ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

London-born photographer Nick Brandt believes animals are as worthy of life as humans. His portraits of them are elegant and intimate, depicting a dream-like world of beauty, strength and vulnerability. But he has an urgent mission: he wants to help raise awareness of the issues that are putting these magnificent creatures under threat, and capture the majesty of East African wildlife before it disappears.

Interview by Peter Brown
GIRAFFES BATTING IN
Serengeti, Tanzania
2008

“This is one of those shots in the book of
ball games better told. They are an exception
to my rule of taking
‘still portraits’ of
animals. But I found
the subject of shapes
they make quite
extraordinary. I have
never seen it outside,
but these shots can end in death.”

NICK BRANDT TAKES PHOTOS OF ANIMALS TO DOCUMENT A VANISHING WORLD, BUT HIS WORK IS NOTHING LIKE CONVENTIONAL DOCUMENTARY GENRE WE HAVE COME TO ASSOCIATE WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY. HIS IGNOBLE FOUL IN A YOUNG BUFFALO’S EYEBALL, FIRE RIPS OPEN ITS FLANKS; A YOUNG CHIMPANZEE TAKES WARM BLOOD FOR THE FIRST TIME.

“I photograph animals in the same way I photograph human beings,” says the former video director, who fell in love with Africa while showing a Michael Jackson video in Tanzania. “I was taking a photograph of Jack Nicholson. For a long time, it wouldn’t work. He was mouth full of teflon, or beef, or playing basketball. I would photograph him simply presenting himself, not doing anything in particular. I remember Richard Avedon or Yousuf Karsh. There are hundreds of photographers who can take better action shots than me. I am interested in capturing a moment of being, a quieter contemplation, rather than doing.”

Amusingly, Brandt never uses a telephoto lens, preferring to get as close as possible both physically and you get the impression spiritually. “I try to show that, and also that every creature has a spirit and an equal right to life.”

Always shooting in black and white (colour delivers too much a sensibility to capture a disappearing world, he says), using old-fashioned, medium-format negative film, Brandt has spent up to six weeks on location in Kenya’s Amboseli National Park or Maasai Mara without taking a single photograph. “I can’t direct animals like humans,” he says, “so I have to wait. And wait. And wait. In the past, it has taken two years to get a specific shot. All I can do, as the words of Samuel Beckett, is “Try again. Fail again. Fail better!”

Failure has an occasion, worked in Brandt’s favour. The accidental bleeding of light onto film creates a celestial

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There is something incredibly courageous about this scene. We had waited for hours as more and more wildebeest gathered on the other side of the river and then, with the water only up to their knees, one of them made the first move. Then - and I have hairs standing up just remembering the moment - they all started to cross. So many of them die in the process, you just want to cheer as each one reaches safety. But sometimes, and this is really degrading, tourist boats will position themselves on the opposite bank and block the wildebeest until they start to cross the water. This is vital to the survival of these creatures, but it has to be responsible tourism.
You know, leopards are not physically attractive, especially the males. And constantly playing with their private parts does not help endear them. This photograph was taken when there was morning sunshine and nothing else to photograph. I had never photographed leopards before, and I’ve tried again many times since, but to no avail. This is the first time the shot worked.

Portraits of leopards against rock, September 2007

“...the most beautiful females I’ve ever seen. How many women have breasts as fine as these? The rock she was lying under was the perfect background to graphically delineate her. I just had to wait for her to sit up and present herself for her portrait.”

A light shaft; a damaged negative produces an image too perfect, too beautiful, into a more romantic reality. This is what he calls his ‘golden code-up’.

Yet Braidel has a very deliberate message to get across. He does not use sepia because it is pretty, he uses it as shorthand to represent a bygone era, to evoke nostalgia for a world that is too-fast disappearing, particularly now, with the renewed threat of poaching. With elephant tusks increasing in value from US$400 in 2004 to US$6000 in India today, the demand for ivory has once again escalated, he says. ‘Carveurs are demanding more and more ivory for the burgeoning middle class in China, and for impoverished Africans the temptation to poach has become too hard to resist.’

A Shadow Falls is the second in a trilogy of books that started with On This Earth, published in 2005. It begins with photographs taken in the lush abundance of Africa after the rains when all seems plump and hopeful. As the book progresses, the landscapes become dryer and drier as water sources dry up and vegetation evaporates. The final image in the book is of an ostrich egg mummified on a dry cracked landscape.

The third book in the trilogy will complete the sentence “On this earth, a shadow falls...” says Braidel. “It will further explore the destruction of paradise. I feel I am nearly done with it, with the task of trying to capture the beauty of the animal world as it is now, before it is destroyed. I cannot ignore what is happening anywhere, and the final book will go one step further than A Shadow Falls and show the reality of what is threatening paradise.”

The exhibition ‘Nick Brandt: A Shadow Falls’ is on from 8 September to 13 October 2006 at The Kit Kat Club, 52 Dover Street, London W1, with all work for sale. See www.takafound.com for information. The exhibition launch is in aid of Tusk Trust (www.tusk.org). "A Shadow Falls" is published this month by Abrams, £25.00.