

# MASTER CLASS

**LOADED  
FOR  
BEAR**

HOW, AND WHY, JILL GREENBERG MAKES PORTRAITS OF SOME OF NATURE'S SCARIEST CREATURES.

BY RUSSELL HART

**J**ill Greenberg was unprepared for the moral uproar generated by her now-famous photographs of crying toddlers. (See *American Photo*, July/August 2006.) So you might think that her newest body of work, in which she gives her trademark high-gloss treatment to members of the *Ursidae* family, was created with a mind to avoiding controversy. Though PETA may yet have something to say about making trained bears pose for portraits—as if they don't work hard enough in the movies—these creatures would seem both safe (in a critical sense) and photographically challenging.

In fact, says Greenberg, her bear pictures are a direct response to the crying-child controversy. "I was feeling a lot of rage against me as an artist," she says. "All those people took on a sort of scary quality." She chose to confront that scariness



An image from Greenberg's *Ursine* series.

**CLASS NOTE:**  
A PAIR OF LIGHTS  
AIMED FROM  
BEHIND CREATE  
EDGE-DEFINING  
RIM LIGHT.

not with images of angry humans (though that project may yet materialize, she says) but with slick, scintillating portraits of bears, the most iconically frightening of wild land animals.

The photographer certainly humanizes her bears, but they are still a far cry from the benign creatures of fairy tales and tacky paintings. (The one exception is her standing polar bear, who looks like he's just walked off the set of a Coke commercial.) "I was interested in the dichotomy between vicious and cuddly," says Greenberg, who calls the series *Ursine*. Lit

with Karsh-like sophistication, immaculately groomed in Photoshop, her bears do rise up and roar—though

you wouldn't hear the sound even if you were on set. "They teach them to do it silently," she says. "It's surreal. They're just pretending to be scary." But the bears also sit, seemingly downtrodden, clutch their faces in apparent despair, and sometimes even grin (though we would guess that their smiles are the product of the photographer's skill with a Wacom pen tablet). Since bears have small, hard-to-read eyes, Greenberg even tried making them more sympathetic by substituting the eyes of a black panther. She went back to the beady eyes we all know and fear.

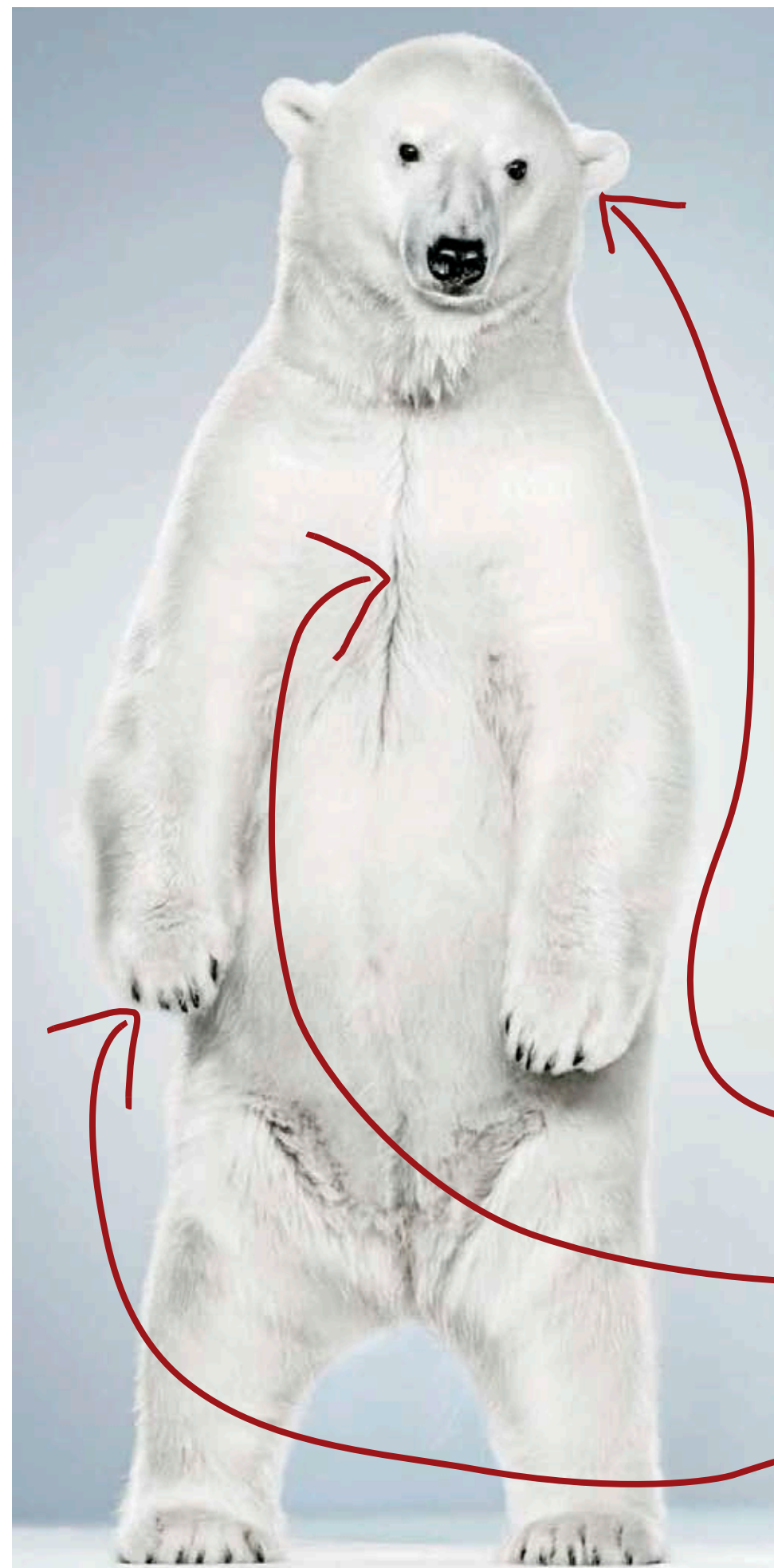
Greenberg went loaded for bear first to Calgary (in 2006) then Vancouver (in 2007), shooting at the animals' training facilities. She arranged in advance for

