

T U R N M E O N

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ON THE SUBJECT OF WISE WIVES *or* SO MUCH FOR THE MYSTERY OF CREATION

“For God’s sake, get some feckin’ behind-the-scenes stuff”.

So commanded Orla - my wise and sensible Irish wife - one week prior to my departure for the shoot.

Foolishly, I only seem to listen to her 80% of the time. And on this occasion, I was instantly dismissive. I get irritated with the Making-of-obsessed media world in which we increasingly live, and rightly or wrongly, believe in preserving the mystery of creation. Can’t art just speak for itself?, blah blah.

So I imposed a strict photography ban on the crew during the three month shoot, as I didn’t want photos being distributed of what we were doing.

Many months later, the day finally came when I started showing the finished panoramas to people. And completely predictably, some people asked if I had just added in the panels in Photoshop.

Cue my silent scream. Months of work spent on production of prints of life-size animals, giant panels constructed of elaborate aluminum frames, up to 23 men at a time carrying 30 foot long or high panels in 100 degree plus heat and heaving them up and strapping them down and leveling them, and...and in theory I could have just stayed at home and done it all in Photoshop??

And now, due to my ban, I had nothing to prove that it was all for real. I had to acknowledge that once again, for the umpteenth time across 14 years of marriage, I should have listened to Wise Wife (as should all Mulish Husbands?)

Fortunately, my assistant from the U.S. disobeyed my edict, and had surreptitiously shot some photos on his iPhone. I also took just a few snap shots on mine. Between the two, you are thus able to see some of the photos on the next two pages, showing that the panels were indeed there on location.





ON THE SUBJECT OF HAPPENSTANCE

But then you may ask, well, so what? What difference does it make that the panels were actually there? Could I not have achieved the same result by compositing the animal portraits into the panoramas in Photoshop? Actually, it makes a huge difference.

Shooting reality, in situ, with the physical life-size panels present, was always going to produce far superior results, due to the countless unexpected incidents, both small and large, that occur throughout any shoot. I could pick any panorama photo in this book, and happily mention something surprising that occurred in the final shot that made it better.

But even I, sagely making this observation now, didn't fully realize this at the start. When we began, I assumed that I would need to 'stage' the action, and with my assistant director co-ordinating, call Action for selected local people to move through frame on cue.

However, within two days of starting shooting at the factory location, I realized that this wasn't working, leading to stiff, dull results. Waiting for something unexpected to happen was more likely to produce something much more interesting, no matter how small, than engineering a situation.

So from that moment, I set up my camera on location in front of the panel, waiting for the unexpected, as over time, the local people grew accustomed to us and the panels being there.

I still asked some local people to walk within the frame, more than anything as a size reference, so the viewer had a better understanding of the true scale of the panels, but these people were now just a part of the overall 'action'. (And even then, I would generally photograph them when they were relaxing.)

Perhaps one location more than any sums up the above: *UNDERPASS WITH ELEPHANTS*, 2015 (*Lean Back, Your Life is On Track*)



UNDERPASS WITH ELEPHANTS, 2015 (*Lean Back, Your Life is On Track*)

Many homeless people, including mothers with very young children and babies, sleep out on the the land beneath this underpass, encircled by a central Nairobi roundabout. I always knew that they would be in the photograph, as would the cruelly juxtaposed billboard beyond, featuring a well-to-do middle class African man leaning back in a chair in his garden, with the tag line beneath: *Lean Back, Your Life is On Track*.

But what I did not expect were all the homeless children sniffing glue. It's impossible to see clearly in this document, but all those kids, some as young as 6 or 7 years old, were high on glue from the bottles hanging from their faces. Even more desperate, there is no societal or family support to enable these kids to break free from this terrible addiction. I saw many kids so strung out that their motor control was already going or gone.

I couldn't direct them in any way, as this would have been a violation of child labor laws. So whatever was going to happen would just happen. However, over the course of the days on that

location, the kids and everyone else there grew accustomed to us, and began to hang around in shot.

On the final evening, a rainstorm forced everyone into the shelter of the underpass. The kids, as usual mostly strung out on glue, gathered close to the camera to stay dry. Eventually, the storm cleared, and the sun, now close to the horizon, illuminated them.

I started photographing the whole scene. Some of the kids stared into camera, sort of posing, whilst some remained lost in their own world. For fifteen minutes, I photographed, without a word spoken between us, but with a connection that could only have come from us spending the number of days that we had there. This became the last photo in the book, *UNDERPASS WITH ELEPHANTS & GLUE-SNIFFING CHILDREN, 2015*. Again, this document is a terrible venue to see what is going on, but for purposes of reference....



