



# PRO FILE: Nick Brandt

By marrying high-end fine art values to wildlife photography skills, Nick Brandt has achieved a unique style that is attracting collectors from all around the world

WORDS Terry Hope PICTURES Nick Brandt

**N**ICK BRANDT IS ONE of those photographers who is, quite simply, impossible to pin down. Born in England, he moved to California where he became a high profile maker of music videos for stars such as Michael Jackson. It was actually while directing the video for Michael Jackson's 'Earth Song' in Tanzania in 1996 that he first began his love affair with Africa.

Having enjoyed a deep connection with animals since childhood, and sharing his Californian home with a menagerie of pets, it was the beautiful and graceful African creatures and the wild, sweeping landscape they inhabit that particularly appealed to Nick. Around five years ago, he decided to leave behind the glamour of the music business to concentrate on becoming a photographer.

He made his mind up from the outset, however, that he was not going to attempt to emulate the litany of wildlife photographers who had found themselves drawn to this charismatic continent, but that he would approach his chosen subject in a highly individual manner. The result was a decision to tackle wildlife in a way

that was almost diametrically opposite to the norm: using a black & white fine art style, a medium-format camera and a portrait or wide-angle lens.

In short, Nick set about photographing his subjects almost as though they were human, and he himself insists that he is not a wildlife photographer at all in the conventional sense of the word.

Right now Nick is one of the hottest names on the fine art circuit. There is no killing, no life in the raw in a Nick Brandt photograph: rather he looks for the beauty in his subject, and will track animals for days in order to achieve the perfect composition. The result is exquisite images that have already become classics, and the reputation of this photographer is set to grow and grow.

We caught up with Nick while he was on yet another expedition to East Africa, and he replied to our questions while sheltering in the Land Rover that acts as his mobile office in the savannah, patiently waiting for a cheetah and her four cubs to maybe get up and do something interesting.





■ **TERRY HOPE:** What led to your interest in photography?

**NICK BRANDT:** I never planned to be a photographer, but I had always wanted to somehow capture my passion for animals visually, and it was only when I visited East Africa that I realised that there was a way to achieve this – through photography, and in a way very personal to me.

■ **How did you become established as a professional?**

I went on my first serious photographic trip to East Africa with a Pentax 67 in December 2000. Quite a few of the images in my first book *On This Earth* are from that trip. I started going back, getting my first gallery representation in 2002, and first shows in 2003/2004.

■ **Photographing wild creatures in this way is something I've never seen before. What led you to this area of fine art?**

The desire to express my view of what I find important and beautiful in the world. I had never been anything more than a 35mm snapper prior to this. I was always frustrated by the smallness of the 35mm

format, and so I bought the Pentax 67 for my first trip.

■ **How did you set about establishing a technique that would allow you to achieve the results you wanted?**

It was never a conscious thing. From the outset, I knew I was only interested in shooting without a



## FOR ME, PHOTOSHOP IS THE WORLD'S BEST DARKROOM. WONDERFUL CONTROL

telephoto so as to capture the view of the animals within the context of their environment. My style, whatever that is, was surprisingly established from the very first rolls of film shot, even the use of infrared.

I love the detail you get in larger negatives. I don't even especially like ISO 400 film on 120 format – I'd much rather always use the finest grain film possible. Even though the Pentax is the most user-friendly MF camera in this environment, it is indeed bloody impractical to work with! Having only 10 shots per roll, having f/4 as my base – which since I'm addicted to my 0.9 ND grad and red filter, really slows my speed down on even bright days – isn't easy. As for using infrared in this context – I cannot tell you the number of great shots I've lost messing around with infrared focus and filters. It's a miracle the animals are still even in frame half the time by the time I've finished dithering around with everything. But I always feel it's worth all the losses for the gains of an MF neg.

