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A vanishing world?

Photographer Nick Brandt
on capturing the climate breakdown

Interview : Marion McKeone



Patrick and Harriet in Zimbabwe

Racing against time to capture a disappearing world

Acclaimed photographer Nick Brandt's latest book, *The Day May Break*, combines arrestingly beautiful imagery with an unspoken indictment at the planet's failure to meaningfully fight climate change

Interview: **Marion McKeone**

There is a terrible beauty in Nick Brandt's work. The exquisite images through which he captures a world teetering on the abyss are imbued with a sense of foreboding.

Most fine art photographers who document nature tend to focus on its more pastoral aspects. The spectacular sunsets, the blaze of autumn leaves, the pristine mountain ranges and the waterfalls as clear and sparkling as crystal glass. Their work comforts us, makes us forget that we're hurtling towards, or may even have arrived at, a point of chaos and destruction that has been caused by our own hand. Where wildlife is the subject, the lens tends to be trained on their beauty and the harmony of their environment, suggesting the course of the natural world is running smoothly.

Brandt's work is different. He makes us confront the terrifying truth, albeit through images that are as haunting in their beauty as they are disquieting in

theme. He forces us to reckon with the consequences of climate change — he more accurately refers to it as the climate breakdown — that is upon us.

I met Brandt at his exhibition, opening at the Fahy Klein Gallery in Los Angeles. The city is just getting its equilibrium back after a brutal 18 months. The civil turmoil caused by the murder of George Floyd, the wildfires that encroach ever closer, and the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic have all taken their toll. Lockdowns caused countless galleries, restaurants and cinemas to shutter permanently. So it feels like something of an occasion, even with mask mandates and proof of vaccination requirements.

Brandt is softly spoken; like his portraits, there's a stillness about him, a calm amid the congratulations and frantic chatter that characterise launches and openings. He's friendly and gracious, but decades in California haven't eliminated that British reserve.

This project, the first in what will be a series across



Fatuma, Ali and Bupa in Kenya



Patrick and flamingos in Zimbabwe

five continents, took him to animal sanctuaries and conservancies in Kenya and Zimbabwe.

The exhibition opening also serves as a launch for his just-published book, *The Day May Break*, a haunting series of portraits that are arresting in their beauty while serving as a scarring indictment of our failure to combat climate change. The stillness and preternatural calm captured in the images is in such stark contrast to the turbulence of the coronavirus era in which we're living.

Each of his subjects, humans, animals and birds, are climate change refugees. Each has been forced to flee their habitat because of human activity and its consequences; the cataclysmic effects of climate change. The animals have survived poachers, poison and starvation due to a rapidly disappearing natural habitat. The people are refugees too: young children, elderly men and women, and desperate parents whose livelihoods have been destroyed by the consequences of climate change.

In some images, the animals nestle close to the humans as they gaze at the camera, stoic and un-

Kuda and Sky in Zimbabwe



Regina, Jack, Levi and Diesel in Zimbabwe

flinching. Their stories are harrowing: they've lost their children to floods and cyclones, lost their farms and livelihoods to fire and drought. But they're survivors nonetheless. In other images the humans move as though in a limbo or other world, among the animals.

The power of this project lies in Brandt's insistence on capturing the animals—rhinos, elephants, cheetahs, giraffes—and the children and adults in the same frame at the same time. In one, Richard and Okra, an eagle hovers inches above the man's (Richard) emaciated chest as he lies face upwards and exhales into the fog. It's a ghostly, otherworldly image that seems to serve as a metaphor for the pandemic—of both human frailty and resilience.

The dream-like quality is enhanced by Brandt's use of a water-based fog machine. It envelops the animals, humans and their parched surroundings in a sort of hazy blanket. For Brandt, the fog serves as an apt metaphor. "In 2020, a world obscured by fog felt wholly appropriate; we all felt as if we were living in limbo," he writes in an email. (Shortly after we first speak in Los Angeles, Brandt boards a plane to Oslo and then London, where he grew up and attended St Martin's College of Art. Most of our interview is conducted over email.)

The birds and animals in Brandt's photographs found refuge in the conservatories and sanctuaries where the photographs are taken. They have learned to trust humans; because of injuries or trauma sustained, they will never be able to survive in the wild and are reliant on their keepers.

The men, women and children came from a nearby town in Kenya where they tried to eke out a living and further afield in Zimbabwe. Each morning, Brandt would arrive at dawn, set up for the day and wait for the subjects to reveal themselves.

