One Thousand Guinea Pigs

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When I was at home earlier in the year, I explained to my parents that my photography project was about the relationship between humans and animals. My father then told me about how he had heard our friend, Gabi, a professor in agriculture at Smith College, on NPR talking about her newest sustainability project. My father said, “You know how people use goats to mow the lawn? Well, she uses guinea pigs. But she needs to use a lot of them – like a thousand.” So, there I am, picturing one thousand guinea pigs munchin’ away, and I thought, “I need that picture.”

Shortly after that, my father and I ran into Gabi in town. I asked her about the project and where it was happening. She laughed, looked at my dad, and said, “John, that was an April Fool’s joke!” As my father and Gabi laughed, I only felt disappointed that it hadn’t been real. But Gabi continued: “You know, it’s been really interesting. Some of the people who heard the piece realized that it was a joke – (after all, she had also said that “the guinea pigs respond well to pig latin”) – but the majority of people responded ‘that’s so cool! What a great idea!’”

Gabi’s response made me realize why the topic of the human/animal relationship is so interesting to me. Our relationship has evolved to the point where anything and everything is possible – even the bizarre and exceptional becomes believable. When there are much stranger things that people really do with animals, of course we would believe guinea pigs are used to mow the lawn! While Smith College may not currently be employing guinea pigs for these purposes, I am sure that someone, somewhere has already tested it out, and it won’t be long before the lawn-keeping goats will be replaced by these small, hungry critters.

In One Thousand Guinea Pigs, I explore different aspects of the relationship between humans and animals. The images represent the hybrid spaces and moments where our worlds collide. We rely on and sustain one another. Neither could exist without the other. We use animals for companionship; we take their remains and sculpt life-like statues; we create aestheticized versions of animals that we proudly put on display. Animals surround our daily lives, whether we are aware of it or not. I began this journey interested first in animal behavior (including human behavior since we are also animals), yet I soon realized it was not simply about behavior, but about how humans and animals behave and interact with each other.

This project has brought me to many different places and allowed me to meet all sorts of people who engage with animals (living or non-living). With everyone I met, there was a clear sense of reliance on these animals either directly or indirectly, and often a strong sense of love. Through this project, I, too, have found love and beauty in the crazy and wonderful relationship we have with animals.

I dedicate this project to my amazing parents. Thank you for your endless supply of love and support, and for always believing in me. I could not have done it without you.