

IN THE FACE OF DEATH

Nothing quite prepares you for the emotional impact of **Nick Brandt's** images in exhibition – prints in huge scale – a blend of stark subject matter with a heartbreaking melancholy that permeates every picture. To discover what drives this dedicated photographer and conservationist, Elizabeth Roberts met him at Atlas Gallery in London, where his latest body of work, **Across the Ravaged Land**, was on show.





Across the Ravaged Land is the final book in a three part series – the first entitled On This Earth, and the second, A Shadow Falls. They have been crafted to create a complete sentence; On this earth a shadow falls across the ravaged land. It is a devastating story of cruelty, greed and destruction. In October 2010 Nick Brant founded Big Life Foundation with conservationist Richard Bonham, their aim being to help preserve and protect the wild animals of East Africa.

Elizabeth Roberts In your introductory essay to Across the Ravaged Land you write: ‘...even 13 years ago, my pessimistic mind did not conceive that things would turn this bad, this quickly’ – the evolving sentence that the three book titles create is a terrible indictment of what man is doing. Do you think that your photographs can change this?

Nick Brandt In an ideal world yes, one hopes that they can change things. I hope that in some minor way people might think a little more carefully about the fact that these are sentient creatures not so different from us. I hope they might appreciate the world I’m photographing and realise that it’s disappearing – that they might be compelled to get more engaged and do something about it.

But, I just don’t know – there’s art and there’s propaganda – and I don’t consider my photographs propaganda – when I take a photograph, for example of the line of rangers with the tusks, I’m taking it for myself but I hope that it will perhaps shock people into awareness. I am very keen to have an exhibition in China. Here I am preaching to the converted but in China and the Far East they don’t understand that elephants are killed for their ivory. The Chinese word for ivory is tooth, so they think that ivory just falls out of the elephants’ heads naturally, like a tooth falling out, and that some nice little fellow comes along and sweeps it up and it’s shipped off to China. Are my photographs going to change that? No they’re not. But they might gradually make people look at animals

and the natural world differently, and make them look at the destruction both more closely and with more concern.

ER In 2010 you started the Big Life Foundation – how important is this to you?

NB Big Life is incredibly important. When I finished my second book in 2008, I didn’t go back to Africa for over a year and when I did in 2010 I was horrified at the change. Elephants that I had known had been killed, and almost every week another one went. It’s not a good state of mind to be angry and passive, it’s much better to be angry and active and I had specific ideas about what I felt needed to happen. I could not just sit back and do nothing. My co-founder, Richard Bonham, felt exactly the same way. >



Above **Elephant on bare earth**. Amboseli, 2011.
Opposite **Lion and wildebeest**. Amboseli, 2012.



Lion in shaft of light. Maasai Mara, 2012.

ER Your relationship to animals is clearly the driving force behind your work – is this something you grew up with?

NB I grew up in the centre of London, but escaped into Kensington Gardens every morning and evening that I could. I've always hated cities. I think that when we are kids we have a natural connection to animals and the natural world, but when we grow up we get distracted by everything from video games to girls or just a bunch of shite. And then later on in life, hopefully we begin to gravitate back to that childhood awareness and affection that we had. It was always there with me but when I visited Africa for the first time in the late 90s there was suddenly a massive trigger to push me back to where I had been as a kid. I remember being obsessed with conservation at the age of five or six.

Animals are unprotected, they don't have a voice, they don't have a way of protecting themselves. So I think I was always going to end up doing something like this.

ER You are remarkably successful as a fine art photographer – what do you think it is that draws people to your work?

NB I can't really answer that question, but one thing I have started wondering about is how often people tell me that there is something so melancholy in my photographs that it moves them to tears. I think it is to do with the awareness that these animals are disappearing. If I was taking photographs of animals that were flourishing, that were in no danger, and were not being annihilated, I don't think that people would have the same level of emotional connection to the images.

What's surprising – and very gratifying for me – is the success I've had in sales (almost vulgar to say sales) of the images of the rangers. There is nothing calming or restful or tranquil about those images, but they are among the most sought after.

ER I agree with that, but I also think that there is a strong sense of you in the images – what you feel about the subject matter comes across

very powerfully. I think it's that that people are drawn to. They are connecting with the subject matter but also with the photographer.

NB Obviously I am looking at these animals and their destruction – every time I go to Africa I see that elephant [he indicates the picture of Elephant on Bare Earth] and I breathe a massive sigh of relief, that he's still alive. He might not be by now.

Whether it's conscious or otherwise it's the way that I take the pictures. And anyway I'm a bit of a melancholy fucker who's terrified of death. I view any creature that I take a photograph of with that knowledge of mortality and preciousness of life. These animals have just as much right to a non-cruel life as we do. People say, 'Oh these wonderful wild animals,' while tucking into a factory farm steak. I have issues with that because we are all just as deserving of life.

ER Are you a vegetarian?

NB I'm a vegan, and I think I would be a hypocrite if I wasn't. >



Top Elephant mother and baby sleeping. Amboseli, 2012. Above Elephant skull. Amboseli, 2010.



