

Blood-Horse

'Essence of the Thoroughbred' on Exhibit

By: Eric Mitchell

June 6, 2016



An exhibit featuring more than 25 large-scale black and white photographs of some of America's premier racehorses and stallions will open June 9 at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Manhattan.

Being exhibited is the work of commercial photographer Neil Latham, who spent two years crisscrossing the country pursuing a vision—to capture the essence of the Thoroughbred.

"I'm intrigued by the juxtaposition of strength and power with beauty and fragility, the illustration of determination and character through taut muscles and coursing veins after a fast-paced run, the wild spirit of a charging herd," Latham said. "I've never felt as deeply about anything as I have about this work."

Latham used medium- and large-format film cameras and shot only in natural lighting.

"To portray true essence, the image has to be truthful. I used film because it can't be manipulated like digital photography," he said. "Film also gives a softness and subtlety that enhanced the emotional connection."

With his subjects challenging enough on their own, Latham also used a unique portable studio with a black backdrop 20 feet tall and 36 feet wide held up with industrial stands, staked to the ground. The entire set had to be rotated 10 degrees every 15 minutes to maintain the perfect angle to the sun.

His subjects include A.P. Indy, Curlin, Ghostzapper, Tapit, and two newest inductees into the National Racing Hall of Fame, Rachel Alexandra and Zenyatta.

Called "Neil Latham: American Thoroughbred," the exhibit will run through July 29. An opening reception will be held June 9 6-8 p.m. at 515 W. 26th St., New York City.

Quest for Excellence

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The following article was originally published in the Jan. 17, 2015, issue of Blood-Horse.

Photographer Neil Latham captured more than engaging images while visiting an upstate New York Thoroughbred farm more than two years ago. He had always loved horses as a child, and after his mother died, he had taken the trip in her memory.

What he captured on film, however, unleashed a two-year, 10,000-mile journey from coast to coast.

“When I got back to the darkroom, I got very excited,” said Latham, a native of Warwickshire, England, who now lives and works in New York City as a commercial photographer. “I realized I wanted to really understand the essence of the Thoroughbred. What is the underlying, indispensable quality of this horse?”

Latham decided Saratoga Racecourse would provide the right backdrop to find out. He initially planned to spend a few weeks there, but his stay stretched into months. Latham had convinced a trainer to let him stay in a racetrack dormitory. Every day he would rise at 3:30 a.m. with the backstretch workers and spend all day photographing Thoroughbreds. And he was not reeling off shots on a digital camera; he was shooting everything on film, using medium-format and large-format cameras.

“To capture the essence, it has to be true,” Latham said about his decision to produce everything as silver gelatin prints. “When you capture the image on film, it cannot be manipulated like digital. The image is true.”

Latham said photographing active Thoroughbreds using the large-format camera was quite challenging and mastering the technique took six months. Even then, Latham was pleased with the work but still not satisfied.

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"I still felt that something was missing," he said.

With the blessing of his wife, Amanda, Latham dropped his commercial work and planned an ambitious road trip that took him and assistant Andrew Williams to Kentucky, then completely across the country to California, and then back to Kentucky.

Latham and Williams first visit to the Bluegrass lasted three months. They camped in a tent at the Kentucky Horse Park but had access to the area's top farms and the breed's top horses.

"The project really required 18 months to two years because I had to completely understand the subject," Latham said. "The great artists—Stubbs, Herring, Munnings—weren't great because they had the eye. They became masters because they put thousands of hours into their craft.

"At first I didn't really understand the power, the strength, the dominance of the animal balanced with the fragility. But when I was in Kentucky, the project completely took on a life of its own. I just executed it," he said.

From Kentucky, Latham and Williams packed up their U-Haul trailer and headed to California. Williams, who recorded the entire project on film for a documentary, mounted a Super 8 camera on the roof of their truck and captured in time-lapse the trip out West. Six weeks into the California campaign, Latham got a phone call that put them back on the road to Kentucky: Latham had been approved to spend a day with Zenyatta, the 2010 Horse of the Year and arguably the highest-profile Thoroughbred in the U.S. since Secretariat.

They cut their stay in California short and left immediately, driving for 34 hours straight and swapping driving and sleeping duties whenever they stopped for gas. They arrived in Kentucky four hours before the allotted session with Zenyatta began.

"She is without question the most glorious thing I've seen," said Latham, who by that time had shot more than 6,000 images of the best Thoroughbreds in the country. "She has a presence I describe as almost human."

Commercial photographers shooting with film often have an assistant who reloads cameras until the desired image is captured. Once the photographer has what he needs, he will let the assistant know by saying, "I've got the shot."

"I remember thinking while photographing Zenyatta that I had the shot, but I never said anything to Andrew and kept shooting," Latham said. "I just felt this tremendous amount of joy shooting this wonderful creature. I didn't want to stop."

At the end of the session, Latham did something he'd never done before: He asked a farm employee to take a picture of him with Zenyatta with her phone.

"She tucked her head under my armpit and just stayed there," Latham said. "It was a very special moment I shared with her."

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The session with Zenyatta wound up culminating Latham's quest; he had captured the essence of the Thoroughbred and has put it all together in what he titled the "American Thoroughbred Collection."

The collection consists of 19 photos from the thousands that Latham took.

These images will be exhibited in the Sport of Kings Theater on the second floor of the Gulfstream Park grandstand, where the Eclipse Awards ceremony will be held Jan. 17. The exhibit will be open to the public beginning Jan. 14 and includes 15 40-by-50-inch prints and four 50-by-60-inch prints.

Latham is selling a limited edition of these prints, five sizes ranging from an essentially life-size 50-by-60 down to 20-by-24. Only five prints will be made in the top two largest formats while up to 25 prints will be available in the smallest size. All prints will be signed, dated, and numbered by Latham.

A significant portion of all sales during the Eclipse Awards week will be donated to three charities that were selected by The Stronach Group, which owns Gulfstream: the Permanently Disabled Jockeys Fund, Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance, and the nondenominational His Place Ministries.

"It is my way of giving back to this industry that has been so supportive of my work," Latham said.

Looking back at the financial sacrifice and the thousands of miles traveled and months spent sleeping in a tent, Latham said he would not have traded away a single minute of his life-changing journey.

"I did it because I felt the work was that important," Latham said. "I never had a feeling about anything else the way I felt about this project. It needed to be done and needed to be done well."