

FEATURE

All images are
taken in Bolivia.
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THE DAY
MAY BREAK

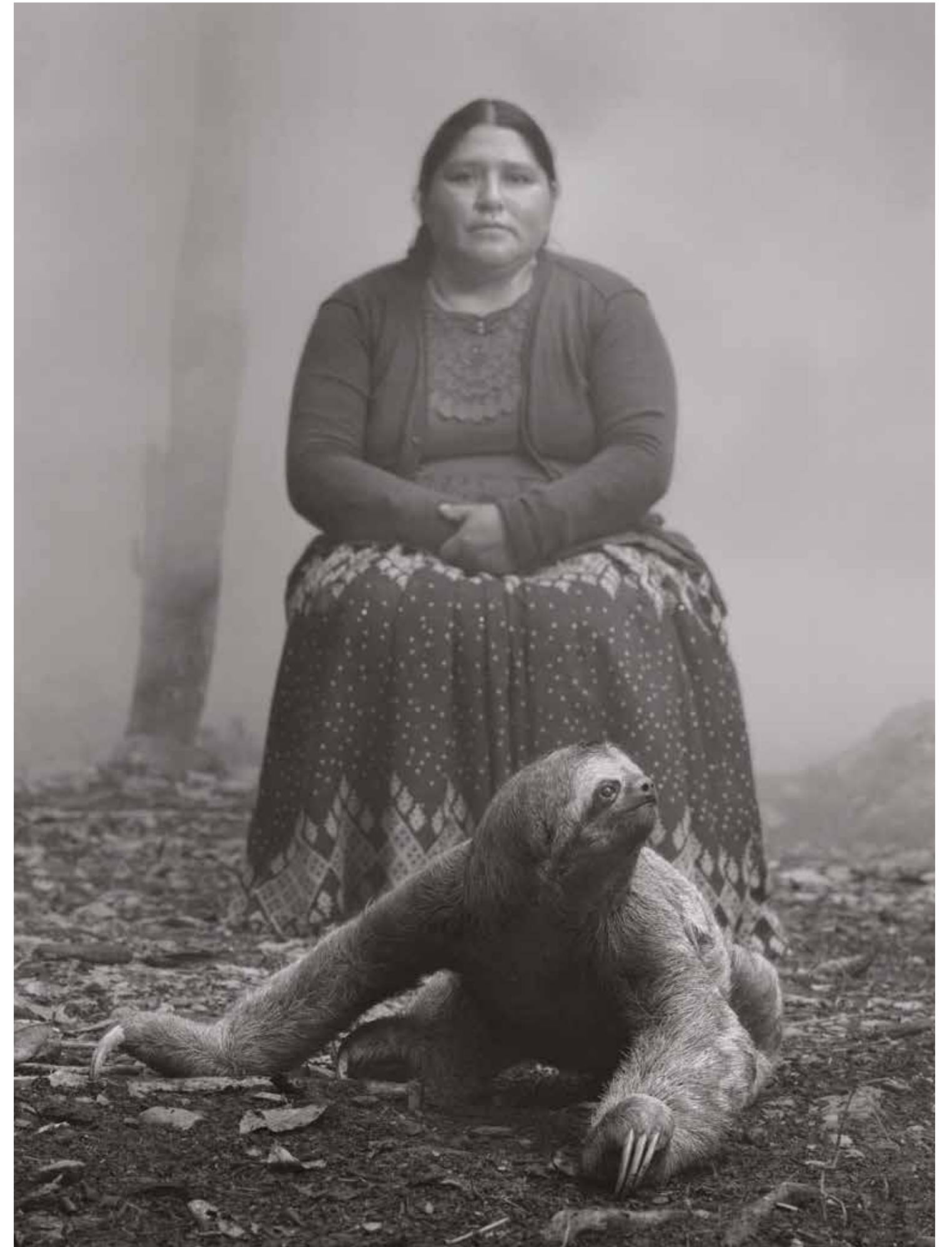
Nick Brandt's latest project pairs people and animals to illustrate the fact that we all share the same planet with the same finite resources. He talks to Graeme Green about moving monkeys, climate refugees and glimmers of hope.

