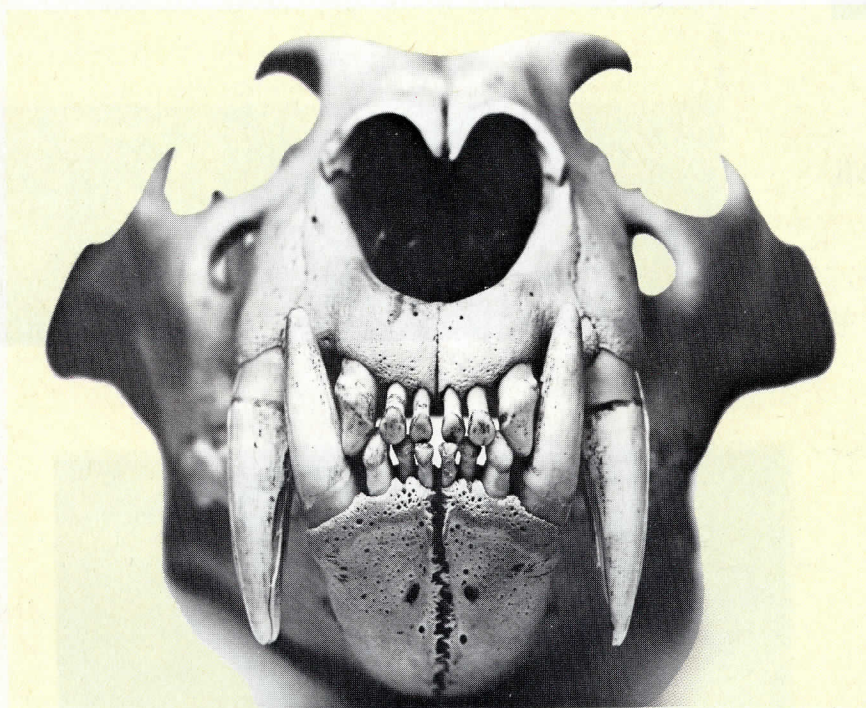


# Alas, Poor Tapir

Irving Penn's bare-bones approach to still life



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*"Lion (front view), 1986": an "exquisite edifice," and a fitting image of the king of carnivores.*

On one of his 1930s Dust Bowl sojourns for the Farm Securities Administration, photographer Arthur Rothstein picked up a sun-bleached steer skull and carried it with him until he found a suitably parched landscape for it. Placing it in the foreground, he shot several versions of the view, repositioning the skull each time to explore how it would best convey a sense of decay and destruction. In so doing, Rothstein recognized the skull's ready-made symbolic power.

What was for Rothstein a considerable artistic gamble—especially given the documentary nature of his work—seems today to be a less risky proposition. The unabashed death imagery of art photographers like Joel-Peter Witkin and (more recently) Robert Mapplethorpe often turns the photographic

space into a sort of reliquary, and the Starn Twins would have us believe they discovered mortality itself with their billboard-scale homages to the subject. Such photographers have appropriated the death obsessiveness of the Victorian era, and offer up the grimmest or most sentimental memento mori without reservation—but alas, without much subtlety.

Irving Penn's new pictures—all of animal skulls—aren't that way. If anything, in their seeming straightforwardness they're more akin to the paleontologist's clinical view of things ossified, as the title of Penn's exhibition at New York's Pace/MacGill Gallery, **"Cranium Architecture,"** might suggest.

What makes the photographs different from pictures a scientist might have taken—aside from predictably superb technique—is their absolute obliteration of the background (which Penn apparently insured by dipping his 20×24-inch prints in bleach, to banish any vestige of tone).

In a scientist's version, such objects might have had to compete with the debris of a dig or the evidence of a makeshift studio. It must have been difficult for Penn not to adopt the scientist's informality as an aesthetic device, because such informality is very much akin to the studio contrivances Penn cultivated in his earlier work—the scuffed and ruffled surfaces, the buckled edge of the blotchy seamless, even the stained tile floor of the studio used for his portraits of Peruvian Indians. But though these stunning new still lifes dispense with such artifacts altogether, they continue in Penn's most conspicuous tradition: One way or another, with mud men or with animal skulls, Penn has for years been using his studio (wherever it ends up being) to deny his subjects their natural context.