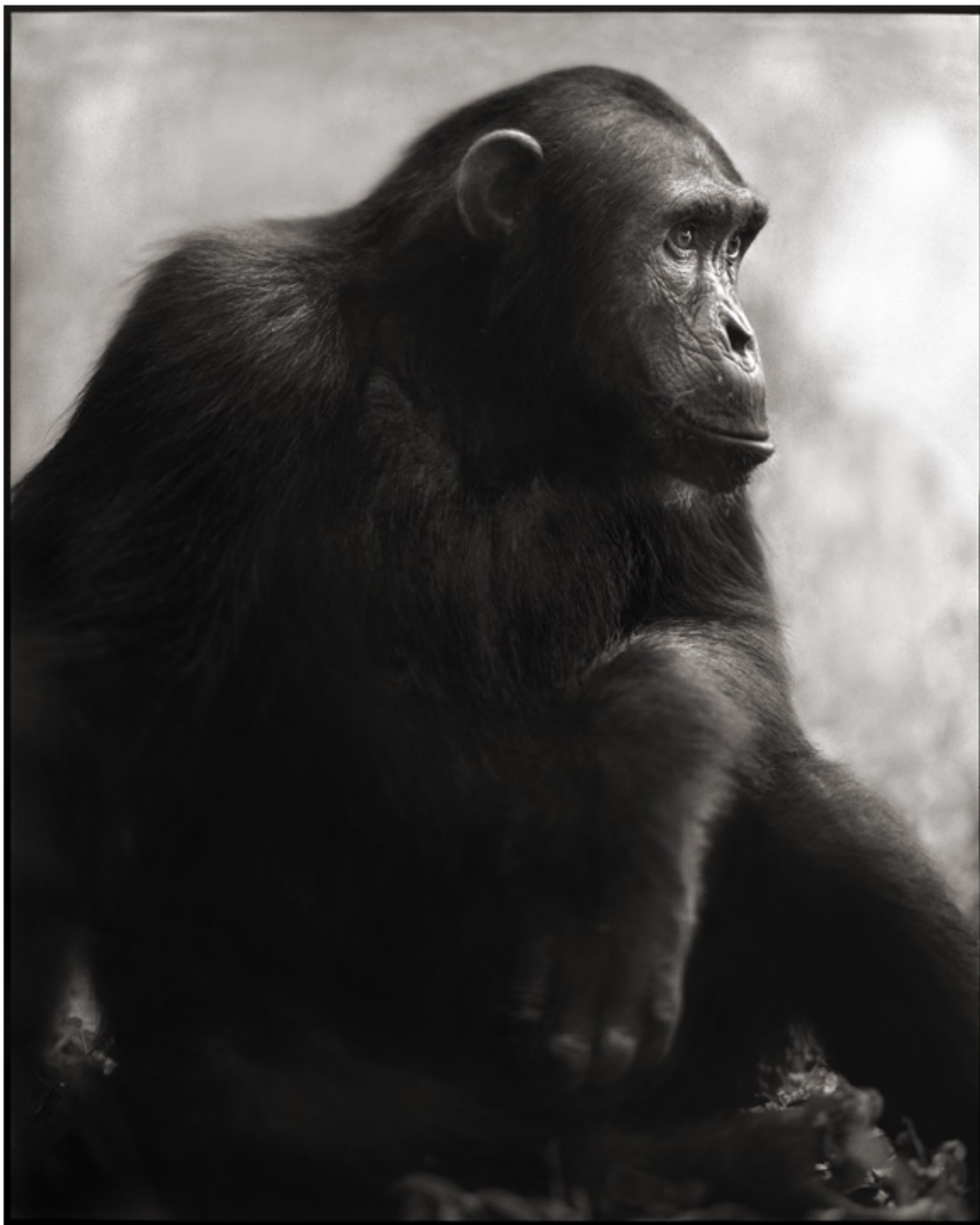
■ **You usually work fairly close to your subjects – what lenses do you use?**

I have three – a 55mm, 105mm and 200mm. So my longest lens is the 35mm equivalent of a 100mm, which hardly constitutes telephoto. However, I believe that you wouldn't shoot a portrait of a human being on a 500mm lens from 100 feet away and expect to capture their personality. I feel the same way about photographing animals. So I photograph animals the same way I would photograph humans – the only difference is I can't tell the animal to turn their head to the right and step back six inches.

