

PHOTOGRAPHY A display of African wildlife portraits shows an affinity with the animal kingdom, writes **Mary O'Brien**.



Captured: a disappearing Africa

DON'T TALK TO NICK Brandt about his life with the stars. Making video clips with the likes of Michael Jackson, Moby, XTC is all in the past. But he remains grateful for his pop successes because they have financed his current obsession — photographing Africa's disappearing world of animals.

Brandt has reinvented himself as a serious photographer — and a very successful one at that. His portraits of animals in repose are haunting. He has an affinity with his subjects. His photographs are a bridge to a lost Eden, a fast disappearing world of amazing creatures.

"The animals of Africa have a kind of hold on all our imaginations more than any other animals," he says.

He has had a deep connection with animals since he was a child and spent all his life searching for a way to express this sensitivity. In his show at Silvershot Gallery, and in his book *On This Earth*, he creates an elegiac chronicle of the animal kingdom.

It was only four years ago that he discovered his calling. He was in Africa shooting a Michael Jackson video when he first started taking photographs. Initially he took every available holiday in Africa. Now this is what he does for a living, spending long stints in his favourite place.

Brandt sets out to take portrait shots of animals as if they were humans. He is adamant that he is not a wildlife photographer. His work has an almost 19th-century

sensitivity, monochromatic portraits framed by an edge. He uses film but extends the image digitally. The result is more like a fine art print than a photograph.

He refuses to use telephoto lens, preferring instead to get as close to his subjects as possible. He uses a good local guide and follows the animals on foot or lies patiently in wait in a car. He frequents places where they are used to the presence of photographers. Although he has never been in danger, he says you can never get too cocky.

"I have no special affinity with the animals, I'm no Dr Dolittle," he says. "But the animals are more relaxed because I'm not afraid."

Brandt doesn't just photograph any animal. He chooses his subject carefully, often getting quite attached to a particular cheetah, lioness or elephant. He can spend days or even weeks, waiting for that special shot. But others, such as *Cheetah and Cubs, Maasai Mara, 2003*, were taken in his first few frames of film or *Cheetah in Tree, Maasai Mara, 2003*, was taken in a split second.

"I want to frame the animals within the context of their environment, their world," he says. "I want to get a real sense of intimate connection with each of the animals."

One of his favourite works, *Hippo River, Maasai Mara 2002*, he saw during his travels and went back a few days later to recapture the scene. He says he is more moved by the elephants than any other animals, especially elephant mothers with babies.



Other photographs exude an architectural elegance, appearing as if Brandt has somehow persuaded his subjects to pose, such as in *Giraffe and Sitting Baby, Aberdares, 2000* or *Storks in Treetops, Maasai Mara, 2002*.

Some of Brandt's works reveal a larger picture, pulling back to show the immense grandeur of the African landscapes as in *Wildebeest Crossing, Maasai Mara, 2003*. In these prints, the evocation of *Paradise Lost* is very powerful.

Born and raised in England, he now lives in Topanga Canyon, California, with his Irish wife, Orla, and a collection of adopted animals. Brandt started as a painter



Nick Brandt and his elephants: "I want to frame the animals within the context of their environment".

and his photography marks a satisfying return to having complete creative control over his work. His distinct style was evident from the beginning but he says his technical expertise has improved much over the years. One of his most important influences is post-impressionist painter and photographer Eduard Steichen.

His photographs have been exhibited in solo shows around the world. Curator Sandra Byron says audiences were taken aback by the breathtaking beauty of the show in Sydney.

There's a sadness to the *On This Earth* series that reflects the photographer's concern with Africa's disappearing world. Brandt says he can see changes in the four years he has been chronicling the animals. With global warming, population pressures and political uncertainty, the African environment is fragile. Even in the Serengeti, one of the best-known national parks, 100,000 wildebeests are slaughtered by poachers every year.

"I'm very affected by any kind of killing," he says. "Every creature, human or nonhuman, has an equal right to live, and this feeling, this belief that every animal and I are equal, affects me every time I frame an animal in my camera."

nickbrandt.com
sandrabyrongallery.com.au
Nick Brandt: *On This Earth*, Sandra Byron Gallery @ Silvershot Gallery, 3/167 Flinders Lane, city, until December 18.