

Looking for whales

An exhibition

by Wade and Robyn Hughes

At one point, Robyn and I were thinking that the next creative project we would embark on may well be writing a book titled “Really? You’re thinking of mounting a photographic exhibition?” It really is a journey from an idea that flows casually out of a Friday evening bottle of red wine to a gallery wall speckled with a rash of red dots! But, now, at the time of writing half way through our week-long exhibition, would we do it all again? Absolutely.

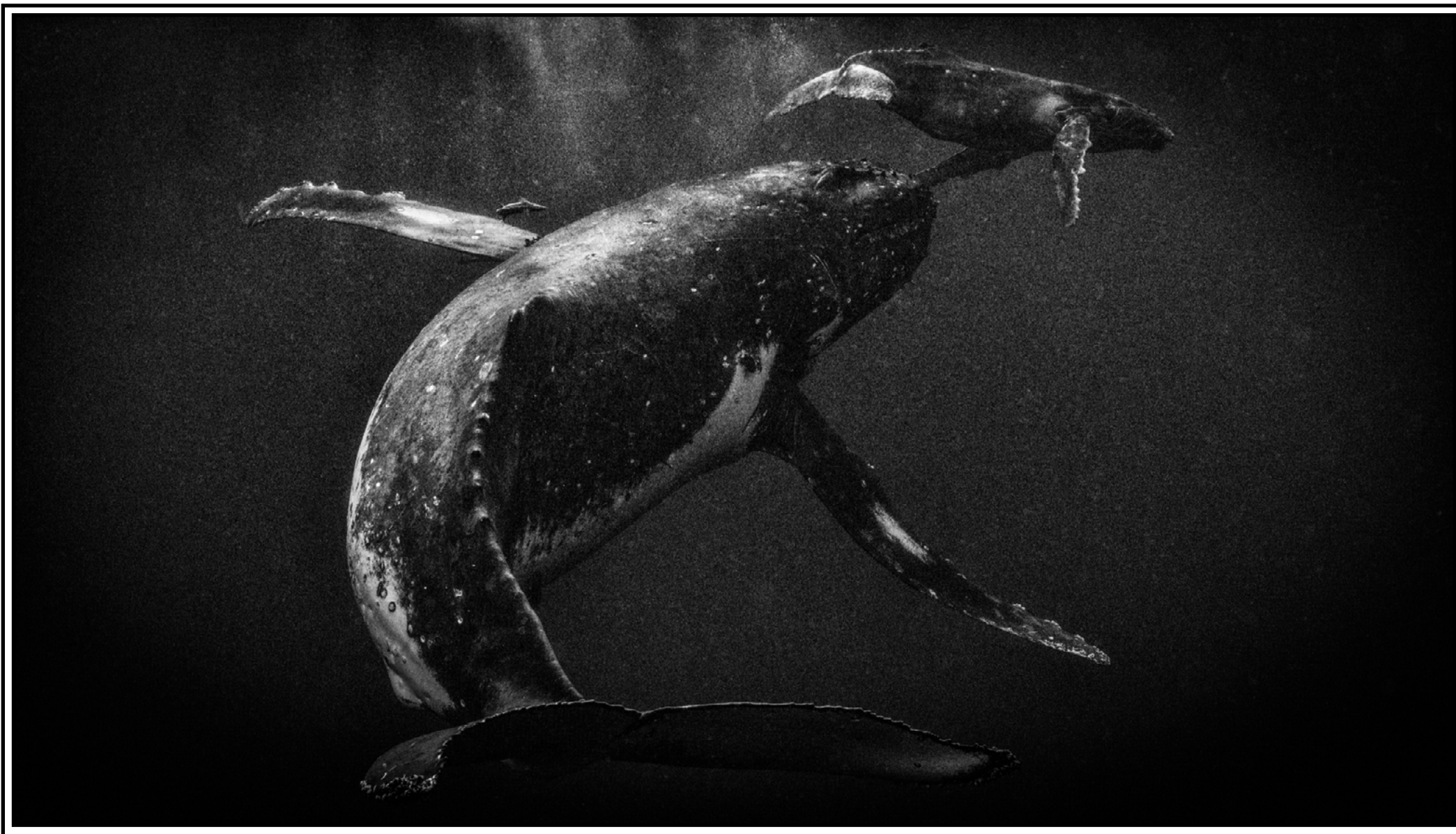
At this point, we’re enjoying strong sales. But the value of this exhibition, for us, goes far beyond whatever the eventual commercial outcome might be. Right from the outset, we were not setting out on a commercial enterprise: there were other, more compelling reasons for mounting this exhibition. We’ll touch on those below, but nevertheless, we worked as prudently and frugally as we could in order to contain costs as much as possible.

But the value began to flow back to us as soon as we began selecting our images. In this we asked for unvarnished opinions from three people who’s artistic skill and judgment we both admired and respected.

The first was Joanna Robertson, owner of the Kidogo Art House gallery-one of the most diverse and vibrant galleries in Western Australia. And

This humpback whale close up portrait was a Finalist in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition 2017.





then Paul Jarvis, Western Australia's only Ilford-certified Master Printer, and an outstanding photographer in his own right. Tony Cunningham artist, scientist, and author, made

up this informal triumvirate. In separate discussions they each offered reactions to each of our candidate images. On some, their preferences overlapped. And in some, they

diverged widely.

But, tellingly, their reflections all evolved from a common principle; without saying it to us directly, they were forcing us to ask ourselves

"When we look at our images, what are we trying to get them to say, to us?" Not to anyone else, but to us.

