

Looking for Home

Nick Brandt is widely recognised as one of photography's greatest environmental champions, and his ongoing project on displaced humans and animals shows how our fates are intertwined.



WORDS TERRY HOPE IMAGES NICK BRANDT

ABOVE: Bupa and People in Kenya.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Kuda and Skylil, Zimbabwe.

WE'RE REGULARLY BEING FED STORIES about the environmental crisis that the world is facing, but words can sometimes not be enough to convey the crucial message, and there's the danger that the message could be falling on deaf ears, lost in the noisy traffic of news overload. Great photography, however, has the capability to cut through all that and to have a lasting and transformative effect, a message master photographer Nick Brandt understands only too well.

Over the years he's worked on a series of strikingly powerful, but sobering, projects that have succinctly conveyed the message about the increasingly challenging issues that are facing indigenous people and wildlife all around the world, and his visual point is that their futures are inextricably intertwined, and that they are both being displaced at an alarming rate.

His latest book and exhibition project, *The Day May*

Break, is intended to consist of several chapters, the first of which was released in 2020, while the latest component is freshly launched and will be shown in galleries around the world over the next few months, including New York, Shanghai, Monopoli in Italy and Paris, while the book is out now, and definitely worth catching up with.

The aim of this global project, which began in Zimbabwe and Kenya in late 2020, is simple: to portray both people and animals that have been impacted by environmental degradation and destruction. All of those in the pictures have suffered to some degree, through cyclones that destroyed their homes, or farmers who have been impoverished through year-long droughts.

Meanwhile, the animals in the pictures have likewise been displaced through the effects of climate change, and can never be released back into the wild as they have spent their lives in sanctuaries and have become >



habituated to humans. Together with their human compatriots they are climate refugees who, while collectively having a small environmental impact on the planet, have ended up suffering the most.

As a photographer living in the mountains of southern California, who has seen first-hand the impact of the terrible fires that have arrived on the back of a sustained drought in this part of the world, Nick felt empathy towards his subjects, and still more motivated to share their stories. We caught up with him to find out more about how this moving and revealing series of images has come together.

Q This is a hugely powerful series of images. Where did the idea for the project originally come from?

In early 2020, I was planning to shoot a new series of work about the impact of the worsening apocalyptic wildfires where I live in California, and using the visual motif of smoke to symbolise how the natural world we once knew is rapidly fading from view. The fog that I used on location in the place of smoke is also, of course, an echo of the smoke from the apocalyptic wildfires, intensified by climate change, burning around so much of the world.

Then Covid happened, and shooting here in California became very hard due to restrictions, added to a complete indifference from my local animal sanctuaries. I realised that this should be a global series anyway. Meanwhile, Kenya, and shortly after, Zimbabwe, had opened, so they became where the series began.

Q How did you source your initial locations?

I needed to go sanctuaries and conservancies where the rescued animals were sufficiently habituated to allow the human subjects to be safely very close to them, photographed together in the same frame. I also carefully chose the sanctuaries based on their reputations and good practices. I only wanted the best of partners, whose conservation and rescue work I could endorse. And this was a two-way street: they also needed to approve me and make sure that the animals would be treated respectfully. It was a pleasure to work with all of them, and I dearly hope they benefit from the additional exposure.



ABOVE: Githua and Kimarjio, Kenya.

Q Did you have a firm idea in your mind at that time regarding the look and approach you were going to take?

The look – the fog, the soft tones with few shadows requiring photographing only in cloudy weather, all contributing to a sombre, melancholy atmosphere – yes, that was clear in my mind from the outset. However, even though I deliberately scheduled to photograph in the rainy season to maximise my chances of cloud cover and damp ground for the fog, we had weeks of constant sunshine, so the waiting days for cloud was the hardest aspect of the shoot, not the animals.

And right at the beginning I did wonder about photographing the people and any dangerous animals (lions, hyenas, etc) in the same locked-off frame, but at separate times, but quickly realised that that would look very stiff and unsurprising, in both emotion and framing. That the serendipity of the unexpected when both humans and animals are in the same frame at the same time would be – indeed is – far superior.

Q Was the idea always to have a Chapter Two?

Once I'd finished Chapter One in Kenya and Zimbabwe,

BELOW: Najin and people in fog, Kenya.



I again tried to make Chapter Two in California. But once again I was met by total lack of interest from the animal sanctuaries that I approached. So then I tried Australia, where climate-change intensified fires have also wreaked incredible environmental destruction and death of wildlife. Again I got very little interest from animal sanctuaries, plus I discovered that, in a rich country like Australia, they euthanise animals that cannot be re-released back into the wild. Compare that to Senda Verde Animal Sanctuary in Bolivia, where I photographed Chapter Two, who, while operating on a tiny budget, take in every animal that comes their way – jaguars, pumas, sloths, monkeys, bears, birds, everything.

Q What led you to Bolivia and the Senda Verde Animal Sanctuary?

The original plan had been to go to Brazil which, for the last five years, under Bolsonaro, has become the poster child for the apocalyptic ever-escalating destruction of the Amazon rainforest.

However, in that country there were only a few habituated species in each sanctuary, and these were spread out the length and breadth of what is a vast country. This would have necessitated many days of flying and driving between each: expensive and wasteful, and it would likely have created the need to start a whole new production in each new area we



TOP: Ruth and Zosa, Bolivia, 2022.