UNDERPASS WITH ELEPHANTS & GLUE-SNIFFING CHILDREN, 2015



UNDERPASS WITH ELEPHANTS & GLUE-SNIFFING CHILDREN, 2015 (DETAIL)

I hope that viewers of these photos realize that it is not just the animals that are victim of this destruction of the natural world. It's also the impoverished humans that are victims.

So it's here, in these final three photos in the book's sequence, that these human victims turn to face us, the viewer.

The other two photos in this final sequence are shot in the giant dumpsite in Nakuru in central Kenya. Every day, the garbage trucks drive up to the dumpsite where we were photographing. As they dump their contents onto the toxic smoking pile of waste already there, scores of people who live on the periphery of the dumpsite appear from out of nowhere, and descend upon the trucks, scavenging alongside the pigs for scraps of rotting food, that they eat right there.

My crew and I photographed there for about ten days, and within that time, almost every crew member became sick with bacterial infections, lung infections, nosebleeds, some in as little as two days. So imagine what it's like for the people who spend their lives there, for whom there is little chance of escape.

GHOSTS IN THE LANDSCAPE, & THE SINGLE MOMENT OF RECOGNITION

My plan had always been that, throughout the series, the animals in the panels would effectively be ghosts in the landscape. With these animals killed or driven from their habitat, the people now living within these landscapes would be oblivious to the presence of the animals that used to live there.

However, my plan was always that in the final photo in the series, just one person, probably a child, would see the animals in the panel whilst all around, no-one else did.

The setting of the underpass was always the place for this shot. I knew that I wanted the little kid in the foreground as the one human who saw the animals.



UNDERPASS WITH ELEPHANTS, 2015 (Lean Back, Your Life is On Track) DETAIL

But I never for a second imagined that this tiny boy would wander into frame, fascinated by these giant elephants, and touch them with what appears to be a stick held in his hand. Once again, I was the beneficiary of the happenstance of shooting with the panels there on location.

While on the subject of locations and happenstance, we had spent months looking for locations that would match those in the original animal portraits. In almost all instances, these species inhabited these locations, but were subsequently driven out by man. (The only exception is the locations with the chimpanzees, who had lived there millennia ago.)

The toughest locations to find and align were those portraits with hills in the background. I was on the verge of giving up altogether with the photo of the rhino mother and baby (*WASTELAND WITH RHINOS, 2015*), when, one afternoon, walking up an unexplored road at the dumpsite, I saw an angle on the hills beyond, and with relief and delight, discovered the ridiculously perfect match of contours.



WASTELAND WITH RHINOS, 2015

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SCANDINAVIAN CLOUDS

Reading back what I've written, I notice that I sound most excited by the incidents involving chance. And yet what truly stimulated me creatively throughout the shoot was being in (relative) control of what was in the frame. I guess this is no surprise: twelve years of being almost completely dependent on pure chance, thanks to my beloved animal subjects, will do that to you. Photographing the controlled series in *Across The Ravaged Land* - the rangers with tusks, and the petrified creatures and trophies - had been a blessed relief. But I am an unrepentant control freak. So I relished the comparative control of this new series.

Of course, on location, there still remain a thousand elements out of one's control. One of the most important for me is clouds. But when photographing in East Africa, I like my clouds imported from Northern Europe. Clouds (and the light that they create) that are somber, gloomy and wintry.

This is one of the main reasons this shoot lasted over three months. Yes, there was a lot of driving between locations and setting up, but even in the rainy season, it's still Africa. Which means a lot of sunshine. So there was also a lot of waiting for the right cloud.

Obviously, any scene is instantly transformed in terms of look, mood and emotion by the sky overhead and accompanying light. None of these panoramas would have worked bathed in hard sunlight. The melancholic atmosphere that I sought for this body of work would have instantly vanished.

Again, some will say that the clouds could have been dropped in via photoshop. But I always wanted the actual cloudscape that connected with the scene on the ground. Time of day, the position of the sun behind the clouds, the particular heaviness of the clouds - all dramatically affect the look of the notionally flat light on the landscape and people below. In other words, there are many, many types of 'flat' light, and invariably, there is one that for me, has just the right indefinable emotional quality.

ON MAKING A STRENGTH OUT OF A WEAKNESS

Over prior years of photographing portraits of animals in East Africa, each of those featured in the panels was originally unused - for whatever reason, justified or unjustified. Fortunately, this did mean that when I started poring over ten years' worth (2003-2012) of contact sheets, I found quite a few that worked well in the context of this project.

Sometimes these photos had gone unused for a very simple reason. I had five strong portraits of my favorite elephant of all - a 40 year old Amboseli bull by the name of Craig - but I felt at the time that I could only release two photos of Craig for *Across The Ravaged Land*. That left three unused portraits for this series (That's him appearing to walk down the street in *ROAD WITH ELEPHANT*, 2014).



