

GALLERY

Elegiac call of the wild

Photographer Nick Brandt is on an 'obsessive pursuit' to record East Africa's vanishing world.

By BRIAN TRIPLETT
Times Staff Writer

THE lioness sits on the plains of the Masai Mara game reserve in Kenya, looking out toward the wide-open space and the African sky. The photograph is an image of contemplation and relaxation, one that makes you look at the animal and realize maybe she's not so different from humans after all.

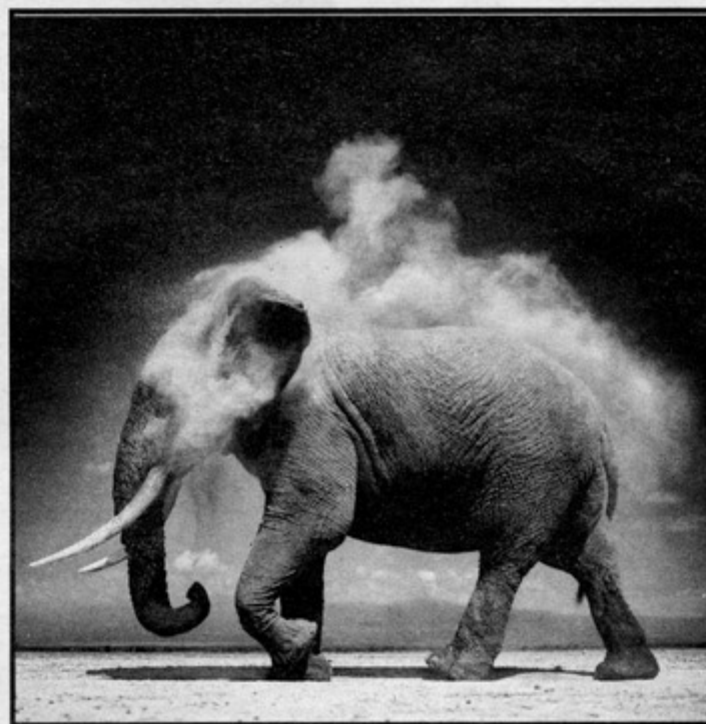
What you don't see, the person behind this sepia-toned portrait, is also of interest. His name is Nick Brandt, and he has photographed animals among the landscapes of eastern Africa for 4½ years. He refuses to use telephoto lenses. In fact, he says he doesn't even own one. That means what you're seeing is how it looked from Brandt's vantage point. In this case, just seconds

away from an encounter with the lioness, if she had turned around and decided to charge.

