

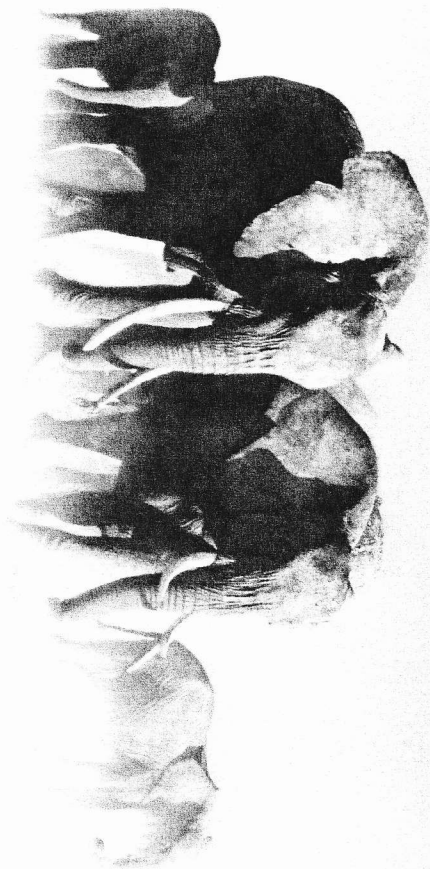
on this earth

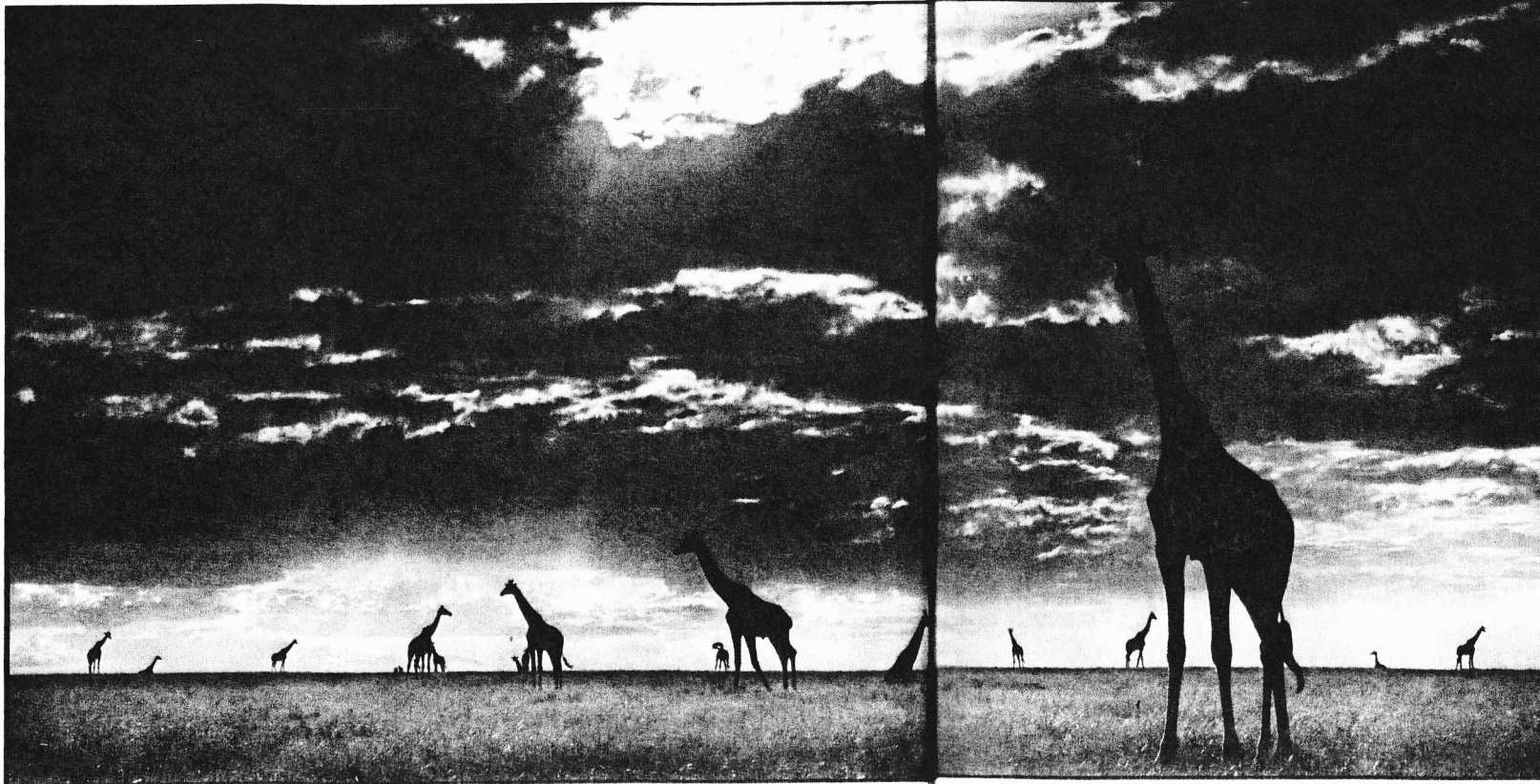
Interview by Stephen Pasquale

Nick Brandt

Introduces the world of fine art photography to the wild animals of East Africa. Since 2003, his work has been on display in galleries, magazines, and newspapers.

Inaugurating the world, the title of his photo essay/interview is borrowed from his 2006 monograph, *On the Edge of the Universe*. His work can be found at www.nickbrandt.com.





