

*The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Wild, an exhibition by Heather Nicole and Andrew C. Strom, at the Courthouse Gallery from February 4 – June 10, 2025. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artists, the city courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Chris Lanier, who provided the following essay.*

## **WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER**

“There is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties... Animals, like man, manifestly feel pleasure and pain, happiness and misery.”

– Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*



Heather Nicole, "Sunset Soirée",  
photograph, 20"x30", 2019

“Wild: Nicole and Strom” collects wildlife and landscape photography by Heather Nicole and Andrew C. Strom. All the formal elements of photography are expertly attended to – indulgences in the bright colors of bird plumage; attention paid to the texture of a lion’s hide, stippled with acacia thorns; an enraptured sensitivity to light and shadow, perhaps most dramatically captured in a sunset scene of elephants, their silhouettes dissolving in gradients of orange. The photographs satisfy the desire for spectacle that we sometimes seek in the animal kingdom – a theater of display and behavior that we can admire for its vividness, and its directness of expression. But as photographers, both Nicole and Strom come armed with an element that can’t be reduced to purely formal operations – a deep sense of empathy with their subjects. I got the sense, talking to them, that they weren’t just interested in capturing a scene. They were interested in creating a bridge between the animal world and the human one (of course this comes with the asterisk that humans are animals, much as we’d like to muddy that fact).

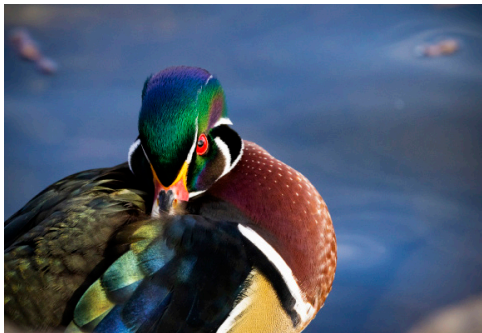
### **Mantis lesson**

Nicole has been interested in wildlife and photography for as long as she can remember – some of her earliest memories are of watching Animal Planet. When she was growing up in Florida, there was a wooded area behind her house that gave her access to a bit of wild territory – populated with lizards, crickets, turtles, and birds. She retains a particular memory of bringing a praying mantis into her house so she could “take care of it” –

abducted from its natural environment, it soon perished. It was an early lesson that often the best way to take care of an animal is to stay out of its way. As she got older, she became more intentional in combining her interest in photography with her interest in wildlife. With a camera in hand, as she put it, “It always makes sense for me to be looking at the wild things.”

Strom and Nicole met during the Covid lockdowns; Nicole was new to the area, and Strom had grown up around Reno. Dating options were sparse at the time, and they would go on outings where Nicole would take her camera, and Strom would drive them to places to look for wildlife to shoot. After a while, she handed him one of her older cameras and told him – “Since you're here, you might as well give this a try too.”

### **A caretaking mallard**



Andrew C. Strom, "Best Looking Duck in the Pond", photograph, 16"x20", 2022

One particular day stands out – at a small pond, they found two mallards, a male with an injured foot, and a female who was staying by his side, not straying too far from him. They documented the ducks’ interaction, and as Strom recalls, “I captured a really close, intimate picture of the female duck’s face, seeing personality and care in her eye – understanding there’s so much more going on there. It’s a creature that has thoughts and feelings and emotion. Some of that may be putting my own emotion into the image, but being able to capture that moment, and convey that to others, made an impact on me.”

After travel restrictions were lifted, they’ve been able to range farther in their pursuit of that sort of connection, traveling with guides and tour groups in a number of countries – among them Kenya, India, Norway, and Costa Rica. I get the sense that the connection is the real goal, and the images are an excuse to lead them to those moments and ratify them. I hear it when Nicole talks about elephants – and the sense of peace that comes over her when she’s in their presence. “Bear and rhinos, too,” she expands, “or – most animals, really. But elephants hold a special place in my heart.”

I asked them about the story behind a few of their photos, and this is what they told me.

### **“The Light in Your Eye” (by Andrew C. Strom)**

This is a photo of a Cooper’s Hawk, a bird whose territory ranges from Canada to Mexico. The image hangs on the bright nail of the hawk’s eye. The dominant palette of the photo is a collection of blues, purples, browns, and greys – and then piercing this is the fierce orange and yellow of the raptor’s eye, lit by the sun but seeming to glow from some interior furnace. The hawk sits perched, wings tucked to its sides, the feathers neatly overlapping. The beige and white breast feathers spread out a bit like a formal bib. The white in those feathers picks up blue and yellow shades from the surrounding shadows – the background is out of focus, dissolving these tones in a painterly mist. In the



Andrew C. Strom, "The Light In Your Eye", photograph, 20"x30", 2022

softness of blur and feather, the eye and the downturned blade of the beak glint sharply – like precious stones, finely polished.

Strom explained, “This was right in our backyard. Cooper's Hawks have a habit of stalking bird feeders. We have a couple of bird feeders in the backyard, and the Cooper's Hawks hang out in the neighborhood and look for birds that are at the feeders” – as he mentions, giving the phrase “bird feeders” a double-entendre. “I was in the backyard this past summer, pulling weeds, and one of them flew in less than 10 feet away from me up on the fence, and sat there and checked me out for 10 or 15 seconds.” His camera happened to have a long lens on it, so shooting the bird so close threw the background out of focus – an element that ended up adding to the overall atmosphere of the photo. “I was able to creep up and shoot straight down the fence line at it. These guys are just wonderful to shoot – they come through fairly often and they don't mind our presence, as long as we keep a respectful distance. The sun was setting, and just happened to come right through between a couple of houses, and lit up the eye. This is probably one of my favorite photos. The bird stands alone, and has this great presence – the stunning eye and the attitude – it feels iconic.”

