

THE BROADER PICTURE



GISELE BENOIT is fascinated by moose. The moose is her life, her artistic inspiration, her consuming passion. Like Diane Fossey, who lived among gorillas, Giséle, a 35-year-old Canadian artist, has dedicated herself to the appreciation and study of moose. She has spent whole seasons among them, learning to communicate with them using calls and body language, and she has made the animal the central subject of her oil paintings.

Giséle was always fond of wildlife. As a girl, she spent more time sketching animals than listening to teachers. She was just 15 when she had her first art exhibition, and two years later won a Canadian Nature Federation scholarship for promising young wildlife artists. Giséle used the bursary to finance a family trip to Alberta and the Yukon—an experience she describes as life-changing. "After the trip, I was sure I'd spend my life painting animals."

It was during a visit to Gaspésie Provincial Park, close to her family home in Montreal, that Giséle first encountered and lost her heart to a moose. Scientists, she says, have shown little interest in the moose and most of what is known has been gathered from hunters. "In hunting folklore, the moose is dangerous, aggressive and dumb. Yet I discovered a superb, calm and thoughtful animal and this gave me the desire to understand it better." Her voice softens when she describes the moose. "They are very reflective animals, not at all nervous like deer. A moose takes time to look and form an opinion, and then acts. So there is time to watch them, get to know them and communicate with them."

With a keenly developed sense of smell and particularly acute hearing, the moose are able to detect humans from 1km away.

However, Giséle has devised her own way of communing with them. "After two years of studying moose, I began to call them. I got to know their 'language.'" Her method involves using calls, a pair of papier-mâché antlers and moose-sensitive body language. By positioning the antlers near her nose, Giséle signals to the moose: "I'm interested in you." Looking straight ahead and rocking from side to side indicates provocation, and putting the head down means "I want to fight."

This last is probably not a good idea. Moose are powerfully built. Taller than the biggest horses, the bulls can weigh as much as 500kg; their antlers extend to 1.8 metres. But Giséle no longer feels at risk in their presence. "I have a sixth sense that allows me to perceive what the animal feels." If she feels threatened, she steps back slowly while reassuring the animal. "The moose is a calm, intelligent and frank animal, which is never aggressive without reason."

Giséle works with her parents, Monique and Raynald, as a team. All year round, except in the depths of winter, they load drawing pads, pencils, cameras and tripods into a fibreglass canoe and paddle to a chosen site to wait for the moose. While Giséle communes, her father records the encounter on film. Together, the Benoit family have produced a 45-minute documentary called *In the Company of Moose*, which took 12 years to complete. Broadcast in Canada in 1993, the film has also been shown in Europe, the United States and Japan.

Raynald's moose reels, however, serve above all as material for Giséle's paintings. Selling at anything from £500 to £8,000 each, these don't come cheap. But then, moose specialists in Giséle Benoit's league are thin on the ground. □

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SCHMOOZING WITH THE MOOSE