GIRAFFES IN EVENING LIGHT MAASAI MARA 2006

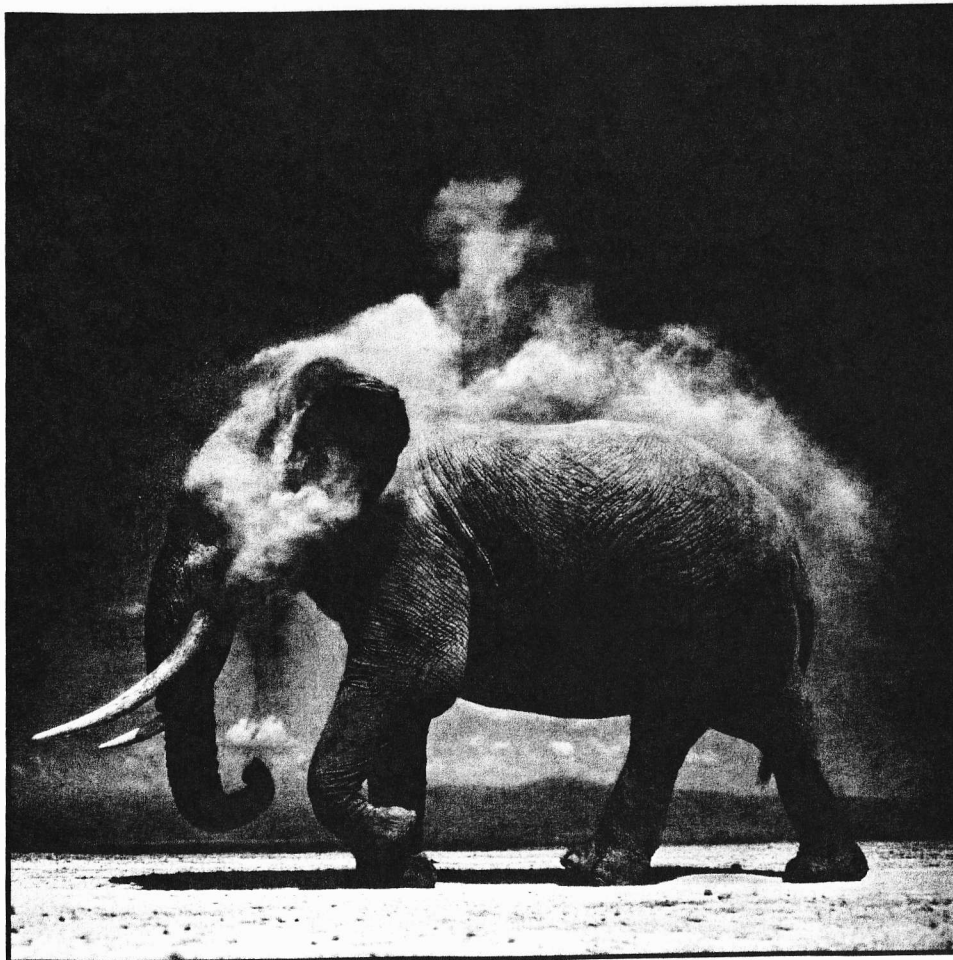
I SEE
WHAT I'M
DOING AS
A LAST
TESTAMENT

SP You've made a career out of photographing animals in East Africa. How did you start working there? What made you continue to go back?

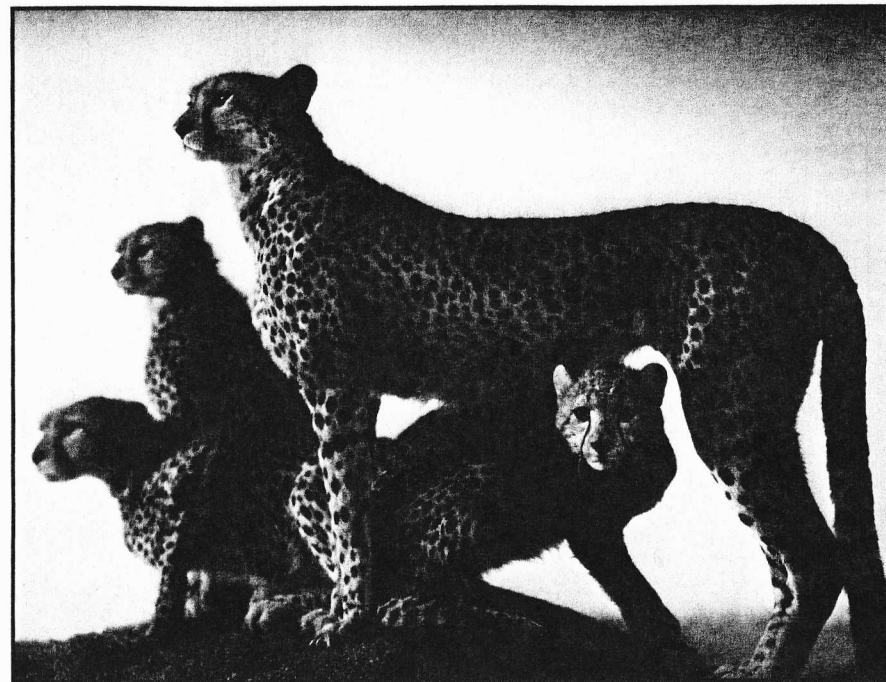
NB I was directing a music video in 1995 for Michael Jackson called "Earth Song," which I had scripted to deal with the various ways in which man was

destroying the planet. The destruction of Africa's wildlife was a natural part of that, and I chose Tanzania to film the African section. In the midst of the

chaotic life that is filmmaking, I found myself entranced by the animals and the landscape, in all the clichéd ways that everyone generally does. I knew I



ELEPHANT WITH EXPLODING DUST AMBOSELI 2004



CHEETAH AND CUBS MAASAI MARA 2003

had to come back properly and get to experience the place in a more conventional, less hectic way. One holiday led to another, which led me to realize that there was a way to photograph these animals in a way that expressed my feelings about them and the places in which they lived, and, I believed, in a way that had not been done before.

How did you get started in photography? Were wild animals your first subjects?

