



Vanishing Paradise

There is more to the exquisite fine art photography of Nick Brandt than meets the eye, because these are images that are designed to serve as an elegy to an amazing but fast disappearing world **WORDS** Terry Hope **PICTURES** Nick Brandt

In the words of the famous 60s song, "You don't know what you've got till it's gone," and tragically that's exactly what's happening on the plains of Africa, as its unique wildlife continues to be harried into oblivion. It's a disaster that no-one seems to be able to stop and those like Nick Brandt who are witnessing it all first hand are helpless onlookers, unable to do anything but record the vanishing beauty for the sake of generations yet to come.

When his first book 'On this Earth' appeared in 2005 it created a sensation, with its startlingly different interpretation of a part of the world that most people thought they knew so well, and now Brandt has followed up with 'A Shadow Falls,' which is destined to be the second book in a trilogy. Once again it's full of highly distinctive work which is presented in the classic Nick Brandt style, with the animals seen within their environment and a black and white approach used throughout.

Brandt has been visiting this part of the world for the past fourteen years and has seen for himself the retreat of the wildlife during that time. "There have been massive changes," he says. "And it's all happened even faster than a pessimist like myself imagined. In 1996 I first drove the main road from Nairobi down through southern Kenya to Arusha in northern Tanzania. Along the way, in completely unprotected areas, I saw giraffes, zebras, gazelles, impalas, wildebeest. A few months ago I made the same journey: I didn't see a single wild animal the entire four-hour drive. It's not that they've moved elsewhere. It's that they've

been wiped out, turned into bush meat.

"Once you subtract all the unprotected areas of the world, the 'officially protected' areas of Africa left over for these animals is frighteningly meagre and vulnerable. Everything really is imminently finite. When I see a dead baby zebra caught in a poacher's snare in the middle of the most famous national park in Africa, or when I see an elephant with half his trunk missing, ripped off by a similar snare, I know that nowhere is safe."

Born in England, Brandt moved to California where he became a high profile maker of videos for stars such as Michael Jackson, Moby and XTC. "I started as a painter, then moved into filmmaking during college, and only came to photography eight years ago," he says. "The reason was that I was more and more desperate to combine my passionate love of animals and wild places, and what they mean to me, with my need to create visually."

"I fell in love with East Africa and the animals when I first visited in 1996 whilst directing Earth Song, a music video for Michael Jackson, and I gradually made my way back there over the next few years. And then in 2000, I started taking photos seriously there for the first time. So the animals came first, photography came second, merely as the conduit to express my feelings about the animals and their environment."

What makes Brandt very different to others who have been inspired to do the same thing is that he is very much approaching his subject from the point of view of producing fine art, rather than conventional wildlife photography. This means that he's not a lover of long lenses, nor is he into the latest high-spec DSLRs or one of those photographers who dives into a safari >

LEFT: Lions Head to Head, Masai Mara 2008

vehicle and roars off in pursuit of animals to photograph.

Instead his photographs are quietly observed, can take an age to come together and have a soft edge to them which reflects the beauty of the occasion. They are also produced using gear that is decidedly 'low tech' in this day and age, with Pentax 67 cameras and three lenses - the 55mm, 105mm and 200mm - covering all his requirements.

"I'm driven ever more crazy by all the impracticalities of this camera now that I have the knowledge of ease of digital," he confesses, "but the pain and frustration are still worth it for the unexpected surprises that occur occasionally with film, and for a few things I just cannot do with anything other than a film camera. Regarding longer lenses, I once tried a 300mm on the Pentax (equivalent of 150mm in the 35mm format) and hated the look - it was too generic telephoto."

Wherever possible Brandt uses Kodak's T-Max 100 because of the finer grain that it gives him, and this is crucial particularly when his massive 80in wide panoramic prints are being produced, with the animal taking up perhaps just a tiny part of the negative. At such times quality is everything, and the classic methods are still capable of delivering

Has the photographer been tempted however by the quality that a new breed of camera such as the Canon EOS 1Ds Mark III, Nikon D3 and Sony A900 is capable of delivering? "I've seen big advances in the last couple of years," he says, "and I do need to go and experiment, but my tendency is to stick with film for the final part of the trilogy. The cameras come in for a beating in Africa, and get blasted constantly by layers and layers of dust and I don't think the high end digital models could hold up in that environment. Also again, the unexpected surprises of film cannot be beaten. And finally there are crude techniques that I sometimes use with my Pentaxes that could not be duplicated with a digital camera."

