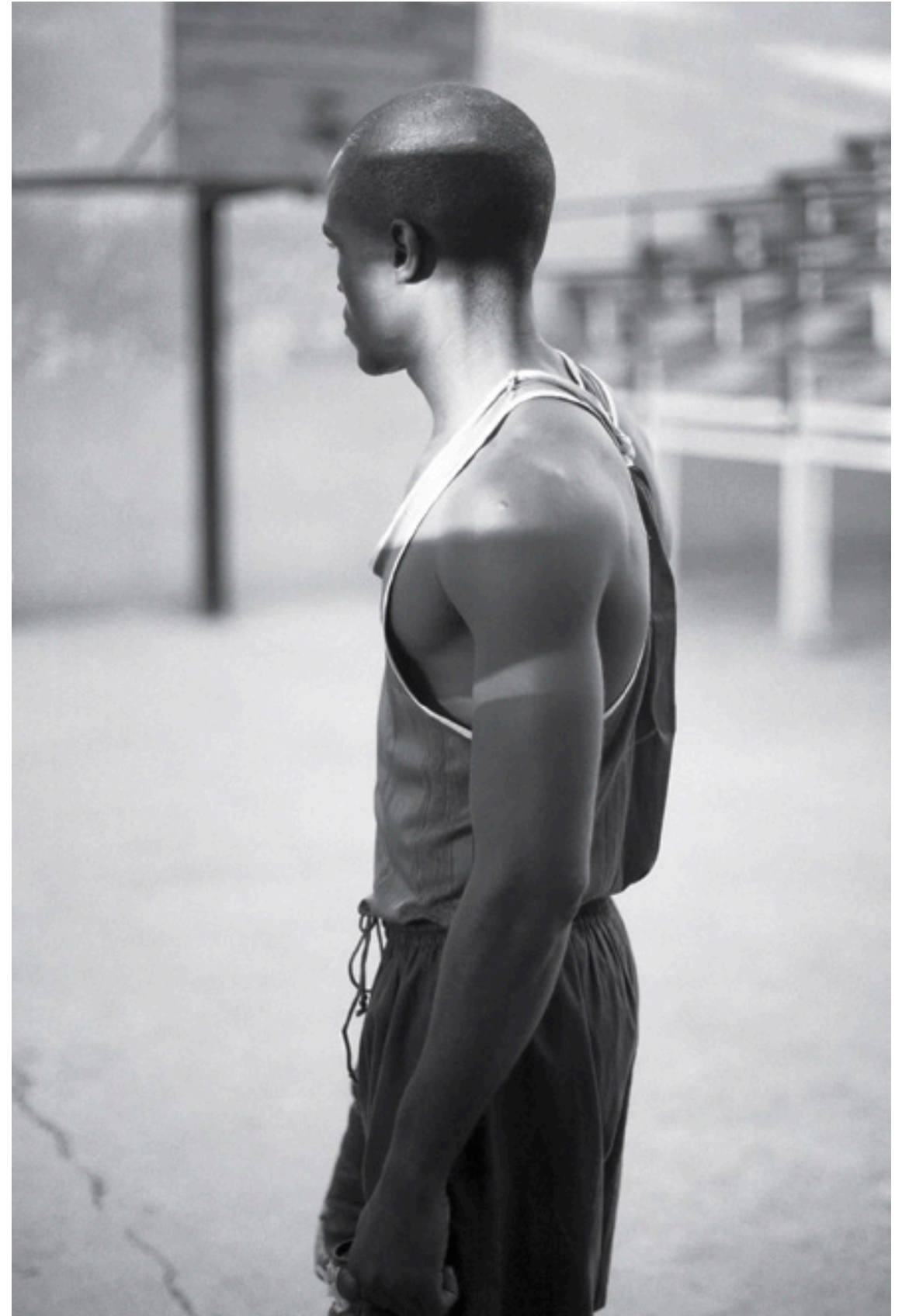




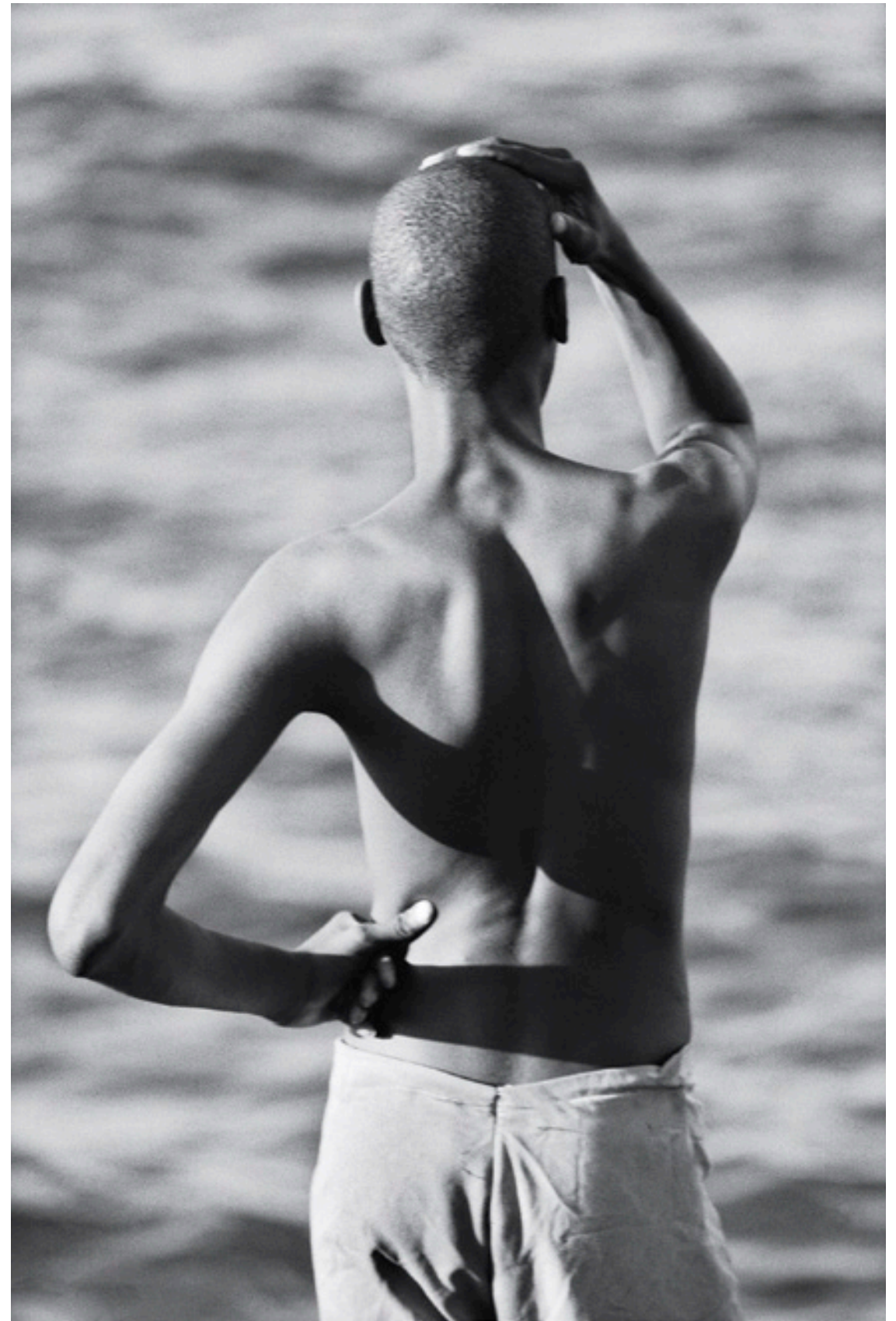




