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Daniel Firman, *Würsa à 18,000 km de la Terre*, 2008, Palais de Tokyo, Paris

French artist Daniel Firman created this taxidermic elephant balancing on the tip of its trunk. The artist based his work on the calculation that the elephant could manage this feat on a planet with a circumference of 18,000 km (because of its weak gravitational pull). The life size and hyper-realist sculpture was created with taxidermist Jean-Pierre Gérard.

## Elephants are more interesting than most humans.

Although it remains the case that elephants cannot balance upright on their trunks, they are amongst the world's most intelligent species. Aristotle was the first to point out that the elephant is the animal which surpasses all others in wit or mind.

Elephant brains are larger than any other land animal, and though the largest whales are twenty times the size of a bull elephant, their brains are only twice the size of the elephant's. It appears that an elephant brain cortex has as many neurons as a human brain, suggesting convergent evolution.

Elephants experience a wide variety of emotions and skills – grief, learning, mimicry, play, humour, use of tools, compassion, cooperation, awareness, memory. It makes the notion of these great beasts being slaughtered for their tusks even more repellent.

Elephants have the closest-knit societies in the animal kingdom, and can be separated only by death or capture. No wonder I still sob all the way through *Dumbo* when he is taken away from his mother. Elephants have been recorded as creating a shallow grave for a family member who had died, and covering it in leaves.

I was intrigued by the report of a ranch herder in the wild of Africa whose leg was broken by a grumpy bull elephant. The bull's female partner used her trunk to lift him under the shade of a tree, and guarded him for the day until rescue arrived. He told how she would gently soothe him by stroking him with her trunk.

Of course it's best to remember if you are planning a trip to see elephants in the wild, they are also considered among the most dangerous animals on the planet.

That is why they have no natural predators, other than a man with a gun. Even then, if the idiot with the gun comes across an elephant during Musth, when a male elephant's hormones are peaking at sixty times higher than normal, not only can they run 100 metres faster than Usain Bolt, but they have been known to charge through two direct hits from a .460 Weatherby Magnum, and trample the hunter to death.

They have been witnessed slinging rhinoceroses 14ft above their heads. Other charming individuals who have tried anchor chains to capture an elephant soon discover that if they get him in the right mood, an elephant is wily enough to angle his tusk into the chain links and pop them. And hopefully, pop the big-game hunter as well.

Of course the most dangerous creature on earth is the mosquito, which can be held accountable for more deaths throughout history than any other living creature.

They are extremely effective at passing on infectious diseases, and Malaria alone can kill 20% of sufferers in severe cases, even with medication.

Other potentially fatal diseases they kindly pass around are West Nile Virus, Roundworms, Tularemia, Dengue Fever and Yellow Fever.

I've never liked swimming in the sea, and my aversion was cemented when I read about the Sea Wasp Box Jellyfish, apparently the most lethally venomous creature in the ocean.

The merest nip from one of these will leave you in excruciating pain, probably enough to wish you'd been killed outright. Some claim that cutting off the limb that has been stung would be preferable in terms of pain-management to leaving it attached.

If you were unfortunate enough to be locked inside its ten-foot-long tentacles, escape attempts would be futile as the venom breaks down the brain's communication with the nerves, paralysing you and stopping your heart beating within 3 minutes.

I wouldn't actually need to be bitten by a Taipan snake to succumb to

a heart attack at the sight of it slithering towards me. Fortunately they are extremely shy and hide from any larger animals that approach.

But if it feels threatened, its toxin is the deadliest on earth, and it likes to inflict multiple bites to ensure an immediate kill.

Taipans tend to inhabit the Australian outback, but I wouldn't take any chances that one of them hasn't wandered into Sydney, next time you're visiting Bondi Beach for a bit of surfing. Best stick to Cornwall.



Daniel Firman, *Nasutamanus*, 2012  
Fibreglass and polymer, Kunsthalle Wien, Austria

This installation named *Nasutamanus* follows the first balancing elephant (previous page) exhibited in France in 2008. Unlike *Würsa*, *Nasutamanus* is not a real elephant, but was created through consultation with a professional taxidermist to make the look and feel of the sculpture as close to life as possible.