Aside from the use of heavyweight mechanical film cameras, Brandt's technique is startlingly straightforward and revolves around the simple art of patience. "It's all about long hours and being terrified to 'walk away' for a second just in case that is the exact moment something great happens," he says. "However, if it's blinding sunlight and cloudless skies day after day - which I hate aesthetically - it can be very tough to keep going. The longest I've waited? I waited seventeen days with lion who slept all day every day under the baking sun until finally on the eighteenth day, a storm came in, and

OPPOSITE PAGE: Giraffes with Dust Devil, Amboseli 2007 **RIGHT:** Elephant Drinking, Amboseli 2007 **BELOW RIGHT:** Abandoned Ostrich Egg, Amboseli 2007

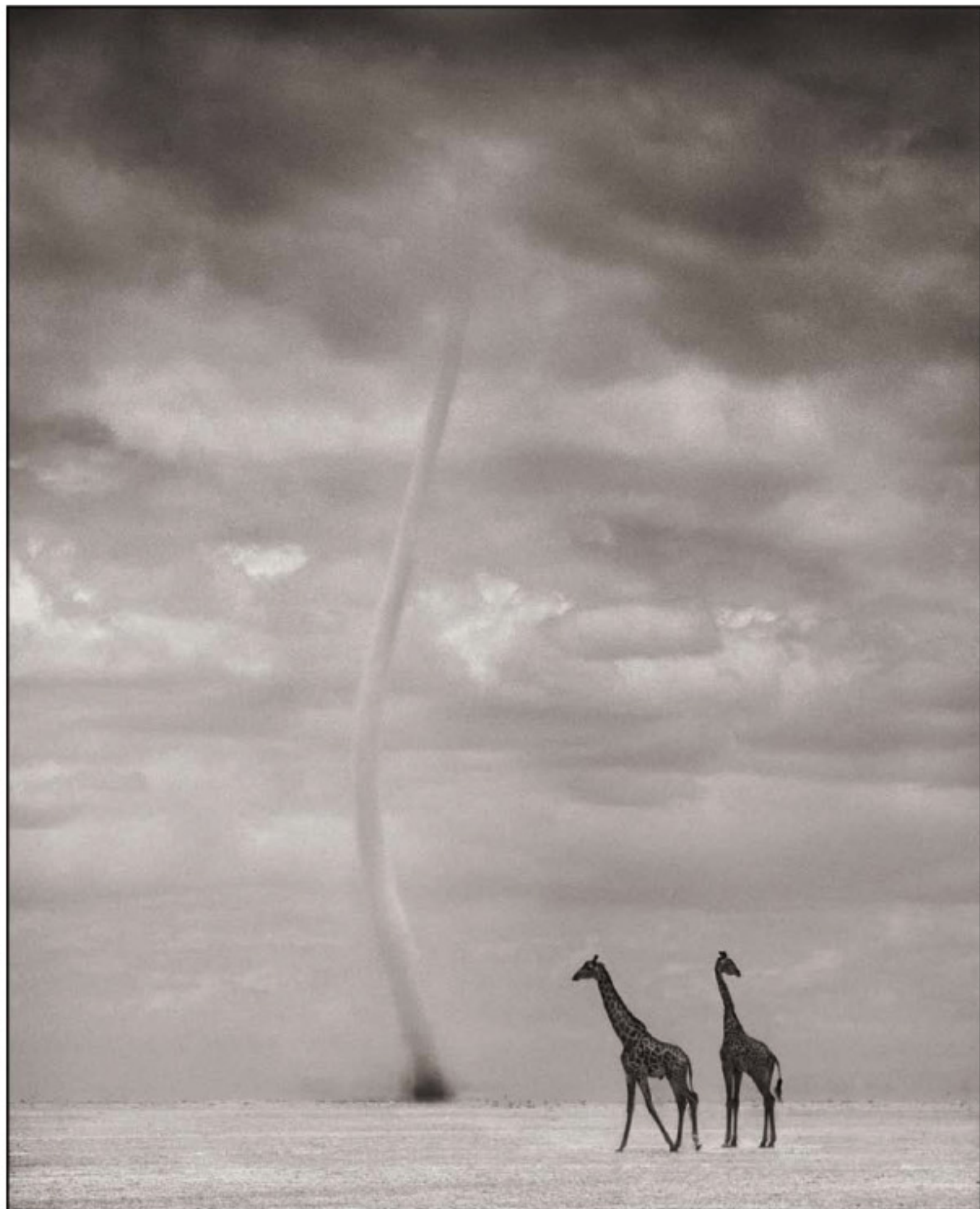
the moment the wind hit him like a freight train, he sat up. He became 'Lion before Storm - Sitting Profile!'