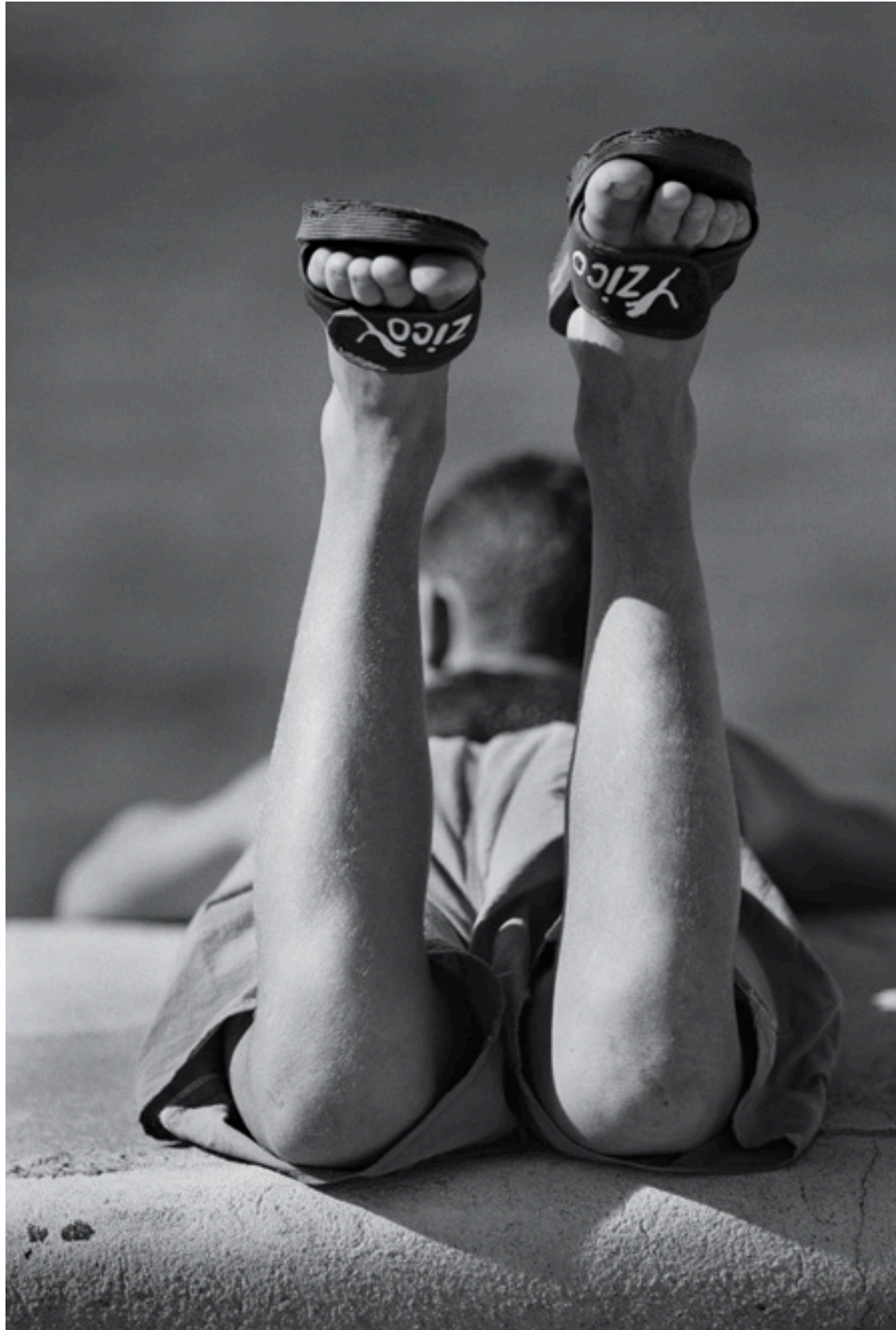
Man Smoking, Malécon, Havana, Cuba, 2000