Jimmy Buffett was on to this idea way back in the 1970s when



he penned a lyric “I won’t make my music for money, no I’m gonna make my music for me”

That simple but profound advice sent us back into our files with fresh eyes. We were looking for images that recounted for us some of the sense of drama and excitement that we’ve experienced while we’ve been looking for whales, and finding some. We have quite a few images that can do that for us. But then we wanted just those few that can go further and reveal for us the aesthetic that we see and revere within the form and behaviour of these extraordinary animals.

In many ways, this is where the technical



aspects of composition and exposure kick in.

Ilford had generously and unexpectedly stepped in and offered to assist with supplies of one of their premium archival papers- 310 gsm archival Galerie Prestige 100% Cotton fourdriner-made rag paper. This is a superb medium for exhibition prints. But, like any high performance technology, it needs expert handling. There's no artificial optical whiteners in this paper. Those whiteners, present in many photo papers are designed to fluoresce when the ultra-violet end of the spectrum lands on them. They make whites really pop. But, over time, they fade and discolour. That's hardly archival. But without them, how to make the whites pop??

Here's the issue: An image that looks fine on a computer screen, even on properly calibrated 5K screens, won't necessarily look as good on paper. The reason is simple: the screen is back-lit; the paper will be front-lit. For those of us alive long enough to remember the last Century, it's the same difference as a rear-illuminated Cibachrome print, versus a standard Kodacolor print .

That's where Paul Jarvis played another important role. As an Ilford Master Printer, using a true giclée printing process, he manages the transition between screen and paper. Like sheep being run through a dispassionate drafting race, some of our images simply did not survive his critical assessment of their ability to make that transition. We learned a lot from that step in the process.

Did we mention framing? UV resistant, clarity glass, that extends the archival life,



significantly reduces reflections, and enhances light transmission from the print, is quite expensive. So. It makes sense in terms of reducing costs, to consider using much cheaper float glass and putting up with all the reflections and virtually no UV protection. Or framing just a few prints to illustrate what outstanding framing could look like, and then hanging the remainder of the prints mounted, unframed, and let the buyers decide for themselves what kind of framing they want. Yep. That makes a lot of economic sense...

Except, for that fundamental question: “what are we trying to get the images to say to us”. As one erudite friend opined: “After wearing the costs of each expedition and putting in all the effort to capture these images, are you trying to get them to tell you that you ran out of time to get them all framed, or is it that you want them to say that you don’t care how they look? Just asking. Not my money.” He was right.

“Who knows that you’re putting this exhibition on?” Another wise question from Joanna that led to our knocking on the door of Perth’s leading arts publicist, Tracy Routledge. “Photographs of whales? Why are you doing this? OK”

Within a few days, Australia’s major newspaper, the Weekend Australian had asked for an Exclusive that ultimately led to a half page, right hand side of the most-read news section of any paper in the country. And extensive follow up media in print and on radio

Back at the gallery, there’s all the cables and hooks that we needed to hang the now consistently framed prints and the accompanying story boards.



He eluded the whalers for years

Solitary and sea-worn, a massive sperm whale bull (above) cruises into the Azores. The distinctive blow of the sperm whale. Low and to the left, erupts from this whales' single blow-hole. Up close, it sounds like a steam-train!



He swims on his back, scanning the surface waters. He's old enough to have been alive when the last major fleets of whalers were still at sea in the 1980s.

After being weaned, he would have moved away, beyond the range of his mother's social unit, probably in company with other young males born about the same time. As they matured, these bachelors would have dispersed to spend their lives roaming the globe alone in search of food and opportunities to mate.

When he finds a receptive herd of females, potentially, more than one of them will be ready to mate, setting the scene for simultaneous births within the herd. He'll then move on, but fifteen months later, the herd will be presented with the newest generation of calves.





Enter Dave, from Hang Art. Dave, literally, hangs art in major galleries and homes with laser precision. As he set up his portable laser to define levels and optimum viewing height, and dispersed our framed prints around the gallery in accordance with accepted exhibition spacings, it became apparent that the story-boards we'd painstakingly developed to help add context to the exhibition images, just would not fly as we had intended. Dave's unassuming "Well, if it was me..." confirmed that. That's a lesson for next time.

With everything hanging to Dave's satisfaction, the bustle and clatter of the late-night installation disappeared. Just Robyn and I alone with our body of work from nine Azores and one Tongan expeditions. "Do you think people will come? Will they like them??"

"Don't know. But we do."

Wade and Robyn Hughes

www.wadeandrobynhughes.com

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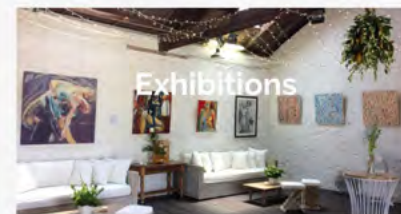


Kidogo Arthouse

The Kidogo Arthouse is a unique exhibition space located at the edge of the sea in Fremantle Western Australia, featuring two gorgeous galleries. Housed in a beautiful, heritage-listed building, the galleries provide pristine art space in a rustic setting where a wide variety of artwork can be exhibited. The Arthouse and surrounding courtyard is also a popular venue for weddings, private and corporate functions, musicians, poets and authors to stage live performances and events.

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Kidogo Arthouse is a bustling independent art centre located at the water's edge at Bathers Beach in Fremantle, Western Australia

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