

# NICK BRANDT

## ANIMAL ELEGY

BY CLAIRE SYKES

Nick Brandt can just picture it: ominous clouds sweeping across the sky above dusty, arid plains. And somewhere in there, the face of the wild — whether it's the look in a lion's eyes, or sawed-off elephant tusks seized from poachers and now in the hands of rangers.

"I have specific ideas in mind when I go out to photograph," says Brandt. He captures his black-and-white environmental portraits of East Africa's endangered animals, and staged scenes of the people trying to protect them, on the grassland savannahs and parched earth, lakes and rocky outcrops at the border of Kenya and Tanzania.

"It's one of the few places in the world where you can stand and turn 180 degrees and see a mass of different animal species," he says. He visits for three to five months a year in Amboseli National Park and surrounding areas, thousands of miles from his secluded home in the mountains of Southern California.

"I'm always looking to go when it's as cloudy as possible, because I want the soft, somber, melancholy light of the Northern European climate," says 48-year-old Brandt, who was born and raised in London. "I don't like photographing in sun. It lacks atmosphere and distracts from the simple, graphic shapes I want in my work."

His sharp eye for composition only enhances those shapes. You can see it in a row of giraffes, their necks arched like an open Japanese fan, in his aptly titled "Giraffe Fan" (Aberdares, 2000). In "Cheetah and Cubs" (Masai Mara, 2003), the profiles of two of the



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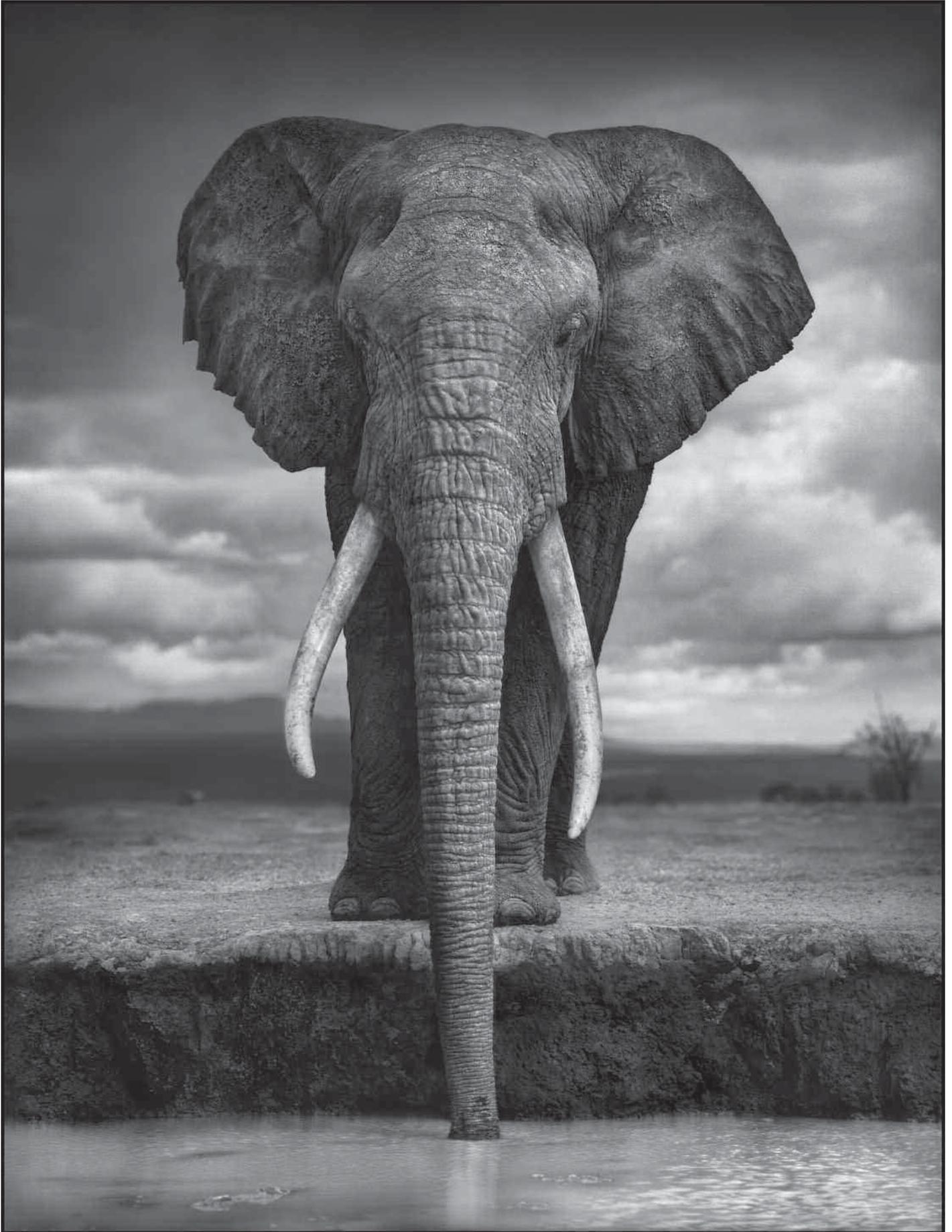
siblings and the mother are stacked one above the other as they crouch, sit and stand facing left, while the third cub hunches under the mother's belly and looks straight ahead. The head-on shot in "Elephant Drinking" (Amboseli, 2007) narrows this mammoth beast down to a V. Intersected triangle shapes, of outstretched ears and angled-out tusks, contrast with horizontal bands of water, land, horizon and a sky smudged with clouds, all tied together by a rich array of grays.

