

THIS EMPTY WORLD

Impending annihilation. Apocalypse of the natural world. Escalating pace of extinction.

For every new body of work, I find myself writing an introduction that speaks of such things. How does one not let out the same scream of existential despair, frustration and rage?

As a result, I think that many of us are in danger of hitting a kind of outrage overload. Or we already have hit it, pummeled into a kind of overwhelmed apathy. There is only so much bad news that we can tolerate before we break down or shut down in mental self-defense.

This seems especially the case in relation to the destruction of the natural world and our fellow creatures. This destruction is happening even faster than pessimists like myself imagined.

We are experiencing the antithesis of creation right now. It took billions of years to reach a place of such wondrous diversity, and then in just a few short years - an infinitesimally microscopic moment of time - to annihilate that.

I could have photographed this concept just about anywhere in the developing world that animals still cling to an existence in the face of the relentless spread of humankind.

And if you live in a developed country, you could be witness to a more quiet, but just as devastating environmental armageddon, as bees, bats, birds and an astonishing number of other creatures that are at the essential core of a functioning ecosystem - that ultimately protects you as well - is scraped off the face of the earth.

However, I chose to photograph in East Africa, partly because it remains the place that over the last 15 years has most moved and fascinated me, where the great mythical animals of the African plains have always seized my imagination. But those mythical animals are rapidly disappearing, and one of the most significant reason is because of space. Or actually, the very finite amount of space.

Space for more people, more homes, more factories and roads and towns. More farmland, more livestock, more grazing, all more food for people, leading to an eroded land in which animals and humans compete, but where the people will always win.

The giraffes, their legs literally cut out from beneath them for bush meat. The lions, poisoned to stop them from killing herders' livestock. The elephants - everyone knows about poaching

for their ivory now - but more and more, killed in conflict with people, as elephants find that land which such a short time ago was wild habitat has been converted to farms.

I've driven through countless areas where just fifteen to twenty years ago there was abundant animal life, but now has been wiped out - sliced up and reduced to bush meat, leaving vast expanses of land devoid of any large mammals.

By 2030, Africa's population is projected to reach 1.6 billion, up from 1 billion in 2018. The countries of East Africa, where this series was photographed - is one of the hotspots for that. All those people have to live somewhere. And this is the other reason - the explosion of human population here - why this project is so relevant to East Africa.

We tend to think that paradise was lost many decades ago, but actually, in the comparative scheme of things, the escalation in killing is fairly recent. The number of wild animals on the planet has halved in just the past 40 years, and for many animals, it's even worse in Africa.

Look at these numbers, which apply to the entire African continent:

Lion: population down 80% since the 1960's, to just 20,000 in 2018.

Cheetah: down 65% since 1975, to just 7000 now, driven out of 90% of its historic range.

Elephant: down 70% since the early 1970's, to perhaps 400,000 today.

Giraffe: down 40% decline since the year 1985.

1985. To put that in perspective for those of you alive and conscious then, 1985 was the year of Talking Heads' *Road to Nowhere* and Dire Straits' *Money for Nothing, of Back to the Future*, and ironically, *Out of Africa*. Not so long ago at all.

So the East Africa of our imaginations - a romanticized view of vast expanses of unspoiled wilderness - is sadly out-dated. In truth, there is almost no park or reserve big enough for the animals to live out their lives safely. And outside of those often surprisingly small areas, the animals are being relentlessly squeezed out and hunted down. It's reaching the point where it's unlikely that any large mammal can survive on unprotected land.

In an ideal world, the beauty and majesty of these animals, and respect for all living things, would be enough to justify their continued existence. But that won't be enough to save them.

Many Africans would say that Western societies destroyed most of their own natural world centuries ago in the interests of economic expansion, and that in Africa, now it is their long overdue turn to economically grow. Why should they be deprived of the comfortable lives that

most people have in the West? In many ways, it's a reasonable argument. But protection of the environment and economic benefit can go hand in hand.

In many areas of East Africa where these animals do still exist - poor but still teeming with natural wonders - ecotourism is often the only truly significant source of long term economic benefit for the local communities. Take away the animals, and there is usually little left of economic value.

This line of argument for preservation is more pragmatic than poetic, but it's the most effective argument in the 21st century. Somewhere like Kenya, the tourism industry - the second largest sector of Kenya's economy - would collapse without those animals. Few would come visit a world of livestock and dust.

What you see in these photos is, for me, symbolic of this invasion of the remaining natural wilderness by humans, as the animals are wiped out in the rapidly decreasing number of places they can live.