In contrast to 2016's *Inherit the Dust* and 2018's *This Empty World*, hugely ambitious undertakings that required much bigger crews, *The Day May Break* is a simpler, stripped-back affair. Brandt arrived at the shoot each day with no plan. He didn't direct his subjects, instead allowing them to become comfortable and find their own poses. Sometimes serendipity played a role. The shifting layers of fog, the animals and people, in movement or in stillness, would conspire to deliver a perfectly balanced composition.

Props were minimal—the bare essentials of human existence, a battered bed, a table, chair, a wooden crate. Several of the pictures include a single bare light bulb in the darkness: a symbol of illumination, even hope.



James and Fatu in Kenya



Alice, Stanley and Najin

The Day May Break was planned as the first in a global series portraying people and animals that have been displaced by the environmental havoc wreaked by humans and climate change. However, when Brandt emails me from Oslo, his plans to make India his next stop have been derailed, for now at least.

"I was hoping to go to India, but found out yesterday that the laws there do not allow any non-staff to be near the animals. So that's kind of that—the entire Indian subcontinent out the window. And then there are all the countries where there are no longer even wild animals to rescue," he writes.

"I am only interested in doing this if the people and animals can genuinely be photographed together, in the same frame at the same time. In Kenya and Zimbabwe at these sanctuaries and conservancies, this was possible because the rescued animals were all habituated to humans, and so could safely be close to strangers."

The scale and ambition of his work guarantees that obstacles and setbacks are inevitable. But Brandt is prolific, notwithstanding the built-in challenges.

I was familiar with Brandt's work from another era, when he was a successful and much-sought-after music video director who worked with some of the biggest stars of the 1980s and 1990s—Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Moby, the Beautiful South, Lisa Stansfield and Take That among them.

I'd been stopped in my tracks a decade ago by his 2007 portrait of an elephant drinking water from a source in the Amboseli National Park in Kenya. The photograph, taken directly in front of the elephant, a 49-year-old male known as Igor, captures the timeless magnificence of the species. Two years later, Igor was slaughtered by poachers. The portrait's title—*Elephant Drinking, Amboseli 2007, Killed by Poachers 2009*—delivers a real blow to the solar plexus.

But his past is something Brandt has no interest in discussing. He refers to *The Day May Break* as his "acoustic album", not as a nod to his previous life, but rather because this project is a quieter affair than the elaborate compositions of his previous project.

Brandt lives in the Santa Monica mountains in a house that he shares with his wife, the Irish actress Oriá Brady. He refers to her as *The Brutal Muse*, a nod, he says, to the "pact of brutality" made by Paul Auster and his wife Siri Husevold to truthfully express what each thinks of the other's work.

He met Brady at a party in Hollywood in 2001. "The first words I ever heard her utter, through a window, were: 'Let's face it, George W Bush is a c**t'." At that moment, I knew that she was the one," he recalls.

Their home was destroyed in 2018 by wildfires. "We bought the property for the hundreds of beautiful mature oak trees," he says. "In the 100,000-acre fire that swept through the mountains, our land was devastated. Only a few oaks remain untouched, hundreds dead and just a few left on a road to death. We lost a few buildings like a guest house, but honestly, the loss of the oak trees, and the transformation of the landscape from what was a kind of paradise, into three years later is now just brown weeds, is hard to witness."

It's the sort of personal disaster that could provide a brutal reality check for most people. But by then, Brandt had already been an environmental activist for more than a decade. He co-founded the Big Life Foundation, which is focused on preserving the wild life and habitats of the Amboseli-Tsavu-Kilimanjaro ecosystem of east Africa through community-based initiatives, with renowned conservationist Richard Bonham in 2010.

Brandt's philosophy is simple: if conservation supports the community, then the community will support conservation. By providing desperately poor communities with sustainable long-term employment in conservation, they have removed the impulse to poach or kill wildlife for bushmeat.

"We started Big Life in 2010 when poaching in the Amboseli ecosystem was dire. Now, 11 years later, with 300-plus rangers protecting 1.6 million acres, the incidence of killing of all animals is dramatically reduced," he says.

"The populations of elephants, lions, cheetahs and giraffes are all increasing. And a total of 500 local people are employed, creating a significant level of community support for conservation in the ecosystem—the only pragmatic way to achieve conservation successes in an ever more crowded world." ■



Richard and Okra in Zimbabwe



Nick Brandt shooting for his book *The Day May Break*



The Day May Break by Nick Brandt is available now, published by Harje Cantz