Yet each variation is always more than Penn just flexing his studio muscles; the device seems to do something different every time. The cigarette butt pictures succeeded in part because they isolated—and magnified—objects that wouldn't otherwise have commanded our attention. They gave us a new perspective on the everyday decay that surrounds us while elevating disagreeable street refuse into a still-life subject suitable for framing. The mud men pictures were shocking because they showed native peoples out of context—an effect that's the antithesis of *National Geographic's* familiar naturalism. These and other images in Penn's extended series of "location" photographs turned gestures and styles of ornamentation that might have been less of a surprise in the jungle or the veld into



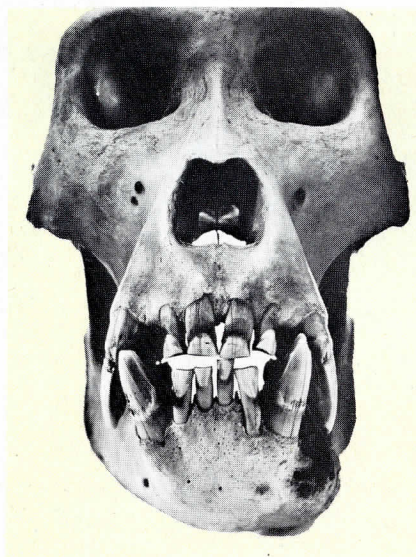
*Above: "Giraffe, 1986": reducing the subject to sculpture so elegant you forget it's the end product of decay. Below: "Gorilla (male), 1986": humanity is relative.*

astonishing and beautiful theater.

In a similar fashion, the new skull pictures work because they reduce a macabre subject to sculpture so elegant that you almost forget it's the end product of death and decay, of things breaking down. In its formality the effect is very similar to what Georgia O'Keeffe achieved in her paintings of animal skulls, which turned the skull into a decorative object.

In fact, the intimations of death and decay that sometimes figure in Penn's work have been getting stronger; ripe, 1950s-era still lifes inhabited by the occasional fly have more recently featured butchered bones and wizened fruit. And yet now, in pictures in which this morbid subtext is full-blown, the effect is one of revivification. Most of the skulls are so powerfully suggestive of their former life that you find yourself putting the flesh back on them, in your mind's eye.

The "exquisite edifice" (Penn's description) formed by each of these strange trophies isn't always an easy read, however. The giraffe's skull, for instance, looks like it came from an alien being, its porous horn protruding like an antenna. The tapir, a less well ar-



more relative of the rhinoceros, has a wedge-like projection extending from its forehead and a delicate vegetarian jaw that make its skull look almost bird-like. The lion seems to be missing the top of its cranium altogether, which practically reduces its skull to jaws and teeth—a fitting image of the king of

carnivores, and one that Penn encouraged by the use of shallow depth of field and a lens of relatively short focal length. The camel's fatuous smile becomes a wide grin in death, as if in glee at leaving its proverbial life of burden.

Within the constraints of higher anatomy—eye sockets, nasal cavities, jawbones—the variations are endless. But the similarities come as just as much of a revelation. It is surprising to discover, for instance, that most of these animals (all but the cats, dogs, and apes) have a second set of chewing teeth way back in the jaw. Such unfamiliar arrangements make the ape skulls in the show seem all the more human. Of course, the viewer's imaginative faculties are aided in good measure by Penn's exquisite sense of light, which makes the skulls powerfully three-dimensional. (John Szarkowski has called Penn's skill "an intuitive awareness of light as an organic part of his subject.") Penn knows not just where the light should fall, but also where it shouldn't—where the suggestion of massiveness or cavernousness might be better served by a shadowy, impenetrable black. Yet, the images have a strong two-dimensional life as well, tortured shapes against an unmodulated ground, with fragments of white seamless flying off the image through eye sockets, between teeth, under and over mandibles and maxillae. They're thoroughly enjoyable on this level, without reference to anything more ponderous—or symbolic.

Penn's premise is simple, and perhaps the danger is in sophisticating it. Then again, even Shakespeare couldn't resist the elevating poignancy of a found skull. Why should Irving Penn, who is no less a stylist? ■

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"Cranium Architecture," photographs by Irving Penn of skulls in the collection of the Narodni Museum, Prague, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, December 1, 1988, through January 14, 1989.