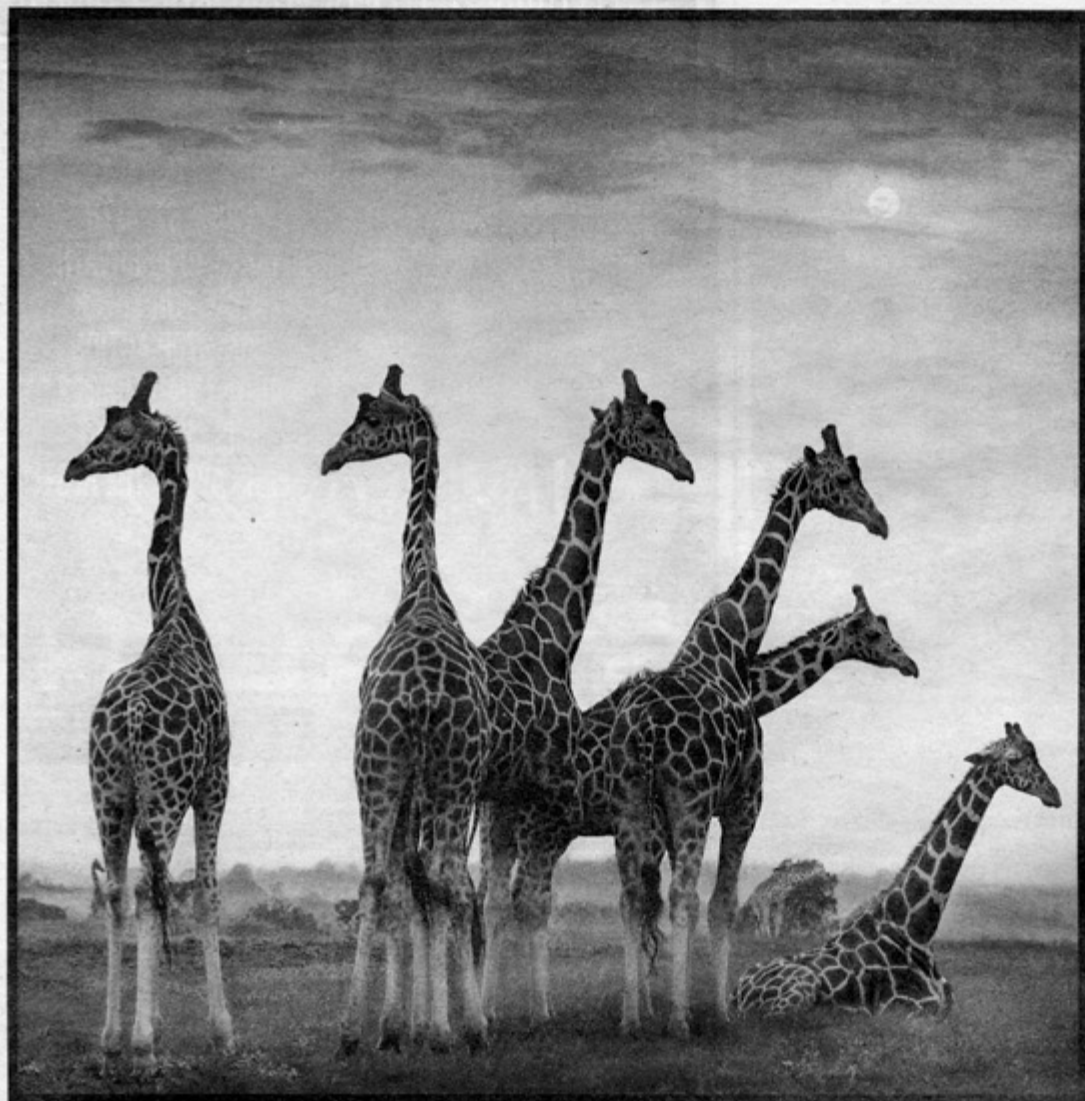
But so far, after cruising around in a Land Rover with experienced guides during eight trips to Kenya and Tanzania to take photos, Brandt has been lucky. Not just lucky that things have gone fairly smoothly — although he has a few good stories to tell at dinner parties. But lucky that he has been able to capture intimate images from close range of animals such as lions, cheetahs, elephants, hippos, rhinos, chimpanzees and giraffes, among others, in the context of their environment to show to the world.

"This is basically now an obsessive pursuit," Brandt said. "It's basically my elegy to a vanishing world. This is a world that is disappearing, and it's my goal to record this world, to capture this world in my way before it disappears."

Thirty-six of Brandt's photos can be seen on display for the first time in Los Angeles, where the 38-year-old has lived for 14 years after moving from London, at the Stephen Cohen Gallery until Aug. 27. Brandt also has a book that will be released in October titled "On This Earth," featuring dozens of his photos.



'ELEPHANT WITH EXPLODING DUST': Amboseli National Park, Kenya, 2004, from "On This Earth" exhibit.

