

I AM THE WALRUS

BY NICK BRANDT

The animals came first.

Not the photography, but the animals.

Or to elaborate, my love of animals came first. Photography was merely the best medium to convey my love of, and fascination with them.

I first visited East Africa in 1995 whilst directing “Earth Song”, a music video for Michael Jackson. I fell in love with the place and with the animals. That’s not very surprising - it has a similar effect on many people. But that experience shifted my focus in terms of what I wanted to say about the world. So I spent the next few years trying to find feature film projects that dealt in sophisticated ways with the subject matter of animals and the environment. But it was hard to find any story in which the money people were sufficiently interested.

Directing is a frustrating business. Vast precious tracts of your life, when, in theory, you are at your most creative and energetic, are consumed with projects that ultimately never see the light of day. You’re dependent on the money people to be able to create. And even if you’re fortunate enough to finally get that money, the compromises involved can take you a long way from your original vision. For so many in the film ‘industry’, you’re living for tomorrow, not in the present, unable to simply do what you are desperate to do: CREATE.

Photography, however, allows you to just go out and create how you want, what you want, when you want. You’re answerable to no-one. You’re in control of your creative life. Joy.

So at the end of 2000, I went back to East Africa, this time to photograph. The irony is that I had chosen a subject matter - animals - over which I had no control whatsoever.

From the outset, I had a vision in mind: I wanted to create an elegy, a likely last testament to an extraordinary, beautiful natural world and its denizens that is rapidly disappearing before our eyes. I wanted to show these animals as individual spirits, sentient creatures equally as worthy of life as us.

I chose to photograph in black and white, because aside from the purely aesthetic (the compelling graphic nature of black and white imagery), it accentuates the impression of the images belonging to another much earlier time. As if these animals in the photographs are already long gone, already dead.

Photographing with film, as I have done throughout, also gives the images an air of timelessness that digital could not.

The camera of choice was, and has remained to this day, incredibly impractical for what I do: a medium format Pentax 67II with waist level viewfinder. Just 10 shots per roll, no zoom, no auto-focus, no auto metering, no motor drive, no image stabilizer lenses.

In fact I only use two fixed lenses, the 35mm equivalent of a standard 50mm and a 100mm, not out of necessity, but out of choice.

In other words, everything I do seems to be perversely, masochistically designed to increase my chances of messing up and losing the maximum number of shots in the process.

In 2011, the temptation to live an easier life - both practically and emotionally - finally seduced me. Frustrated by the number of shots I was losing shooting with film, I brought a Hasselblad 60 megapixel medium format digital camera to Africa with me. I took photos side by side with my film camera. The digital camera's images were sharper. They had more detail in both the shadows and the highlights. The digital camera made photographing very, very easy.

And I hated it. For me, the images were too clinical, too sterile, too devoid of atmosphere. Just too....perfect. In fact, had I photographed using a digital camera from the beginning, I'm not sure that I would have liked a single photograph that I had ever taken.

So as long as there is film available to buy, and airport security people that can be gently persuaded to hand check the precious vulnerable exposed rolls, I will continue

to photograph with film. And I'll continue to lose endless shots along the way. So be it.

The first two books in the trilogy were entitled *On This Earth* and *A Shadow Falls*. The title of the final book, *Across The Ravaged Land*", completes the sentence and the trilogy:

On This Earth, A Shadow Falls Across The Ravaged Land.

I may have had a clear vision from the outset of how and what I wanted to photograph, but with the horrifying acceleration of destruction over the last few years, I could no longer photograph an idyllic view of what I saw. Thus the title of this book.

In the past few years, every time I photographed an elephant, I wondered if this would be the last time I would see him, and photograph him, alive. Sometimes it seemed like a miracle when one of my favorite elephants, like the beautiful giant-tusked male on the next page, reappeared after months of no sightings.



Portrait of Elephant on Bare Earth, Amboseli 2011

How could an elephant bearing tusks such as these, his great ivory treasure worth literally hundreds of thousands of dollars in China, safely move, unharmed, across a land so filled with poverty-stricken people? How is it possible that he would not be killed for them? Indeed, some of these elephants, and lions, were killed not long after I photographed them. And this beautiful giant-tusked male may already be dead as I write, or you read this.