The images from this series were all photographed on local Maasai community ranch land, inhabited by people and tens of thousands of cattle and goats. Although close to Amboseli National Park in Kenya, the land has no protected status.

In that regard, it's probably one of the last unprotected places where animals and humans - a sizable number of humans - live alongside one another, something more and more rare in the 21st century. Considering their level of poverty, it is all the more impressive that mostly, the Maasai tolerate the presence of the animals amongst them.

Each image was a combination of two moments in time, captured weeks apart, almost all from the exact same locked-off camera position:

Initially, a partial set was built and lit. Sometimes, such as with an entire dead forest, it was actually the complete set. Weeks, even months, followed whilst the animals that inhabit the region hopefully became comfortable enough with all this strange new stuff to enter the frame.

Once the animals were captured on camera, the full sets - bridge and highway construction sites, a petrol station, a bus station and more - were built by the art department team.

The camera remained fixed in place throughout, in all but a few of the photos.

A second sequence was then photographed with full set and people drawn from local communities and beyond. The final images were a composite of the two elements.

For me, it was essential that wherever possible, the animals, locations and people were all photographed in the exact same place. I could have made my life a lot more easy by photographing the animals in the wild, photographing pre-existing locations elsewhere, and then compositing those disparate elements together.

There was a clear technical superiority to photographing everything shot from the exact same camera position - everything aligned perfectly. But doing this also made a critical difference to me in aesthetic and emotional terms. With so many of the elements in the same location, new ideas, unexpected incidents that I would never have thought of, reveal themselves whilst photographing.

In this way, the whole project felt much more organic as it unfolded. And it culminated in an appropriate full circle, when months later, after the sets had long ago been taken down and all their elements recycled back into the African supply chain, there was no evidence in the landscape that we were ever there.

Some years earlier, in similar landscapes close by, I photographed wild animals just like these, but in a very different way. Those photos took the form of studio-like portraits, the animals' strong presences framed low against epic African skies.

Now, in this work, I chose to present the animals in a very different way, appearing diminished and trapped by humankind. Many of the animals were photographed down in deep trenches, as if the earth was swallowing them up, as if this was to be their graves, while above, the march of 'progress' continues relentlessly on.

Meanwhile the African people in the photos are also often helplessly swept along by the tide of 'progress'. They are never portrayed as the aggressors, because they're not. Environmental degradation and the impact of climate change will almost always affect poor rural people the most, due to the exhausted natural resources upon which they rely. The true villains - the majority of politicians, industrialists and their largely self-serving ilk - are all off camera.

The damnation of animal life, the debasement of human life, the destructive conjugality between the two: It is not just the animals who are the victims of environmental devastation, but also the humans now inhabiting these landscapes.

Modern-day humans across the planet seem to have learned little from what has come before. History is littered with the collapse of previous civilizations that imposed far too much burden on their surrounding natural world. Now, with so vastly many more of us, with our impact so much more all-encompassing, it's not 'just' a region that is destroyed as in the past. If current trends continue, the destruction can and will mushroom to an ecological - and resulting civilizational collapse - of our entire planet.

It seems exponentially worse at this moment in time in the place that I live, Donald Trump's America. The anti-science crowd in the United States continues to willfully disregard the overwhelming scientific consensus on man-made climate change. Their greed, ignorance and obstructionism, and deliberate dissemination of misinformation, is allowing, and will allow, many billions of animals, and millions of people, to suffer and die, the impact lasting for centuries to come. Jeopardizing the future of the planet for the sake of their own short-term profit is, in my opinion, a crime like no other in the history of humanity. As the environmentalist Judy Bonds said, "There are no jobs on a dead planet".

It can all feel overwhelming. How does one even begin to fight back?

I come back to the phrase I use endlessly, because quite simply, I believe it: It is better to be angry and active than angry and passive. Once you become active, the despair feels less overwhelming. Your actions - no matter how small - can energize and focus you.

For me personally, that comes in two forms: my photography, and the work of Big Life Foundation, the non-profit organization that I co-founded in 2010. Based in Kenya and Tanzania, 200+ rangers now protect 1.7 million acres of ecosystem.

As for the photography, I don't think that I'm about to run out of subject matter any time soon. As such, I have come to a sobering acceptance that I will go to my death bed angry. What kind of world will we live in if it's stripped of its natural wonders? The answer for me: an empty world.

Meanwhile, the number of escalating problems will not be magically solved. But regardless, those of us who care must continue to do our damndest to try and preserve what we can, to minimize the damage as best we can. To keep on fighting for what we hold to be of indescribable value, poetry and beauty for both us, and those that come after us.

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September 2018