■ **There has been a lot of debate about how you achieve the unusual depth-of-field effects within your pictures. Is there some special technique you use?**

My photographer friend Rocky Schenck has always told me, never reveal your work methods. All I can say is that it is always done in camera, on the neg.





■ **How much of a role does Photoshop play within your work? You said once you thought that if Ansel Adams was working today, he would have used Photoshop, but is there a limit to what you personally would feel comfortable doing with it?**

For me, Photoshop is the world's best darkroom. It allows me wonderful control over my grading in a way I never had in the traditional darkroom (which I abandoned in 2001). It enables me to pull huge amounts of details out of shadow areas while keeping highlights from blowing out.

Yes, there is a limit to what I personally feel comfortable doing. For example, since the Fuji 6x17 camera is too impractical and slow to use with animals, for my occasional panoramic shots I take two quick exposures in succession, and stitch the negs together.

But I would never clone animals to increase their numbers, or use plates of landscapes and composite the animals in. That's a very bad,

slippery slope and besides, what happens in the real world is better than anything I can come up with in Photoshop.

■ **Would you ever work in colour or with a digital camera?**

No to colour. I like the way black & white makes you focus on the shapes, the graphic nature of one's subject. Also, black & white has a more appropriate aesthetic sensibility for what I'm shooting. Colour has a very modern feel on the whole and since my feeling is that many of these animals will soon be gone, and are therefore from a bygone era, the black & white aesthetic further heightens that impression.

Digital – I would only use digital once it is as good as a medium-format negative, and I could be sure the camera's electronics wouldn't break down under the brutal conditions my cameras go through.

■ **I understand that you produce digital prints for sale. Has anyone**

I WANT MY IMAGES TO BE AN ELEGY TO A WORLD THAT IS TRAGICALLY VANISHING

**ever refused to buy a print because of its digital origins?**

I keep asking all my dealers if people are saying no to buying my prints because they are digitally printed, and to my pleasant surprise, apparently no one ever has – not in the US, UK or Germany where I have had my shows.

■ **Is your specific area of fine art photography a particularly difficult one in which to try to make a living?**

I have fortunately hit upon a niche ☉





that currently enables me to live purely on the sales of my photos, without having to resort to any commercial work (which I'm sure I would be poor at anyway). This is just as well, since the cost of the trips to Africa is astronomical.

■ **How long do you typically spend on a project?**

Typically, I go for four- to six-week trips. Any longer and I get burned out as I work intensely – out before dawn, back after dusk, no breaks, all day every day. Some of my best shots are taken in the middle of the day, in the conventionally 'worst' light.

