

Behind the Scenes with Neil Latham

Zenyatta Blog

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Zenyatta Captures Thoroughbred Essence, Says Photographer Neil Latham

For fine art photographer Neil Latham, his mum was the most powerful and soulful woman he had ever encountered, so when he noticed similar qualities among grazing horses in upstate New York while grieving his mum's passing, he did what came naturally: he took a few photographs.

The shots captivated Latham – there was strength yet fragility, athletic supremacy with graceful movement, determination yet peaceful confidence. He sensed his mother's presence. He was struck by a compulsion to capture the essence and mystique of the Thoroughbred on film, honoring these magnificent animals and his mother at the same time.

Yet over thousands of miles, 100-plus horses, 6,000 images, and countless equipment trials and set rotations, it wasn't until Latham met Zenyatta that the original objective crystallized for him

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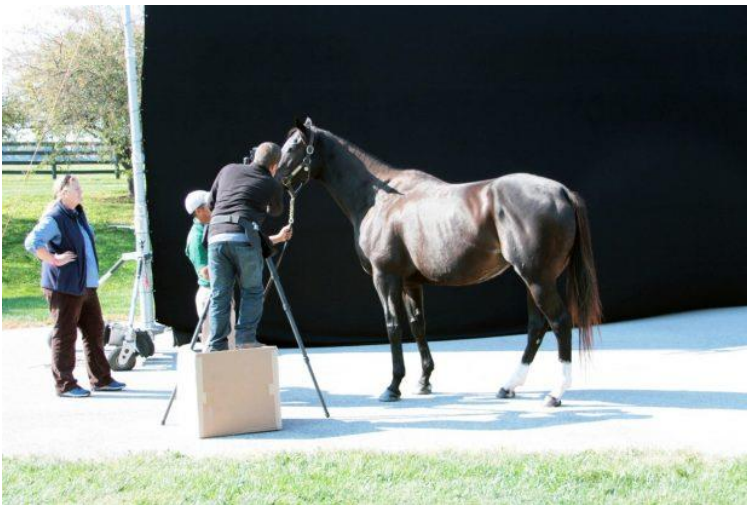
The Challenge of Essence

In order to reveal the profound, transcendent element he sensed beneath the surface of these complex animals, Latham fine-tuned his artistic vision, resolved technical issues and sorted logistics. He convinced horse owners and trainers to let him photograph their multi-million-dollar racehorses, and crisscrossed the country loaded with equipment. He slept in the groom dorms at Saratoga Race Course and camped in a tent at Kentucky Horse Park. "I had to live it and wait for the special moments," he says.

To achieve absolute perfection, Latham experimented with photographic equipment, light, exposure and large-scale sets. He built a portable studio with a black backdrop 20 feet tall and 36

feet wide that had to be rotated every 15 minutes to maintain the perfect angle to the sun. He also shot stampeding horses to capture intrinsic wildness, with the swirling dust giving a magical element.

In the process, Latham visited storied horse farms including Lane's End, Gainesway, Stonestreet, Coolmore, Spendthrift, Ramsey, and Adena Springs. He photographed Thoroughbred legends such as A.P. Indy, Curlin, Tapit, Rachel Alexandra, Ghostzapper and American Pharoah. Black-and-white images revealed isolated musculature after a good breezing, architectural lines and curves, frenzied running, and more as he pushed the artistic limits of the subject matter. Some images nearly resemble equine versions of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs.



And Then There Was Zenyatta

Latham and his assistant were shooting in California when approval came in to photograph Zenyatta. Excited, they drove for 34 hours straight, swapping driving and sleeping, arriving at Lane's End Farm just four hours before the start of the scheduled session.

"By that time I had shot more than 6,000 images of the best Thoroughbreds in the country, yet she was the most glorious creature I had ever seen," says Latham. "She was nearly posing...she seemed to know her best position. She loved to be

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

photographed and looked right at the lens. She was so alluring. I was fully aware that what I had in front of me was an iconic animal – a horse with soul. I felt a tremendous amount of joy photographing her and didn't want to stop."



When Latham asked a handler to take a photo of him with Zenyatta at the end of the session, something quite unexpected and extraordinary happened. "She tucked her head under my arm and just stayed there. A Thoroughbred would never do this. Then she tilted her head and looked straight at me. It was like she was talking to me through her eyes. I knew she understood people and felt emotion, and it seemed like she was in touch with my inner thoughts and feelings. This was a revelation...she connected with me on a different level. And I felt something I had never felt before with a horse," he says.

As the moment ended, Latham knew it was the end of the journey, too. He had captured the essence of the Thoroughbred.

"All of my photos portrayed the power and dominance of the breed, but it wasn't until Zenyatta that I was able to reveal the emotional, fragile side," says Latham. "It was the missing piece. I felt the finality, and then a wave of sadness. I never wanted it to be over; it's hard to stop an obsession. But it seemed like there was nothing else to say – it had all been said with Zenyatta."



Zenyatta Forever

Latham's iconic portrait of Zenyatta is currently featured in an exhibition, "Neil Latham: American Thoroughbred," at Steven Kasher Gallery in New York City through July 30. Gallery hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Address: 515 W. 26th St. in Chelsea. www.stevenkasher.com/artists/neil-latham. Limited edition prints are available in a few sizes ranging up to 50 x 60 inches for maximum impact. They are numbered, finished on archival paper with museum framing, and signed by the artist.

Zenyatta is also a highlight of the limited edition fine art coffee table book "American Thoroughbred" by Neil Latham published by Twin Palms. It features 182 pages with 80 duotones, and is casebound and slipcased for quality presentation. It retails for \$95 and is available from the publisher at <https://twinpalms.com/books-artists/american-thoroughbred/> or from Amazon (ISBN: 978-1-936611-12-6). It can also be purchased at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York through the end of July.

American Thoroughbred has developed quite a following on Instagram, see @neil_american_thoroughbred. The photographer's website is www.neillatham.com.