



# Captured on Film

Elissa Kline photographs wild horses so they might continue to live free

► **By Amy Abern**

It's the opening day of Herd But Not Seen at the MadDog Art Gallery in Challis, Idaho. In the past, this exhibit featuring life-size photo-panels of wild horses has been shown in artsy communities populated with animal lovers.

Challis is populated with cattle ranchers and hunters, so Elissa Kline, the photographer, is nervous.

"I have no idea how this will be received by the ranching community," she says. "I kind of wish my husband was here, you know, just in case." She's only partially joking.

One of the first people to show up is her boss, singer Carole King (of "You've Got a Friend" fame). Elissa manages Carole's ranch and they've become close friends. "I love the way it feels like the horses are actually moving," Carole says, walking among the panels. "This is really something beautiful."

Other Challis locals trickle in and engage Elissa in conversation. Many had no idea that wild horses live in their own backyard. At least one rancher shows up. After making a sweep through the exhibit, he ambles over to the photographer and asks what she hopes

will happen as a result of her work.

"I just want to show people that I think these animals should be allowed to live in the wild," Elissa tells him.

He turns to look at the photos, then back at Elissa. "Huh," he says, and walks out.

Elissa understands that not everyone is going to "get it," and she's OK with that. The point of the exhibition is simply to share with people what she sees through her work: the sheer beauty of wild horses, living their lives. And if only a few people "get it," well, that's good enough for her.

## The wonder of wild horses

Elissa shot her first photographs of the Challis wild-horse herd back in 2004. As a longtime Idaho ranch manager, she was no stranger to horses or her emotional attachment to them. So she was a little confused by the intensity of feelings that struck her during her first visit with the herd: awe, humility, wonder.

"I have a very intimate relationship with the horses I care for, in

the way we relate to each other,” Elissa says. “I am the food lady who rubs their necks. They’re the sweet animals who come to greet me when they see me coming. But what I observed out in the field that first day had nothing to do with my impression of ‘horse.’”

She witnessed families and cliques of friends, doing what comes naturally: playing, nurturing, protecting, loving. To live their lives, these horses don’t need any help from “the food lady” – or anyone else.

Over the past three years, Elissa has taken more than 40 trips to that particular spot. She keeps the location secret, she says, to avoid a potential “Wild Horse Disneyland” scenario. During one of the early trips, however, she thought, “I wish people could see what I see.”

Now they can.

### Caught in the act of living

Herd But Not Seen features intimate shots of herds of three, four, sometimes even six or more wild horses living off the land. “Before I became involved in this, I always thought of a herd as 50, maybe 100 horses, all running together,” says Elissa. “But what we’re seeing are actually several small herds; you can see how they’re divided as they run. Each herd is a family.”

In addition to portraits, the show includes nearly life-size photos of the Challis herd stretched onto seven-foot translucent cotton panels suspended from the ceiling. In this way, viewers walk “through” the herd, the thin fabric wafting with movement. From one angle, the lighting and positioning of the panels makes the experience intimate and the horses impossible to ignore. From other angles, they appear almost as apparitions, disappearing into the fabric.

It’s an intentional optical trick, a way for Elissa to effectively display what she sees: that the American wild horses are disappearing. And before anyone can throw the words “agenda” or “activist” at her, Elissa explains she’s not out to “save” the American wild horse. The purpose of the exhibit, she says, is to introduce people to her subjects through her photographs and to share her opinions and ideas if prompted. In a separate room from the exhibit, she offers written information explaining the plight of the wild horses, along with a silent two-minute video of a wild-horse roundup. If anyone asks, she’ll talk.

“I’m just a photographer,” she says. “I’m not interested in waging any campaigns or becoming some kind of political figure for the horses. Others can do that so much better than I can. These photos represent a labor of love, and I want to keep it that way.”

### Horse sense

To see the horses, Elissa drives two hours from her home. She dresses the same way every time, so the horses will recognize her. She waits patiently, armed with nothing but water, protein bars and her cameras. Sometimes she stays all day, only to go home without a single snapshot. But more often than not, the horses do show up, first as a small, unformed blob in the distance. Soon, individual features are defined – manes flying in the wind, tails brushing away flies. And then, with almost fast-forward motion, they’re within Elissa’s range. They see her, acknowledge her and go about the business of being wild horses.

“They have a very curious nature,” explains Elissa. “But you have to earn their trust. I’m honored that they’ve let me into their lives.”

Elissa understands their dynamics, personalities and idiosyncrasies. She’s watched mares go from svelte to pregnant to proud mom. She’s seen the foals develop into frisky young colts and fillies, feeling their oats.

Over time, she has learned ways to communicate with the herd. “I talk to them,” she says. “I always say, ‘I’m not going to hurt you, I just want to take your picture to show people how beautiful you are. Maybe I can help you stay here.’”

“I find them staring at me sometimes,” she adds, “and the message I get from them is ‘Help me stay here. Help me stay wild and free.’”

### Moved to tears

Golde Wallingford comes to MadDog Art Gallery late in the afternoon. She knows what to expect, since she had seen the wild-horse exhibit in Bozeman, Montana. Still, Golde’s eyes mist over.

A few years back, Golde witnessed a wild-horse roundup from a few hundred yards away. One horse tried to jump out of the pen to escape; he fell down and broke his leg. And then he was shot. “It was so senseless,” she says. “I really wish more people knew what was going on. I think everyone should see what Elissa is doing.”

Elissa plans to show this exhibit in all 10 states with wild-horse populations. “I’d also like to show this in a gallery near Washington, D.C.,” she says, “where the people who make the laws are. Maybe if they see what I see. . . .” 🐾

**For more information on Elissa Kline, contact Gilman Contemporary in Ketchum, Idaho, at (208) 726-7585 or visit the website at [www.gilmancontemporary.com](http://www.gilmancontemporary.com). To see more photos from Herd But Not Seen, go to [www.elissakline.com](http://www.elissakline.com).**

### Wild horses need your help

In 1900, more than two million wild horses populated the West. Now there are fewer than 25,000. Several organizations and advocacy groups are working to save the wild-horse population through education, sanctuary and proposed legislative efforts. You can learn more about wild-horse issues and campaigns and how you can help through the following organizations.

#### **Return to Freedom American Wild Horse Sanctuary** [www.returntofreedom.org](http://www.returntofreedom.org)

Founded by Neda DeMayo, the sanctuary provides safe haven for individual wild horses, herds and burros. The setting also provides an opportunity for people to experience wild horses in their natural habitat.

According to the sanctuary’s vision statement, Neda hopes to “establish a Wild Horse Land and Trust Conservancy to preserve genetically diverse, viable herd groups as a valuable and intrinsic part of America’s resources and ecosystem.”

#### **American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign** [www.wildhorsepreservation.com](http://www.wildhorsepreservation.com)

This advocacy website spearheaded by Return to Freedom offers updates on legislation and calls to action.

#### **Wild Horse Sanctuary** [www.wildhorsesanctuary.org](http://www.wildhorsesanctuary.org)

Located in California, the Wild Horse Sanctuary serves “to protect and preserve America’s wild horses as a living national treasure in a publicly accessible and ecologically balanced environment with other wildlife for future generations.”

#### **Let ’Em Run Foundation, Inc.** [www.letemrun.com](http://www.letemrun.com)

Founded by singer/songwriter Lacy J. Dalton, this Nevada organization is committed to the protection and preservation of wild horses and the heritage of the American West. Nevada is one of the fastest-growing states in the nation; housing developments are taking over the land that wild horses call home. Let ’Em Run is working with other organizations to set aside large tracts of land for the wild-horse population.