

The acoustic project

With his new book, *The Day May Break*, Nick Brandt makes a significant departure from his recent photo epics. **Keith Wilson** finds out the reasons for this change of direction, and why it might be his most significant work yet

To say that Nick Brandt is not feeling happy when we speak, might be an understatement. That's not to say he is in any way impolite or reluctant to talk. Quite the opposite, in fact. The man is effusive, excited, and occasionally unguarded in expressing his views and feelings. Of course, he has every good reason to be answering my questions: there is a new book to push with signings and talks, as well as the accompanying exhibitions in Los Angeles, London, New York, Paris, Melbourne and Dubai, where legions of eager collectors await to purchase the latest Brandt.

But there lies the crux of the matter: it is the subject of this new work that provides the source of the outspoken photographer's underlying pessimism and downbeat mood. In the first on-the-record words of our interview, he declares, 'I've never been more despairing than at this moment, because if people can't do something as basic as wear a mask, what chance of sacrifice for climate change?'

This is not a rhetorical question because the new work, enigmatically

titled *The Day May Break*, marks the first part of a global series portraying people and animals that have been severely impacted by environmental degradation and climate breakdown.

In many ways, *The Day May Break* marks a departure from Brandt's previous projects: it is the first to tackle a theme that will take him beyond his familiar African shores; it is the first project to primarily focus on people as the main subject, with his beloved animals taking a step back; and – whisper this very carefully – it is only the second series of published photographs that he has shot digitally.

There are other aspects to this work that makes *The Day May Break* arguably the most significant undertaking in Brandt's acclaimed canon of photography epics, but it is the people, the animals and the ever-present shroud of fog that make these photos stand out from anything he has done before. So, what has driven him to the creation of this new series, and what is he trying to communicate with these graphically austere images?

'Throughout my photographic career, I have been obsessed with

Above: Alice, Stanley, and Najin, Kenya 2020 © Nick Brandt / The Day May Break / Published by Hatje Cantz

addressing humankind's destruction of the natural world,' he explains, 'but with climate change or climate breakdown, more and more it also dramatically impacts the human race as well. I feel that we are all creatures on the same planet, both animal and human.'

The plan, he says, is for this book

to be the first of a global series, photographing in various climate-damaged locations around the world, 'where there are people suffering from climate breakdown and there are animals that have been rescued from poaching, from poisoning, from habitat destruction'. Ironically, his plans to begin the

project in California were thwarted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, so he returned to his familiar African haunts of Kenya and Zimbabwe. 'It was both practical and possible to get into those countries. So much of the rest of the world I couldn't get into, so I just started there.'

Climate refugees

In Kenya and Zimbabwe, Brandt spent two months making the 60 photographs that feature in the new book. The theme of connection between animals and humans, equally imperilled by climate breakdown, began with the choice of subjects for each



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image. 'The people in the photographs were carefully chosen from research,' he explains, 'in the case of Zimbabwe, from all across the country, including a couple of people whose children had been swept away in the floods from the cyclones, never to be seen again. There were a lot of farmers who were displaced from years of extreme droughts, the same up in Kenya. So, everybody was a climate refugee to some degree.'

As long-term rescues relocated to sanctuaries and conservancies, the animals were habituated and could never be released back into the wild, but they were entirely safe to share the same space with their human 'co-stars'.

In all, Brandt photographed at five separate locations: Ol Pejeta in Kenya, home to the last two northern white rhinos in the world, the nearby conservancy of Ol Jogi,

and three places in Zimbabwe: Wild is Life Sanctuary near Harare, Imire Rhino Conservancy and Kuimba Shiri Bird Sanctuary. He has nothing but praise for the handlers and the bonds they built with their animals, including elephants, rhino, giraffe, zebras, cheetahs, eagles and owls. 'The animals were calm because of the amazing handlers,' he says. 'Everyone trusted everybody else. It was a very, very smooth, calm shoot in that regard.'

Brandt decided to use fog as an additional unifying element to enhance the connection between animal and human in each scene. He explains: 'When I first came up with the idea, the fog was a symbol of the wildfires raging around the planet. But with the onset of Covid, the fog took on an extra layer of symbolism because just about everybody has felt for the past year and a half that we are living in a

kind of limbo where we don't know what's going to happen in terms of Covid, but even more consequentially we don't know what's going to happen with the future of this planet.'

Fog and photographic jazz

In each photograph, the fog swirls across the frame, blocking out any background detail and thereby giving greater focus to the subjects and a handful of austere props that help emphasise the basic elements of what remains when all else has been lost. Although generated by machines, Brandt confesses the fog was a stressful addition to his creative vision. 'We had weeks on end of 35°C, five or ten per cent humidity, and driving winds, so the water-based, non-toxic fog that was generated out of the machines, evaporated almost immediately.' The solution was

Nick Brandt on location

Nick Brandt calls *The Day May Break* his 'acoustic project'. He describes the technical changes he made to create these photographs

'The main element was generating the fog, because once it got really dry we had to bring in more machines. But the props were just a chair, a table, a bed, and a light bulb. Just a light bulb, one light. After the last two projects it was very stripped down, and I revelled in the spontaneity of that and discovering moments of happenstance where animal, human and fog all aligned in one serendipitous moment – or not. That was how I was able to get 60 photographs in two months.'

Did you work as before with just the minimum of lens and camera?

'Because of the fog and because it was shifting on a frame-by-frame basis, I had to shoot digital medium format, so I used this Fujifilm GFX100, and for the first time ever, having been a total purist to my own detriment, for the first time ever I used a zoom, one of those short zooms. Almost every photograph is uncropped, original frame, which I would never have been able to do with a prime because I wouldn't have had the time to get up and move in that moment; that sort of serendipitous moment of alignment between human, animal and fog would have vanished, so I got off my purist high horse and benefited massively from that.'

