

HEARING NATURE'S CRY

The natural world is under threat and in the not too distant future all we might have left is a handful of dust. Photographer and conservationist **Nick Brandt** illustrates this stark reality in his new series, but believes there's still time to change. Anna Bonita Evans reports.

All images © Nick Brandt



Wasteland with Elephant, 2015.



Quarry with Lion, 2014.

Not too long ago the spoilt landscapes you see here were Kenya's savannahs, a paradise rich with nature's bounty. These pictures are rooted in the sobering fact that what little biodiversity is left on this planet is vanishing fast. Industrialisation is charging through east Africa at an alarming rate; as the size and aspirations of its population continue to grow, so does the industrialists' unshakable eye stay focussed on its natural resources.

Witnessing this concrete blanketing of Kenya's wilderness was British photographer Nick Brandt who, for the last 15 years, has photographed the country's complex and ever-diminishing relationship with the natural world. These panoramas are from his new series *Inherit the Dust* – which is a photographic elegy to our urbanisation of the planet.

In early 2014, after releasing the final book in his epic trilogy *On this Earth, A Shadow Falls, Across the Ravaged Land*, Brandt got his next idea: to illustrate the loss of an ecosystem by placing

photographs of wildlife in the landscape where they once roamed. Looking back through his vast archive, Brandt printed the wildlife portraits at the actual size of each animal.

The prints were then installed in different industrial locations across Kenya to produce chilling scenes of man's impact on the planet. Committing himself to the project for just over two years, the results of his vision are now being exhibited in galleries and museums all over the world. The biggest show, now open at Stockholm's Fotografiska, expects to have around 150,000 visitors over the next few months.

Nothing quite prepares you for seeing the panoramic images in exhibition. Viewing the prints (some nearly three metres wide) at Photo London, I found there was no escaping the bleak truth: the magnificent mammals were now ghosts of the landscape, haunting my conscience. As I stood in the gallery I wasn't alone in my reaction, overhearing comments by viewers who also felt a sense of awe and melancholy.

Wanting to discover more, I arranged to speak with Brandt by phone at his California studio, a day or so after him promoting *Inherit the Dust* across Europe. He has a well-founded reputation for being intelligent and approachable. As we began to talk I took to his quiet, charming manner, a quality that no doubt has contributed to his success in the art world and his achievements as a conservationist.

In 2010 Brandt co-founded Big Life Foundation to preserve east Africa's wildlife; six years on, the charity protects almost two million acres of the Amboseli-Kilimanjaro-Tsavo ecosystem. Telling me about Big Life's triumphs, he also shared his fondness for 20th century B&W portraiture, Hieronymus Bosch paintings and why he creates what he does. Here is our conversation:

Anna Bonita Evans: I stayed in the Atlas Gallery stand at Photo London for quite a while, listening to people's reaction to your work. I overheard the words: inspiring, depressing, strange, difficult. Everybody was transfixed by the images. Why do you think people connect so deeply to *Inherit the Dust*?

Nick Brandt: *That's good the work elicited an emotional response. I don't always hear the public's reaction to my images. I hope that the subject matter of this new work is having an impact: at its core, it shows that we – mankind – are destroying the planet. When seen on a computer screen, the images' power is so diminished, so I do think you've got to see the work in large scale to be moved by it.*

The work is a call to action. There's no point in the images being exhibited so far down the line that they're nothing more than historical observation. If the animals are all gone that's just what Inherit the Dust will be, so I feel a real urgency for this work to be seen broadly; showing the work in commercial galleries isn't enough, it has to be exhibited in museums. The series may appear to offer no hope, to be nothing but a dystopian vision of an oncoming environmental apocalypse, but the point is in east Africa there's still time to protect its ecosystems and the animals that live there (albeit fewer and fewer by the day) but we have to act really fast.

ABE: Tell me about the hope aspect of *Inherit the Dust*. ➤



Wasteland with Cheetahs and Children, 2015.

◀ **NB:** I can't get it across in just the photographs so I have to explain it subsequently through essays and interviews. Ecotourism is where the hope comes in. Once you take away the animals there's almost nothing left of monetary value for the local communities. While the wildlife is still there, the villagers can benefit from an extraordinary long-term economic gain. It might not sound that poetic, but in this day and age we have to be pragmatic: this is a continent populated by many people living in poverty and they have to be part of the solution. The ethos of Big Life Foundation is that conservation supports the community so the community supports conservation. Big Life is the biggest employer in the region [which sits across southern Kenya and northern

Tanzania] and nature tourism is the biggest employer as an industry across that area too. You then get to the point where everyone wins: the animals, the local community and the whole planet.

