

Award for Outstanding Achievement

Ashes & Snow

TAKE A PERSONAL JOURNEY TO FRAGILE POSSIBILITIES

by Gene Jeffers

Since its debut in Venice in 2002, more than a million people have attended Ashes and Snow, an exhibition of more than 50 large-scale photographic artworks, a 60-minute feature film, and two nine-minute film haikus by Gregory Colbert. The Nomadic Museum, the permanent traveling home of Ashes and Snow debuted in New York in March 2005 and then traveled to Los Angeles in January 2006. Ashes and Snow at the Nomadic Museum will open in Odaiba and run from March 11 through June 24, 2007.

--www.ashesandsnow.org

There is an air of reverence and of mystery as one enters the nomadic museum - a temporary, 48,000 sq. foot structure designed by Shigeru Ban and built of 148 abandoned cargo containers - and begins to experience Ashes and Snow, Gregory Colbert's epic exhibition of image, film, relationships, and ultimately, responsibility. The exhibit is a moving homage to animal and human life together and inseparable on this

planet. Visitors are immersed in a spiritual environment as Colbert shows animals and humans in intimate, often reflective and uncharacteristic contact with each other. The faces and creatures are familiar enough; what is new and provocative are the unexpected relationships between the subjects and the emotions that the images inspire in the viewers.

Displayed throughout the cathedral-like interior, Colbert's large-scale, sepia-toned portraits on handmade Japanese paper reflect the visible product of 14 years and 34 expeditions. The massive still images (none of which was digitally manipulated) and three documentary films provide a poetic vision of iconic species connecting with individual humans.

"I've been an apprentice to nature," Colbert explains in outlining his efforts to create a universal, 21st century bestiary. Unlike other bestiaries of the past, he says his

bestiary "attempts to inspire an emotional understanding of nature and our place within it." The effort is haunting, beautiful and evocative, compelling visitors to slow their pace and engage in a message of what could be, perhaps what should be.

Seen from the outside, the museum appears ordinary: a boxy stack of cast-off shipping containers seemingly far removed from its nature-based contents. Inside, the images, space and light - or rather darkness and lightness - all conspire to create an environment that feels almost like a house of worship. And perhaps it is just that: a house of worship dedicated to the importance of humankind's relationship to other species, to encouraging a return to an earlier time when the world was simpler, more unified.

A massive, vaulted apse contains two long rows of large, still images - captured moments between people and animals - sometimes active, sometimes passive. The visitor is



Exterior of the Nomadic Museum.



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led to a one-hour film documenting Colbert's underwater shots, and the images are entrancing with their sheer beauty and their underlying concept. Colbert emphasizes that none of the images was staged or collaged, and none of the animals trained or domesticated. His bestiary now includes Asian and African elephants, manatees, sperm whales, eagles, falcons, hawks, cranes, ibis, loggerhead turtles, penguins, elephant seals, cheetahs, leopards, zebras, elands, wild dogs, and more.

The artist has a lifetime goal of creating a universal bestiary that will include images of people interacting with as many species as possible. At heart is the message that something incredibly important about being human on a planet full of other species is also incredibly fragile and needs to be protected to ensure that such relationships are not lost forever.

Indeed, Colbert has created a foundation to help animals obtain their fair share of income derived from advertising that makes use of their images. His non-profit Animal Copyright Foundation will seek to collect 1% of all media buys involving animals, and will distribute those funds to nature conservation projects around the world. One only has to see the beauty of Ashes and Snow to support this concept. 

