

Photography

Nick Brandt: Across the Ravaged Land

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We all know that images can be powerful. All photographers seek to capture and tell a story with their lens and when done properly, a still can be far more profound than moving image.

Nick Brandt is one such creative whose quest to capture the essence of his subjects has been realised through photography. Over the past 12 years he has been documenting the changing landscape of East Africa and its wildlife, in relation to the actions of human beings. His body of work contains countless examples of profound imagery.

In 2000, Brandt embarked upon his ambitious photographic project: a trilogy of books to memorialise the vanishing natural grandeur of East Africa. This last installment sees the first inclusion of humans in Brandt's imagery, underlining their importance in telling the story of both the destruction and preservation of African wildlife.

Brandt shoots on medium-format black and white film without telephoto or zoom lenses. He believes that photographing animals is no different to photographing human beings and it is with this in mind that he seeks to capture their sentient nature and presence on film, thereby persuading the world to pay more attention to the plight of this falling animal population.

Ben Burdett, ATLAS Gallery's owner says: 'This exhibition comes at a time when each photography auction seems to set a new record for Brandt's work. He is now amongst a small group of fine art photographers whose work sells regularly for six figures. At his last London opening in 2009, some works sold out before the exhibition had even opened, many to A-listers, avid collectors and loyal fans of his work. Brandt always draws a high profile crowd, and we're preparing ourselves for something of a feeding frenzy as the launch approaches this autumn.'

We spoke to Brandt ahead of the exhibition to further understand his astounding images.



WHAT MADE YOU START TAKING PHOTOS?

Animals. The animals came first. Photography was merely the medium I found best expressed my feelings regarding them.

WHAT WAS THE MOST POWERFUL PHOTO YOU HAVE EVER TAKEN?

Well, of course everyone is going to have a different photo that has an effect on them, or not at all. So the question really for me becomes, which do I HOPE is the most powerful. And in that regard, I hope that 'Ranger with Tusks of Elephant Killed at the Hands of Man' has the most impact.

I wanted to find a way to graphically show the tragedy and level of killing of the elephants in Africa without resorting to documentative photos of bloody faceless carcasses. The tusks in this photo belong to an elephant killed by poachers six or seven years ago. It was photographed on Amboseli's lake bed, where over the years, I have seen large herds of elephants crossing together.

The man supporting the tusks is not a poacher, a destroyer of life, but a protector – one of the 310 rangers employed by Big Life Foundation, the Foundation that I co-founded in 2010. Those tusks in the photo would fetch about \$500,000 on the Chinese market today. The rangers are there to try and preserve the animals and ecosystem of a 2 million acre area that Big Life covers. So far, they are doing an amazing job, with the incidents of animals poached dramatically down.

But this photo, the position of the ranger, I hope that the viewer interprets his pose in a couple of different ways – as an expression of grief, perhaps also an expression of support.

YOU WERE BORN IN THE UK BUT YOUR WORK IS MAINLY FOCUSED ON AFRICA, CAN YOU TALK US THROUGH HOW YOUR FASCINATION WITH THE CONTINENT CAME ABOUT AND WHY IT INSPIRES YOU SO MUCH?

Before I became a photographer, I was a director. I came to Tanzania to film part of a music video that I directed for Michael Jackson, 'Earth Song'. Seeing that number of animals en masse in the wild, something that we will never see again in Europe or North America, in these vast landscapes, was (almost predictably) life-changing for me.

There is something profoundly iconic, mythological even, about the animals of East and Southern Africa. There is also something deeply, emotionally stirring and affecting about the plains of Africa—those vast green rolling plains punctuated by graphically perfect acacia trees under the huge skies. It just affects you in a very fundamental, possibly primordial way.

DO YOU AIM TO IGNITE CHANGE WITH YOUR IMAGES OR DO YOU TRY TO SIMPLY DOCUMENT AND CAPTURE?

I am always simply trying to take photos of what obsesses me personally. In other words, I take photos only for myself. If along the way, they have the power to affect or even change some people, that is great, an added bonus.

YOUR LATEST EXHIBITION IS THE THIRD PART OF 'ACROSS THE RAVAGED LAND' – A TRILOGY THAT HAS SPANNED ACROSS TWELVE YEARS. WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO CREATE THE TRILOGY?

From the outset, I had a vision in mind: I wanted to create an elegy, a likely last testament to an extraordinary, beautiful natural world and its denizens that is rapidly disappearing before our eyes. I wanted to show these animals as individual spirits, sentient creatures equally as worthy of life as us.

However, over the three books and dozen years, a lot changed, the pace of killing and destruction escalated dramatically, and so the books have an arc – from the vision of an African Eden at the start, through a shadow falling over that in the form of man's influence, to the grim reality of the present day, as this extraordinary natural world rapidly disappears. On This Earth, A Shadow Falls Across The Ravaged Land – the three book titles forming one consecutive sentence.

DO YOU THINK YOU SUCCEEDED?

I don't know, but I hope that photos might raise more

awareness, more consciousness, that they might remind or strengthen the notion of these creatures as not so different from us; I hope that the photos might highlight the very immediate ongoing and impending destruction of these animals and their natural world. If some people are affected in this way, then that can be seen as some mark of success.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE ANIMAL TO PHOTOGRAPH AND WHY?

Elephants. The fascinating and complex ways that they interact, their intelligence and individual personalities. In other words, again not so different from us. I can spend many contented hours in their company, doing nothing but watch them go about their day.

IS THERE A REASON WHY YOU ONLY PHOTOGRAPH IN BLACK AND WHITE?

I photograph in black and white, because aside from the purely aesthetic (the compelling graphic nature of black and white imagery), it accentuates the impression of the images belonging to another much earlier time. As if these animals in the photographs are already long gone, already dead.

