

Rachael Hale

Pet Photographer

Rachael Hale is an internationally known animal photographer who grew up and lives in Auckland, New Zealand. To date she's published two best seller photographic books. Her first being a quirky tribute to dogs, '101 Salvations' and the follow-up for cat lovers, '101 Cataclysms'. Later this year Rachael releases a more cross species book called 'It's A Zoo Out There'. Her spectacular, clever and often funny photos can be seen on greeting cards, stationery and a range of household objects from bags and coffee mugs.

Rachael's photographic career began when she took night classes while still at school. She went on to complete an Auckland Society of Art Diploma majoring in Photography and the Professional Photography Design Programme at Wellington Polytechnic. The following three years were spent working as an assistant for a leading New Zealand photographer, before establishing Rachael Hale Photography in 1995. That year Rachael was awarded gold for both the NZIPP (New Zealand Institute of Professional Photography) and AIPP (Australian Institute of Professional Photography) Independent Assignment Competitions.

Rachael's love for animals came from her upbringing in a close-knit family living in the Auckland suburb of Remuera. Rachael's had a comfortable upbringing and her parents encouraged a keen work ethic. "I bought my first horse with \$200.00 that I earned doing labour intensive paper rounds and I was encouraged to pay for my horse's upkeep and vet bills. Instead of getting dropped off in a car by Mum or Dad I had to ride my bike to see my horse and attend pony club meetings. Mum said I could have a horse as long as I paid for it and took the responsibility of such an expensive pet. We were never deprived of anything but we were encouraged to work hard and to do things for ourselves."

I caught up with Rachael on a recent trip to New Zealand where she graciously agreed to take time out of her busy schedule to talk with me about her craft and business achievements. Her offices bustle with the assistance of five staff members including a product manager, accountant, accounts and administration assistants and her business partner and CEO, David Todd.



Guinness - Guinness is hoping his teapot disguise will work... soon the cream will come out.

Rio - loves a tickle on her tummy to lull her to sleep.



How many pets do you currently have and what are they?

"Henry, my Newfoundland, was my muse and he was a real inspiration for many pictures. Sadly Henry passed away about 9 months ago. He was still relatively young but he had fractured his hip and it was devastating for me to make the decision to put him down as he was a source of pleasure and joy. I am left with just three little cats at the moment. I'm tempted to get another Newfoundland but am probably going to leave that for a while. Thankfully I used him in many of my shots and I'll always have him with me."

How did you start out doing your particular brand of animal photography?

"In 1995 there was a photography contest where you had to utilise a watch and the prize was a set of studio lighting. I was just starting out and to win studio lighting was a real incentive. I thought about what would be the most bizarre idea to utilise a watch and I came up with the concept in the middle of the night—photograph a pig wearing a watch!

I made the watch out of an alarm clock and belt and embellished the 'watch' with sparkly diamantes. The shot was done with an excessively ugly but adorable pig called Pixie. I discovered that I could get Pixie to do what I wanted with food bribery—copious amounts of bread and bananas. I guess it really captured peoples' imagination, it spurred me on and I ended up with a nice set of studio lights.

I then entered the photographic awards in New Zealand and Australia and got gold in both of those. An article was published in a major newspaper here in New Zealand. From there I was approached by a publishing house and then was approached by David to take on my business affairs and become a partner. Everything just snowballed from there and grew into this current business."

Have you ever had a concept for a shoot that you thought was going to be really easy and ended up being really hard or didn't even eventuate?

"I often go to a shoot and have everything organised knowing exactly what I want to achieve. It all works in theory but only if you've got a really co-operative animal. At times you just have to be adaptable once you realise that animal doesn't share your concept of a photo.

For example, I went to Paradise Valley Springs in Rotorua to photograph Rio the lion cub. I originally wanted to have her sitting on a chair, which initially seemed to me to be quite an easy shot. However Rio had other ideas and didn't share my vision—this lion cub wanted nothing to do with the chair. I had no other props with me so I ended up sitting there quietly with her, tickling her tummy. The end shot is just of a little lion cub lying upside down and it's the most peaceful and adorable shot—it just melts peoples' hearts when they see it.

It became a simple shot and ended up working. It's now one of my favourites. I've become quite talented at changing things on the day so that I get a good shot—flexibility is key to what I do."

What's the easiest and quickest shot you've ever done?

"The one which surprised me the most was King Geoffrey the Frog. First of all I thought would take hours to photograph this little frog as he just hopped around the studio and wouldn't stay still. I had made him a little crown but it was too big so I had to make a smaller one on the spot. I positioned him to take the photo against the background and then popped the crown on his head. Amazingly he just sat there while I took the shot. What I thought would take a painstakingly long time turned out to take a minute with great results."

Perhaps after the crown was put on his head he thought you might kiss him.

(laughs) "Possibly, we'll never know."

We know that animal photographers have a vast array of tricks and treats etc, what do find is the best thing to try and manipulate an animal?