ABOVE: Lucio and Tarkus, Bolivia, 2022.

visited.

Fortunately, salvation – practical, and therefore financial – lay to Brazil's west, in Bolivia, home to Senda Verde Animal Sanctuary. This isn't just a wonderful place and a non-profit organisation, but, practically speaking, it's home to rescued members of almost all of the key South American species. This meant that I was able to photograph the entire Chapter Two part of the project in



ABOVE: Regina, Jack, Levi and Diesel, Zimbabwe.

LEFT: Patrick and Harriet on Ground, Zimbabwe.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Lucio and Chasca, Bolivia, 2022.



Q How did you decide on the people who would be photographed alongside the animals?

Because these animals were rescues, the people whom I photographed had to come to where the animals were. In the weeks before I arrived, researchers travelled around, meeting people who had been dealt misfortune in differing degrees due to climate change. Some were extreme. Many were climate refugees, uprooted from their former homes by the loss of their land and their homes due to years-long droughts or floods. But throughout their time on the shoot, they were all unfailingly gracious, dignified and patient.

Q How did you direct the scene you were photographing?

The shoots were very spontaneous, while the animals were generally pretty relaxed thanks to their carers. I like working very loosely. I feel that what happens in real life is superior to what I might pre-script in my head, although of course, yes, I do pre-visualise some photos that we work towards, like taking a portrait of someone next to a giraffe, with the person up a tall ladder so that their heads are at a similar height in frame.

But during photos sessions, I frequently swapped out people with each respective animal until it felt like somehow, emotionally, the right combination. I like seeing what unexpected serendipity might unfold. For me, it was like a kind of photographic jazz.

In most cases with the animals in Africa, they were quite extraordinary, coming into exactly the right spot in the frame pretty quickly, which was just as well since I often had a very small window of opportunity to shoot when there was sparse cloud cover.

However, the hyperactive monkeys in Bolivia – well, literally blink and you've missed it! The same with the jaguar and bears. So that indeed was very much a case of working around what they would give me. Much harder work.

Q The overall feel of the images is highly evocative, and you've obviously presented everything in monochrome and shot using fog to bring down the contrast. It's highly effective, but what made you go for this look, and is it crucial to this project that the feel throughout is the same?

As mentioned previously, the fog is a visual motif to symbolise how the natural world we once knew is rapidly fading from view. And an echo of the smoke from the apocalyptic wildfires, intensified by climate change, destructively sweeping so much of the planet.

I would have said it was crucial to the project that the feel throughout is the same but, in Chapter Three which, all being well, I'll be shooting next spring, I don't use fog at all. I do however use another form of obscuring, not to be revealed right now.

Q What's the significance of the light bulb in some of the scenes?

The props in the photos represent the barest bones for living – a chair, a table, a bed. And for light, a single bare lightbulb to illuminate the darkness.



ABOVE: Bolivian Group Portrait I, Bolivia, 2022.

ABOVE: Bolivian Group Portrait II, Bolivia, 2022.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Jame with People in Fog, Bolivia, 2022; XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Q In the BTS pictures you can see strands of wire between the animals and the human subjects: were these to protect them just in case the animal got too close?

The electrified wire is only used with Tarkus the bear in Bolivia. He lives in a large hilly and forested enclosure with an electrified fence. He knows not to go anywhere near the fence, or anything resembling it. So we used a single electrified wire that separates him from me and the cast during the shoot. This made it possible for Tarkus and the human subjects to be very close together, in the same frame at the same time. With Hernak the jaguar, we had a large custom sheet of glass made, set within chain link fence, to safely separate the people from him.

Q It looks as though these scenes were very much as you saw them, and not arranged at all?

Yes. What you see are pretty much the RAW files, with adjustments for contrast and brightness, etc. And wire removal where needed of course.



Q What kit have you worked with for these images?

On this project, I chose to work with medium format digital in the form of the Fujifilm GFX 100, not film, because the fog, created by water-based fog machines on location, was obviously – with ever-shifting wind – very different from frame to frame.

This meant that at the end of each session, I had to check the fog was the right balance at the moment of what might be the keeper frame for the people and animals. I don't like to look at frames until the end of the session; I like to be purely in the moment, only looking through the viewfinder.

The critical best part of working with the GFX 100 was the viewfinder tilt adapter. I like to look down onto where a film camera's ground glass viewing screen would have been, it's just my particular thing. I need to be turned on by my camera, and that tilt adapter is what gets me there. Tech geek out.

Q What are you hoping might be achieved by this series and, as a photographer who is very concerned about the environment, do you almost feel that's your job in a way to be using your profile to raise awareness about the huge issues you're addressing?

It's my mission in life as a photographer to explore



these concerns. It's why I became a photographer. I'm not so keen to be using me, my profile, to raise awareness, but certainly I want the work to raise the issues. I know that, frustratingly, I can't reach the same number of people as a photojournalist or a Nat Geo photographer, but those areas are not my skill set. I'm who I is.

The Day May Break Chapter One, published by Hatje Cantz Verlag, is available priced £36.59 Chapter Two is scheduled for publication in Spring 2023.

More information: nickbrandt.com/the-day-may-break