Extreme times call for extreme measures. After a visit to Tanzania in 1995 to direct the music video for Michael Jackson's *Earth Song*, English photographer Nick Brandt not only fell in love with East Africa's animals but also became painfully aware of the devastation being wreaked on the natural world. Starting in 2001 with stark black & white portraits of elephants, cheetahs, gorillas and other wild animals, his work has become increasingly conceptual, working with crews and local cast members, alongside animals, to create collections of often bleak images that explore habitat destruction and climate change's impacts on animals and humans, including projects *Inherit the Dust* and *This Empty World*.

Born in London, Brandt studied painting and film at St Martin's School of Art in London. He moved to California in 1992, where he still lives. In 2010 he co-founded Big Life Foundation, which works to protect a large area of the Amboseli-Tsavo-Kilimanjaro ecosystem in Kenya and Tanzania.

His latest ongoing series, *The Day May Break*, pairs humans and animals, all 'survivors' of a world changed by human activity, from drought and flood to habitat loss and wildlife trafficking. Chapter One was completed in Kenya and Zimbabwe, with Chapter Two taken at Senda Verde Wildlife Sanctuary in Bolivia, the first time Brandt had photographed outside of Africa in more than two decades. Another (radically different) instalment, from Fiji, is on the way. >

Left (top) **Luis and Hernak I**
Left (bottom) **Juana and Tarkus**
Opposite **Carmen and Zosa II**





Lucio and Chasca



Marisol and Luca

◀ **How did the idea for *The Day May Break* come about?**

At the beginning of Covid, we were all in limbo. It was like a fog, not having a clear view of anything. That fog symbolism extended into an idea that had been forming in my head about the disappearing natural world.

It was meant to begin in California but, due to all the lockdowns, everything was inaccessible. Many countries were inaccessible, except, strangely, one I've photographed repeatedly: Kenya. So, I switched the idea from California to Africa. Zimbabwe also opened up. I began working with sanctuaries and conservancies that had a good reputation.

What was your thinking behind pairing people and animals?

The point of them sharing the frame is that we're all sharing this same very finite planet with finite resources. As environmental destruction and degradation escalates, every living creature on the planet will be sharing the same fate. Initially, animals will have it worse. But billions of people will also experience the impact of climate change, and millions will die.

I had zero interest in trying to construct this in Photoshop or AI.

The animals from Zimbabwe and Kenya are largely rescue animals, victims of poaching and habitat loss. What issues are the people you photographed there facing?

Due to a variety of problems, from droughts to floods, people have lost their homes, lost their land and lost their livelihoods. There are quite a few people in these photographs who can no longer live on their land due to years of intensive successive droughts, where their animals gradually died, and crops could no longer be sustained. They've become climate change refugees.

A very gratifying thing is that the people in the photographs from Chapter One have all received royalty payments from the sales of my prints.

How much?

It's 5%. That money goes into a pot and is divided evenly. But, more consequentially, I've also had a number of collectors who bought photographs, who have then sent large sums of money to people in the photographs. That's been life-changing. People have been able to start businesses. We've got three sets of kids going through six years of school, paid for by one collector. We've had a couple of homes rebuilt.

Chapter Two marks the first time you've photographed outside Africa in more than 20 years. Why did you want to explore beyond Africa?

I've spent far too long in Africa. I wish I hadn't spent that amount of time because my concerns are global, and the environmental issues are global. *Inherit the Dust* and *This Empty World*, my two previous projects, could have been shot anywhere, but because of my knowledge of East Africa it made sense to photograph where I understood what people were facing.

Did you want to get out of your comfort zone?

Yes. I like being scared, going into a new project. I like doing something no one has ever done before. I like not knowing if I'm going to be able to pull it off. I find that incredibly stimulating and energising. I use my fear to help me, not hurt me. ▶

Overleaf

Left (top) **Tricia and people in fog**

Left (below) **Ruth and Zosa**

Right (top) **Lineth and Kini**

Right (below) **Juana and Hernak**





< What made you choose Bolivia?

The wonderful Senda Verde Wildlife Sanctuary in Bolivia, where I ended up photographing, operates on a minuscule budget of \$300,000 a year, but somehow, they take in every single bear, jaguar, monkey, parrot and sloth that comes their way.

In Bolivia, wildlife trafficking is rampant. Take monkeys, for example. With many species in Bolivia and South America, people go out and kill the mother to get to the baby monkeys to sell. People buy them like toys. When they die, it's like, 'Oh well,' because they're so cheap, or monkeys become too much of a handful and they're dispensed with.