Man Turned, Malécon, Havana, Cuba, 2000







Photographer's Notes

I started my photography life as a documentary photographer, fancying myself a historian with a camera. I studied history for four years at The University of Chicago before getting myself expelled in my senior year—but that's another story. My early journey was a rocky one but I was set right by my 30s. I was getting enough work, making enough good pictures, and doing okay in those glorious low-rent days. Not bad for a budding artist.

It helped that I had no children to support, no mortgage to pay, and a seven-year-old Dodge Dart to keep expenses low.

So, I shot country musicians in Nashville, Cajun folks in Louisiana, jockeys and horses in Saratoga Springs, camel racing in Dubai, music fans and performers of bygone eras in Branson, Missouri, and much, much more. Then I hit a wall and discovered boredom. I was in my mid-40s, central casting for a man in a mid-life crisis. What to do?

Like many others before me, I looked to my work for answers. This show and catalog from List Gallery tells that story. I took a break from documentary work in 2000 after shooting on the Malecón, a five-mile-long seawall where many Cubans kill time hanging out and entertaining. I turned inward—reprising the days when I studied with Harry Callahan, Arthur Siegel, Minor White, and Aaron Siskind—days where image rather than ideas ruled. My teachers were still teaching me—telling me to find good subjects, rich light, tight compositions, and make meticulous prints.

It was peaceful to focus solely on the image at hand without fighting with plane schedules, uncooperative subjects, and other downsides of documentary work. I tried to make thoughtful pictures of animals and then humans in a way that was new—a tough assignment for subjects that have been covered so often and for so long. I got in very close and pushed the graininess of the subjects. I toned them brown and hoped for the best.

Many thanks to Ernesto Aparicio for the amazing catalog design and Mark Doyle of Autumn Color for file preparation and printing. Prints were also made by Tyler Healey, Logan Nutter, and Hannah Latham, who also kept things things in order and provided copyediting. I am grateful to Swarthmore College and the Cooper Foundation for supporting this show and catalog. A very special thanks to Swarthmore stalwarts Andrea Packard and Ron Tarver for inviting me and curating the exhibition.

Henry Horenstein, Boston, MA, 2019
<https://www.horenstein.com>

Biography

Henry Horenstein studied history at the University of Chicago, and earned a B.F.A. and M.F.A. at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), where he studied with the legendary photographers Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. Horenstein's work has been exhibited internationally and he has published over 30 books, including *Shoot What You Love*, *Histories*, *Honky Tonk*, *Animalia*, *Humans*, and *Close Relations*. His instructional books, including *Black & White Photography*, *Digital Photography*, and *Beyond Basic Photography* are used by thousands of colleges, universities, and high schools in foundational photography courses. Horenstein has also made several films, including *Preacher*, *Murray*, and *Spoke*. His most recent film, *Partners*, premiered at The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in May, 2018, and won Special Jury Prize at the 2019 Amsterdam International Film Festival and Van Gogh Awards. Horenstein is Professor of Photography at RISD.

This catalog was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Henry Horenstein: Selected Works*, which was presented by the List Gallery, Swarthmore College, September 12–October 27, 2019. With the exception the reproductions on pages 4, 18, 26, 30, 34, and 35, all works reproduced in this catalog were selected for exhibition at the List Gallery. The presentation consisted of *Animalia* C-prints measuring 26 x 39 inches, *Malecón* silver prints measuring 8 x 12 inches, and *Humans* pigment prints measuring 15 x 23 ½ inches.

The exhibition was co-curated by List Gallery Director Andrea Packard and Visiting Assistant Professor of Art Ron Tarver.

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