Yes, why self-flagellate as a purist more than you have to?

'Oh yes, I've spent years self-flagellating. All the photographs I've lost by shooting medium format film with a roll of ten, and then, when you get home, discovering there was a technical problem with the camera! Weeks and weeks of work have been lost in discovering technical problems and having to go back and start again.'



to photograph in the half hour before sunrise and the half hour after sunset. ‘Everything just had to be done in that half hour, and then we waited for 12 hours in between.’ Fortunately, with just two half-hour windows each day, it was the trust between the animals and their handlers that saved the shoot. ‘They were quite extraordinary, they were able to get the animals to stand almost exactly where I wanted them for each frame.’

It may sound like a logistical nightmare: positioning human and animal subjects in the same frame at the same time, with no physical or eye contact between the two; props already in place and then hoping

Above: Richard and Okra, Zimbabwe, 2020 © Nick Brandt / The Day May Break / Published by Hatje Cantz

Right: Patrick and flamingos, Zimbabwe, 2020 © Nick Brandt / The Day May Break / Published by Hatje Cantz

that enough fog can be generated to fill the space – all in half an hour. Is it any wonder that Brandt is sensitive to any accusations of post-production trickery: ‘A lot of people may think, “oh, it’s just composited”. No, it’s not,’ he exclaims. ‘Those animals and those people are all in the same frame, at the same time, photographed together. It’s not fxxxing Photoshop.’

Following on from the large-scale and expensive complexities of his previous two projects, This Empty World (2019) and Inherit the Dust (2016), Brandt has found a greater sense of gratification and relief with the creative process behind his latest

work. ‘For this project, I was relieved that it was much more pared down and stripped back,’ he says. ‘*The Day May Break* is like my acoustic album after the previous works, but it was also an absolute joy for me to be working so spontaneously. For me, it was like photographic jazz, in that I would walk out each morning knowing the animal I would be photographing, but nothing else.’

Excited and scared

Brandt is looking forward to travelling beyond Africa’s familiar shores to shoot the next part of this new series, even though circumstances forced him to postpone that wish this time round.

The Day May Break is a carbon neutral project. A percentage of the proceeds will be granted in the form of royalty payments to all the people in these photographs.

Photography copyright Nick Brandt from his book *The Day May Break*, published by Hatje Cantz.

I remind him that this year marks the 20th anniversary of when he began work on his first landmark project, *On This Earth*, which was published to global acclaim in 2005. It was the first of a trilogy of best-selling books of wildlife portraiture, including *A Shadow Falls* (2009) and *Across The Ravaged Land* (2013), all of which were shot in Africa. Why has it taken him so long to look further afield?

‘Yeah, it’s been too long, too long,’ he admits. ‘I am quite frustrated with myself for spending so long there because my concerns have always been global. However, with the last two projects, Inherit the Dust and This Empty World, because I have such a familiarity and knowledge of those places, it made sense to do such complex projects in places that I knew.’

Fair enough, but has he worked out where to go for the next shoot, or how many parts there will be in the new series? ‘No, because it all depends on what’s possible – where there are sanctuaries and conservancies where they have animals that are sufficiently habituated that, like in *The Day May Break*, we can put with human strangers in close proximity, safely.’

Looking back to *On This Earth*, how significant does he think it has been to what has followed? His reply reveals a mind that is quick to leave finished work in its place undisturbed. Moving on to the next creative mission is what keeps him driven. ‘When I did that first work, nobody else was photographing animals as portraiture in the wild, in black & white, as if it was Irving Penn or Richard Avedon,’ he explains. ‘Then, obviously, in short order a lot of other people were and I needed to move on.’

‘I am only interested in starting a new project when I think I might, hopefully, have come up with an idea that nobody has done before. I am not interested in creating if I feel it has already been done. It may have already been done and I’m not aware of it, okay? Somebody may already have done something like *The Day May Break* and I’m just not aware, which is kind of horrifying to me. So, I really need to believe that this is something that nobody has ever done before, and in the creation and execution of that hopefully new concept I want to be both excited and scared.’

Titles and labels

The title of a Nick Brandt book is always memorable. I tell him I find them quite poetic, but what I particularly like about *The Day May Break* is its ambiguity. He sighs: ‘They take forever to come up with those titles. It’s always last minute, last bloody minute. Yes, it’s dual meaning: either the day may break and the world will shatter, or the day may break and the dawn will still come. The dual meaning is because the people and the animals in these pictures are all survivors, and in that alone lies hope and possibility. Yes, I am despairing of the future. Yes, I feel we have already passed the tipping point in climate breakdown, but I wouldn’t be doing this work if I didn’t feel that, at the very least, we can do everything that we can to mitigate the damage, and save hopefully countless lives and ecosystems along the way.’

Brandt is a difficult photographer to categorise. He hates labels and

finds some to be insulting as well as inaccurate, so I ask him how he would describe himself as a photographer? ‘I would simply say an environmental photographer. I mean, I would just say photographer, but environmental photographer because it’s about the environment and how it impacts both humans and animals. When Richard Avedon died, he was one of my photographic heroes, I was curious to see what the obituaries would say, and sure enough, *The New York Times* used the phrase fashion photographer, which is appalling since he’s one of the greatest portraitists that’s ever lived. Then, another one I was curious about was when Peter Beard died, and sure enough it was wildlife photographer. What the f***? He wasn’t a wildlife photographer. I feel I need to stay alive and working long enough until I feel secure that my own obituary will not use that phrase.’

