

A BROKEN WORLD

All images
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Nick Brandt's *The Day May Break* is the first part of a series documenting the people and animals displaced by climate change. Shot in Kenya and Zimbabwe, his ethereal portraits give voice to those struggling to survive in a world that's fading from sight. He talks to Jon Stapley about his new work.



Above **Fatuma, Ali and Bupa, Kenya, 2020** | Opposite **Halima, Abdul and Frida, Kenya, 2020**

Jon Stapley: Thank you for talking to us, Nick. I understand you've been making prints of images from *The Day May Break* this morning?

Nick Brandt: You've obviously only seen them on a computer screen, but as usual, they are so superior in their print form. I've just been in the studio reviewing the large prints.

JS: Was this the first time you've seen them printed?

NB: It's the first time on the paper I use for limited-edition prints. Here's the thing: I cannot tell whether I've taken a good photograph until it's printed. Everything looks great when backlit, illuminated and

luminous on a computer screen, but for me, the real test of whether you've taken a good photograph is to see it in two-dimensional printed form. So, almost immediately, back in January, I started printing these images on cheap paper. This week is the first time that I'm seeing the final real large-scale prints on Hahnemühle Museum Etching paper, revealing the full depth and lustrousness.

JS: Were there any surprises from seeing the proper prints – positive or negative?

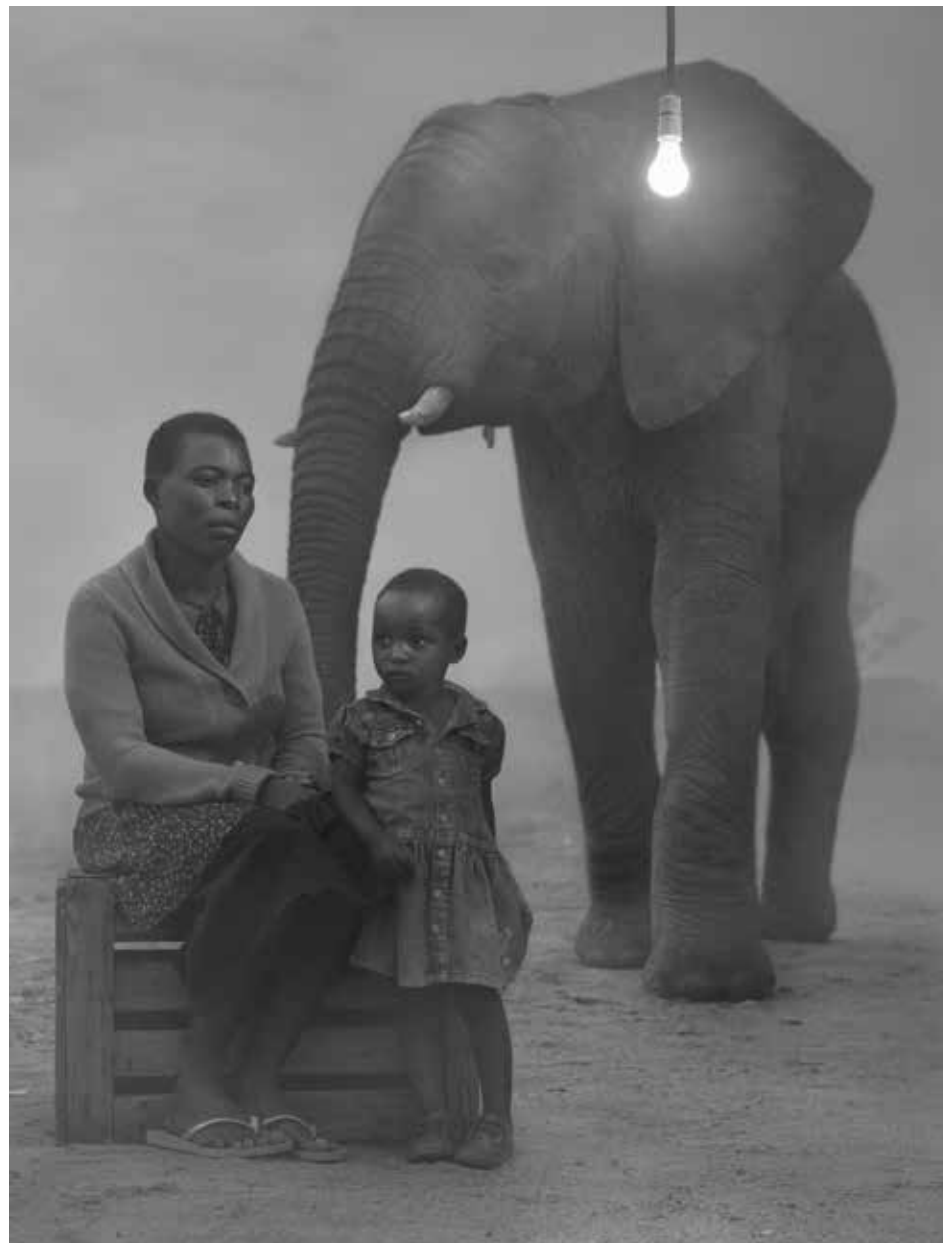
NB: Having that different perspective – print compared to image on computer screen – is invaluable. As everyone who prints knows, some images suddenly look flat and