"His skies are amazing — romantic and roiled, many of them," says Vicki Goldberg, photography critic and author. "You know those clouds are moving, indicating that his subjects, the animals, will also be changing. When he expands the vista, that one, small lion in the distance is like an exclamation point giving both significance and scale. The animal concentrates the landscape and makes us understand the landscape is also a living thing, interacting with the life within it."

Sarah Hasted, of Hasted Kraeutler Gallery in New York City, comments, "What I love about Nick is that he truly is a photographic artist. He not only elevates this traditional medium, but also surpasses stereotypes. His prints are complicated and simple, traditional and contemporary, at the same time. I'm attracted to the epic quality of his work. It's cinematic."

Brandt, formerly a film director, prefers black-and-white film

*Above: Nick Brandt. Amboseli Lake Bed, Kenya, 2010  
Opposite: Elephant Drinking, Amboseli, 2007*



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*Ranger with Tusks of Killed Elephant, Amboseli, 2011*

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**— Nick Brandt**



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*Zebras Turning Heads, Ngorongoro Crater, 2005*

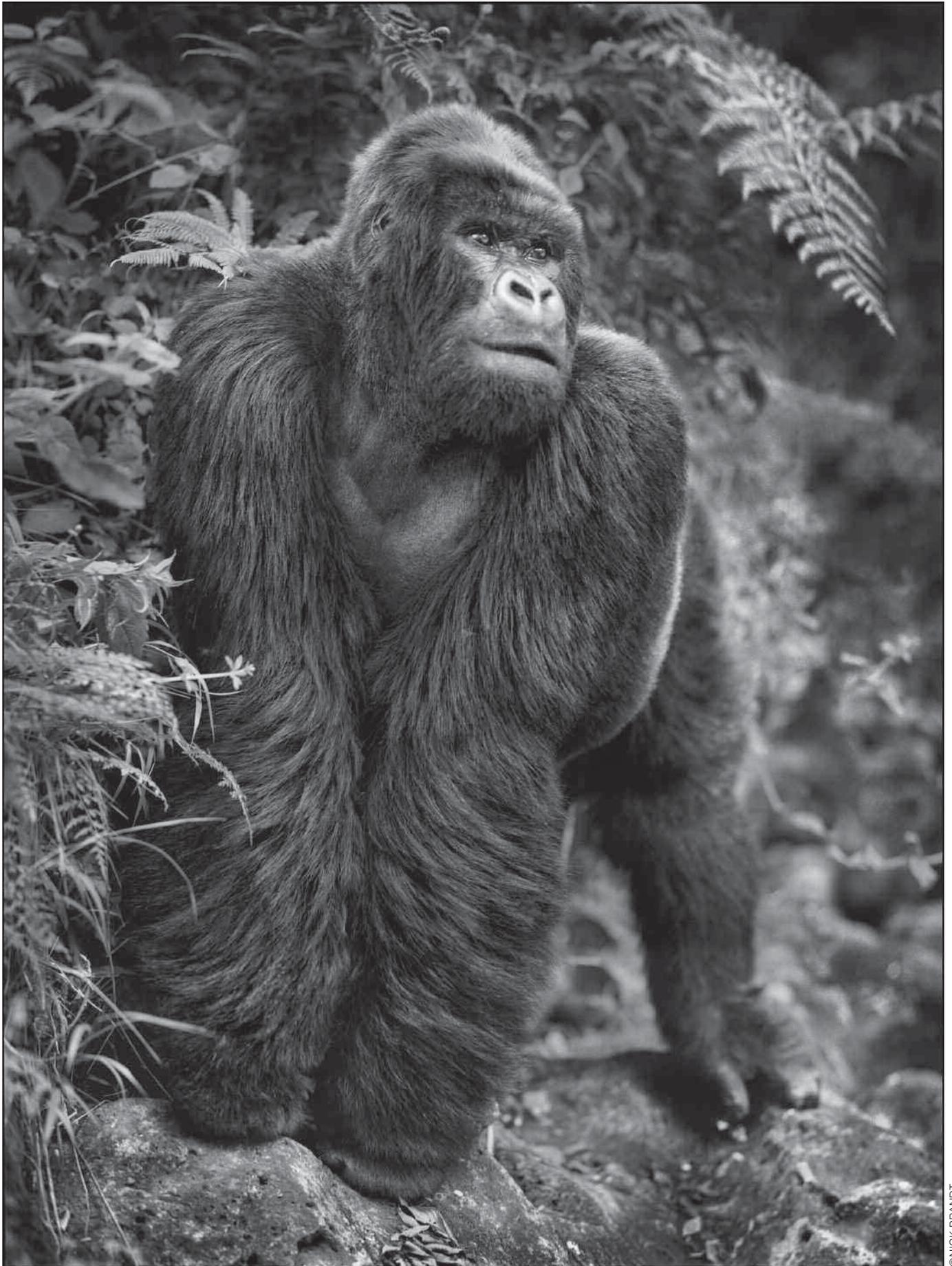
“for that timeless quality. I can’t easily put it into words. There’s something organic, magical and mysterious about it.” Taken with a medium-format Pentax 67II — the camera he’s always used — some of his portraits seem as though they might come from an earlier time, showing animals “that are already long gone, already dead.”

Too many of them are. In the areas Brandt has photographed, poachers chainsaw tusks from live elephants, machine-gun them down or otherwise murder them — at the rate of 35,000-50,000 a year — to supply the demand for ivory in East Asia, which also supports a black market for rhinoceros horns. Giraffes are killed

for bush meat; lions, for body parts used in Chinese medicine; leopards, for their pelts. Add in human population growth intruding on their territories, climate change from deforestation, and global warming that’s drying the land — and you wonder whether, too soon, these animals will only exist in photographs.

“Animals are sentient beings, equally worthy of life as we are,” says Brandt, and he wants us to see that in his portraits. Goldberg affirms, “I feel empathy and a sense of connection. He obviously respects and cares about all the creatures he waits so patiently to photograph.”

