



Steve Grubman:

ANIMAL INSTINCTS

By Jennifer Chen



Photographing a dog or a baby is a serious challenge because both subjects don't take direction well and their attention spans are short. Now imagine photographing scorpions, spiders, alligators, rhinos, cows, zebras, and elephants. For photographer Steve Grubman that's just an average day in the studio.

Steve didn't start out herding rhinos into his studio, but instead, as he puts it, he started "from ground zero." About 20 years ago Steve was working as a cab driver when a friend showed him how to develop a roll of film—a moment that changed his life. He loved the magical quality of developing film in a darkroom. He landed a job as a photographer working with contemporary painter Ralph Cowan by showing up with four prints—and one of the prints was fading.

Cowan told him it was his enthusiasm and lack of photo knowledge that got him hired. So for three years Steve developed color prints for Cowan in a darkroom, being stuck inside and inhaling strong chemicals. He decided to venture into architectural photography, thinking he would be able to spend all of his time outside, but he ended up shooting a lot of commercial spaces after people left their offices at odd hours in the day.

When Steve started a family and wanted regular hours he decided to open up his own studio. One client promised him more work once he had his own studio, so Steve rented a 5000-square-foot studio in Chicago. The client lost their job and Steve was forced to find studio clients quickly. He focused on tabletop and still life, shooting "anything that fit on a table" and grew successful with his work.

What got him some national attention, and probably the spite of some chickens, was

when he shot the Chick-fil-A campaign. He landed the famous "Eat Mor Chikin" shoot after a successful self-promotion. The promo was full of images of animals. He had the promo printed and wanted to send them out to art directors, but he realized that it would be too expensive to mail out. In fact, it was less expensive to fly out his agent with his book in tow to Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York. Steve shares, "It was, to this day, the most successful piece I did."

The Richards Group, based in Dallas, TX, dreamed up a winning campaign using 3D black-and-white cows on billboards encouraging humans to eat more chicken. The outdoor billboard for Chick-fil-A, with one black-and-white cow standing on another

cow painting the words, "Eat Mor Chikin," won several awards. Sales for Chick-fil-A grew and Grubman photographed calendars and more cows writing notes to humans, littered with misspellings. As the success grew CNN (also based near the headquarters of Chick-fil-A in Atlanta, GA) came to film one of the cow shoots. This successful series of cow images landed Steve with the reputation of being the "animal guy."

But Steve admits he enjoys the title—even if it does get hairy in his studio. On occasion he'll bring his yellow lab Polly into the studio, mainly with the cows and pigs, to get a great shot. Steve explains, "If the cow gets a sniff of my dog, the cow will look over at the camera."

Typically, the studio is packed not only with animals, but animal handlers and the animal's owner as well as the production crew. Steve takes great care to talk to everyone involved ahead of time before the animal is actually brought into the studio. When the animal arrives, the clock is ticking and those important discussions beforehand are key. Before the animal is released on to the set, Steve will walk through the shoot with the handler.

"A lot more goes into the shoot before the animal even arrives," he says. "I'm prepared with the lights and the entire set because sometimes the shoot is over in minutes. My biggest concern is safety." To make sure that an animal feels comfortable he adjusts his lighting. "If I'm shooting continuous lighting I'll have it going before the animal enters,





or if I'm using flash, I fire it all the time," he says. In all of his shoots he's never had a problem with an animal running away or getting aggressive. "Most likely, the animal exhibits a behavior or pose that we didn't expect," he says.

Collaboration is key and Steve makes sure to work with the same team to ensure successful shoots. "I work with the best animal handlers. I've had the same agent, Carolyn Somlo, and digital technician, David Kreutz, for 25 years. We have a professional crew who are fun to work with. We work hard and don't take ourselves too seriously," he says. "When I work with new people, I tell them my goals and setup for the shoot before we start working."

To get a sense of what Steve deals with and why he loves his job, he discusses a favorite shoot of his—photographing Indian elephants for a pharmaceutical company. The shoot called for an elephant to be posed in a scene with props and furniture. Steve

photographed the elephants first, then the props separately. The six Indian elephants journeyed from Oklahoma to Chicago in large tractor-trailer trucks. “Waiting for those trucks to arrive was like waiting for your own personal circus,” he says.

The morning of the shoot Steve and his team picked a few elephants they wanted to use and the animal handlers bathed the elephants in the street drying them off with leaf blowers. When the shoot started, the handler asked Steve if she could bring the elephant’s pal in while the starring elephant was being photographed.

The kinship sparked amazing results for Steve. “The eye contact between both of them was amazing. Any time I was looking at them, they were looking at each other and it was clear that they were more comfortable when they were together,” he says. He had them lie down and hold each other’s trunks. Steve even felt a trunk sniffing him head to toe. “The most fun part was that it was going to the zoo without any bars in your way. I was able to shoot up close and look into their eyes and see their personality.”

His animal images have led him as far away as Melbourne, Australia, where Steve shot all the promo material—life-size cut-outs, coming-soon posters, coloring books—for the live-action film adaptation of *Charlotte’s Web*, the classic children’s story. Steve explains how they were able to get the animals, “two or three years before the movie was shot, the animal handlers went

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to Australia scouring the country for the best specimens of livestock and pigs. They went so far in advance to have ample time to train them.” For instance in the movie, a goose opens a latch with its beak and a horse nods. The director graciously stopped shooting the film for a day so Steve and his crew could

shoot and get the images they needed of the animals. Steve brought along his daughter to the set and got to witness a behind-the-scenes making of the movie.

One of his latest projects is a new venture for Steve—a children’s book called *Orangutans Are Ticklish: Fun Facts from an Animal Photographer* (Schwartz & Wade, June 2010).

Unlike his photo shoots that involve short time frames and images being sent quickly to the client, the children’s book process took three years. He even had to lull a cow to sleep with soft music during one shoot.

The book is aimed at young readers with a focus on educating children about a variety of zoo animals, and Steve mentions that he considers, “the subtheme is that you should do something you like and you’ll be happy.” The publishers were cost-conscious and since Steve already had a large selection of animal photography the bulk of the images were already done. He shot some filler shots for anything that seemed to be missing.

“On each page, there are some comments from me about what was going through my mind when I was photographing or what the animal was doing. I’ve gotten a few requests to appear at signings and make presentations in front of school kids and zoos. I look forward to reading the book to children. And the whole process has given me a chance to think about projects that I want to do.”

View Steve’s work at www.grubman.com.



Jennifer Chen is the former features editor for both *Rangefinder* and *AfterCapture* magazines as well as the former editor of the *WPPI Monthly Newsletter*. She has written for *Everyday* with Rachael Ray, *Natural Health*, *Bust*, *VegNews*, and *Audrey*. She is currently working on her first young adult novel. She blogs at www.typecraftwriter.com.