With jaguars, ranchers will have their workers hunt down jaguars who may be around, because they might be trying to hunt their cattle. Tiger teeth have a huge value in China. Now, they're looking further afield, and fangs from jaguars have a value in China.

The list goes on. A lot of animals are rescued because of habitat destruction, so a baby bear might be found on the road. But the majority are a result of wildlife trafficking and animals found in markets, or, in the case of Zosa, the lovely sloth, she was in a cage for entertainment, along with other animals, in a restaurant.

How is climate change impacting people's lives in Bolivia?

With the climate change-intensified rains, there have been record-breaking floods that have swept away people's homes. Farmers have lost all their land. The Bolivian people in my photos are not climate change refugees, like in Africa, but they're impoverished.

The series features large and potentially dangerous animals: rhinos, elephants, jaguars, bears. Have they been difficult to work with?

None of the animals have been difficult. These animals are all habituated. If you go to Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya, people are petting the rhinos. The elephants were also very relaxed. Nothing ever happened with them.

In Bolivia, it was the first time we had to use a physical separation. With jaguars who are not habituated, we built a giant piece of glass in their enclosure. It looks like the person and animal are sharing the same space, but actually there's a thick sheet of glass in between.

What's been the most challenging element?

The most challenging thing by far was the weather. It's always the weather. I need to shoot in cloud. Aesthetically, the emotion of the photographs requires soft, melancholy light. With sun, often you can't shoot. The other issue is wind. I'm using fog from fog machines. You're all set up, the fog is blowing and the wind changes direction. So, you're a

Left (top) Valeriano and Tarkus

Left (below) Florentino and Apthapi



Jame with people in fog

headless chicken – you put the fog machines on the other side, and the wind changes again.

It's about trying to align all the different elements. Humans are the easy part. With some animals, especially a monkey that doesn't keep still for a moment and just runs around all over the place, you're just trying to get that moment of repose. You'll get the animal still but the fog's nowhere to be found, or you'll get the fog, but the monkey is nowhere to be seen.

You've been working on Chapter Three in Fiji. How does that move the series on?

Chapter Three is very different. I felt I needed to address rising oceans as part of climate change. Chapter Three is with people only, no animals, and in colour. I've photographed people who are South Pacific Islanders, who live by the ocean and who are representative of the people who in the coming decades will lose their homes, land and livelihoods to rising oceans. I've taken portraits of people underwater, with furniture.

How many chapters do you expect the series will have?

I can't afford to keep doing this. They cost a lot of money, and if the prints of Chapter Three don't make enough to break even, which is

a lot of prints, I can no longer afford to keep doing this.

I do have another concept in mind. I'll keep trying California, but I think that will be conceptually different.

