

The Verge

Pop Culture

Bear Market

On December 21, 2009 at 5:06 PM



I went into the bookstore at MoMA the other day looking for an old Gerhard Richter monograph and ended up instead spending forty-five minutes totally captivated by a book of bear photographs. Animal photos can be terribly cloying, but this collection was artful; soulful, really. Almost as if Richter himself decided to do a photo-realist series of bears. There were Polars and Kodiaks, Blacks, Russian Browns, and Grizzlies. The lighting was subtly textured: crisp in spots, hazy and lunar in others. Each page resonated with essential beariness, a link to something primitive and formative, something crucial to the existence of this animal. It seemed a secret about them was being let loose.

The book is called *Bear Portraits*, and Jill Greenberg is the photographer. She shoots other beastly subjects, too, often for this very magazine. But I'll take her bears. She catches them being pensive, playful, downright funny (turns out they're trained bears whose film and television credits are listed towards the end of the book). Sometimes they look stupefied, furious, or magnificently hungry. Some of

her shots evoke quiet everyday pathos (goes far beyond bears), others seem like landscape shots (bear as iceberg; bear as mountain), and still, others, comment on animal vulnerability and wanting in a way that suggests that we are all, in fact, very much bear-like.

— *Howie Kahn* photo: Little, Brown and Company

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