

ODE TO AFRICA

With the artistry of a portraitist and the zeal of a conservationist, Nick Brandt finds beauty in the wild.

On This Earth: Photographs from East Africa, by Nick Brandt (Chronicle, \$40), 130 pages, 12½x10½ inches

In this collection of black-and-white nature photographs, Nick Brandt makes many of the world's wildest and most unfettered inhabitants appear elegant and serene. Combining splendid natural backdrops—flowing grasslands, rugged outcroppings, billowing skies—with a portraitist's approach to the animals, these images show not only the reckless beauty of the region's vanishing wilds but also the humanity of its creatures. "I believe that being close to the animal makes a huge difference in the photographer's ability to reveal its personality," Brandt writes in *On This Earth*, noting that he does not use telephoto lenses with his Pentax 67II film camera. "Many of these moments have been achieved by one not-so-simple thing: getting very, very close to the animals."

As a result, the pictures have an uncanny intimacy. "Nick's exquisite photographs arouse deep emotions," writes famed conservationist Jane Goodall in her introduction to the book. "It's almost impossible to look through his work without sensing the personalities of the beings whom he has photographed."

With his images shown in fine-art exhibitions throughout Europe and North America, Brandt brings a compositionally precise and painterly style to a genre dominated by action shots and documentary image making. In addition to heightened contrasts and other visual effects—for more on Brandt's photo techniques see *Technology & Vision*, page 31—he often employs blurred and faded borders to recall the look of antique photographs. Born and raised in England, Brandt studied film and painting at St. Martin's School of Art in London and directed music videos and commercials before embarking on his quest to document the African wilderness. "My images are unashamedly idyllic and romantic, a kind of enchanted Africa," notes the artist. "They are my elegy to a world that is steadily, tragically vanishing." —J.C.

"Cheetah and Cubs, Maasai Mara, 2003."

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African wildlife, for all its threatened beauty, is one of the most overexposed photographic subjects on the planet. It is no mean feat to make pictures of lions, cheetahs, and chimps that elicit an "Oh, my." But the black-and-white wildlife images in **Nick Brandt's** *On This Earth: Photographs from East Africa* do that and more, with a dreamlike, elegiac beauty.

That quality has much to do with the sense of being physically close to Brandt's subjects, yet without fear. His serene creatures often fill the frame, but even when he shows them in context, as in this shot of a cheetah surveying the Kenyan plain, the images don't have

the telltale compression associated with a telephoto. In fact, Brandt shoots with a Pentax SMC 105mm f/2.4—the "normal" lens for his **Pentax 67II** 6x7cm SLR. "With a telephoto lens, the photographer is generally framing the animal against earth or scrub that has little poetry or beauty," says Brandt. "I want to see as much of the sky and landscape as possible."

In lieu of magnifying power, the photographer relies on camera-to-subject distance, adjusted on foot or by car. "I get as close as I can, inching my way forward, often to within a few feet of the animals," he says.

Though old-fashioned legwork and great patience

were key to Brandt's capture of the creatures in *On This Earth*, everything that followed was cutting edge. After scanning his Kodak T-Max 400 negatives, he worked on them in Photoshop, using a 9x12-inch Wacom pen tablet. He printed the results on Epson Stylus Photo 2200 and Stylus Pro 7600 inkjet printers.

But those are only tools, and Brandt, a former painter, came to photography as a way to express his passion for animals. "I could never figure out how to merge my love of them with my visual creativity," he says. "It was only when I visited East Africa that I realized the potential that was there." —RUSSELL HART