

Nick Brandt: Across the Ravaged Land

By Leslie Hauge

The lioness, ribby, slicked with blood, stares at us over her slumped kill—a wilderbeest—and the impulse is to almost step away from the whole, dark animal reek of it. But it is only a photograph, one of Nick Brandt's portraits from his new show "Across The Ravaged Land" at the Hasted-Kraeutler gallery. Both the show and a book of the same title, document a parched, disappearing African wilderness where its beasts are made both mythical and intensely present in the work. Despair and patience combine to make good art. He uses only film, a medium-format camera—never a zoom or a telephoto lens—and leaves almost no trace of his relatively minimal post-production work.

Born in England and currently living in Southern California, Nick Brandt first went to Tanzania to direct Michael Jackson's 'Earth Song' video in 1995. Moved by what he experienced there and having found his subject, he has returned to the Amboseli-Tsavo ecosystem of East Africa over the past 13 years to complete a photographic essay in three books that shifts from depicting a lush, silver-lit ancient African paradise to a darker, still-beautiful place that is gradually being leached of its own vitality. The trilogy's three separate titles: "On This Earth"/"A Shadow Falls"/"Across The Ravaged Land" leave only a small space for hope. The vast and stark portraits of elephants are some of Brandt's best work for they are rich studies of time suspended and time running out for the wilderness in which they live.

Poor countries in the throes of war, pressures on the land from local populations and increasing demand for ivory in Asia that spurs poachers to kill in ever-more brutal ways (only a few days ago, 80 elephants in Zimbabwe were killed by cyanide poisoning) are all part of the problem. Brandt thinks that at the current rate of slaughter, the elephants may be gone in ten years, which is why he, together with Richard Bonham, established Big Life, a foundation that works with the local communities and puts rangers into the enormous tracts of lands outside the reserves where the animals are at their most vulnerable. "I can deal in dark subject matter," he says, "as long as I feel I can do something about it."

One of the first things that I wanted to ask you was that you have said that do not consider yourself a wildlife photographer. I was wondering what kind of photographer you do consider yourself to be.

NB: I'm ... a photographer. I mean I dislike pigeonholing and it's overly simplistic. It would be like calling Richard Avedon a fashion photographer. I photograph the disappearing natural world of Africa. A wildlife photographer typically takes telephoto color shots of animals in action—I'm not interested in any of that. I'm not interested in telephoto, color or action—I'm interested in animals in a state of being.



I was reading about the way in which you had sat in a vehicle for 17 days straight watching a sleeping lion, then the wind blew, the lion sat up and you got your shot. Are you naturally patient or is that a kind of discipline, something you've had to learn?

NB: I'm naturally extremely impatient! I'm naturally a multi-tasker and I'm also a control freak so it's the only time in my life that I'm completely accepting of waiting, not multi-tasking and not being in control. I consider myself fortunate when the animals do finally present themselves ... but I'm photographing them—or intend to photograph them—no differently than [I would] a human being in a studio portrait.

What have you learned from observing animals that you've taken into your own life?

NB: Kind of what I already knew ... which is that they're no different from us and that we are not superior to them. They have just as much a right to life. They're sentient creatures with a whole complex array of emotions and spending time with them is just ... [sighs] whether it's my dogs at home or a lion out in the wild, to me it's just all the same [sense] of sentient, complex creatures.

Are you mostly alone when you're working and shooting?

NB: I have a driver-guide who knows me so well and what angles I need that he will drive me into exactly the right position because I don't have a zoom, I don't have a telephoto.

I was interested in the fact that you're always looking for the unexpected—I was wondering if that was one of the reasons you resist using digital cameras.

NB: I resist digital cameras because I hate the way the photographs look. They're too sterile, too perfect, too commercial. And with digital, there is this huge temptation to check what you're photographing as you go along and in so doing you're removing yourself from being right there in the present. Photography, for its entire existence until the present day, has been based around the notion of the decisive moment, that potentially decisive magical quintessential moment when you click the shutter and you capture something extraordinary—hopefully.