I only came to photography seven years ago. The reason was that I was more and more desperate to combine my passionate love of animals, and what they mean to me, with my need to create visually. My love of animals came first, photography



LION BEFORE STORM II - SITTING PROFILE MAASAI MARA 2006

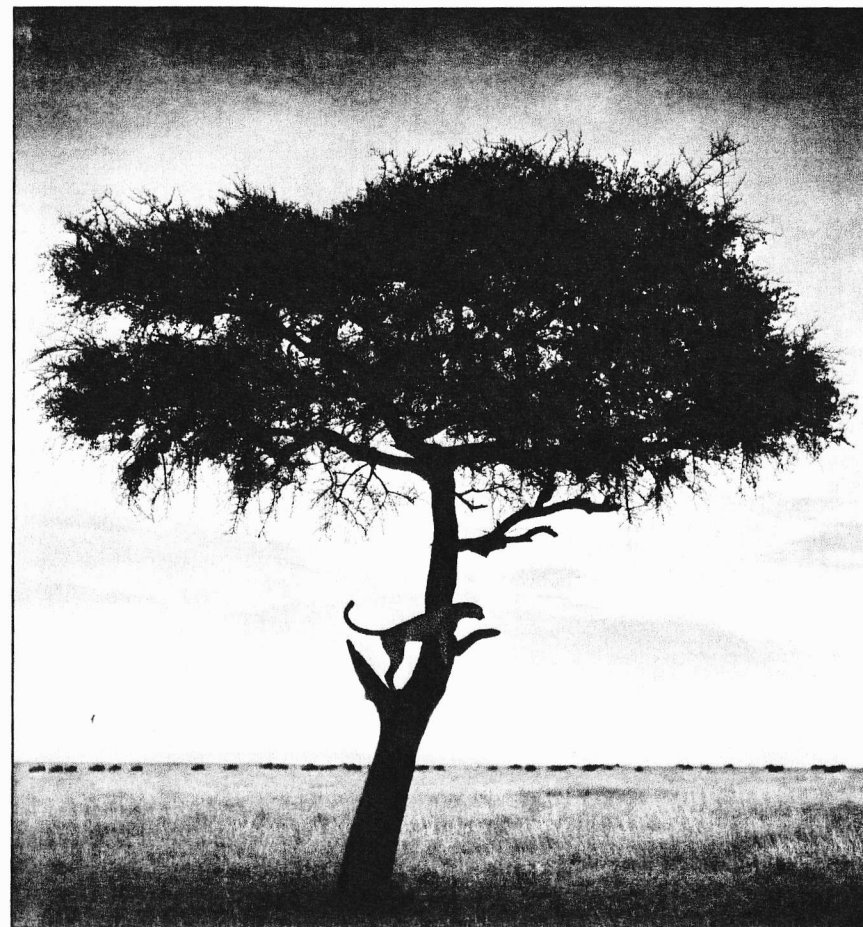
merely the chosen method to capture that. At the moment, it's all I want to photograph for the rest of my life.

What kind of equipment do you use?

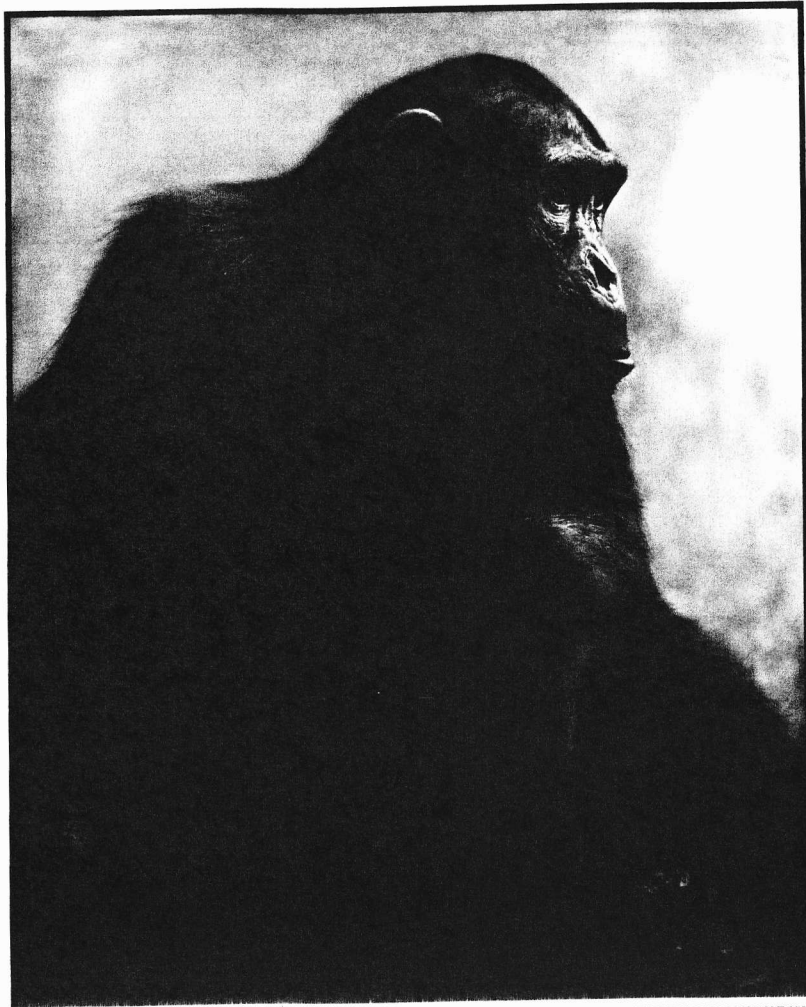
Medium format Pentax 67 and standard and x2 lens.

Why do you prefer film?

I use medium format film (6x7cm), and at this stage, this is still superior to digital for capturing the range of tones from highlights to shadows, and for detail. I'm sure that within a couple of years, that will have changed. But I also like the unexpected surprises that sometimes happen with film, things that you never expected. And there are certain things that I can do with a film



CHEETAH IN TREE MAASAI MARA 2003



CHIMPANZEE POSING MAHALE 2003



BABOONS IN PROFILE NAKURU 2007

camera that I could never do with a digital camera. For example, the particular localized de-focus of some of the images is done in camera at the time of shooting, and could never be achieved with a digital camera, or afterwards in Photoshop.

Why shoot only in black and white?