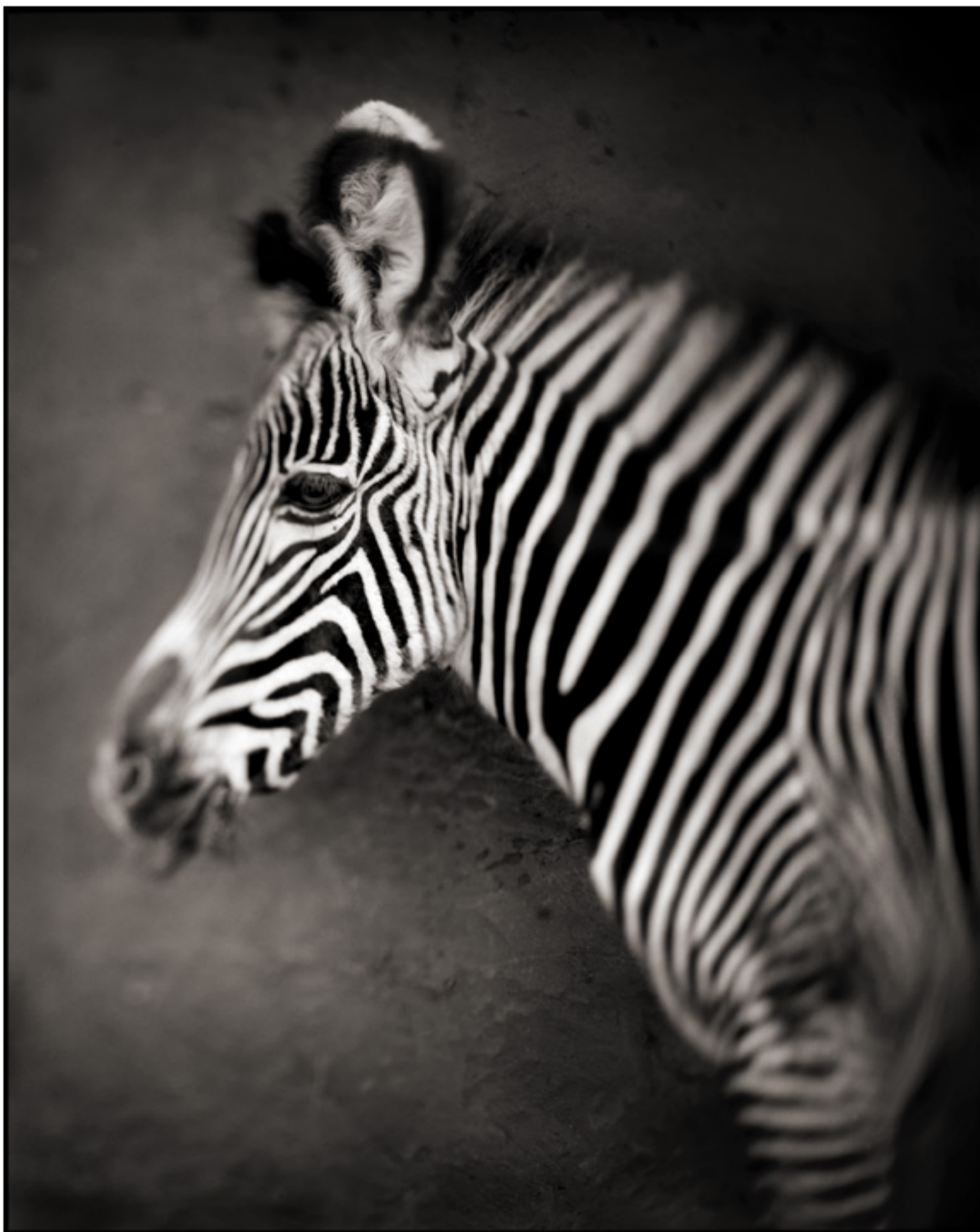
■ **Do you work with a guide and from a vehicle?**

Yes, almost always with a guide from a vehicle. There's a few occasions where I'm on foot – with the chimps, and one particular giraffe herd.

■ **Have you experienced any dangerous moments?**

Not yet, but you can never get too cocky or nonchalant.





■ **Is it just African animals that you are interested in?**

Right now, it's just Africa, and specifically East Africa. There's something about the animals here – their mythic, mythological, iconic quality – and the landscapes that they inhabit that moves me tremendously, but, in time I may photograph animals in other parts of the world.

■ **Do you feel your images have a role to play in raising awareness about the pressures humankind is putting on wild animals?**

I hope they can. I want my images to achieve two things in this regard – to be an elegy to a world that is tragically vanishing, to make people see what beauty is disappearing. Also, to try and show that animals are sentient creatures equally as worthy of life as humans. ■