"This is a question I get asked a lot. For me there are probably some basic rules to go by to get animals comfortable. My relationship with animals is that they trust me. I don't know what it is, maybe it's because I'm a calm person and animals just come to me. There has to be some real trust there."

I find with photographing cats to get their attention I use visual stimulation. With dogs I've found they're more noise or food orientated. However there are really no rules because sometimes I'll get a dog who is more visually stimulated or a cat who responds to treats or sounds. You have to judge each animal by their individual personalities. I've discovered that rabbits like bananas and pigs like liquorice allsorts, but there are all sorts of tricks that I've learnt; the main rule is just patience."

Pigs like liquorice allsorts? What kind of food substances did you try before you discovered such an unusual thing as liquorice allsorts?

"Oh that was an accident. I was going through a phase where my personal sweet of choice was liquorice allsorts and I had these in my bag. We were photographing a pig called Missy. We worked hard at getting her to respond and it was taking some time. We just ran out of bread and I just thought about what else I might have on hand. I grabbed my allsorts and said something like 'here let's see if Missy will go for one of these.' She loved them and then started turning up her nose at everything except the allsorts. So now we make sure we have plenty on hand, as every pig I've worked with since, just loves them."

I understand that you've been on Martha Stewart's show and also on Sharon Osbourne's. No Oprah yet?

"I love the opportunity to work on TV. With the Martha Stewart segment, they requested that I reconstruct a shot that I'd done with my dog Henry. It's a shot of Autumn leaves all around

him. We had to use Martha's Chow Chow, Paw Paw. Basically I used a piece of cardboard cut out to slip around the dog and then pile on the leaves—less leaves and less mess.

Sharon Osbourne's show was much looser and was something I could really have fun with. There were less rules, she gave me free reign to do what I wanted. The cameras got to follow me around all day, photographing her four dogs. The segment proved to be more realistic and the results ended up looking great.

I haven't had a call from Oprah's office yet but recently did a segment on 'Good Morning America' with the release of '101 Cataclysms:'"

If you weren't doing this, what do you think you'd be doing?

"I love all photography, except photographing cars—cars don't really excite me. I'm really fortunate to be able to combine my love of animals and photography. I also love working with people and children as well. They always say don't work with children or animals, but they're probably what I love the most. I still do the odd people portraiture for friends. There's nothing more exciting for me than to be able to create and see the joy in a person's face when they see what I've created for them."

What type of film do you prefer to use. Black & White, Colour, Digital?

"Definitely film but I am using a little bit of digital now, as well. I've been using a 35mm digital camera, it's totally different to what I'm used to but it is a learning curve."

You may disagree with me, but I think dogs seem to be easier to photograph than cats, cats seem a little tricky?

"Yeah, dogs are definitely more responsive. The photographs in the cat book weren't easy to produce but I was amazed at how I got some of the shots I did."



Cindy - I say Cindy is a joy to work with and she says it all in her smile.



King Geoffrey - A very regal pose from King Geoffrey.



Barbie - Barbie had perfect manners all day. And could even tip the hat politely with her ears.

What are your plans for the next few years? Without giving too much away.

"I've got a new book coming out later this year called 'It's A Zoo Out There' which is a combination of dogs and cats and all the other images which I've photographed. It's got Rio the lion cub which I mentioned earlier and lots of my favourites like Barbie the camel and Hedgamahog the baby hedgehog. It's great because people probably think that I'm just a dog and cat photographer but I actually love to do all sorts of animals."

With all of the photos, were they done in New Zealand or were they done elsewhere?

"All of the cat images were created in New Zealand, one of a dog was done in England. The 'zoo' photographs were done in New Zealand and Australia, with a family who live outside of Sydney who have lions and camels. The only photograph taken in an actual zoo was the giraffe, all of the others are privately owned pets."

What was the most exotic, apart from the lions and tigers?

"Not the most exotic but definitely unusual was a goldfish. It went really well. As long as I tell myself 'you are able to capture the character of a goldfish', It works if I tell myself to capture character in an animal—it's a gorgeous shot of an animal most people would consider very unexotic."

No otters or meerkats?

"Not yet but would love to, and I think I probably will over the next few years start building up a collection of those sort of animals. Probably the animals I'd most love to do are the panda and other bears. I'll probably have to do some serious research for where I could gain access to a panda sanctuary in China. To combine photographing them whilst doing some meaningful volunteer work is a dream of mine."

What about reptiles?

"I've got nothing against them but I don't think they've got that cute and cuddly appeal. I can't really see myself making a crocodile or a snake cute and cuddly."

And Weta's* are off limits as well?

"Yes! But I'd love to photograph a snail. I love snails."

*Authors note: Weta - prehistoric looking, long-horned, orthopterous insect found exclusively in New Zealand. You never want to come home from a late night out and find one of these in your bed!

101 Salivations - For The Love Of Dogs
Published by PQ Publishing October 2003

101 Cataclysms - For The Love Of Cats
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