A couple of reasons. One, I just simply prefer the aesthetic—the way that in

black and white, you are forced to focus much more on the graphic shapes and forms. Two, black and white has more of a timeless sensibility, and part of the aesthetic reasoning for it, and the sepia toning of the photos, is that it makes the viewer feel more like they are viewing images from another time, from a bygone era. Color has too modern a sensibility. Having said that, the colors out there are often so amazing that it seems vaguely ridiculous that I'm shooting

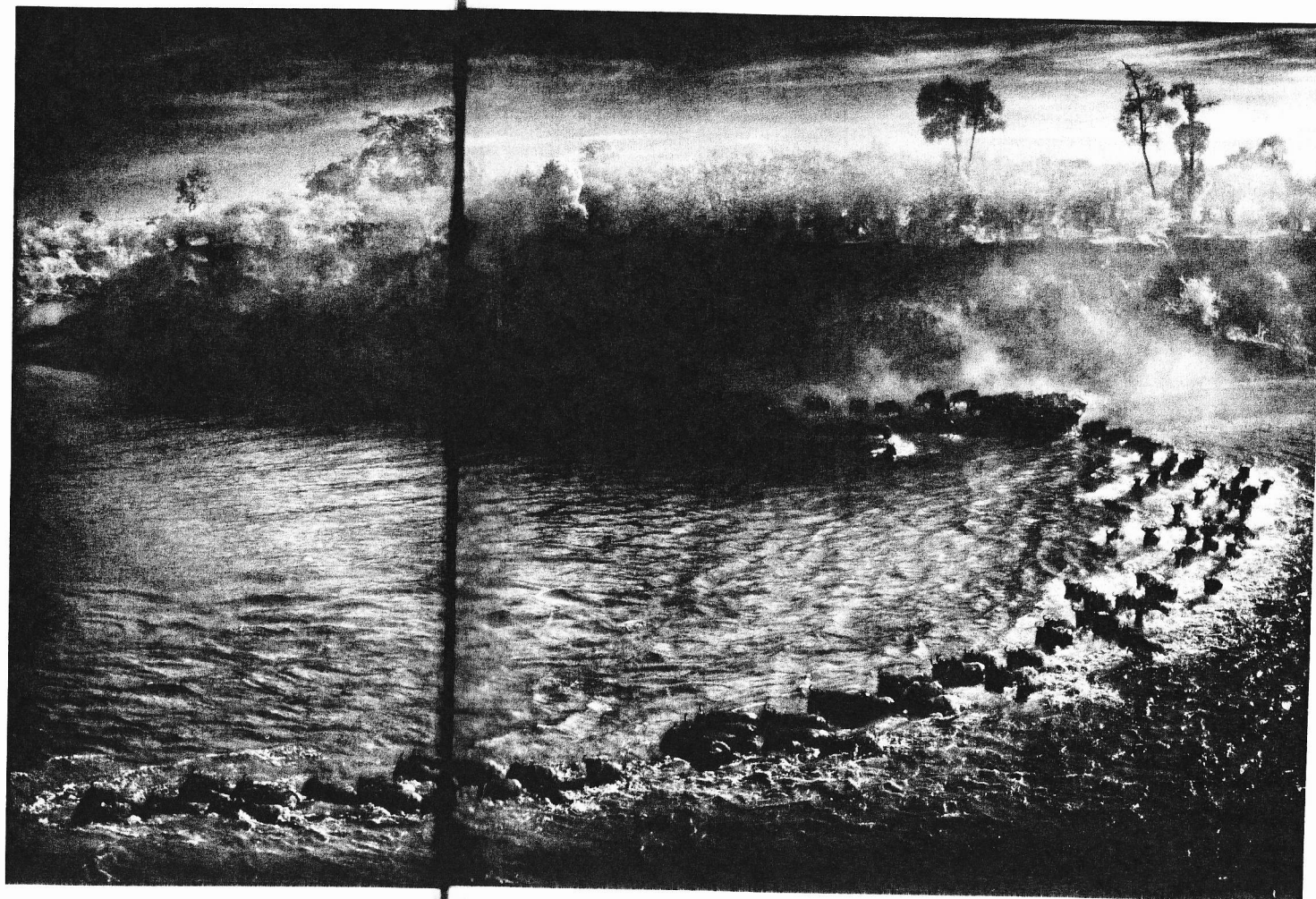
black and white only. But I bet those photos, taken in color, would just be too much like eye candy.

How much of a role does Photoshop play in producing your images?

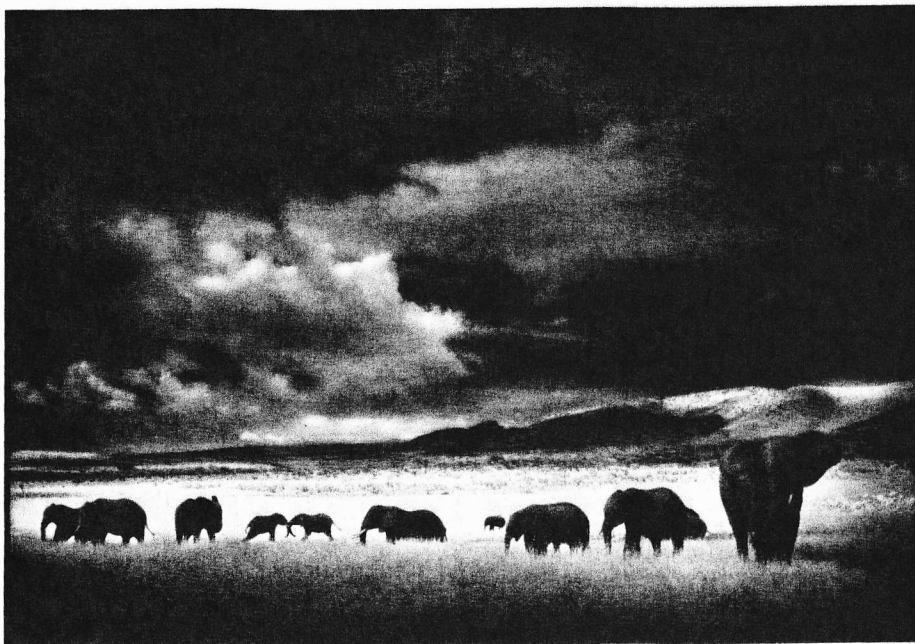
The fundamental integrity and content of the image is there on the negative—the animals, the landscape, the sky. I don't add animals or clone them or whatever. But I do do a lot of grading—darkening the skies, lightening the ground, doing localized contrast adjustments. The panoramic-shaped photos are two shots, taken consecutively, that are stitched together. I love doing these as they give the viewer more sense of the epic expanse of the environment.

