

A Gallery Transports

Roam: African wildlife conservation through the lens of Xtina parks

BY FRANCIS SCHELL

Walk into the airy spaces of ROAM photo gallery on MASS MoCA's campus in North Adams, and you are surrounded by majestic, life-like images of Africa's vast and endangered animal kingdom. From monkeys to birds, from giraffes to hippos, from hyenas to zebras, they are all present in their great diversity on these walls. A lion's head stares you down, an elephant seems to want to talk to you, a leopard surveys you from a tree's crotch. Nature photographer Chrystina (Xtina) Geagan Parks spent seven years crisscrossing the continent from Botswana to Tanzania, from Kenya to Zambia with her Nikon digital camera, trekking into cloud forests and sleeping under the stars on the immense plains to take these images. "My aim has been to get close to the animals, to create their individual portraits," she says.

Xtina's business card reads: "Photographer, Philanthropist, Phenomenon." Add: "Massachusetts native." She grew up in Springfield, attended the University of Massachusetts, then an early marriage took her to California where she remained off and on for 25 years. She worked in feature films production, did a six-year PR stint for NBA players, then went into museum public relations, including, after a divorce, a spell at the Quadrangle back home in Springfield. Later in California, she worked at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles, where she met her current husband, businessman and board chair James R. Parks. That's her backstory.

Her new life story began when in an equestrian accident almost ten years ago— she shattered her arm and was laid up in a cast for a year. "I am a Type A person and it almost drove me crazy," Xtina recalls. When the cast came off, her mother suggested, "You've always liked taking pictures, why don't you take a photography course?" She signed up for one, loved it, and after four months the instructor singled her out to accompany a group of students photographing wildlife in Africa. "The first time I saw an elephant close up, I burst into tears. I can't describe the emotion I felt in the presence of these animals. I had only seen them in zoos, and here they were free to roam in their grandeur." After a time, she sensed that she possessed an understanding of their behavior. "I realized I was able to get up close without infringing on them, to capture their personality," she says. This gift, plus a keen eye and a sense of purpose, have catapulted Xtina into the ranks of award-winning photographers. "I am humbled because in my field I am completely self-taught," she says.



ROAM gallery, on the campus of MASS MoCA, showcases work like this, titled "I Lose the Standoff," by Xtina Parks.

PHOTO BY XTINA PARKS

Her passion for animals led to a dedication to preserve them and their habitats. Included among the images on display at the gallery are some stunning renderings of the African landscape. From taking pictures, she has become an ardent conservationist. “Only last week, in a protected area in Botswana, poachers were able fly in and decapitate two rare rhinos for their horns that fetch huge sums on the Chinese market,” Xtina says. “Some African states are lifting the ban on killing elephants. Nine of ten people here don’t realize that this is going on. We must raise grassroots awareness to stop the slaughter before it’s too late.” A portion of the sales proceeds at the gallery goes to WildAid, dedicated to diminishing demand for wildlife products.

Conservation is also the dynamo driving Xtina Studios, her documentary film production company headquartered at the gallery. At present, Xtina and her technical crew, augmented by biologists and conservationists, are at work in Ethiopia’s Bale Mountain National Park on a feature for television about the little-known Abyssinian lion. Xtina has additional plans to advance her cause: a comic book and cartoon film for children about wildlife conservation and a coffee table book of her photos. She wants the gallery to host the work of other established or aspiring photographers of the natural world, “to combat our relentless claim on resources.”



It’s all happening here in the Berkshires. “My heart explodes when I am in Africa,” Xtina says. “But next to Africa, this is where I want to be.”

In the Field

Xtina Parks is currently working in Africa with conservationists, primarily in Botswana, using still and video photography to document their work.