

Horse Racing Superstars In Neil Latham's 'American Thoroughbred'

By: Teresa Genaro

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At the Steven Kasher Gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea, the exhibit American Thoroughbred features some of this country's most famous racehorses: last year's Triple Crown winner American Pharoah; 2009 Horse of the Year Rachel Alexandra; 2010 Horse of the Year Zenyatta.

The horse that inspired the exhibit boasts a far more modest résumé.

Several years ago, photographer Neil Latham was driving upstate from his New York City home shortly after the death of his mother when he spotted a horse in a nearby field. Growing up in rural England, he was used to being around horses; his mother had two of her own, and as a child, he'd been taken on a bareback equine joy ride by some of his neighbors.

There was something about this particular horse that arrested him.

"His shoulder was rippling with muscle," Latham said recently in a telephone interview. "It reminded me of my mother's muscular definition. She was an incredibly athletic woman. It sparked this curiosity in me, and that's how this journey got started."

"This journey" took Latham from the backstretch at Saratoga Race Course to the prestigious breeding farms in Kentucky's bluegrass to California. He slept in a dorm room at the track and a tent at the Kentucky Horse Park, shooting thousands of photographs, all on film, over several years, resulting in the exhibition and a limited edition eponymous book.

Among the first horses he photographed were those of Maurice Regan, who breeds and raises horses at farms in New York, Kentucky, and Ireland, and who became a financial supporter of the project.

"This would never have happened without him," said Latham.

Though Latham sought the biggest equine names in racing, most of his photographs make them deliberately anonymous; Rachel Alexandra's distinctive blaze is nowhere in sight in the photograph of her, the print instead focusing only on her leg. Stripped of identifying features, she could be any horse, nothing tipping that she is the mare that will be inducted into the Hall of Fame next month.

Horse racing aficionados might suspect that the big gray horse featured prominently in the exhibit is Tapit, the leading sire in the United States last year who commands a \$300,000 stud fee at Kentucky's Gainesway Farm, but they'll need to look at the tag next to the photo to confirm it.

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“I wanted to capture their form and their beauty,” Latham said. “They’re the most beautiful forms you’ve ever seen. It’s sort of like Usain Bolt’s thigh—nobody has that construction, so it was very important to document the most important Thoroughbreds living. It started from that original vision, and I got completely curious about the anatomy of the animal, their strength and power.”

To convey that vision, Latham eliminated any trace of the natural landscapes in which the horses live and work. Set against a stark black background, the photographs often focus on only part of the horse—a leg, a shoulder, hind quarters. Many of them were shot after the horses had exercised, their veins bulging with exertion.

“I had no intention of photographing them like other photographers do,” he said. “I chose film because I wanted it to be truthful and honest. Each print is hand-made, traditionally, in a dark room, to bring out the most beauty.”

The prints range in size from 24” by 30” to 50” by 60”, and in price from \$4,000 to \$25,000.

Latham’s comments about his work take on a reverential, almost mystical tone, perhaps not surprising as the project was inspired by a moment that recalled his late mother, and the photographer admits that it has become something of a love story.

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“I am drawn to the majesty of the breed,” he said. “My whole goal was to capture the essence of the Thoroughbred.”

He was convinced that he had achieved that after photographing Zenyatta at Lane’s End Farm.

“She put her head under my arm and looked up at me,” he said. “We formed a bond and I’ll take that moment to the grave. I knew then that the collection was finished.”



Prior to the project, Latham had worked for, among other clients, Condé Nast, his photographs appearing in publications such as Vogue, his subjects of the human variety. American Thoroughbred has changed that, and he is already working on his next equine-themed project.

“The next chapter is just starting,” he said, declining to offer details. “But it will be as big, if not bigger, than American Thoroughbred.”

American Thoroughbred closes on July 30. The Steven Kasher Gallery is located at 515 W. 26th Street in New York.