Have you ever had any close calls with the animals? How close do you get?

No close calls in terms of danger. Well, I pissed off the alpha male in a chimpanzee troop once by getting too close and he hurled a boulder at me, and swung a liana in my direction (I was a bit slow off the mark and it thunked me on the head). I do get pretty



WILDEBEEST ARC MAASAI MARA 20

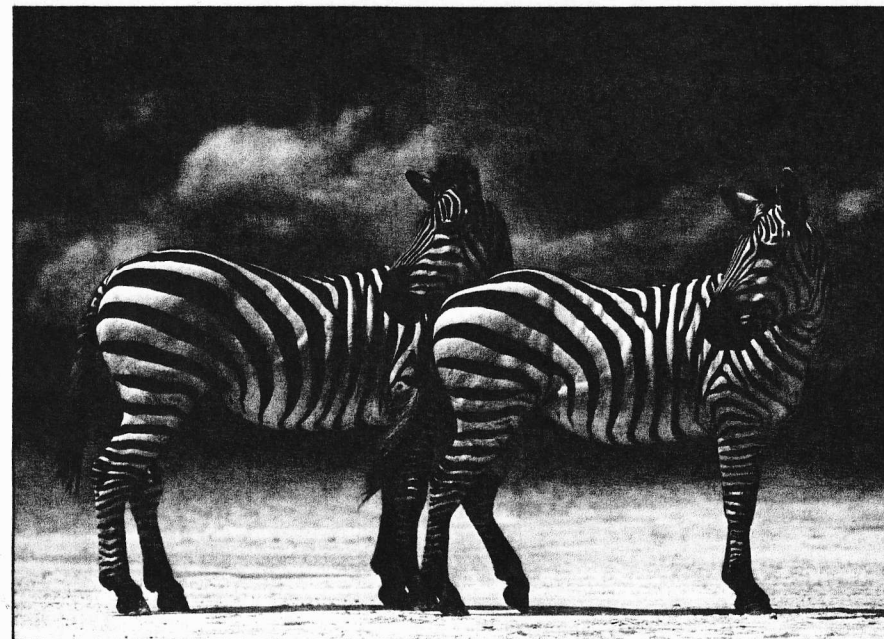


ELEPHANT HERD SERENGETI 2002

close to the animals as I don't use a telephoto lens, but with the exception of the primates, these are done from the safety of a car, so I'm fairly safe.

In a July 2006 interview with *Professional Photographer*, you said that you want your images to be "an elegy to a world that is tragically vanishing." Talk a little bit about how you see your body of work as such.

Well, time is running out fast. Every year I go back, there is less. Most of it is due to population pressure, some of it is due to poaching (which, of course, is often a natural extension of population pressure in poor communities). I see what I'm doing as a last testament. A lot of people have compared my work to Edward Curtis', whose photos were a last testament to the American Indians' way of life. I wish I could be



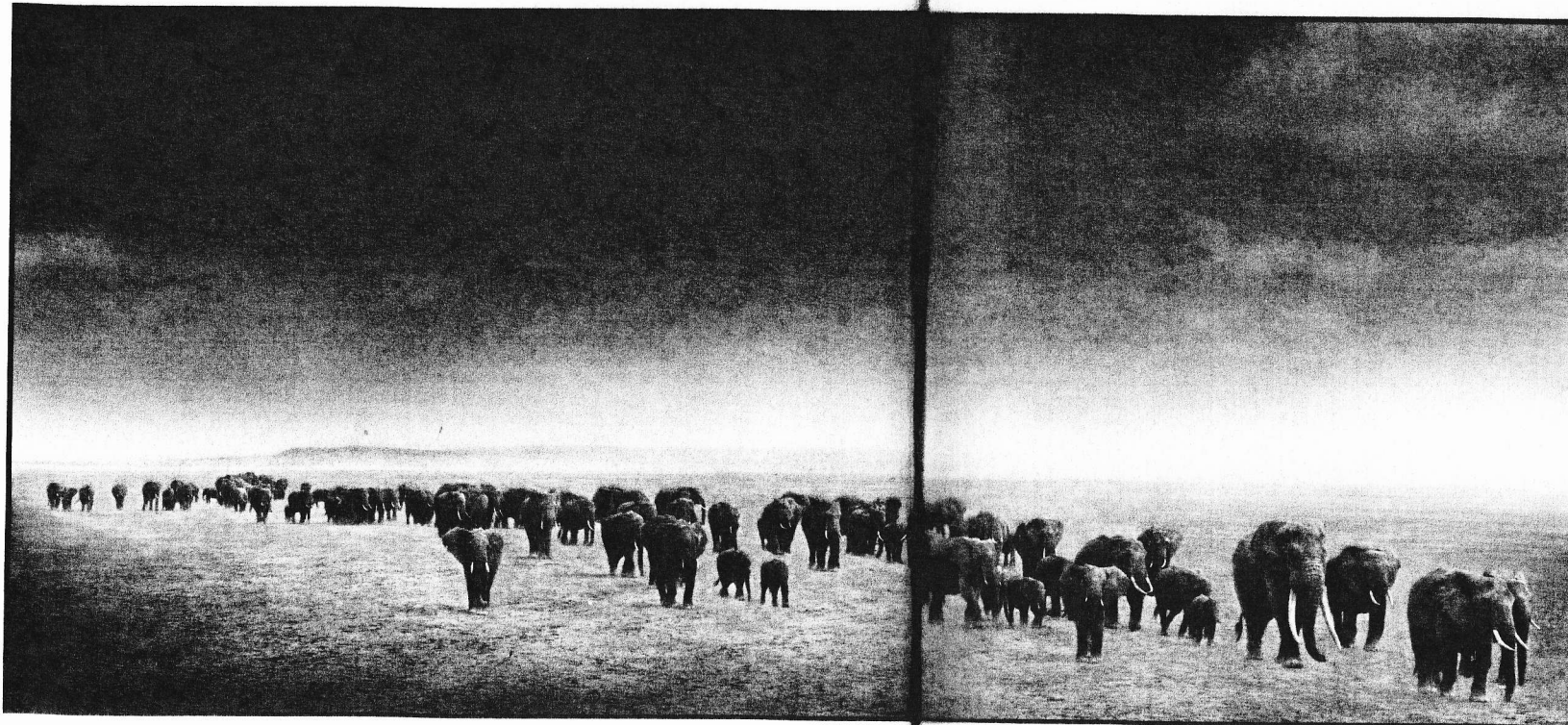
PORTRAIT OF TWO ZEBRAS TURNING HEADS NGORONGORO 2005

wrong. I wish I could say that it's not a last testament, but I don't feel hopeful.