## MASTER CLASS



Greenberg calls this seated black bear the "sad bear."

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## CLASS DEBATE DIGITAL VS. FILM

Greenberg shoots much of her commercial work with high-resolution digital backs from both **Phase One** and **Leaf**. That way, clients get to see the results immediately. But the photographer prefers to shoot film—specifically **Kodak Portra 160NC**—for personal projects such as *Ursine*. She says it's "almost as fast" as digital because after processing it her lab immediately scans and uploads the images to a Website, where she can do her picture editing and art directors can get files for layout purposes.

Greenberg says that when she's Photo-shopping scans from film, "it feels like there's more information there to work with." (It helps that she uses an **ICG 370HS drum scanner**.) That said, digital is *easier* to re-touch. "It's smoother. You don't have to worry about mashing up the grain. **You can play around more.**" So the photographer says she will continue to shoot both digitally and with film. "It's like the difference between video and film," she says. "They just look different. I wish digital would get even better, but I don't think it's going to."

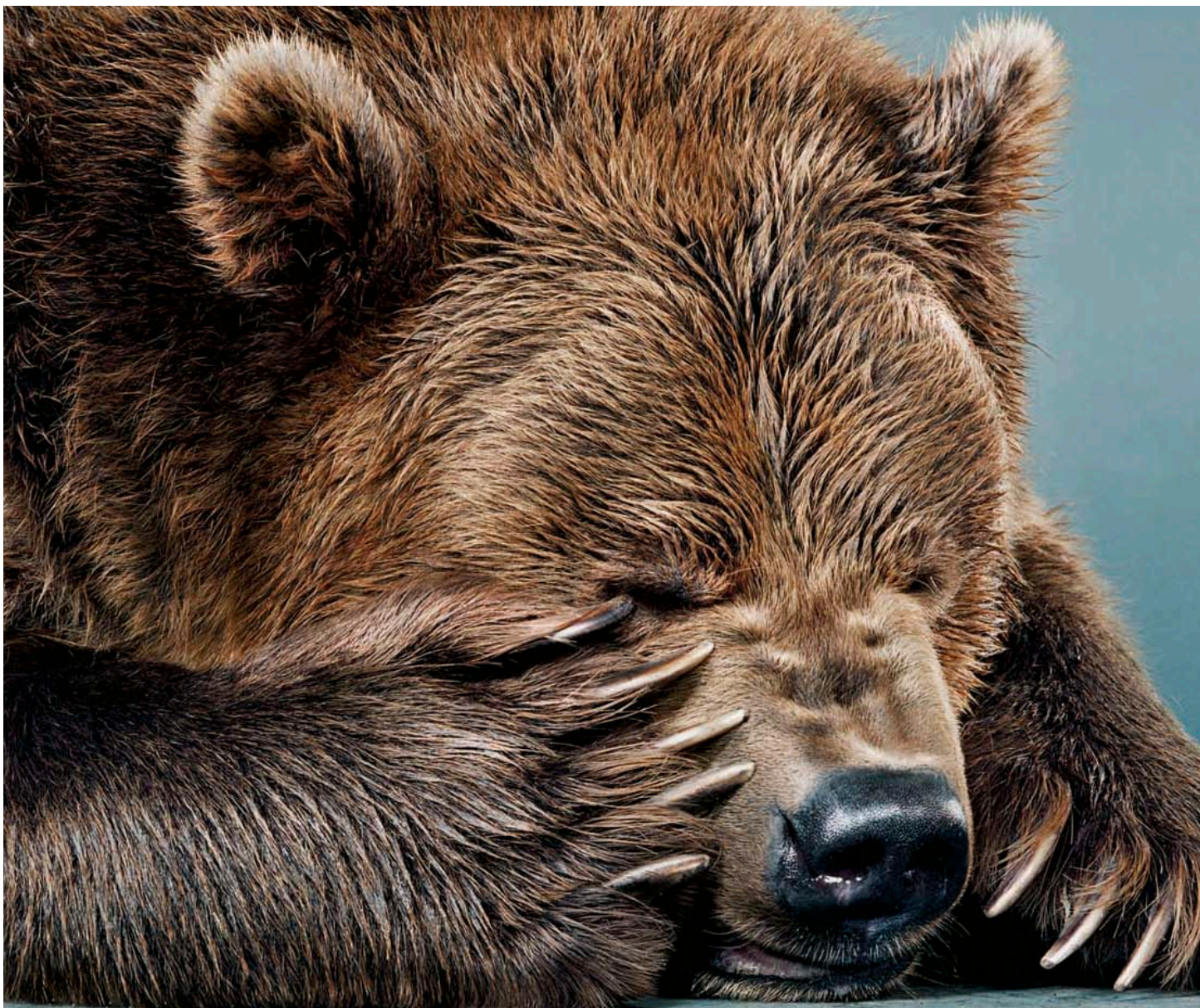
## CLASS POINTERS ON LIGHT

Greenberg is as circumspect about her lighting technique as she is about her vaunted Photoshop skills. "It's too much fun seeing all the bloggers try to **deconstruct** it," she says. The bloggers seem to feel likewise. "Reverse-engineering Jill Greenberg's light is always a fun way to spend a few minutes," says *The Strobist* ([strobist.blogspot.com](http://strobist.blogspot.com)). "Two big brollies, ringlight, twin back/rimlights, an overhead **beauty dish**, and a background light." That arrangement was deduced from a video of Greenberg shooting her bears on the Cool Hunting Website ([coolhunting.com](http://coolhunting.com)), and it seems on the mark.