Like his compassion, Brandt’s prints are huge, up to 60 x 80



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inches. “Their size gives them a sense of drama and presence that you can only experience when you stand in front of one,” says David Fahey, co-owner of Fahey/Klein Gallery in Los Angeles. “His photos offer an up-close look — as close as you can get without actually being there — of what’s at stake, what we have to lose. More than seeing, it’s about feeling.”

Brandt never uses a telephoto or zoom lens, sometimes shooting from only six feet away, always safe inside a Land Rover. Since poachers generally are on foot, the animals tend to view vehicles as nonthreatening. “My guides and I are very careful; we’re never cocky. Being afraid doesn’t occur to me. I’m intent on capturing the vision I have in my head.” For his portraits, that means showing “the animals’ individual spirits.” Though he doesn’t claim any “lion whisperer” relationship, he can’t help but feel a rapport with some of the animals, formed by his faithful attendance and his perception that they believe he won’t harm them.

I ask Brandt what he sees of himself in his work. “It’s not conscious, but I’m presuming that it’s my obsession with mortality and death. I think that this might actually help my portraiture, and my photography in general. It’s that sense of the lack of permanence, the transience of life that perhaps partly informs the work.”

Goldberg states, “There are signs of movement, or its potential, in all the creatures Nick portrays. But there is also the subtle, underlying sense, over the course of his work, of a movement toward death.”

Ever since his first trip to East Africa in 1995, Brandt says, “I’ve always had an absolutely clear notion that I wanted to capture an elegy for the vanishing natural world.” He was there to direct Michael Jackson’s music video “Earth Song,” and fell in love with the place and the animals. Everything shifted for him. He became set on making feature films that dealt with animals and the environment “in sophisticated ways.” But he couldn’t track down interested backers. Even if he did, he knew compromises would get in the way of his vision. He desperately wanted the freedom to create, and photography allowed him to do that.

Brandt, who was never schooled in the medium, had taken pictures only as an amateur before his next trip to East Africa in 2000. He describes his first photos, of elephants and lions, as “already fully formed in their intentions.” They, and others from a trip in 2002, appear in his first book, *On This Earth* (Chronicle Books,

2005). By then, sales of his work replaced the need to direct car commercials to fund his passion. He combined selected images from this and his next book, *A Shadow Falls* (Abrams, 2009) in a third that links the two titles, *On This Earth, A Shadow Falls* (Abrams, 2012). His latest book, *Across the Ravaged Land* (Abrams, 2013), completes the sentence.

With each East Africa visit, Brandt learned more about the escalating atrocities towards animals. His early, romantic and Edenic portrayals moved closer to the truth and became more melancholy. He says, “It was no longer relevant to keep photographing pretty animals in pretty places. It’s not their world anymore.” After 2006, he stopped using infrared film, as it painted too idyllic a view. He still dodges and burns his scanned negatives in Photoshop, but not as heavily. (“Everything else in the photo is what was there in the original negative. I’m not adding animals, not changing the sky.”) At the start of *Across the Ravaged Land*, the animals are very much alive, but the images carry a sense of foreboding. Towards the end, his photos record the macabre, reflecting grim environmental statistics.

By 2010, it wasn’t enough for him to make photographs, show in galleries (in the U.S., Europe and Australia), sell prints and publish books. With help from philanthropists, Brandt co-founded Big Life Foundation with Richard Bonham, director of operations and a key conservationist in East Africa. The organization is devoted to protecting two million wilderness acres in the Amboseli-Kilimanjaro ecosystem of Kenya and Tanzania. In the last three years, Big Life has rapidly expanded, now employing over 300 local rangers; poaching has dramatically decreased, “though it still remains an ever-present, ongoing danger,” says Brandt.

Peter Singer, professor of bioethics at Princeton University, animal rights movement leader and author of *Animal Liberation*, observes, “Establishing this foundation is a wonderful thing. That’s the kind of initiative needed to protect these animals before it’s too late. When I look at Nick’s photos in *Across the Ravaged Land*, I feel deep sorrow for the animals he portrays. And I know the facts, so that intensifies the emotions I already feel. What he’s doing — combining his amazing photographs with a morally good purpose — is really important.”