You mention in your afterword to *On This Earth* that you're primarily interested in showing these animals "simply in their state of being." What does that mean for you?

Most wildlife photography is all about the action, the dramatic moment—the

moment of the chase, the kill, etc. I've really no interest in that at all. When you take a portrait of a human being, you don't take it as they're running for the bus or beating their kid(); you take it as they present themselves for their portrait. I am usually waiting for that moment where they're just "being," not doing much at all, but in a way that also appears to convey something of their personality, their spirit, whatever you want to call it.



ELEPHANT EXODUS II AMBOSELI 2004

THESE
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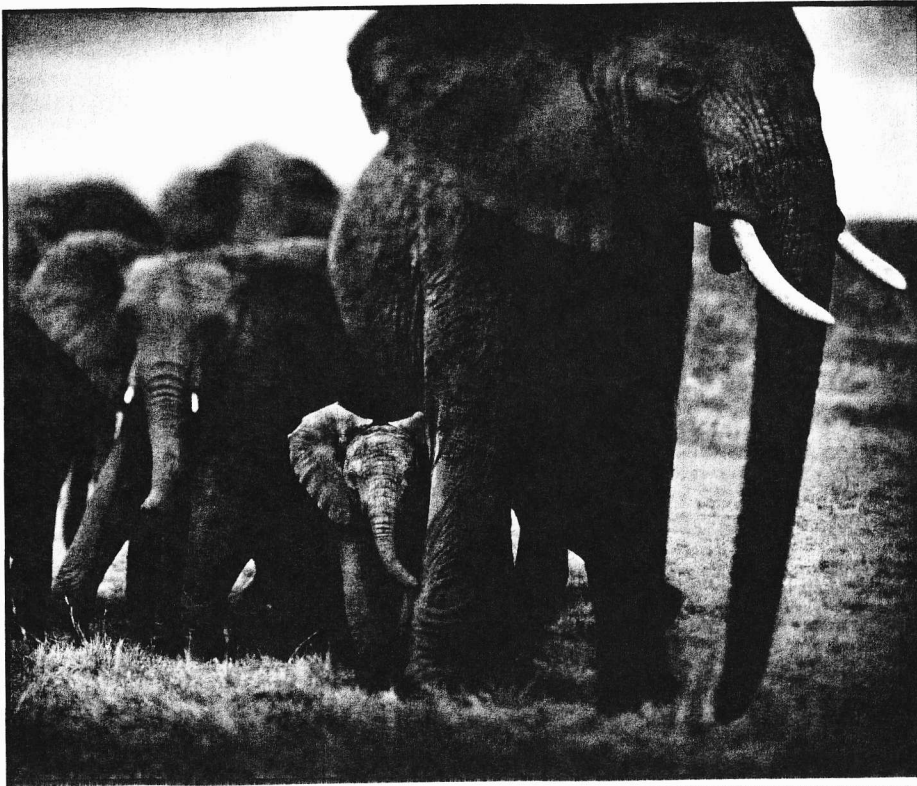
Do you consider your work to be politically charged?

Political in the conventional sense? No, even though I am very political. But political in a more somehow spiritual sense? Then yes. By that I mean, I want

my photos to go further to people realizing that these animals, all animals, are sentient beings who have just as much right to life as us. I want them to look at the photos, be moved by the photos, and then get out their checkbooks and write a whopping big check to an environmental

or animal rights group. I want them to get educated about all of that, and, most of all, vote for the Democrats. The League of Conservation Voters breakdown of the voting habits of the last six years of Congress shows that on average, the Republican House and Senate members

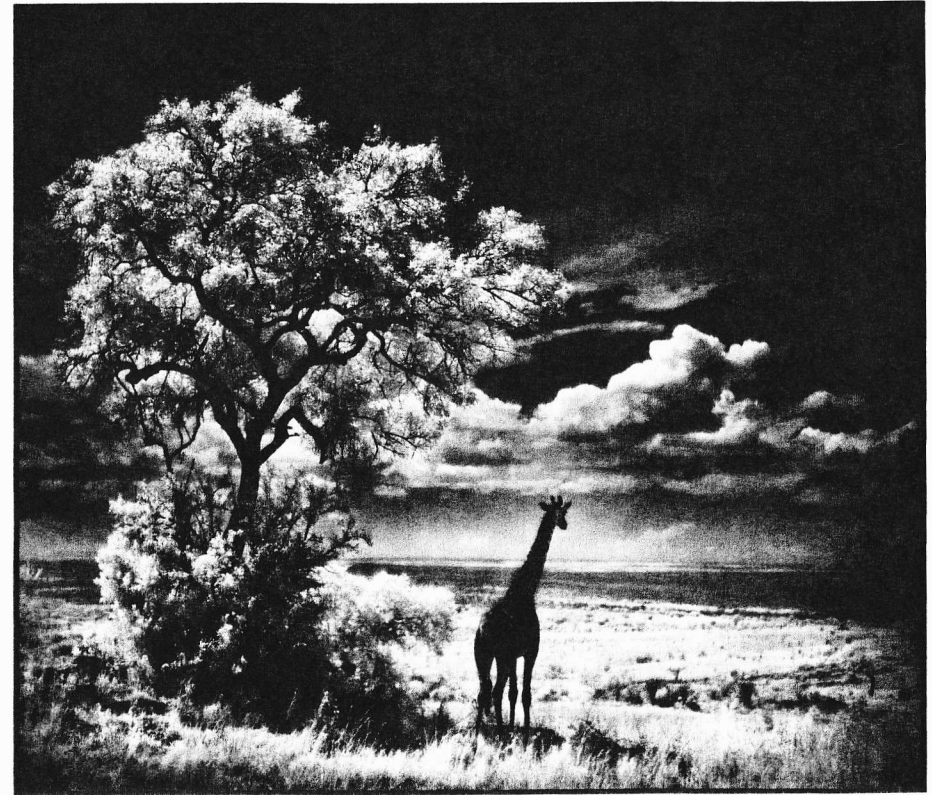
voted pro-environment just thirteen percent of the time, whereas the Democratic House and Senate members voted pro-environment around eighty percent of the time.



