

The Widest Prairies

Back in Amsterdam, I sit on my couch while outside my window construction workers are building in the sun. A large blue crane turns every five minutes or so, placing building materials on the foundation of what will be Amsterdam's largest mosque.

My mind floats back to the horses of Nevada. I visited them three times over the previous five months; February, early April and again in mid-June. I was able to observe them in different seasons - In the cold looking for food, during mating season while in heat, and with their growing foals in late spring, roaming the hot desert near the outskirts and foothills of Dayton, Stagecoach and Silver City.

Dayton, Nevada - it's fame lies in being one of the first settlements of the gold rush of the West. It also featured as the backdrop of the film, *The Misfits*. In this movie Clark Gable, Montgomery Clift and Eli Wallach go after mustangs while Marilyn Monroe is along for the ride. It's a pretty dramatic scene. The shots of horses running across the alkaline white surface, as they are being roped and caught from the vehicle that is chasing them are spectacular and haunting. The area is now known as The Misfit Flat.

I've long had the wish to photograph wild horses. I hadn't yet been able to do it, because the subject is so laden with symbolism and I was cautious to approach it. After I completed the portraits of the burial horses of Arlington Cemetery, *Anima*, which I had shot at very close range in the confined dark spaces of their stables at night, it felt right to seek out the wider plains and challenge of finding these horses that are roaming free, unbound by fences. They are, however, surrounded by human boundaries since their habitat overlaps and infringes upon those who live nearby them. This proximity has created new interactions between man and animal and has changed perceptions of the wild horses.

The wild horses in Nevada are important in the history of the American West. They once symbolized freedom and the possibility of expansion, values of great weight to the American psyche. Their existence is now jeopardized, as are these values, by changing political and economic conditions.

This became clear to me when visiting the area around Carson City where unemployment is high and many homes are foreclosed upon and abandoned. Still the human presence expands in the area. During the course of the five months I was visiting, highway 50 between Stagecoach and Silver City was being widened because of increasing traffic. A tunnel to lead the horses underneath the highway was under construction as fences were being put up alongside the road, since they often cross and on occasion get killed by passing traffic.

I searched and found the horses in the mountains and hills they traverse with help from locals who keep track of the herds and bands in the area, though usually I would run into the horses in the residential areas around Dayton and Stagecoach making their way through gardens and scrap yards, grazing and feeding on the trees between the mobile homes.

There is a moment when horses stop all their activities and just stand still, seemingly contemplating. There, they would let me approach them and I'd spend hours in their company, observing them, as they did me. People were nowhere in sight, as if the horses had taken over

the area. I could find the same horses at a different time and location and they would be unapproachable, wild.

It took me a while to gather some courage to come near. With time's passing I got to know them a little better, feeling happy to find the same horses again, taking a liking to some over others.

They prevail somehow, though circumstances are far from perfect. The draughts drive them out of the mountains in search for water and food.

Some people feed them, especially in winter, although forbidden by law. There remains an old grey stallion covered in scars from previous battles, he has lost all his teeth and resides in the front yard of one of the homes.

New foals are being born in this changing landscape where the horses become more and more a pressing topic of discussion between wild horse advocates, the state, and other involved parties - each having different opinions on what should be done about the situations of the horses.

I was able to follow and observe the horses. They have roamed these lands for centuries while their landscape has changed. They remind me of the free spirited characters of the stray dogs of Palermo in Sicily - resilient. Obeying the dynamic and rules of the band they are part of. They migrate. They mate, search for water and food, they bicker and fight and stand together in comfort in the desert wind.

“ 'The Widest Prairies' features a selection of images shot by Charlotte Dumas on medium format and 4x5 inch Instant Film of the wild horses of Dayton NV. It approximates a cinematographic account of these undomesticated animals roaming the fringes of the foothills into the neighborhoods where peoples and animals paths cross.”