(NB continued)But now, with this new generation of cameras, where you can just literally roll video and the quality is so good that you can just pluck from it. There is no longer such a thing as the decisive moment. I continue to photograph the way I like photographing, which is on these completely manual cameras with no auto focus, no metering, no zoom, no nothing. And I make my life extremely difficult for myself.

Is your best work unconscious at some level—you don't know when you've got it?

NB: Oh I never know. I'm completely crap at knowing when I've got a good photograph. Some photographs ... I see them on the contact sheet and I've completely forgotten I've even taken them. And other photographs that I was convinced at the time that they were going to be absolute masterpieces, when I look for them on the contact sheet, they're so boring that I can't even find them.

What inspired the series of pictures in the new book of stuffed and mounted animal heads stuck on posts that were then set out in the actual bush?

NB: I wanted to get a sense of portraiture of animals in the place where once they roamed. It's almost as if they're alive in death. The [photograph] of the lion trophy was as if it is looking out across the land where once it roamed and I was trying to imbue it with a life in its eyes and its expression.

What do you think of the ways in which your work has often been compared 1930's stylized black and white glamour portraits of movie stars?

NB: I think that's kind of the earlier work ... what I originally did was to try to capture this sort of elegy to a disappearing world so there was a certain romanticism in the early work but I can't ignore the reality of the situation today. The progression of the trilogy is from this ... you know, somewhat romantic of view of an idyllic paradise to what is no longer a paradise but is a fast-diminishing world being ripped to shreds.

I grew up in different countries in Africa and I have to say on the one hand I do see this—I came away from looking at your book feeling depressed at the scale and rapidity of it—but at some level I can't help thinking Africa does endure. Do you just think it's too fragile?

NB: What do you mean by that?

Well, I do think Africa is changing in certain ways and that perhaps there are going to be governments who realize that these animals are an asset—I'm more optimistic on that than I used to be. And also, I have a sense that it's too strong a place to completely submit to human domination.

NB: It's naive. I wish it was the case. Yes, Africa could be, as somebody put it, "a global superpower" when it comes to wildlife tourism. But

unfortunately as is the way around much of the world, short term gains win over long term gains. In a similar way, how could it be that man is allowing the asset that is the planet to be plundered through ignoring global warming? Where Big Life's ethos comes from is that conservation supports the community and the community supports conservation. There is a huge long term benefit to protecting the wildlife because in a land where there are few natural resources, the one thing that really gives people a living is the wildlife. But because they're also very poor you just need a few bad seeds to come in there and very quickly and easily wipe out those precious resources. And so you have some of these beautiful elephants, who I've taken photographs of, and it's a bloody miracle they're still walking the earth when sticking out of their skull is thousands and thousands ... tens of thousands of dollar's worth of ivory. And here's some poor guy who can't resist. But it is a completely selfish act. You don't justify somebody burgling your house and stealing your jewelry as "Oh poor guy. He has to feed his family."

And you're seeing with increasing affluence in Asia [where the biggest market for ivory exists] that the demand is just getting higher and higher.

NB: Yep. There's a huge race against time and when you talk about the governments seeing the light ... well at the present rate of destruction, the [elephants] are gone in ten years. We're losing 35,000 to 45,000 elephants a year. The number of [ivory] seizures has just kept on skyrocketing.

Do you think there is a very cruel irony to what do which is that you capture the mystery and myth surrounding a creature like an elephant and those are the qualities are so amazing in what you do, but it also imbues the ivory with its perceived exotic value. I found myself wondering in if, in a horrible way, the pictures double back on themselves.

NB: There would be if there was a potential irony if the photos were being seen in the Far East—but they're not. It's a point I've never actually heard before. I would be horrified if I thought that I was in any way contributing to what's happening.

We live in a relentlessly upbeat world and I was wondering if people might tend to shy away from the melancholy of your pictures. I was left feeling a bit helpless myself. What would you say to someone like me?

NB: Donate to organizations like Big Life because it's better to be angry and active than angry and passive. I started Big Life because I thought I could do something and I feel better now that the people on the ground who work for Big Life are making a huge difference.