ELEPHANT MOTHER AND TWO BABIES SERENGETI 2002

Besides your photography, what steps do you take in your everyday life to advocate animal rights and to spark change?

I get on my soapbox and harangue and harass almost everyone I can about the bigger picture. The torment, torture and misery that factory-farmed animals endure for the sake of a cheaper mass-



GIRAFFE LOOKING OUT OVER PLAINS SERENGETI 2002

produced cheeseburger is unconscionable. The rape of the oceans by vast line-trawlers, gathering up and killing everything in their mile-wide path, the aquatic equivalent of the clear-cutting

of rainforest, is unconscionable. I really believe you cannot call yourself an environmentalist if you consume industrially-raised meat and mass-produced fish. For example, all the Amazon rainforest



HIPPOS ON THE MARA RIVER MAASAI MAPA 2002

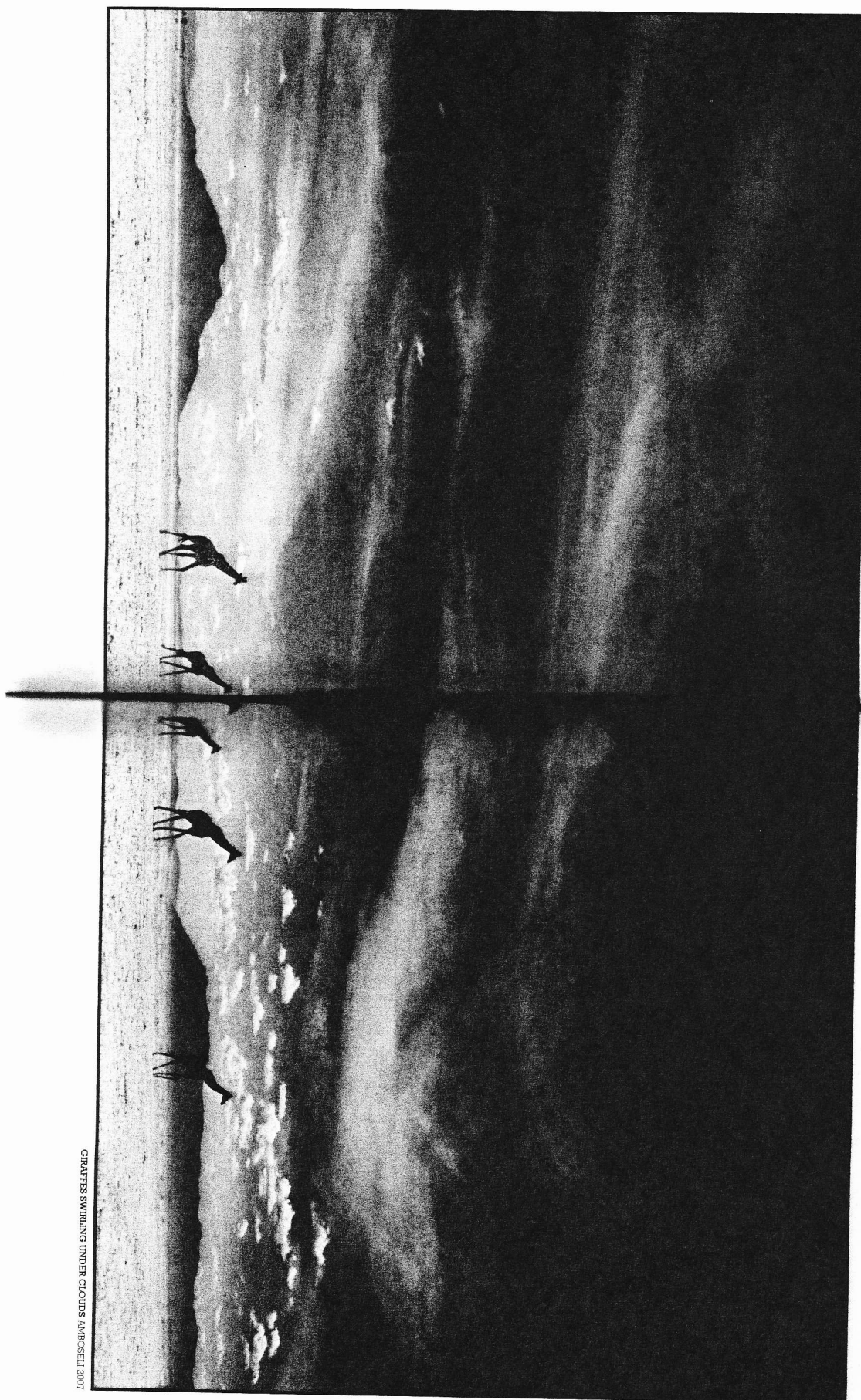
being ripped down to make way for soybean farms—just eight percent of that soy goes towards human consumption. The whopping rest of it, ninety-two percent, goes to feed the cattle that humans end up eating. The sheer amount of wasted life, wasted energy, wasted water—all to provide a few seconds of sensory pleasure on the nerve endings of your tongue—like I said, unconscionable. A frigging ongoing planetary holocaust. Bush and his sanctity of life? Animals don't seem to count. What a load of bollocks. Okay, rant over.

