

AN ARTIST OF THE PRISTINE WORLD

A canvas of breathtaking landscape and exotic wildlife made Loango National Park an artistic paradise for British painter Davina Bosanquet



FLYING OVER RAINFOREST, hanging out of Jeeps to photograph forest elephants, staking out the jungle for sightings of elusive red-capped mangabeys and night-canoeing along inky-black rivers after crocodiles were just some of the lengths Davina Bosanquet went to in search of perfect pictures for her African sketchbook.

The UK-based portraitist has just completed a period as artist-in-residence at Loango National Park and she spoke to us from her studio in London where she is working on a series of large oil paintings for an exhibition this year. Taking shape on two immense canvases were a forest elephant emerging from a watery swamp and a herd of buffalo throwing up dust as they galloped across a savannah.

Davina (www.davinabosanquet.com) is a portraitist and illustrator who specialises in wildlife. She had previously focused on equine and people portraiture but was keen to expand her subject matter. "I wanted to produce a body of work showcasing endangered species," she says.

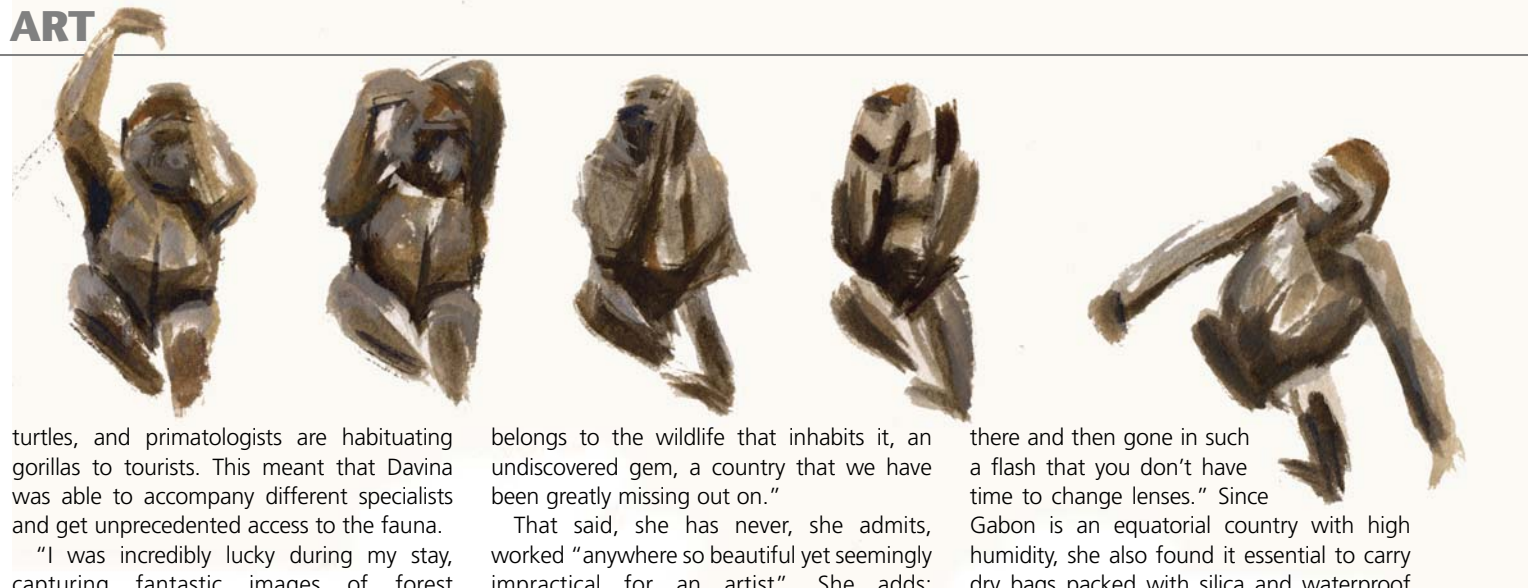
Invited to show her portfolio to Rombout Swanborn, the director of

Africa's Eden, the organisation that manages Loango National Park, she was delighted when he liked her style so much that he suggested she visit the reserve for an extended stay. "It was better than anything else I could have been offered!" she says.

Davina had once spent time in Kenya but she found the wildlife in Gabon far more rewarding. "For a start, what you see is altogether different to southern Africa and because it lives in the rainforest or the thick bush, it is much harder to see," she says. "For me that made it like a treasure hunt. There is little more exciting than hearing an elephant ahead of you in the jungle."