### **“Fading” (by Heather Nicole)**

This photo of a polar bear at the edge of a sheet of ice was taken near Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago between Norway and the North Pole. Prior to this photo being taken, the bear seemed in a playful mood – he approached their guide boat, sat up, and waved at them. As Strom put it, “If you didn't know better, you'd think it was a bear out of a circus.” They felt its intense curiosity – a curiosity born out of their ordinarily very solitary lives. It was their first encounter with a polar bear, and perhaps it was the bear's first encounter with an inquisitive boat. They were interested in each other.



Heather Nicole, "Fading", photograph, 16"x24", 2024

The photograph conveys a more somber mood. The bear itself is perfectly silhouetted – head slightly bowed, the wet fur giving its outline a serrated edge. His body stands against the shimmering white of the plane of ice and, beyond that, the sun-spangled water. He stands atop his shadowy reflection, mirrored and wrinkled in the water just beyond his heavily planted paws. Nicole has smeared the landscape where the bear is facing, using Photoshop to liquefy the pixels, giving the impression that everything is on the verge of melting, to be carried away on an inexorable current. This sort of visual editing amounts to a form of editorializing – something Nicole usually avoids, but in this case, she felt compelled to use the gesture as a way to nod to the wider context she understood beyond the confines of the frame. She explained: “I don't have the words to describe how intensely beautiful it is up there, but also how intensely sad it is. The North Pole and the High Arctic is the epicenter of the global changes of climate that we're witnessing – and it's changing faster there than anywhere else in the world.”

“If you can go up and see this place and not be changed by it, then there's something

wrong with you. I felt like I had a duty – an assignment – to witness it, and share the story of what's going on up there. It's not typical for me to alter an image, but I felt it required a little bit of a narrative, to say: this is what's happening. This is reality, the fact that his world is disappearing, it is fading away. And in turn, our world is fading away."

## Urgent Beauty

These images aren't complacent in their beauty – there's a sense of urgency underlying them. They are scenes captured on metaphorical quicksand, the animals' ecosystems and behaviors in flux, warped under the pressures of climate change. The guides on their trip to the North Arctic relayed the changes they had observed over the course of two decades in the area. For one, they were able to travel to the 80th parallel north by boat in early April – something that wouldn't have been possible five years ago because of the density of the pack ice. And Nicole and Strom observed a polar bear pursuing reindeer as prey – a behavior that seems to be increasing as the bears' normal hunting territory of sea ice dwindles.



Heather Nicole, "The Last Stand",  
photograph, 20"x30", 2019

Over two trips to Kenya, they witnessed dramatic shifts in the landscape within the span of only three years. When they first went to Amboseli National Park in 2019, on the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro, the landscape was lush, and elephants could be seen in large numbers. Three years of drought followed, and when they returned in 2022, it was almost unrecognizable – sparse, dry, with the elephants appearing in far fewer numbers. Some were thin and malnourished. The perpetual ice cap on Kilimanjaro had produced an extreme runoff that altered the ecosystem at Amboseli, flooding the area. Places that were usually dry were now swampy, and areas that were usually swampy had dried up. They saw the carcasses of many animals – elephants, hippos, wildebeest, zebras. Hoofed animals were dying of hoof rot because they were standing on wet earth all day. Similar to the story of the polar bears hunting reindeer, their guides told them they had witnessed new feeding habits from the local egrets. Egrets have a symbiotic relationship with elephants – they can be seen hitching rides on their backs, eating lice and ticks off the elephants' skin and hair. And when the elephants stir up bugs from the grass where they walk, the egrets follow and feed themselves on the routed buffet. Now, with the proliferation of dead elephants, the guides had seen egrets feeding on their carcasses – something they'd never seen before.



Heather Nicole, "Safety",  
photograph, 20"x24", 2022

Nicole's photo, "Safety," was taken in the shadow of those dire scenes. In it, a young elephant stands encircled by older members of its herd. We only see portions of these protectors – wrinkled legs and trunks, a blurred arc of tusks, a tail ending in a coarse tuft of hair. The focus is on the juvenile, its ears flattened against its head, one side of its face bright with dry dust. It was actually one of two baby elephants – perhaps a couple of weeks old – among that group. "They were playing



and bumping into each other,” Nicole explained, “they were just like rambunctious little kids. It was a moment of light. It’s natural for the elephants to shelter the babies in the middle of the herd to protect them from predators and from wandering off or getting separated from the herd. And I thought – these two youngsters, they can do it, they can make it.”

There’s a cliché of the photographer being a dispassionate observer – capturing life while standing outside it. Obviously that’s a stereotype that doesn’t apply to Nicole and Strom. For them, photography is a form of ethics, of being a part of the world. If there’s a message to be found in their wildlife photography, it’s one that both encompasses and transcends the politics of the moment. It boils down to: we’re all in this together.

Chris Lanier  
Reno, Nevada  
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Heather Nicole



Andrew C. Strom



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