

PHOTOGRAPHY ROBIN SCHWARTZ TEXT ALEX WAGNER



ALL
CREATURES



New Jersey-based photographer Robin Schwartz has been photographing animals for over 25 years now, with two books on the subject already published: *Like Us: Primate Portraits* and *Dog Watching*. "I'm driven, really driven by animals," she declares. Two years ago, Schwartz brought along her then-five year-old daughter, Amelia, to the backstage area of a circus while she shot adult chimpanzees. Amelia immediately gravitated towards a young chimp named Ricky. "She and that chimp—who was a year younger than her—they loved each other. And I know the dangers of monkeys," Schwartz says. "They fell off the chair, hugging each other! It was like one of those movies where they run and they fall into each other's arms—love at first sight! It was a very affectionate moment." Though primarily a black and white photographer, Schwartz captured the embrace in color. "Somehow," she explains, "this connection was made." Her printer, Julie Pochron, edited and enlarged the pictures, a revelatory move that made "the entire project viable," according to Schwartz. Thus began the Amelia Project, a series of portraits featuring Schwartz's daughter among animals: surrounded by reindeer at an outdoor petting zoo, cheerfully smiling while being lifted off the ground wrapped in an elephant's trunk, poised and serene as she is pounced upon by five hairless cats.

It's not just the humor in juxtaposition that makes Schwartz's work remarkable: while Amelia is a young girl placed in otherworldly, magical settings, she remains confident, aware, engaged with the camera—the star of one of Maurice Sendak's stories, made flesh. She is remarkably composed with three baby chickens on her head, manages a look of insouciance while a monkey strokes her ankle—the portraits are as much about the girl as they are about the animals.

"The older Amelia gets, the more interesting she gets," says Schwartz. **"She's fearless. There are things I'm afraid of. I'm not partial to snakes or insects or to dead things. And she picks up everything!** This is nothing that I've forced upon her—you can't force kids to do stuff, they're sort of like monkeys."

While much of Schwartz's earlier work was executed in a documentary style, it's been her recent trips to the Metropolitan Museum Of Art that have most influenced the composition of her new work. "I love Sally Mann and the light in her work, but I think her light is really painterly, and I connect that to going to the Met and looking at Rembrandt and Vermeer," Schwartz says. You can easily see the echoes of the elegant, Classical painters in photos like "Two Pink Sphynxes" where Amelia cradles two hairless kittens, the wistful look in her eyes reminiscent of noble portraiture of the 18th and early 19th Century, her luminescent skin and the rich, dark background a nod to the Dutch artists of the 17th Century.

Schwartz is the first to admit the narcissism of shooting one's own child: "The thing about kids is, I'm only interested in mine," she says. Yet the indulgent sappiness of "personal photos" never sullies her work. While the series itself is driven by two of Schwartz's great loves, she maintains a keen eye towards composition and expression, focus rarely blurred by her personal connection to the subjects. This is the work of an artist, not a doting mother. As Schwartz says, "I'm really happy because I think on the inside I'm a frustrated illustrator or a painter. I painted as a little girl, pictures of little girls and animals and monkeys. I haven't changed at all." **F**