"I waited fourteen days before the cheetahs in 'Cheetah and Cubs Lying on Rock' all lined up in the right landscape, skyscape and light. And I waited twenty days without getting a single shot before all the giraffes lined up on the plains in 'Giraffes in Evening Light.' So many people think this photo is Photoshopped, but all those giraffes were there in those exact places under that exact sky with rays of sun. Anyone who doesn't believe me is welcome to come over and look at my contact sheet. It's frustrating sometimes - you almost feel like you have to use a less good frame because otherwise some people will think you faked it. But the truth is that you just waited long enough or got lucky."

There is regular debate also about Brandt's Photoshop technique, with some critics loving to scrutinise his work to figure out exactly what's been done. The fact is that the photographer has never denied the involvement of Photoshop technique - in fact he has declared in the past that it's the 'world's best darkroom.' However there is no doubt that he takes great care that his final images are true to their origins and he bristles at any suggestion that post production work has made the work any less real.

"Even though I use heavy ND grads and red filters, there's still a lot more grading that is usually done in Photoshop," he says. "Pulling more details out of the highlights and shadows is the main thing, but I draw the line at adding in animals, cloning them, etc, and my skies will all be from the actual time and place. I do bracket sometimes if I get a chance to get a better exposure on the sky from another frame, but it's shot at the same time. I only ever added in one sky, in a photo called 'Giraffe Fan' in 2000. I don't soften the images in post at all - any 'softening' is all done in-camera at the time of shooting, with a low-tech, on-the-fly crude version of swing and tilt."

In an average year Brandt spends around three months engaged in intense dawn to dusk days and his return rate on images that he considers good enough to turn into a fine art print is excruciatingly low. He's now working on his third book in the series and, given the pessimism he has regarding the future for the diversity of wildlife that he's been recording in Kenya, he's on a mission. >



“It’s about long hours and being terrified to walk away in case something happens”



“I’m presuming it will be another four years before the trilogy is finished”

against the clock to get the images that he needs. “I’ll work as quickly as I can with everything changing (for the worse) so fast,” he says, “but given how long it takes me to get photos I think are good enough to release, I’m presuming it will be another four years before the final part of the trilogy is ready. Why three parts? Three acts - beginning, middle and end.”

The three titles of the book will ultimately form one consecutive sentence: *On This Earth, A Shadow Falls...*, and the work is set to become progressively darker as Brandt moves away from the paradise that he depicted in his first book. The photographer is as yet unsure of what he’ll move on to once the trilogy is finished, but he’s convinced that he will continue to photograph animals. “I kind of consider that my mission. But where or which - I don’t know right now.”

As well as fulfilling the prime aim of drawing attention to the plight of Africa’s wildlife, Brandt has also seen his fine art work attract a serious following, which is reflected in the prices that his prints are currently attracting. The US collectors’ market is leading the way with a number of galleries stocking photographic prints, while Brandt perceives the market in the UK to be far more niche. There is also much less

resistance to pigment prints from high-end digital prints, with traditional prints almost appearing these days to be the aberration.

Prices for 22x28in prints in editions of 25 range from £1800-£9000, 40x48in editions of 15 are priced from £4300 to £28,000 and, in a few instances, 40x80in and 60x80in prints in editions of 8 are selling at up to £45,000. The very best images also eventually make it to a Platinum/Palladium edition of 25 printed at 30x44ins, and these are priced from £6000 to £25,000.

“I have three galleries representing me in the US - Fahey/Klein in Los Angeles, Staley+Wise in New York, and photo-eye in Santa Fe,” says Brandt. “And there are three galleries in Europe - CameraWork in Berlin, Atlas Gallery in London and Young Gallery in Brussels.”

Perversely, Brandt still uses his five-year-old Epson Stylus Pro 9600 44in LFP to output his work. “I tried the 9600 for some time, and eventually traded it in for Epson’s last unopened 9600,” he says. “When they moved from Ultrachrome to K3 inks (both fully pigment), they made the black inks cooler, which is less good for my sepia toning. Also the print head technology of the 9600, although half the speed, works better with the heavy 350gm Hahnemühle Museum



TOP: Elephants Walking Through Grass, Amboseli 2006

ABOVE: Lion before storm: sitting profile, Masai Mara

Etching paper I use - it lays down the ink more smoothly in uniform mid and dark tone areas on the heavily curled Museum Etching than the 9600 print head does. For the 60x80 prints, the Canon iPF 9100 is used, but I prefer the Epsoms. Prints are then sprayed with three coats of UV Print Shield.”

The high prices being achieved are a reward for excellence and originality, but there is still a sombre message behind this exquisite work. In this case not only are the prints a limited edition but so are the subjects themselves. ■

● Contact: www.nickbrandt.com

● A Shadow Falls by Nick Brandt, published by Abrams Books, ISBN-10: 081095415X, £29.99