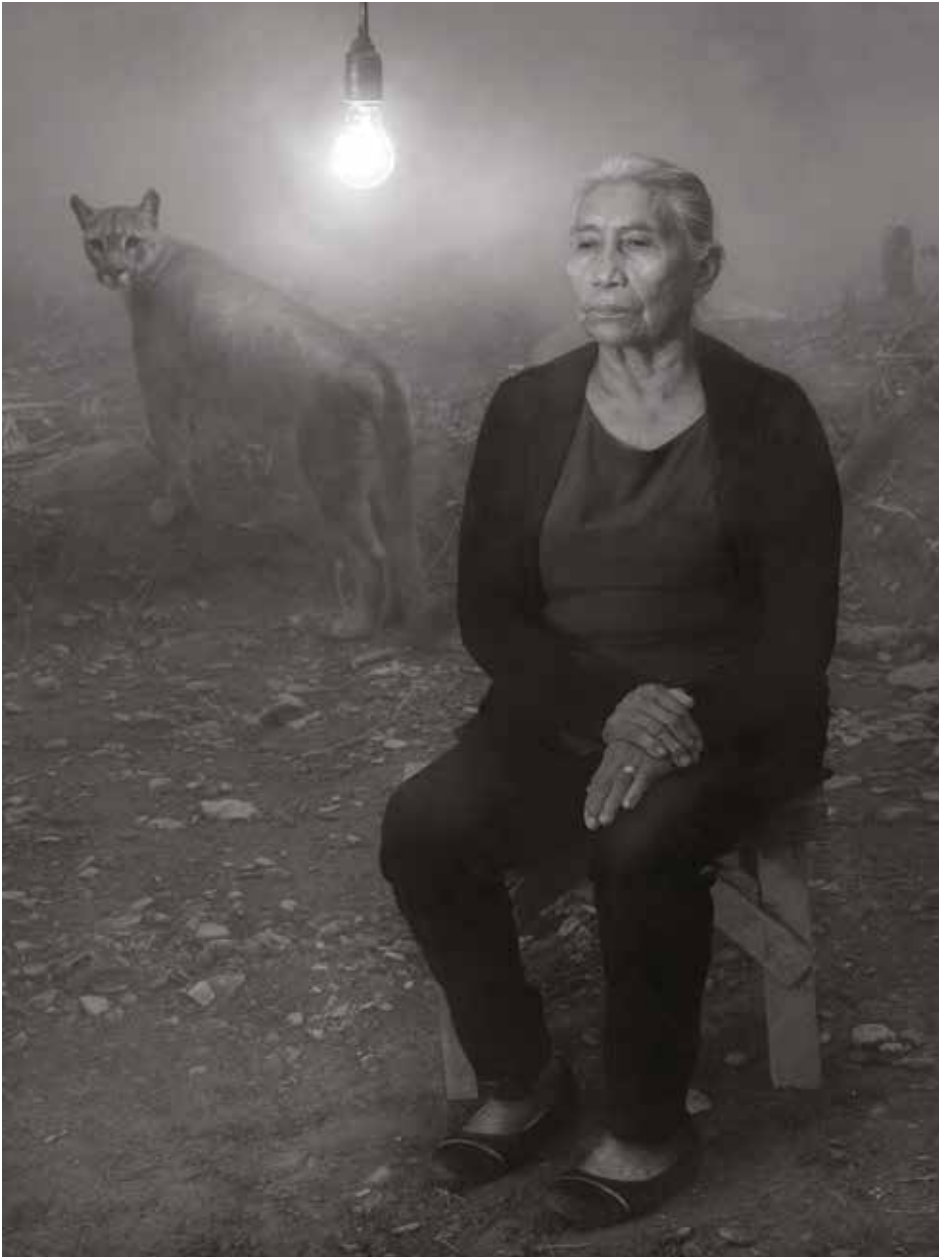
When you started working in 2001, not many

people were photographing wildlife in black & white. What made you want to capture animals that way?

I never thought I was photographing 'wildlife'. I thought I was photographing portraits of sentient creatures in the wild. Coming from a historical photographic perspective and having >



Behind the scenes, Nick Brandt photographs Jame and people in fog



always loved the black & white photography of Irving Penn, Richard Avedon and Arnold Newman, I always photographed in black & white.

You worked in colour for *This Empty World*. What made you feel black & white was right for *The Day May Break*?

The fog distils the shapes in the frame to the most essential elements – the shape of the person, the shape of the animal. Black & white enhances that distillation to the most essential elements. I love the graphic simplicity that black & white brings to a photograph. There’s also often a timelessness – that’s quite important to me as well. It was clear those first two chapters had to be black & white.

Your images often feel bleak.

Are you hopeful for the future?

You would be foolish to say, ‘I feel hopeful’. All the indicators are pretty dire. However, there can still be tempered hope. I wouldn’t be doing this work if I didn’t think that. With *This Empty World*, you’re seeing the invasion of humanity across remaining wild habitat, but, for example, with Big Life Foundation we’ve seen it’s possible and worthwhile to preserve areas that still remain. Likewise, in *The Day May Break*, every single one of those animals and humans are survivors. The people are still alive and can live their lives, and the animals are in conservancies and sanctuaries, safe and secure. That’s the reason for the title – the day may break and the earth may shatter, or the day may break and the dawn still come.

In the bigger picture, with the way humankind is going, the outlook is bleak. But that doesn’t mean we all just give up. Everybody can contribute to making the world a better place. It could be that you stay away from factory-farmed meat because of the torment and misery that comes to those animals, or you eat less meat so there’s less rainforest destroyed to plant soy to feed those animals, or you buy less food that’s wrapped in plastic. How you choose to live your life can make a difference.

Left (top) **Juana and Nayra**

Left (below) **Lucio and Tarkus**



▣ *The Day May Break: Chapter One* (£47) from Zimbabwe and Kenya and *The Day May Break: Chapter Two* (£51) from Bolivia are both published by Hatje Cantz (hatjecantz.com). Chapter Three on Fiji is likely to be published in 2024.

▣ For prints, exhibitions and previous projects, see nickbrandt.com and follow on Instagram @nickbrandtphotography