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ARTS REVIEWS

Identifying the positive in negatives



Work on the wild side ... one of Nick Brandt's epic prints from *On this Earth*.
Photo: Nick Brandt

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From the savannah to the Left Bank, the photographic still captures a creative form in perpetual motion, writes Robert McFarlane.

Photography reveals its past, present and a possible future in a series of provocative exhibitions this week.

At Sandra Byron Gallery, the English photographer Nick Brandt presents *On this Earth*, an innovative view of the wildlife of east Africa. Brandt photographs the extravagant creatures of the African plains with an approach that is part portraiture and part 19th-century idealisation of these impressive animals.

He ignores the convenience (and safety) of a telephoto lens and instead gets very close, "often within a few feet", and tries to see "as much of the sky and landscape as possible".

Brandt doesn't explain how he can work so intimately with dangerous creatures but says it is possible to see them within their environment and get a real sense of connection, to the point that they are "almost presenting themselves for a studio portrait".

The best of these large digital prints convey views of animals occupying spaces in which they appear remarkably unthreatened. In one, taken using infra-red film, Brandt shows a giraffe at the centre of a planetary Eden, standing serenely beneath eerily highlighted branches of a tree (infra-red film exaggerates the lighter tones within nature).

In another, more distant, view of African animal life, Brandt observes a score of busy hippopotamuses along the banks of the Mara River. This is one of those archetypal pictures that imprints itself in the memory. Like the giraffe image, it is an elegantly crafted picture of life on earth, this time as lived by a community of corpulent river-dwellers in an idyllic world of rock, river and sky.

Brandt is especially entranced by the big cats of Africa, and his obvious physical closeness allows the viewer to feel almost like an invisible member of the pride being photographed. This photographer presents his sepia images through digital prints (the exact process is not named) with the slightly muffled feel of mezzotint printmaking.

What is clear from the approach Brandt uses is that he has significantly extended the visual grammar for wildlife photography. Photographs in this exhibition are drawn from Brandt's book, *On this Earth* (Chronicle Books).