



# Beauty and terror

**T**he animals of East Africa hold a deep fascination for Nick Brandt. Since he first saw them he felt driven to photograph them, to capture their beauty and majesty. But he was also driven by a heartfelt desire to show how the animals' future is in serious threat.

I met Nick at Air Gallery in London where preparations were going on for an exhibition of pictures featured in his new book, *A Shadow Falls*. It's a heartbreakingly beautiful book, full of epic landscapes and iconic images. Pictured in black & white, the animals appear noble, even mythic, in a way

With his first book, *On This Earth*, **Nick Brandt** became one of the most highly acclaimed photographers of recent years. His new book continues his ambitious project to memorialise the vanishing grandeur of East Africa. He talks to Mark Bentley

rarely seen before. But there is also a strong sense of the plight of these animals. Dark clouds overhead suggest an ominous future. A strong wind in a lion's mane warns of the storm approaching. Animals trek across vast plains, like refugees from disaster. Added to this, the edges of some pictures seem aged,

suggesting the animals are already extinct, already in the past.

The pictures on the walls of the exhibition are, of course, much bigger than they appear in the book. They convey the scale of the landscape and the majesty of the animals. But they also increase unease about the animals' ▶







vulnerability, that if we don't do something soon, the animals will be gone. One woman said a picture had almost brought her to tears.

Nick is a funny and intelligent man with a deep concern for the future of the animals he photographs. How did he first get into photography?

'The strange thing is that photography came second. The animals were what I was fascinated by, not photography, and photography was simply the best medium for me to capture my views and feelings about animals.'

'I was a director before that. I started with painting way back and switched to film

because I wanted my images to have music. I became very frustrated with film because there didn't seem to be a way of telling a story in an adult way about animals, it was mainly as kids' films, and so it was when I was directing a music video for Michael Jackson in Africa that I fell in love with the place and thought this would be a way of capturing the way I thought about the animals through photography.'

It must have been quite a bold move. 'A lot of people thought it was, I didn't because it seemed the natural thing to do. It felt like from the very first roll of film I had my style, my sensibility and knew what I wanted. So when you're obsessed about something you

don't think much about whether it's a sane thing to be doing – giving up one career and ploughing into another.'

Nick is a film user and takes his pictures with a Pentax 67. He doesn't use a telephoto lens, preferring instead to get up close so he can capture the personality of the animals. The patience required for wildlife photography is legendary. 'The funny thing about patience is that as a director I'm a control freak and now I've chosen a subject matter that could not be more out of my control. It's strange. I'm a very impatient person in real life but I have huge patience for the animals because they can't change what they do so I just have to ▶





◀ wait for them to oblige and present themselves in the right place at the right time and the right light. And I just have to be in that place in the right moment.'

What does that patience involve in an average day? 'Driving and driving and driving and hours and hours and hours and hours of waiting! And often weeks without taking a single photo, literally. I've gone six weeks without getting one photo – (he points) that lion picture took 18 days. It was 17 days and on the 18th day the wind came and he got up and that was when I took the photograph.'

And did Nick know in advance that he wanted that particular image? 'Oh I had no idea, no. One thing that is interesting is that people assume you've done it in Photoshop. But the thing is that I think that what happens in real life is better than something in your imagination. If you look at the cheetah and cubs photo in my first book, the choreography of those cheetahs is perfect in the way they are posing and I could not possibly ever have arranged them better in Photoshop if I had tried. They all came together – on the first frame, on the first roll, five minutes after sunrise they just did that, for that one frame. And I know I would never get a better photograph of cheetahs, in terms of choreography. If they spoke human you would ask them to arrange themselves and you wouldn't get it!'

Does he get a tingling feeling when he knows he's got the shot?

'When I'm taking photographs I have absolutely no idea when I've taken a good one. And that's the beauty and terror of film – you don't find out until much, much later what came out.'

When it came to putting the pictures together into a book, Nick gave considerable care to the narrative. 'If you look through the book, it starts with a kind of lush abundance and gradually as you move through it the land dries out, the trees are bare, the animals are shot from a higher angle. They start at a lower angle, so there's a kind of heroic quality to them. But as the book progresses it's more high angle, so they become more diminished, more diminutive, more lost in ▶







the landscape as the landscape dries out. There's a deliberate narrative of what is going on in that world.

'The book is part of a trilogy: *On this Earth*, *A Shadow Falls* and then the third book will complete the sentence. So the third book will complete the cycle and give a certain more dark vision.'

Is it something he finds distressing? 'Oh totally. I'm beyond distressed by what's going on out there. There's nothing good about what's happening. There's more pressure on the land, the wild land is being turned into farmland and that encroaches right around the borders of the parks. The animals obviously don't stay confined to the parks – they go wandering and when they do they get speared. There are so few animals now.'

There's a unity about Nick Brandt's images

that overrides the very different animals he portrays. It's rooted in his love of the animals and his determination to tell an important story.

'I photograph these animals no differently to how I would photograph a human being. So every animal to me has just as much right to live as a human and that informs everything. And so when I take these photos I'm choosing a specific animal that interests me just as I might take a portrait of someone on the street that interests me.'

### How to help

- [tusk.org](http://tusk.org)
- [wildlifedirect.org](http://wildlifedirect.org)
- [janegoodall.org](http://janegoodall.org)
- [elephanttrust.org](http://elephanttrust.org)



### Book offer

*A Shadow Falls* by Nick Brandt (Abrams, £29.99) is available to readers at the special offer price of £26 including free p&p. Please call 01206 255777 and quote reference 50146.

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