This further sense of foreboding, this greater level of melancholy on my part, informs the way that I photograph the animals in this book as opposed to the previous two.

The shadow falling over the animals and land (and therefore also us) in the second book, is now turning a somber, inky black.

As with so much in life, sooner or later, we learn to adjust to living with diminished expectations. African savannas once teeming with wild animals not that many decades ago, are now denuded to near-emptiness, and this state becomes the new norm. This was the impetus behind the photographs of the trophy heads of lion, buffalo and kudu to be found towards the end of the book : portraits of decapitated creatures, appearing alive in death, looking out over lands where once they lived and roamed in their multitudes.

But that doesn't mean to say that I have given up hope. In the photographs of the rangers holding the tusks of elephants killed at the hands of man, yes, those elephants were killed as a result of human greed, evil and vanity, but those men are rangers employed by Big Life Foundation, empowered to protect those elephants and other animals that are still gloriously alive.

The notion of portraits of dead animals in the place where they once lived is what also drew me to photographing the creatures in the Calcified series:

I unexpectedly found the creatures - all manner of birds and bats - washed up along the shoreline of Lake Natron in Northern Tanzania. No-one knows for certain exactly how they die, but it appears that the extreme reflective nature of the lake's surface confuses them, and like birds crashing into plate glass windows, they crash into the lake. The water has an extremely high soda and salt content, so high that it would strip the ink off my Kodak film boxes within a few seconds. The soda and salt causes the creatures to calcify, perfectly preserved, as they dry. I took these creatures as I found them on the shoreline, and then placed them in 'living' positions, bringing them back to 'life', as it were. Reanimated, alive again in death.

Over the years, there have been many questions regarding the work I do on the photographs after scanning the negatives. Some people think that the scenes could only have been conjured up through post-production artifice. However, I have always found that with quite endless amounts of patience and luck, the natural world will eventually, unexpectedly provide you with something far better than your imagination - courtesy of Photoshop or the equivalent - could come up with.

So the fundamental integrity and content of what you see in the final image is always there on my original negatives: the animals, the landscape, the sky were all there in that place at that moment. I don't add animals or clone them. I don't composite in a different sky from another time and place. From that point on, using Photoshop, there are varying amounts of tonal adjustments made within the frame before the photo is complete.

However, and again this comes back to film versus digital, I have always loved the unexpected surprises that sometimes happen with film. These surprises - mysterious, indefinable, unrepeatable - are something that would never have happened with the more literal 'perfect' digital capture.

There are also certain effects that I can achieve with a film camera that I could never do with a digital camera. A case in point is the shifting focal planes that are evident in some photos in the previous books, such as *Lion Before Storm- Sitting Profile*. Those are all achieved in camera at time of shooting, using a very crude and simple low-tech technique that could never have been achieved with a digital camera or recreated in Photoshop.

Other early effects, pre-2006, are no longer used: the infra red film to heighten the sense of idyll, the aged stains from other negatives to further convey the feeling of another time. Nowadays, I look for more simplicity.

But I'm talking too much technique here. It's not all about technique. In that regard, I have always been inspired by an unlikely source. In fact, it's an especially unlikely source in the context of an essay about photographing in Africa:

The inspiration is the Beatles albums from the mid-1960's. Listen to those albums, like *Revolver* or *Sgt. Peppers*. Listen to the wondrous invention of songs like "A Day in The Life" or "Tomorrow Never Knows" or "I Am The Walrus". Listen to what they created with just four tracks of analog tape. They didn't need ninety-six technically perfect digital recording tracks and software and a bank of computers. They simply needed imagination and emotion, determination and belief. Technique is merely the means to help convey those, not the be-all and end-all.

So with a thank you to the Beatles and their great producer George Martin, bring on the film, and accompanying cursing, as yet again, the film in the camera runs out just as I'm about to take the impossible - but always to be hoped-for - perfect shot.