

PHOTOGRAPHY



Photographs by NICK BRANDT. Photo | Klein Gallery

NICK BRANDT'S book "Inherit the Dust," to be released March 5, includes his photo installations set amid urban squalls in "Underpass With Elephants (Lower Back, Your Life Is on Track)," above, and "Wasteland With Rhinos."

Africa's surreal modern realities

Photographer Nick Brandt is putting his own spin on the relentless encroachment of urban life into what was wildlife habitat.

By LIZEL BRADNER



Nick Brandt has been photographing the grandeur of East Africa's stole wildlife since 2004, but during his many trips he has observed a troubling pattern:

"The destruction of the natural world was occurring at an alarming rate — faster than my already pessimistic imagination could have anticipated," Brandt said from his studio in Malibu.

His forthcoming series of photos, "Inherit the Dust," was conceived as his elegy to Africa's natural world. He came up with the idea of photographing displaced animals in places where just three years earlier they used to roam — but no longer can because of rapid urban sprawl. Factories, garbage dumps and quarries now stand where elephants, lions, rhinos and cheetahs once lived.

To compose his latest photos, Brandt had life-size prints of the animals transferred onto giant panels and erected in situ — once familiar ground where people are oblivious to the giant creatures in their midst. Like ghosts in a landscape.

"It was an effective way of showing this level of present-day dystopia that humans are creating," Brandt said.

For his ghosts, he selected never-before-published black-and-white portraits including one of his favorite subjects, Craig, a 40-year-old Amboseli bull elephant.

Photos printed in California were shipped and glued to aluminum and plywood frames. The panels, up to 30 feet long and sometimes rising even higher, were loaded onto trucks and driven to their designated sites. As many as 23 men worked in

heat that reached 100 degrees to set up and strap down the panels in often rugged terrain. Horizon lines were carefully matched up with the composition of the original photo and contours of the land.

One of the biggest challenges during the four-month shoot was waiting for perfect clouds. Somber, melancholy clouds align with the skies in the panels to complete his artistic composition.

Animals in Africa desperately need people like Brandt "to visually document their plight for survival, share their stories and hopefully inspire policy change that will help save them from extinction," said Alexander Garcia, executive director of International League of Conservation Photographers in Washington, D.C. She credited Brandt with raising the bar for fine-art nature photogra-

phy to have a strong conservation message.

For Brandt, 51, what he saw through his Mamiya RZ67 Pro II "was worse than what I imagined," he said. "I worried that I was exaggerating the situation, but at the end of the day, these photographs don't cover nearly the level of actual dystopia."

Pikroaiser and conservationist Derek Joubert said every photographer-conservationist struggles with the dual desire to show beauty in the wild while protesting what is happening in formerly pristine lands. "What Nick has done is combine the two in a way that sends a visual protest but doesn't detract from the beauty inside of each wildlife frame," Joubert said, calling the result a "juxtaposition of celebration and regret."

Brandt's "Wasteland With Elephants" de-

picts an elephant walking through a river of garbage in central Kenya. "Just three years ago, zebras, gazelles and impalas could be seen in roaming through these places," he said. "Now there's a city appearing out of the ground from nowhere."

Sitting in a trash-filled alleyway next to a stagnant pool of fetid sewage, a solemn chimpanzee lowers his head as if mourning the loss of his former home.

"It really strikes a chord," said Michael Nichols, former editor-in-chief at National Geographic magazine. "I really love what he's doing visually — the tenacity, the rugged edges. He keeps evolving as an artist. Something he's done since he's started. He hits a note and keeps hitting it."

Twelve days of the project were spent at a dump site in Nakuru, Kenya. Brandt de-

Nick Brandt: 'Inherit the Dust'

Where: Fabry/Klein Gallery, 348 N. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles
When: March 24 through May 24; closed Sundays and Mondays
Info: (323) 934-2250, www.fabryklein.com

scribed it as toxic, smoking piles of waste where desperate locals scrounge for scraps of food. After just two days, members of his crew experienced nosebleeds and bacterial and lung infections.

Brandt compared the "out-of-control development, overpopulation and crowds" in some parts of modern Africa to that in parts of China and India. "I never thought I'd put Africa in the same category," he said.

In 2008, the photographer, along with conservationist Richard Barham, established the nonprofit Big Life Foundation. About 300 rangers are employed to protect more than 2 million acres in Kenya and Tanzania.

"Poaching in the area Big Life protects has dramatically dropped in the five years we've been operating," Brandt said. "If conservation supports the community, then community will support conservation. That's a model we found to be incredibly effective."

An exhibition of "Inherit the Dust" will

open March 24 at Fabry/Klein Gallery in Los Angeles and will run through May 14. A book of the same title will be released March 5.

One of the more disconcerting images, "Underpass With Elephants," shows a family of elephants beneath a raised roadway in Nairobi. Situated among a homeless encampment of glue-sniffing kids, a lone peyote-eating toddler stares at the enormous creatures directly in front of him. In the distance is a billboard of a man relaxing on a park bench with the ironic slogan, "Lean back, your life is on track."

"It's not just animals that are victims," Brandt said. "We've hopefully established that human beings are also victims of environmental degradation."

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