For six weeks she was able to study and make sketches of animals in the park. "I was flown, boated, driven and hiked by Africa's Eden from one breathtakingly beautiful location to another," she says. "I stayed in tents on open savannah, alongside lagoons in the forest, in huts on secluded white-sand beaches, on an island sanctuary for gorillas and in the wonderfully comfortable Loango Lodge where I was provided with a small studio and an easel."

Loango is also a base for scientific research. NGOs such as the WWF are studying its whales, elephants and



turtles, and primatologists are habituating gorillas to tourists. This meant that Davina was able to accompany different specialists and get unprecedented access to the fauna.

"I was incredibly lucky during my stay, capturing fantastic images of forest elephants, buffalo bolting across the grass-land, hippos wallowing in lagoons, herds of red river hogs and sitatunga grazing, as well as so many species of bird, reptiles and insects," she says. Davina also saw wild chimpanzees and spent time with gorillas at Loango's rehabilitation project for western lowland gorillas.

Here, young gorillas orphaned by the bushmeat trade are being reintroduced to the wild. The oldest, however, is Mabeke, a 27-year-old silverback who has spent most of his life in a lab. "He will never be able to be released, so the island sanctuary is the next best thing," says Davina. "I fell completely in love with him and I spent many hours outside his enclosure. He would sit opposite me with a fence between us and try to communicate with me in low grunts while I sketched him. It was incredibly moving."

The combination of ever-changing landscape and some of the most rare species in the world made it a haven for an artist like herself. "I discovered that this is a place that

belongs to the wildlife that inhabits it, an undiscovered gem, a country that we have been greatly missing out on."

That said, she has never, she admits, worked "anywhere so beautiful yet seemingly impractical for an artist". She adds: "Sometimes we would trek for hours and find nothing, or stake out a beach searching for hippos, me with cameras and pencils flying around all over the place."

Space, living arrangements and the amount of time spent trekking meant that Davina had to work on the move. On top of this, the materials she had considered necessities back in her London studio became luxuries in the wild. "I didn't take much in terms of art materials because I couldn't," she says. "I took gouache as it can wash out easily with water and avoided my having to bring solvents." Gouache (a mix of pigment and gum arabic) is versatile and can be manipulated to be used thin like watercolour or thick like oil.

Photographs were often the basis for her work on paper or canvas later back in camp. "I spent many hours creeping round with cameras on either shoulder," she says. "It was necessary to have two – one with a wide angle and one with a 400mm zoom attached to a monopod for stability. Animals can be

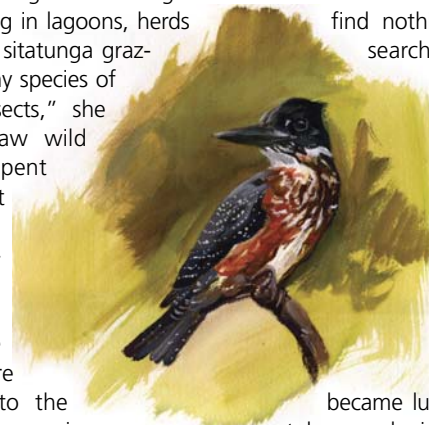
there and then gone in such a flash that you don't have time to change lenses." Since Gabon is an equatorial country with high humidity, she also found it essential to carry dry bags packed with silica and waterproof protective gear for her cameras.

From the way Davina speaks about her experience it is clear she became emotionally involved with the animals and the long-term projects in Gabon. She began to consider not just what could be taken back from Loango, but what she could give to the park.

She designed a collection of signs to name the huts at the five camps in Loango, as well as creating universally-recognised illustrations outlining a code of conduct for visitors when they are around the animals. Later this year she will hold a *Go-Gabon* exhibition in London, displaying the breadth of wildlife and giving information on the conservation projects underway at Loango. A percentage of the sale of her work is being fed back into wildlife preservation at the park.

"Anyone who has been to Africa will know that it is a magical place; it touches you; gets under your skin," she says. "Gabon is no different. The sights, sounds and smells fill every inch of your senses, and the more you get to know it, the more you realise what a very special country it is. I hope that my paintings can help bring awareness to this extraordinary place." ■

Sarah Monaghan



“ SHE HAD NEVER BEFORE WORKED ANYWHERE SO BEAUTIFUL NOR SO IMPRACTICAL FOR AN ARTIST...”



ALL IMAGES: DAVINA BOSANQUET



Davina in her London studio before a large oil canvas featuring forest elephants at Loango. Bottom left: Mabeke, the silverback gorilla, captured Davina's heart and he became the subject of many of her paintings. All other images by Davina Bosanquet

