



LIONS HEAD TO  
HEAD, MAASAI  
MARA 2008

'This shot can be read as sentimental,' says Nick Brandt. 'There is often a tendency to anthropomorphise, so people might look at this and think, "Ah! Isn't that sweet." But that is not what is going on. The male had simply come over to greet the lioness. That is all.'

# ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

London-born photographer **Nick Brandt** believes animals are as worthy of life as humans. His portraits of them are elegant and intimate, depicting a dream-like world of beauty, strength and vulnerability. But he has an urgent mission: he wants to help raise awareness of the issues that are putting these magnificent creatures under threat, and capture the majesty of East African wildlife before it disappears.

Interview by **Peter Browne**



GIRAFFES  
BATTLING IN  
SUN, MAASAI  
MARA 2006

'This is one of three shots in the book of bull giraffes battling. They are an exception to my rule of taking "still portraits" of animals, but I found the ballet of shapes they made quite extraordinary. I have never seen it myself, but these battles can end in death.'



NICK BRANDT TAKES photographs of animals to document a vanishing world, but his work is nothing like the brutal documentary genre we have come to associate with wildlife photography; the terrible fear in a young buffalo's eyes as lion rips open its flank; a young cheetah cub tasting warm blood for the first time.

'I photograph animals in the same way I photograph human beings,' says the former video director, who fell in love with Africa while shooting a Michael Jackson video in Tanzania. 'If I was taking a photograph of Jack Nicholson, for example, it wouldn't be with his mouth full of fillet of beef, or playing basketball. I would photograph him simply presenting himself, not doing anything in particular, in the manner of Richard Avedon or Yousuf Karsh. There are hundreds of photographers who can take better action shots than me; I am interested in capturing a moment of being, of quiet contemplation, rather than of doing.'

Astonishingly, Brandt never uses a telephoto lens, preferring to get as close

to his subjects as possible both physically and, you get the impression, spiritually. 'Every creature has a spirit, a life force,' he says. 'Descartes, the French philosopher, said animals are just emotionless machines, but anyone who has a pet knows that's not true. Animals have feelings, of course they do. I try to show that, and also that every creature has a spirit and an equal right to life.'

Always shooting in black and white (colour delivers too modern a sensibility to capture a disappearing world, he says), using old-fashioned, medium-format negative film, Brandt has spent up to six weeks on location in Kenya's Amboseli National Park or Maasai Mara without taking a single photograph. 'I can't direct animals like humans,' he says, 'so I have to wait. And wait. And wait. In the past, it has taken two years to get a specific shot. All I can do, in the words of Samuel Beckett, is "Try again. Fail again. Fail better".'

Failure has, on occasion, worked in Brandt's favour. The accidental bleeding of light onto film creates a celestial

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ELEPHANT  
DRINKING,  
AMBOSALI 2007

'This elephant is one of the last half dozen old bulls with big tusks left in Kenya. The rest have been poached. When I first started photographing eight or nine years ago, there were bulls with tusks down to the ground. They are all gone now. Visually, I really like the fact it looks like it is shot on a sound stage. As a video director, I used to build sets like this, with a painted sky and blended foreground, but this is the real thing.'







WILDEBEEST  
ARC, MAASAI  
MARÁ 2006

'There is something incredibly courageous about this scene. We had waited for hours as more and more wildebeest gathered on the other side of the river and then, who knows why, one of them made the first move. Then – and I have hairs standing up just remembering the moment – they all started to cross. So many of them die in the process, you just want to cheer as each one reaches safety. But sometimes, and this is really disgusting, tourist buses will position themselves on the opposite bank and block the wildebeests' exit so they tumble down the bank and drown trying to cross back over. Tourism is vital to the survival of these creatures, but it has to be responsible tourism.'





BABOONS IN PROFILE,  
AMBOSELI 2009

"You know, baboons are not physically attractive, especially the males. And constantly playing with their private parts does not help endear them. This photograph was taken when there was blazing sunshine and nothing else to photograph. I had never photographed baboons before, and I've tried again many times since but, as is so often the way, the first time was the best."



PORTRAIT OF  
LIONESS  
AGAINST ROCK,  
SERENGETI 2007

"She was quite simply the most beautiful lioness I'd ever seen. How many women have beards as fine as hers? The rock she was lying under was the perfect backdrop to graphically delineate her. I just had to wait for her to sit up and present herself for her portrait."



BUFFALO WITH  
LOWERED  
HEAD, LAKE  
NAKURU 2007



PORTRAIT OF  
ZEBRAS  
TURNING HEADS,  
NGORONGORO  
CRATER 2005

"A lot of people think this is Photoshopped because the zebras' heads are virtually identical. It isn't. This is just what zebras do. That raised hoof is my favourite thing about the photograph. It was shot at Ngorongoro in Tanzania. Unfortunately, there are too many tourists there now. It is being loved to death."

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light-shaft; a damaged negative pushes an image too perfect, too beautiful, into a less romantic realm. These are what he calls his 'glorious cock-ups'.

Yet Brandt has a very deliberate message to get across. He does not use sepia because it is pretty; he uses it as short-hand to represent a bygone era, to fan nostalgia for a world that is too-fast disappearing, particularly now, with the renewed threat of poaching. With elephant tusks increasing in value from US\$400 a kilo in 2004 to US\$6,000 a kilo today, 'the demand for ivory has once again escalated,' he says. 'Cartels are demanding more and more ivory for the burgeoning middle class in China, and for impoverished Africans the temptation to poach has become too hard to resist.'

*A Shadow Falls* is the second in a trilogy of books that started with *On This Earth*, published in 2005. It begins with photographs taken in the lush abundance of Africa after the rains, when all seems plump and hopeful. As the book

progresses, the landscapes become drier and drier as water seeps away and moisture evaporates. The final image in the book is of an ostrich egg marooned on a dry, cracked landscape.

"The third book in the trilogy will complete the sentence 'On this earth, a shadow falls...'" says Brandt. 'It will further explore the destruction of paradise. I feel I am nearly done with idealism, of trying to capture the beauty of the animal world as it is now, before it is destroyed. I cannot ignore what is happening anymore, and the final book will go one step further [than *A Shadow Falls*] and show the reality of what is threatening paradise.'

*The exhibition 'Nick Brandt: A Shadow Falls' is on from 8 September to 3 October 2009 at The Air Gallery, 32 Dover Street, London W1, with all work for sale. See [www.atlasgallery.com](http://www.atlasgallery.com) for information. The exhibition launch is in aid of Tusk Trust ([www.tusk.org](http://www.tusk.org)). 'A Shadow Falls' is published this month by Abrams, £29.99*