Looking at the painting *Mountain Gorilla* by Canadian artist Daniel Taylor I am struck by two key factors: the painstaking, almost obsessive quality of its rendition (acrylic on board), and its effect as an individual ‘portrait’ (of someone) rather than a natural scientific study of ‘type’. Taylor’s *Mountain Gorilla* is not a work that would normally be considered ‘cutting-edge’ or even ‘contemporary’ art, yet seen within his overall practice as an ‘Endangered Species/High Realist Wildlife Artist’ and the related outreach and educational work this has spawned, it professes an undeniable radicalism.

‘There’s contemporary art and then there’s high-realist art’, says Taylor in a US TV interview, in answer to the journalist’s analogy with his work to photography. The question naturally arises: if attention to realistic representation is so integral to Taylor’s paintings wouldn’t he be better off turning to photography? Taylor defines ‘high realism’ vaguely, as a skill or approach which is ‘very difficult to acquire’ and also, importantly, that ‘it has to be heart-felt as well’.

Indeed Taylor does use photography, as part of his sketching/documentary process and by having his paintings reproduced and merchandised through a range of products (prints, T-shirts, puzzles), less a Takashi Murakami or Ken Done-like sweep on commercial design marketability than the simple objective to raise funds and awareness for wildlife conservation and related programs in Africa, where Taylor works in partnership with the African Conservation Foundation (established in 1999) and other related societies. His work in conservation art came about through his appointment (under former US President George Bush Senior and Canadian Premier Michael Harcourt) as ‘Ambassador To The Arts Of The Handicap’ through the JFK Centre for the Performing Arts, Washington DC, which involved him in creating art workshops for children around the globe as well as raising money for medical research.

Only 400 Mountain Gorillas remain in the wild, Taylor informs, their natural habitat under constant threat from logging, hunting, and farming (particularly palm and cocoa plantations). Forced to migrate to higher and colder locales, the gorillas’ already delicate reproductive cycle (with only one baby born every three years) is significantly disrupted, with cross-breeding also diminishing distinct species. Taylor sends me an article (‘Cross River Gorilla Silverback Slaughtered in Cameroon’) reporting the recent tragic death of a Cross River Gorilla, Africa’s most endangered ape (with 250-300 remaining). The gorilla in this case was a forty-year-old male silverback who had been sighted about a kilometre from the village of Pinyin (north-west Cameroon) and shot (reportedly forty-five times, and stoned and clubbed) at the command of local authorities without any real assessment of the danger it posed to the local human population.
That Taylor pulls out the paint brush rather than camera for his artwork is not just a question of technical prowess or prestige, or of hand-made tradition over the scientific exactitude represented by photography (and now, the digital age). These are important questions nonetheless, with Taylor most specific about the technical details of his discipline; the need for a fast-drying acrylic paint, for instance, and the length of time each painting takes (generally six to eight months). While photography may rupture the science and/or historical purpose of painting, in a Western sense both mediums share the same trajectory: the single-point perspective of photography has liberated painting from its mimetic function, while painting’s innate (‘autographic’) subjectivity also exposes photography’s illusion of objectivity. The hand and eye of the individual artist/photographer prevails.

Taylor’s hand, apart from the patient brushwork – itself an evocation of love or respect for subject – is evident in the way his paintings frame each endangered ‘specimen’: in relative close-up, with face and eyes (largely) full-frontal; in a manner, as alluded to above with Mountain Gorilla, that makes them more akin to portraiture than specimen study. His painting of a mother chimpanzee with her baby, for instance, could well be a kind of ‘Madonna and Child’. Other artists in Australia such as Lisa Roet and Sam Leach also draw connections between evolution and our fragile natural environment through their varying depictions of apes but Taylor’s paintings, by contrast, are devoid of contemporary art’s characteristic irony or cool conceit. The term ‘high realism’ may denote a certain kind of high morality underlying Taylor’s technique, one which could lend the work an overdose of sentimentality. At the same time as Taylor ‘humanises’ the members of these species, communicating their plight to a human audience, he also, to a degree, places them above human endeavour and ultimately, through active conservation work and fundraising, beyond the reach of destructive human forces.

This month (27 September) Daniel Taylor takes part in the event Hope 4 Apes at the Savoy, a gala dinner fundraiser in the Lancaster Ballroom of the Savoy Hotel, London, hosted by David Attenborough and involving other noted wildlife film and media professionals and conservationists. Taylor will create a painting during the event to be auctioned towards the end of the night: 4apes.com/hope; artsavingwildlife.org