Do you think your photography has the potential to spark change?

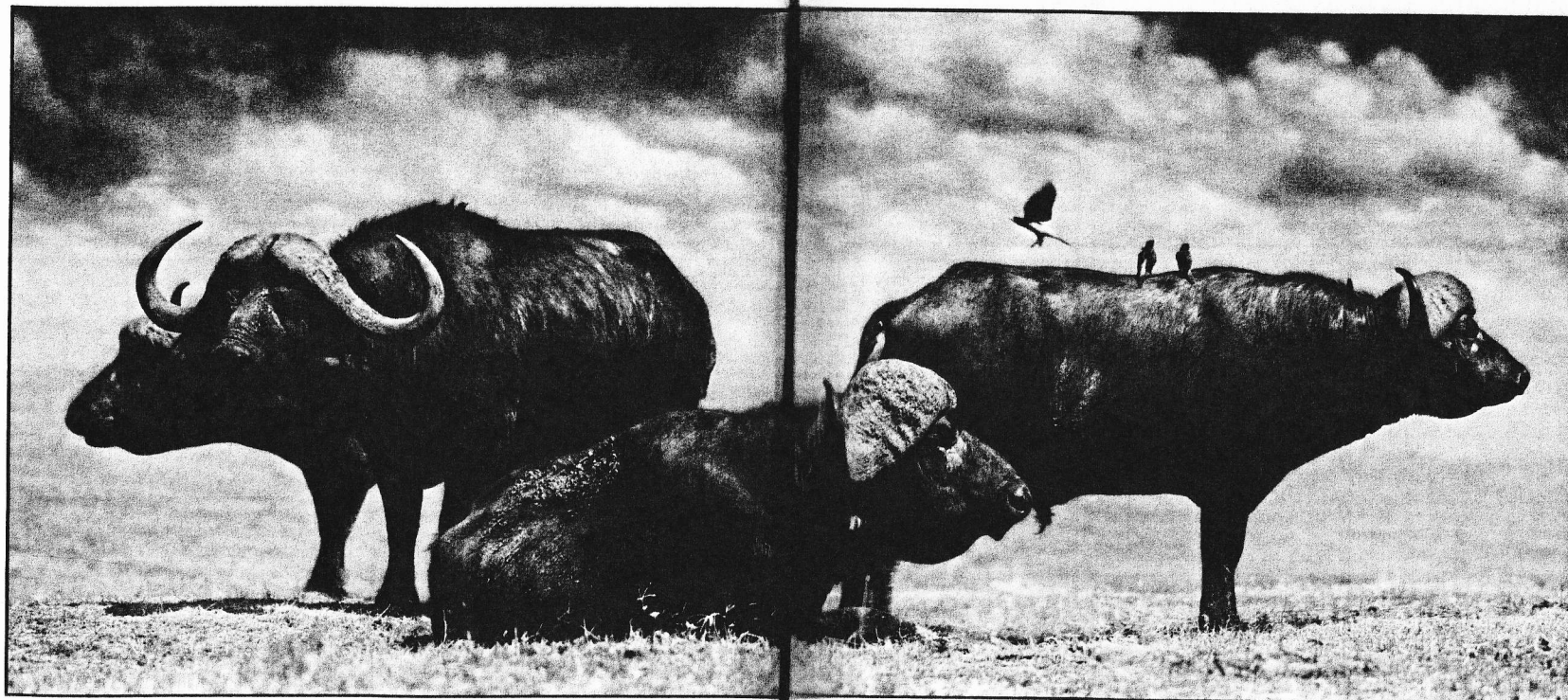
Not on its own, no. But as part of a groundswell of many people in all areas of the media pushing, screaming, shouting? Hopefully. But it's still oh so minor due to the limited audience. And if I went and photographed animals being slaughtered in abattoirs, dogs and cats being skinned and boiled alive in Korea, well, no one's going to look at those, are they? Hell, I'm not going to look at those.

Does your photography ultimately fail without that political effectiveness? I'm curious as to how you evaluate your own art in respect to its potential political message.

No, it doesn't fail without that. I can do what I can, and some people will be moved—even if it's just one person, you've succeeded on some level.



GIRAFFES SWIRLING UNDER CLOUDS AMROSELL 2007



BUFFALO GROUP PORTRAIT AMBOSELI 2006

And if they still work from an aesthetic point of view, that's valid.

In regards to your feelings on photographing slaughters: You mentioned in a 2005 interview with *LensWork* that you won't shoot kills. Why not?

I won't shoot kills because all I see is the animal that is about to die, dying in terror, often being eaten whilst still alive. It's too distressing. Also, on a different note, as mentioned earlier, it's not part of my aesthetic framework.

How do you produce what critics have often called "haunting images" of, as one critic has written "ghostly beauty"? In other words, put these descriptions into practical, photographic terms.

I don't consciously go out of my way to create "haunting images" or "ghostly beauty." I just photograph what I photograph and let people interpret them how they will. But I must admit to liking those descriptions of the photos.

You have mentioned that there are some images you choose not to shoot, deciding that no single frame could appropriately capture the image in front of your eyes. Talk a little bit about one of those moments and what goes into that decision to put the camera down.

Last year, I was fortunate enough to see an incredibly rare sight—on the plains where the Serengeti meets the Mara, I saw a baby elephant get born. The interaction of all the elephants, both pre- and post-birth—the matriarch, the mother, the baby, all of the herd—was extraordinary and fascinating. I didn't even bother to pick up my camera. For the sake of a mediocre photo, I would have spoiled the experience watching something really truly, deeply moving. At other times, the spectacle is just too epic, too vast, or too much about the beauty of the motion, to do it any kind of justice with a single still frame.

In your experience in East Africa, which do you prefer: memory or the photograph?

Without hesitation, the photograph. Otherwise, what the hell am I doing there? Plus, you still get the memory, right?

Do you have any desire to photograph subjects beyond the wild of East Africa?

Eventually I will have to shoot other animals elsewhere, but I can't yet see myself doing anything other than animals. That's my obsession, my purpose. HЯ



LIONESS LOOKING OVER PLAINS MAASAI MARA 2004