Nature also can kill, Brandt reminds us in his latest book. Surreal is the only word for “Calcified Fish Eagle” (Lake Natron,

**Opposite: Gorilla On Rock, Parc des Volcans, 2008**

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**— David Fahey, Fahey/Klein Gallery**



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*Lion Trophy, Chyulu Hills, Kenya, 2012*

2012): an eagle, clearly dead, sits on a bare branch centered against a backdrop of moody clouds, like a studio portrait. It joins photos of other birds and bats that he unexpectedly found washed up along a lake shore in Northern Tanzania. No one knows for sure, but scientists surmise that the creatures became confused by the extremely reflective lake surface, perceiving it as sky, only to crash into it and die in the water’s high soda and salt content — which “would strip the ink off my Kodak film boxes within a few seconds,” says Brandt. He took the rock-hard, perfectly preserved animals and posed them on branches, as if they were alive.

I did a double take when viewing “Calcified Bat” (Lake Natron,

2012). Encircled by thorns, it’s not hanging like it would be in real life, but standing upright. In this image, Brandt could easily be saying, “Things are going very wrong here.” I read his bodies of work like chapters of a novel, one that begins with the Garden of Eden and heads toward Hell; we’re at a crossroads with his calcified creatures.

Meanwhile, each year the number of poaching deaths rises. Nailed by the neck to a post, like a deer’s head on the wall of a country-western bar, the kill in “Lion Trophy” (Chyulu Hills, Kenya, 2012) gazes over the land where it once roamed. Brandt gradually earned the trust of headhunters and borrowed their tro-



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*Calcified Bat II, Lake Natron, 2012*

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*Elephants Walking Through Grass, Amboseli, 2008*

phies, allaying concerns that he wanted to parade an anti-hunting message. “I don’t approve of hunting,” he says, “but my intention is to make a statement saying, ‘Here are the animals in the places where they lived.’ I give them the appearance of being alive.”

Brandt’s tale continues with Big Life rangers holding hacked-off elephant tusks. He renders the confiscated evidence as downright beautiful in “Line of Rangers with Tusks of Killed Elephants” (Amboseli, 2011). Twenty-two uniformed men stretch into the distance, following a similar curve as the two tusks they each hold. With this photo, Brandt deliberately echoes the procession of elephants in his earlier “Elephants Walking Through Grass” (Amboseli, 2008).

I ask Brandt where he, himself, is going. “I’m not prepared to talk about what I’m currently working on, except to say that it’s a natural extension of my other work. And it’s increasingly staged photographs. I don’t want to repeat myself. I was moving on with the calcified animals, the trophies and the rangers, and hopefully I will with this new body of work, too.”

He adds that while his photography, and Big Life, aims to make

a positive difference, “There’s still going to be heartbreak. I’m still going to my deathbed angry. That’s unavoidable for just about anyone working in conservation. We’re doing everything we can; we’ve won some battles. But what a struggle in the face of man’s greed, indifference and stupidity.”

In the final image of *Across the Ravaged Land*, there are no animals or vegetation, only baked and cracked earth marked by a passage. “Elephant Footprints” (Amboseli, 2012) holds no promising sign. That sign was in the photograph Brandt *didn’t* take — the day he came across a group of elephants under a large acacia tree. One of the females was agitated, and triggered the same from the others. He watched them sway back and forth, and turn and knock into each other. Then, from her massive form, a newborn slipped onto the grassy savannah. ▲

*Claire Sykes is a freelance writer living in Portland, Oregon. Her articles on photography and other visual arts appear in Afterimage, Art on Paper, Camera Arts, Glass, Graphis, Photo District News, Photo Insider, and Communication Arts, among others.*