uninteresting, others surprise you with a presence you hadn't expected.

JS: Especially for environmental photography, where it isn't just about the image – the purpose is to evoke an emotional reaction.

NB: In my own small way, I do want people to be more aware of the stuff that most concerns and obsesses and upsets me. The line that I say, *ad nauseam*, is that it's better to be angry and active than angry and passive. A friend of mine saw the work yesterday, and he said, 'Wow, it's breathtaking. I think it's my favourite work of yours'. And I said that I was really angry with myself that it had taken this long to get >





◀ to this point, but he said, 'Well, maybe you weren't ready'. And I thought, actually, there's a point there, in that it's really only in the last decade that we have seen climate change truly start destroying people's lives.

With climate change, I think it's reasonably safe to say that the acceleration and escalation of the destruction being wrought upon innocent people's lives across the planet has truly gained steam in the last decade. Before, my work was more about animals, but in my last three projects, people have come more and more to the fore because the rural poor are those who are most heavily impacted by environmental degradation.

JS: That's definitely something I took from it – the way people are at the forefront of the images. So often, the conversation about ecological destruction has that one-sided skew to it, where it's humanity inflicting itself upon the natural world. Which is true, but it's also humanity inflicting itself upon itself.

NB: 'The Day May Break' is the first part of a series, and I just happened to have started in Africa because it's where I could get into during Covid. The plan is to go to any number of countries where there are still wild animals and people impacted by climate change. With every passing year, the number of countries that one could go to increases.

With [my previous project] 'This Empty World', there was no hope in the photographs themselves. With 'The Day May Break', I like to think that there is some semblance of hope because both the animals and the people are actually survivors. They survived, and therein lies possibility, and hope. That's the reason for the title. It's a dual meaning – the day may break and the earth may shatter, or the day may break and the dawn will come.

JS: There's hope and despair in there, which, I suppose, must be how you live a lot of the time.

NB: I fully expect to go to my deathbed angry. I don't expect that's ever going to change. But I don't want to sound like a complete doomsayer; I wouldn't be doing this work if I thought all hope was lost. I'm doing it because I think it's important to scream and shout, and this is just the way I can do it, through this photography. There are others, like Nat Geo photographers, who are getting their message out to a far, far wider audience. I'm just not made that way. I have to do it in my own, more niche way. ▶

Top Left **Luckness, Winnie and Kura, Zimbabwe, 2020**

Below Left **James and Fatu, Kenya, 2020**

Opposite Top **Thomas and Vincent, Zimbabwe, 2020**

Opposite Below **Regina, Jack, Levi and Diesel, Zimbabwe, 2020**

Overleaf Left **James, Peter and Najin, Kenya, 2020**

Overleaf Right **Kuda and Sky II, Zimbabwe, 2020**







◀ **JS:** I can see that – your projects always seem to have a unique angle or approach. In this case, it's these stately portraits with the fog brought in – it's very distinctive.