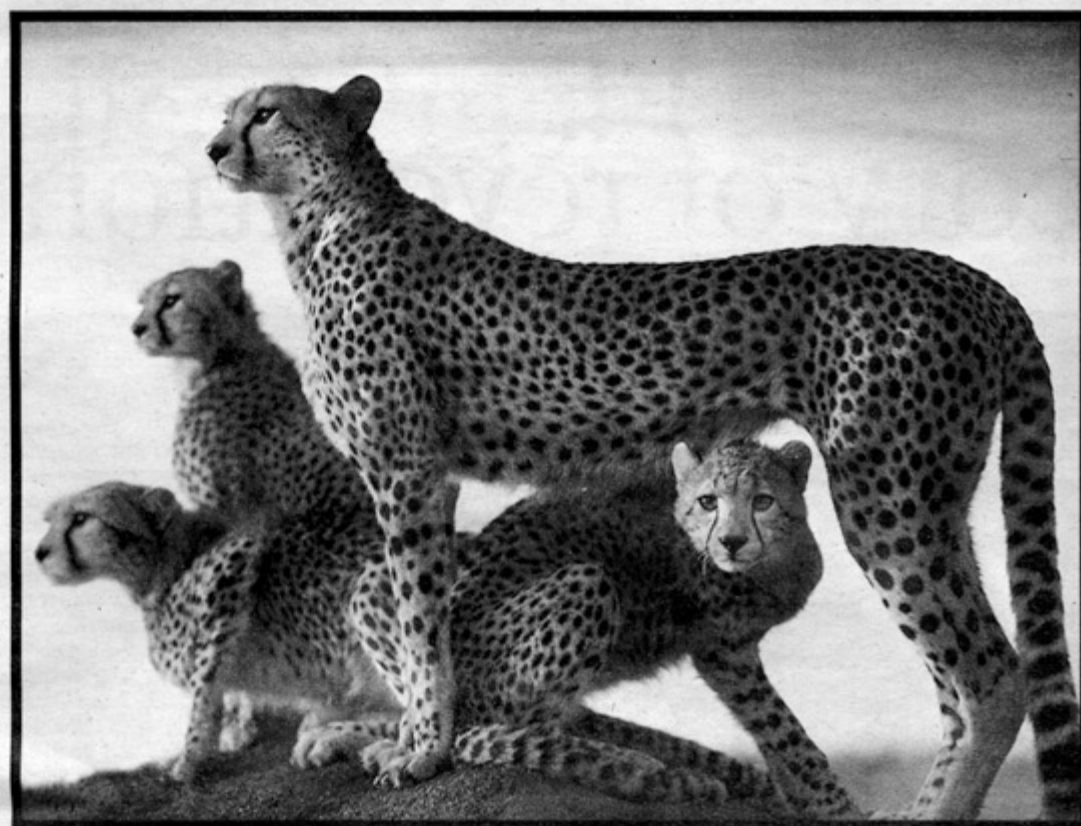


'GIRAFFE FAN': Aberdares National Park, Kenya, 2000.

Photographs by NICK BRANDT Stephen Cohen Gallery



'ELEPHANT MOTHER AND TWO BABIES': Serengeti National Park, Tanzania, 2002.



'CHEETAH AND CUBS': Masai Mara National Reserve, Kenya, 2003.

Brandt's background is in directing music videos, but he now makes a living solely as a fine-art photographer.

"All that other stuff, that's in the past now," he said.

But it was actually his former career that introduced Brandt to the beauty of East Africa. While directing the Grammy-nominated music video for Michael Jackson's "Earth Song" in the mid-'90s, he realized the images found in that part of the world were something he wanted to go back and explore.

"There's something about the animals and landscapes of East Africa that is so mythical," Brandt said. "The animals are so iconic."

"For years I've been trying to merge my visual creativity with my love of animals. And when I went to Africa and I saw these animals, I realized there was a way to do it in a way nobody had ever done before."

FOR now, Brandt has no interest in photographing animals in other regions of the world or using his talent in any other area of photography. And he makes it clear that he considers himself a fine-art photographer, wanting to continue to create images similar to portraits.

"I have no interest in capturing these animals in action. There are a zillion photographers who can do this," Brandt said. "I'm trying to capture the animals in just being — their personalities, their souls — and photograph them in the exact same way as if I was photograph-



'WINDSWEPT LION': Serengeti, 2002.

Nick Brandt
On This Earth: Photographs From East Africa

Where: Stephen Cohen Gallery, 7358 Beverly Blvd., L.A.

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays

Ends: Aug. 27

Info: (323) 937-5525;
www.stephencohengallery.com

ing a human being."

Brandt said he has the luxury of getting fairly close to the animals because they have gotten used to human interaction with

the increase of tourism in the area. But aside from occasionally hopping out of the vehicle to pursue chimpanzees or giraffes on foot, he stays put in the Land Rover, waiting until the animals present themselves for the perfect portrait.

Brandt is there strictly for artistic purposes, but inevitably it can also become an adventure.

He sums up a series of events that many people would use for hours of storytelling like this:

"I have been charged by an elephant. I've been charged by a hippo. I've had lions coming at me, and I've been kicked by a giraffe."

And by the way, he's going back for two months this December.