ABE: Do you think photography has the power to change things?

NB: In an ideal world one would like to think you could effect some kind of change. I hope I'm just some incremental cog in the wheel that begins to switch the dialogue towards a growing consciousness of our destruction of the planet. There are some instances where photography does make an actual difference: when my work gets exposure that

leads to collectors and the public donating to Big Life Foundation. Their donations help protect a two million acre ecosystem in east Africa so, at the very least, their donations are contributing to this extraordinary natural area.

Looking at the bigger picture, it's harder to quantify. A lot of the time you're preaching to the converted but people need to look more carefully at the carnage they are helping wreak upon the planet. I want to show the work in China and Africa. It also needs to be seen by industrialists. You'd hope their conscience might be slightly pricked and the pictures will make them think a little more carefully about going in and sticking a cement factory right in the middle

of a wildlife corridor – which is what we're dealing with right now. I want politicians to see it too. It might encourage them to think twice about the short-term economic gain that results in environmental destruction and resultant long-term economic loss. Of course, trying to get politicians in any country to consider and understand the long-term economic gain of environmental protection is a struggle.

ABE: *Inherit the Dust* is impressive not just in its concept but from the production side of it too; you completed each element of the project with meticulous execution. Why is it so important you work in this way? >



Underpass with Elephants (Lean Back, Your Life is on Track), 2015.

◀ **NB:** For each image there are between six to eight negatives per frame so you're talking about a large format negative by the time you're done. I shot that way [with a medium format camera and subsequently stitching the negatives together digitally] out of technical necessity – a standard panoramic camera doesn't even begin to cover the area I wanted. I'd like the pictures to be even larger, but because of the limitations of shooting slow film (ISO 100) in cloudy, overcast light with people in motion I could only get a certain depth of field – if there was a discrepancy between each negative it wouldn't have worked. Also, you think an image is OK in terms of focal planes when seen small, but when you print it up to 12 feet

you discover all types of issues with focal planes that don't quite match up. It was an incredibly complicated process.

The decisive moment, which was at the core of photography for over a century, has been whittled away by technology. Now, on your DSLR you can roll video and [while editing] pluck out a perfectly good quality frame – this makes me push my work further. There's also a certain masochistic obstinacy on my part to shoot film. When I've shot with digital cameras (which I occasionally did for the project as backup) I found the process so easy it disturbed me. There's a part of me that wants to go through the stress, neurosis and paranoia of using film. You don't have the luxury and temptation (or

distraction) to check what you just shot with analogue, so you have to stay utterly focused and in the moment with your subject matter.

ABE: So what's your response to people who say this project could have been created in Photoshop?

NB: I just downloaded the latest version of Photoshop and an introductory tutorial shows you how to take a giraffe, photographed in the savannah, and drop it over a background of the Golden Gate Bridge in about 10 seconds flat. Yes, these things are now possible, but I always want to preserve the fundamental

integrity of the scene in front of me when photographing.

Watching the tutorial video emphasised and reinforced how easy it is to fake things, but those unique interactions you have in real life wouldn't happen. One example I'm increasingly citing is Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) where they drag this ship over a mountain in the Amazon jungle. Nowadays that would have been done in CGI and it would never be as good: the strain and realism of people genuinely hauling that ship would be missing.

It's a constant source of concern for me that the default response for some is: "Oh he just did it in Photoshop." One guy even thought I had superimposed the bottles of glue under the children's noses in the



Street with Lioness and Cub, 2014.

'There's a certain masochistic obstinacy on my part to shoot film. When I've shot with digital cameras (which I occasionally did for the project as back-up) I found the process so easy it disturbed me.'

image Underpass with Elephants (Lean Back, Your Life is on Track), but this reflects on the person viewing it and their lack of imagination. I hope that seeing the panels so integrated into the landscapes – with the objects and occasionally people in front of them, and with the panels so banged up – that this helps give them a feeling of their genuine three-dimensionality within the landscape. The panels were bashed around, lifted up and screwed together on site so

cracks started to appear. My team and I deliberately further distressed the panels by tearing off more of the paper. I was so paranoid during the shoots that I would erect 100m long, six foot high fences just to stop people photographing the set on their phones. Once an idea is out, someone can knock it together in Photoshop in a matter of weeks and that's it, my project is dead in the water.



Inherit the Dust by Nick Brandt is published by Edwyne Houk Editions in hardback at £45.
 ISBN 978-0-6925-2054-3
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Learn more about Big Life Foundation at biglife.org