NB: *Maybe it's ego, I don't know what it is, but I have no interest in embarking upon a project unless nobody has ever done it before. That's another reason why, when I have an idea, I've got to do it now, now, now. I'm paranoid that somebody will come up with the same idea and beat me to it. I need to be scared when I start a new project, of whether I'm going to be able to pull this off.*

JS: I know you're an enthusiast for shooting on film – is that fed by this desire to be scared, the element of the unknown that film brings?

NB: *Well, my last two projects have had to be digital. I absolutely adore medium-format film. Right from the beginning, I shot medium-format black & white film, but then on 'Inherit the Dust', I got home after weeks of shooting, costing a lot of money, and discovered that both my Mamiyas were causing vibration on the negatives. I had to go back and reshoot.*

With 'The Day May Break', I also stuck with digital because of the fog. It was created by water-based fog machines, and it was constantly moving because of the wind. Every single frame was fundamentally different to the last. With no film lab within 3,000 miles, I had to shoot on digital so that I could check how the images were looking with the fog, because the fog was a critical element.

'The Day May Break' was very hard, but the hard part of the shoot was not the animals – incredibly co-operative – and was not the people – incredibly gracious, patient and calm. It was the sun, and the wind blowing away the fog. For three weeks out of eight, I literally only shot half an hour before sunrise and half an hour after sunset, because the rest of the time we had no shade cover, and it was so dry and hot that the water-based fog would evaporate within two feet of coming out of the machine. It literally just disappeared.

So, we just sat around all day. You have to learn to be quite zen, quite philosophical, about spending another expensive day paying a bunch of people to not photograph. But you also have to have everything dialled in, so that when you do get those 30 minutes, you actually get a shot. ▶

Top Left **Teresa and Najin, Kenya 2020**

Below Left **Richard and Grace, Zimbabwe, 2020**

Opposite Top **Patrick and Harriet on ground, Zimbabwe, 2020**

Opposite Below **Alice, Stanley and Najin, Kenya, 2020**





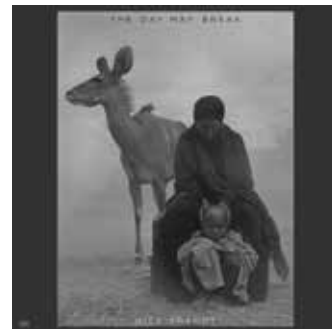
◀ **JS:** Can you tell us anything about the next phases of the project?

NB: *My hope is, depending on Covid, that I will continue this project on other continents. I need to find places where you can genuinely have a human safely sit or stand close to a habituated animal. You'll notice that in 'The Day May Break', there are no lion photographs, which is a huge shame, but the only way I could have photographed lions would have been a two-step operation where you photograph the lion first, then you take them away and photograph the person. I had zero interest in doing that.*

In this Photoshop world, there is nothing to beat everything being shot for real. These really are, more or less, Raw files. The animals were amazing, the keepers were amazing – they were able to have them come in and stand exactly in the position that worked for the composition. And then the people showed no fear whatsoever, even when the rhinos – which, by the way, are the last two northern white rhinos on the planet; the species goes extinct when those two die – would come right up and nudge them. They were amazing. The organic nature of everything being shot at once, in the same frame – I would never be able to get anything better by compositing it. It's not just that it wouldn't look as good, it wouldn't have the same emotion.

JS: Because it's unrepeatable. If you'd made a composite, in any number of years when these rhinos are dead, you could make another one. But you can never take these shots again.

NB: *And the people in these photographs have genuinely been impacted. Some of them have had their lives destroyed. The husband and wife in these photographs literally saw their children swept away in floods, never to be seen again. There are numerous farmers who lost everything – lost their homes, lost their farms – all because of the changing climate. It's important that people understand that.*



▶ **The Day May Break** is published by Hatje Cantz in October.

▶ Pictures from **The Day May Break** can be seen at Atlas Gallery in London and Fahey Klein Gallery in Los Angeles from September 2021, and Edwynn Houk Gallery in New York and Polka Galerie in Paris from January 2022.

▶ nickbrandt.com

Top **Helen and Sky, Zimbabwe, 2020** | Above **Nick Brandt photographing Matthew and Mak in Zimbabwe**