What's the most effective thing that Big Life can do?

NB: The reason it works where it does is because we have the support of the local communities. The only hope for conservation is



encouraging that support because they increasingly see the economic benefit of having the wildlife through wildlife tourism in an area where there isn't much of an economy otherwise. And Big Life itself is the single biggest employer in that area—and what happens is that each of those rangers we employ has a family and that family is invested in that ranger keeping his job. And when the poachers come in to kill the animals, we so often will hear about it through this huge circle of informers that comes from the rangers' wives, children, grandchildren and so on.

How successful are the prosecutions of poachers?

NB: That is the biggest problem right now. There are many prosecutions where the judiciary are way behind the ball. It's gotten a lot better in Tanzania. In Kenya we're waiting for a bill to go through before the end of the year that will significantly increase the penalties on poachers. Right now too many poachers are getting away. Big Life prosecutions advisor and the Kenya Wildlife Services are taking this very seriously because too many cases were falling apart because the judges just don't give a damn.

What about reducing demand for ivory and rhino horn? What can be done?

NB: We have to do something, for example making sure that people in China are educated [in this]. You've got a huge percentage of the population in China believing that elephant ivory just comes from tusks falling out naturally and some little guy is coming around and picking them up off the ground in a completely innocuous fashion. There's a huge need for education and very few groups doing it. One group, WildAid is great. They've really reduced the numbers of sharks being finned. They used Yao Ming, this Chinese basketball player, to talk to people, rather than getting some condescending Westerners and I think there's been a 70 percent drop in shark finning. [Yao Ming also speaks out against poaching for ivory and rhino horn.]

There were some powerful visuals years ago when Kenya decided to burn stockpiled ivory and made them into huge ivory bonfires—how effective was that?

NB: That was fantastic—that changed everything. Every country needs to take their stockpile of ivory and burn it.

As humans we have such contradictory feelings about animals. On the one hand we're mesmerized by them, we put them into stories and myths and we adore our pets and on the other hand we're brutal towards them. How far along are you in understanding our complex feelings towards animals?

NB: There is this appalling double standard with regard to the animal world. People will devote endless amounts of love and attention and money to their pets without even thinking a second of the torments and misery of the animals unfortunately enslaved in factory farming production.

Have you ever thought of taking photographs of battery farmed hens or abbatoirs?

NB: For many years I have thought I should do that and I don't have the strength to do it because I can't save them. I can deal in dark subject matter as long as I feel I can do something about it.

Now, what about the importance of playfulness and fun—some of it is fun, right? Do you take photographs of playfulness, even if they don't make it into the books?

NB: Nope. But let me just say one thing. When I take portraits of the animals, I'm not, or I wasn't in past times, trying to take a deliberately depressing photograph. I was trying to take a photograph that was a portrait of that particular personality. And I waited for that moment when that animal kind of graces me with a pose that is graphically interesting and emotionally charged. Along the way people see the photos and see the melancholy in them. My guess, just a guess, is that some of the melancholy that they interpret into the photographs comes from their knowledge that this world is disappearing.

Nick Brandt's new show, "Across the Ravaged Land" opened at the Hasted Kraeutler gallery on West 24th Street in Chelsea on September 5th with a fundraiser and auction of photographs on September 10th hosted at the gallery by Wendie Wendt, Executive Director of Big Life Foundation and the artist, Nick Brandt.

The benefit for the foundation, whose mission is to protect the wildlife of Kenya and Tanzania's Amboseli-Tsavo ecosystem against the ravages of poaching, was sponsored by the restaurant Atrium DUMBO and Kopali Organics and was attended by Agnes Gund, Donna and Marvin Schwartz, Andy Sabin, contributing writer to National Geographic, Bryan Christy, Dr. Billy Karesh, President of the World Animal Health Organization, Dr. Scarlett Magda from Veterinarians Without Borders as well as Kelly Lynn Gitter, and Julie Tokashiki. The benefit was followed by the artist's reception on September 12th.

"Across the Ravaged Land" at Hasted Kraeutler, 537 West 24th Street, closes on November 2nd.