## Try telling Bill Rankin that clouds are soft and fluffy.



Berndnaut Smilde, *Nimbus II*, 2012, Lambda print, 125 x 186 cm

Dutch artist Berndnaut Smilde used a smoke machine, combined with moisture and dramatic lighting to create a hovering indoor cloud in the empty setting of a sixteenth-century chapel in Hoorn, Holland. "I imagined walking into a museum hall with just empty walls. The place even looked deserted. On the one hand I wanted to create an ominous situation. You could see the cloud as a sign of misfortune. You could also read it as an element out of the Dutch landscape paintings in a physical form in a classical museum hall."

In 1959 Lieutenant Colonel William Rankin was piloting his U.S. Air Force jet at about 50,000 feet. His plane caught fire, and he was forced to eject. He dropped into a cumulonimbus cloud, full of thunderous rage, that trapped him, flailing him about inside its grip for over half an hour, pelting him with icy hail.

He is the only known survivor of such an encounter, albeit with severe frostbite, blood pouring from his eyes, nose, mouth and ears due to the decompression, and a body covered in welts and bruises from the pummelling hailstones.

Even more miraculously, his parachute was still functioning.

The cumulonimbus is the type of cloud all pilots of aircraft dread encountering. The hail-from-hell that they contain is capable of puncturing the exterior skin of an airplane, the lightning inside the cloud can destroy the on-board electronics, frozen water will coat the plane's wings in ice, and air currents are powerful enough to fling even large airliners upside down.

The sky itself is still an enigma to scientists, and certainly to the rest of us. When you look up at the night sky, light from distant stars takes so long to reach us, we are actually seeing how they appeared hundreds, thousands or even millions of years ago. We are really looking back in time.

And we can only see about 5% of the universe. The rest is made up of Dark Matter, a mysterious property also known by astronomers as Dark Energy, and it's all invisible to humans.

The sun is a mighty object indeed, producing so much power that every second its core releases the equivalent of 100 billion nuclear bombs.



I am baffled that on Mercury, the planet closest to the Sun, temperatures can reach -280 degrees Fahrenheit. It's something to do with having no atmosphere to trap heat, so the dark side of Mercury, facing away from the Sun, is chillier than you can imagine. But Mercury has no clouds, unlike most other planets, so it's safer for Lieutenant Colonel Rankin than flying his jet around Earth.

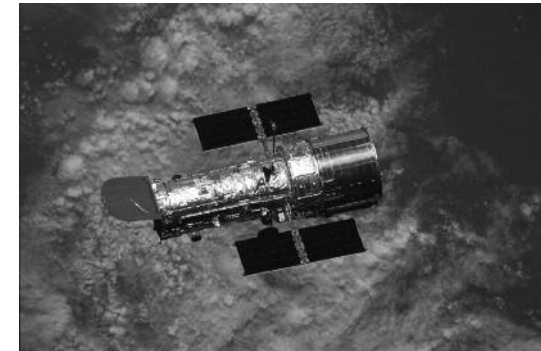
Do you recall that in February 2011 NASA discovered an unknown solar system, with six planets orbiting a sun-like star? It is called Kepler-11, after the space telescope that is finding new worlds in the search for alien life. So far it has detected more than fifty planets that are considered to be habitable zones.

Some of these are believed to have an earth-like atmosphere, and the planet Gliese 581d appears to have seas on its surface. Also discovered was a star made entirely of diamonds. The crystallised white dwarf measures over 2,400 miles across and is composed of ten billion, trillion, trillion carats.

Unfortunately for treasure hunters, or rap stars seeking a really eye-catching pendant, it is 50 light years from earth (that's three hundred trillion miles).

The Kepler is an advance on the Hubble telescope, which has given scientists images of various galaxies, and eerie celestial objects that look like enormous, but delicate butterflies.

Captain Kirk and the Starship Enterprise will one day be beaming down onto one of them, and send back nice pictures of their little trip.



The Hubble Space Telescope was launched by NASA in 1990 and has photographed the birth and death of stars, capturing galaxies that are billions of light years away. It has helped scientists estimate the age and size of the universe, and its photograph entitled 'Hubble Ultra Deep Field' shows the furthest galaxies ever seen, about 14 billion years old.