◀ **ER I've just become a vegetarian but I'm having trouble with leather shoes.**

NB But it's a start – I didn't even think about leather for years. Look, anything anybody can do, even if it's just eating meat only once a week, it all helps and is fantastic. Yes, shoes are extremely hard because you end up like me with canvas and rubber!

ER Yes, the leather will have to go.

NB Yes, eventually. But one of the things I can't stand is the idea that not only did an animal live a life of torment, torture and misery in a factory farm but then it went to waste – that life went to waste. And so when I see somebody eating meat and throwing

some of it away that grieves me – at least do that animal the respect of eating all of it, don't just chuck it out like it was a bit of mouldy old lettuce.

ER This project must have been immensely time consuming – and expensive – how did you fund it?

NB Initially, in the first couple of years, it was just a passion project, I was still directing stupid car commercials to pay for these trips. But very quickly, and very fortunately, I began to be able to make a living from the sales of the photographs, and within three years I was able to completely fund the trips. They are hugely expensive because I have three vehicles

out – there's a crew – a driver and spotter vehicles – helping find the animals and following them. It's an efficient use of time.

ER Included in Across the Ravaged Land is a series of calcified birds – can you say why you chose to photograph them and what they represent to you? You refer in your essay to them as 'living in death'. This theme of death is interesting.

NB I'm Jewish and we need to know more! Certainly the calcified birds don't fit thematically within the rest of the book in terms of the fact that they didn't die at the hands of man. However, what I am interested in, and what is consistent with the work, is >



Above **Calcified songbird. Lake Natron, 2010.**
Opposite **Buffalo trophy. Chyulu Hills, Kenya, 2012.**



Elephant footprints. Amboseli, 2012.

◀ an on-going fascination with taking portraits of the animal world. Finding these creatures, perfectly preserved, that normally I would never in a million years be able to get close enough to take a portrait of, means that I can set up a shot. I took these creatures, which I found calcified in poses where they looked like they were alive, and I positioned them in the landscape – there was something so compelling about photographing them in death.

It was liberating to be in more control of the photographs. When I wasn't just going day after day after day after day in the hope that I might get something. When I do that, I have to wait until all the hoops are aligning – the lighting-hoop, the subject-hoop, and the location-hoop. And they've all got to align perfectly to get the bullet through to get the shot. Two of the hoops are eliminated when I'm setting up the shot myself – I find that liberating and it's something I want to do more of. The rangers, the calcifieds and the

trophies are the three series where I was able to do that. Very good for a control freak!

ER I wanted to ask you about the trophies – where did they come from?

NB I put them there. Basically I wanted to do a series of portraits of animals in a place where they had once roamed, so for quite some time I collected old hunters' trophies that I could then take out into the wild landscapes. Again, portraits of them in death as if they were alive.

ER This book – the final in the series – is largely about death but there is an undercurrent, through the Big Life Foundation, that you still have hope – is this true?

NB Yes, bear in mind that the human beings in the photographs are the protectors – those guys holding that line of tusks protect the animals, they protect the elephants from having any more tusks horrifyingly hacked or chain-sawed out of them while they are

BIG LIFE FOUNDATION



In October 2010, in urgent response to the escalating slaughter of wildlife in East Africa, Nick Brandt founded Big Life Foundation with conservationist Richard Bonham, their aim being to help preserve and protect the wild animals of East Africa. Igor, the 49-year-old elephant in the photo above, killed by poachers in 2009, became Big Life's unfortunate poster child. The Amboseli ecosystem – bordering Kenya and Tanzania, and one of East Africa's most extraordinary and important wildlife regions – was Big Life's major pilot project.

As of April 2013, Big Life employs 280 rangers, with 24 outposts and 15 vehicles protecting nearly two million acres of wilderness in the Amboseli/Tsavo/Kilimanjaro ecosystem. As a result, poaching has been dramatically reduced in the areas that the Big Life ranger teams patrol. In the two years since its inception, Big Life's rangers have made 880 arrests and confiscated 2,290 weapons/poaching tools.

Big Life is now starting to expand into other areas desperately in need of protection and preservation.

▶ You can learn more by visiting the Big Life website at biglife.org.



▶ Across the Ravaged Land by Nick Brandt is published by Abrams in hardback at £40, ISBN 9781419709456.

still alive. So yes, there is hope, but of course it's a qualified hope. There is an apocalypse of destruction going on across the African continent right now when it comes to animals in the natural world – and there are only so many battles that can be won. And in the particular area that Big Life is in, a two million acre area of ecosystem in Kenya and Tanzania, we are, for now, winning that battle. The only hope for conservation in most of Africa is a collaboration with the local communities. They understand that without the wildlife they have no long-term economic future so it's a case of the conservation supporting the people and then the people will support the conservation. So in pockets there are a few battles being won but across much of the continent, for lack of resources and infrastructure – you need community, wildlife, tourism, government and NGOs all in place, it's difficult. When you don't have these things in place the chances are, the battles will be lost. B+W