ROAD WITH ELEPHANT, 2014

There were also quite a number of the photos that originally, I had felt were flawed for more aesthetic reasons. But now, placed within the context of each very different setting, the portraits' original weaknesses are transformed into a strength.

Take the photograph of Qumquat and her family (*ROAD JUNCTION WITH QUMQUAT & FAMILY*, 2014) - a photo that was taken just a week or two before this glorious matriarch and two of her daughters were brutally murdered at the hands of poachers.



ROAD JUNCTION WITH QUMQUAT & FAMILY, 2014

As I've mentioned before, I approach the photographic portraiture of animals no differently to the portraiture of humans. But this becomes more complicated when it's a group portrait of animals, simply because, of course, I can't direct them in how or where to pose.

The original photo of Qumquat and her family had worked very well for me, except for one flaw. If you photograph a group portrait of humans, and someone's head is concealed, you would reject the photo. For me, the same applies here, as the head of Qwanza, the small calf in shot, is concealed behind Qumquat, his mother. (Qwanza survived the killing by the poachers, and is now an orphan at the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust Orphanage in Nairobi).

But here in the panorama setting, little Qwanza looks like he is cowering under his mother, hiding from the monumental trucks thundering by them. And so it is that the original weakness of the photo becomes one of its strengths.

There were other photos that became stronger when resuscitated for this project:

In QUARRY WITH GIRAFFE, 2014, I felt that with the original portrait of the giraffe looking over the plains, it was not quite powerful enough, because I had photographed him from behind. But here in the setting of the giant quarry, he appears to be looking out at his former home and seeing what has now become of it - a former paradise laid waste and stripped bare.



QUARRY WITH GIRAFFE, 2014

In ALLEYWAY WITH CHIMPANZEE, 2014, the panel of the chimp is set by a semi-stagnant stream of fetid sewage (where perhaps a creek with clear forest water once ran?). I had rejected the original portrait because I had hoped for more of a connection with the chimp. But here in the alleyway location, with his head bowed, he appears, in my mind, to be lamenting the loss of the world that he once knew, and the denuded world that is now there in its place.



ALLEYWAY WITH CHIMPANZEE, 2014

ON THE SUBJECT OF FILM (AND RESULTANT NEUROSIS)

As with all my previous work, this series was shot on black and white medium format film. Each panorama was constructed out of 6x7cm negatives stitched together in Photoshop, to create the final widescreen view. Practically speaking, to shoot this series on film instead of digital, was even more crazily, willfully impractical than usual.

This is because each final panorama required the frames to be seamlessly stitched together. Had I been shooting digital, I would have had the reassurance that the rest of you now do, of checking almost immediately that you had captured what you thought you had (I hate you all). And you would have been able to sit down at your computer that night, and roughly check that your stitched images lined up as planned.

But for me, I was stuck in East Africa on a three month shoot, with no way of processing the film and printing contact sheets of the negatives within three thousand miles. There was no way of knowing whether it really would all come together, until months later, when back home 9000 miles away.

So every two weeks, unable to deal with the growing stress over what I'd photographed would actually be even there on the film, we would arrange for someone interested in a free flight to Britain, to hand-carry a couple of hundred exposed film rolls all the way to a small film lab in central London, into the safe hands of Bob, one of the last of his kind to still process film by hand.

However, just seeing scans of his contact sheets was not enough to guarantee whether when stitched, the panoramas would work. It was only those months later, back home, where, engaged in the time-consuming and frequently pointless task of scanning possible negatives in high resolution, I was finally able to discover if the focal planes of each frame aligned with the next, so that nothing looked focally inconsistent when stitched together.

Of course, what I went through in the course of shooting was the norm for all photographers in the 20th century. But we have all quickly become very spoiled by technology. We forget what was so universally prevalent only a few short years before. So, of course, those photographers never had the luxury of Photoshop that we now do, to so effortlessly improve the photos. The huge wide field of vision of these panoramas could never have been achieved on any analog camera prior to the existence of photoshop, to assemble that field of vision.

So perhaps inevitably you ask, would you shoot film again, on an equivalent project - with all the stress and massive extra expense?

And once again, right now, the artist and masochist in me tightens his jaw, grits his teeth, and quietly utters a single word....

Yes.

And you might ask, But why?? And I would sigh wearily, and just say, as I have so many times before :

Because digital, in its frequently sterile and clinical perfection, leaves me stone cold bored; because in spite of all the considerable extra expense and aggravation and major technical compromises, I covet the glorious surprises that are sometimes achieved by the magical interaction of light and film negative. Because film just turns me on.