**Rim light (or backlight):** Portrait photographers often use a "hair light" for their human subjects, and Greenberg does much the same with her bears. (Call it a fur light.) Created with a couple of strobe heads aimed at the subject from behind and to the side, it outlines the bears with a bright fringe and glancing highlights.

**Ringlight:** Shadows on the bears are well controlled because Greenberg's ringlight (a flash tube designed to encircle the lens) provides full-frontal illumination that fills them with detail even when the main light is directional. (When the bears are roaring, that's why you can clearly see the teeth.)

**Hard light:** Greenberg says that her lighting is "on the hard side," not soft and diffused to the extent of that used by most portraitists of humans. Though this helps set up the crisp, brilliant rendering she does in Photoshop, she says the final pictures "really look a lot like they did on film."



© JILL GREENBERG

local carpenters to build a roomlike set; for the Calgary shoot, an assistant had to drive in all the equipment from a rental agency in Vancouver. That outfit was more or less the same as what Greenberg uses in her Los Angeles studio for kids, monkeys, and celebrities: ten 2,400 watt-second Profoto power packs; 12 Profoto heads (including a large ringlight); miscellaneous softboxes and umbrellas (the latter silvered for more directional light); and a couple of Mamiya RZ67 bodies with lenses, including her preferred 140mm macro. (It took a generator to power all that gear.) She bought 100 rolls of Kodak Portra 160NC color negative film and 20 packs of Fuji instant film in Canada. Film was also processed north of the border to reduce customs hassles.

**F**or Greenberg, whose continuing project was shown this fall at New York's Clamart Gallery and will be published in a 2009 Little, Brown monograph, the bears were not as cooperative as humans or their simian relatives. "The trainer thought I was

**CLASS NOTE:**  
A RINGLIGHT'S  
STRAIGHT-ON  
ILLUMINATION FILLS  
SHADOWS AND  
BARES BEAR TEETH.

**Top:** Bear despair. **Right:** A frame from a video of Jill Greenberg at work, which you can see at [coolhunting.com](http://coolhunting.com). Note the bear treat being offered just behind the ringlight.

insane when I said I wanted to make the polar bear look sexy," she recalls. It helped that her subjects could cool off in their personal swimming pools between takes. Says Greenberg, "There was also a constant flinging of raw fish and vanilla sandwich cookies." ■



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