



In a startling body of work that shines a light on environmental destruction, Nick Brandt embraces colour for the first time. He explains why

WORDS: GEMMA PADLEY

OUT OF DARKNESS



UNTIL RECENTLY IF you searched online for Nick Brandt you'd see distinctive black and white images of animals in Africa. Monochrome has been his medium of choice since he started taking photographs in the early 2000s.

Search now and you will find images from Brandt's new body of work, *This Empty World*, in which the artist has, for the first time, chosen to use colour.

It was something he vowed never to do, but when Brandt dreamt up the project – intricate staged tableaux-style images that marry constructed sets and casts of many with images of animals in east Africa – it was his only option.

'I immediately imagined the photographs at night, with the unnatural, often garish and sickly colours of the modern human world,' he writes in his new monograph of the same name. 'That was it. I would have to work in colour.'

The project was shot in Kenya on

'What keeps me doing this is the heartache of the destruction of the natural world and, therefore, us'

community land owned by the Maasai people, close to Amboseli National Park. 'I never thought I'd move into colour or digital. All my photographic heroes are black and white photographers,' he says. 'I found it incredibly exciting to embrace colour and use it as expressively as possible.' His next project, in America, will also be colour. 'Strangely, I don't see myself going back to black and white.'

It is also the first time Brandt, who lives in southern California, has embraced an entirely digital workflow, due to technical, practical and creative considerations. Each cinematic-looking image is a composite of two moments in time made weeks apart in almost always the same place.

The animal(s) were photographed in 'places where they still cling to an existence' – after which sets, such as a construction site, petrol station or forest, were created and the cast brought in for

the second phase of shooting. Brandt worked with a crew including assistants, an art department, assistant director, a producer, production manager and production coordinator. To describe the project as epic is an understatement.

Ten Pentax 645Z medium-format cameras were set up at the same time across different locations, he explains, with each set requiring multiple stands and scaffolding towers with lighting. The animals were photographed first with 'the lighting set-up the same for the sets that were built and the people'.

Motion sensors triggered cameras' shutters when animals passed by. Importantly, the sets were recycled as much as possible afterwards, with the areas returned to how they were.

'I wanted the images to feel as though I'd wandered into a location and just caught this,' says Brandt. 'I didn't ever want the work to feel too staged. I wanted



it to feel like documentary – beautifully lit documentary – but documentary.' People assume the animals were photographed then 'dropped in via Photoshop', but he has always aimed to be as true to reality as possible. 'I felt it was absolutely necessary to do it as much as possible in camera and to build the sets,' he says. 'A much

cheaper, simpler, less stressful and far less superior way of doing it would have been to photograph the animals and then photograph some real-life location and stick the two together in Photoshop, but it would never have been as good.' His labour-intensive approach enabled Brandt to create images that deliver a stronger emotional punch. The

animals, he says in the book, appear 'diminished and trapped by humankind' as though 'the earth was swallowing them up, whilst above the march of "progress" continues relentlessly on.' Born and raised in London, but based in the USA since the early 1990s, Brandt has always loved the natural world and is passionate about conservation. ●

ABOVE, LEFT River bed with hyenas

ABOVE Construction trench with jackal

LEFT Roundabout with gazelle

PREVIOUS PAGES Bus station with elephant in dust



ABOVE Savannah with lion and humans

LEFT Petrol station with lioness

FACING PAGE The gathering

Early in his career he was a painter and directed music videos including Michael Jackson's *Earth Song* (1995), filmed in Tanzania – which helped set in motion what would become a lifelong love affair with Africa's wildlife and land.

He began photographing there in 2001, making striking portraits of animals in the wild – in 'a state of being', where they look like they are posing. Brandt would spend weeks 'getting close to' his subjects, waiting for the right moment.

'I've always seen animals as sentient creatures equally worthy of life as us, so it was the most natural thing in the world for me to photograph animals in exactly the same way I would human beings.'

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With the latest project, the approach and mindset were different. The animals, he says, 'needed to appear to be (even though in reality they were not) under threat, trapped, anxious, rendered immobile, at best melancholic'.

The emphasis was on depicting a world where animals are being pushed out by human development but, crucially, where both humans and animals are the victims.

He uses the image Savannah with Lion and Humans as an example. 'You see the similarity of the expression between the lion and the people. There's a feeling of empathy, of a shared plight, of a connection between them ... I never wanted the images to be misinterpreted as the people looking like they were the aggressors because, generally speaking, rural poor are not the aggressors. They're trying to survive as well.'

The work follows on from Brandt's project *Inherit the Dust*, in which life-size photo installations of African animals were physically placed amid scenes of destruction – places which they had, until recently, inhabited.

'This Empty World is a further and more conceptual exploration of this escalation of destruction at the hands of man,' says Brandt. 'The early work was more about recording what was in front of me, and that ceased to be enough.'

With its cinematic feel, the recent project is like a terrifying nightmarish dystopia, which on one level it is, but at the same time this isn't the stuff of fiction – it is happening now. Brandt's images feel like an urgent call to action.

'For years I photographed [nature's] vanishing, melancholic beauty but for me it became irresponsible to only show that,' he says. 'I needed to show the reality of what was happening. Each



PROFILE Nick Brandt

Brandt's photographic career is dedicated to highlighting the human destruction of the natural world. In 2010 he co-founded Big Life Foundation, a not-for-profit conservation organisation

artist to his or her own obsession, and my obsession is to show what we are doing to the planet. That's my mission.

'What keeps me doing this is the heartache of the apocalyptic destruction of the natural world and, therefore, us as well. There isn't hope in the work, but that doesn't mean to say that there isn't hope.'

This Empty World by Nick Brandt is published by Thames & Hudson, priced £45. An exhibition of prints from the series is at Waddington Custot, London, 7 February to 7 March. Visit nickbrandt.com and biglife.org