

From Michael Jackson to the Masai Mara

Nick Brandt is a photographer on a mission

Thirteen years ago I was living in Los Angeles directing music videos. 'Earth Song' was one of four and a half I did for Michael Jackson (his last-ever video, 'Cry', was never finished because he was arrested for child molestation mid-shoot). We shot his scenes in New Jersey and there was a lot of cynicism from the crew, but when he finally started singing just after midnight, all these jaded New Yorkers had their hair standing on end. When he switched it on, he was electrifying. Nobody ever said 'no' to Michael, but in general he was very quiet and low-key. He would always leave me to come up with the story and for a video director it was a dream. Not just because it was Michael Jackson but because of the big budgets.

Essentially I was allowed to make 'Earth Song' into my own short film, so I went round the world documenting environmental destruction (a subject very important to me) in places such as the Amazon and war-torn Croatia. When I arrived in the rolling savannahs of Kenya and Tanzania, I just fell in love. I had been looking for a way to express my concerns for the animals we share the planet with and I was finding it very hard to do it

through film. So I applied the principles of photographing people to animals, the only difference being that I couldn't give them directions. Within a couple of years my giant, 6ft black and white photographs were selling for up to \$70,000 [Sting, Brad Pitt and Clint Eastwood are collectors], and after a video for Snow Patrol and a few car commercials, I gave up film completely.

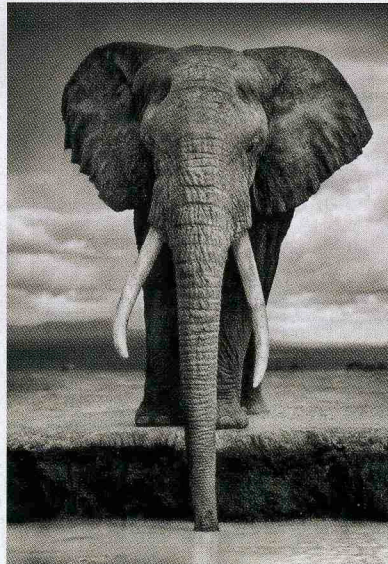
I'm not a wildlife photographer. I'm not looking for a kill and shooting from a distance. I don't even own a telephoto lens. Ninety-nine per cent of my time is spent driving and waiting for that perfect shot, which invariably means an overcast sky for a softer, less modern sensibility. I have three vehicles in radio contact with spotters who understand the animals' movements and that's the only

little bit of film production I take with me. A lot of people think it's all Photoshopped. There's one picture in my new book, *A Shadow Falls*, of giraffes on a plain, and so many people ask how they are so perfectly placed. I say, 'Yeah, it took three weeks to get that shot.' You do go a bit gaga driving 200km a day.

I still live in Los Angeles with my wife Orla, an actress (I moved here from London 18 years ago for work), and typically spend two to four months a year in Africa. One of the most astonishing sights happens yearly in the Amboseli Game Reserve in Kenya. Up to 100 elephants pad across the dry lakebed in total silence, coming within metres of the camera. I can watch it over and over again from the roof of the Land Rover (you're really meant to be inside). Elephants are my favourite animal, even though I've been charged a few times. It's their intelligence and the way they interact. Raising awareness of their plight is a huge part of what I do. The charity I support, Tusk, understands better than most the importance of involving local communities. With people's new commitment to conservation, communities are supported so they see the economic value of what is around them. Unfortunately it doesn't take much for Somali militants with machine guns to come in and wipe out all that effort.

With the sudden surge in demand from China, ivory has gone from \$400 a kg to \$6,000. It is estimated that up to 40,000 elephants a year are being killed, ten per cent of the African population. And for what? To make chopsticks. I don't blame the poachers. You can understand the temptation for people who are very poor. An elephant walks past and it's got tusks worth tens of thousands of dollars. All they need is a spear and a chainsaw. The people I blame are the business cartels in the Far East. They get the Chinese road crews building the infrastructure in Africa to play middlemen. We all thought this was over. It's not. For my next book, I need to experience the poaching first hand.

In an ideal world I would print all my pictures the size of elephants. They need to be seen big to capture that epic, elemental quality. The sepia tone is there to add to the sensibility of a bygone era. I've just started a third book and the animals already feel as if they're from a bygone era. The pictures have become an elegy to a vanishing world. I hope they don't turn into a last testament. *Nick Brandt's A Shadow Falls: Photographs from East Africa is at The Air Gallery, 32 Dover Street, W1 (airgallery.co.uk), until 3 October. For more information on Tusk, go to tusk.org*



Three emails with Nick Love

Film director



Watching *The Entourage* box set. I am styling myself on Ari Gold, the loathsome, nefarious Hollywood agent. The man couldn't lie in bed straight.

Reading Orwell's *1984*. Starkly beautiful, frightening and more prophetic than ever.

Meeting Mark Knopfler from Dire Straits, an idol of mine and a really lovely, warm man. I met the rest of the band, too, and fame and success haven't tainted their friendships in the slightest.

Eating I made chicken in milk at the weekend, a Jamie Oliver recipe. He gave me the confidence to cook.

Loving Guy Ritchie. Having been pitted as rivals for the last few years (me always the loser), we've matured and have started to hang out a bit and he's a blinder. He showed me some of *Sherlock Holmes* and it looks brilliant.

Hating That I can't afford to buy anything from Brunello Cucinelli apart from socks. If it was affordable, it could revolutionise men's fashion in this country. We'd all look like we were in a piazza in Florence on a Sunday.

Wanting I'm a wannabe. I'm a nouveau capitalist from the burbs. I want a Range Rover.

The Firm is in cinemas now

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