

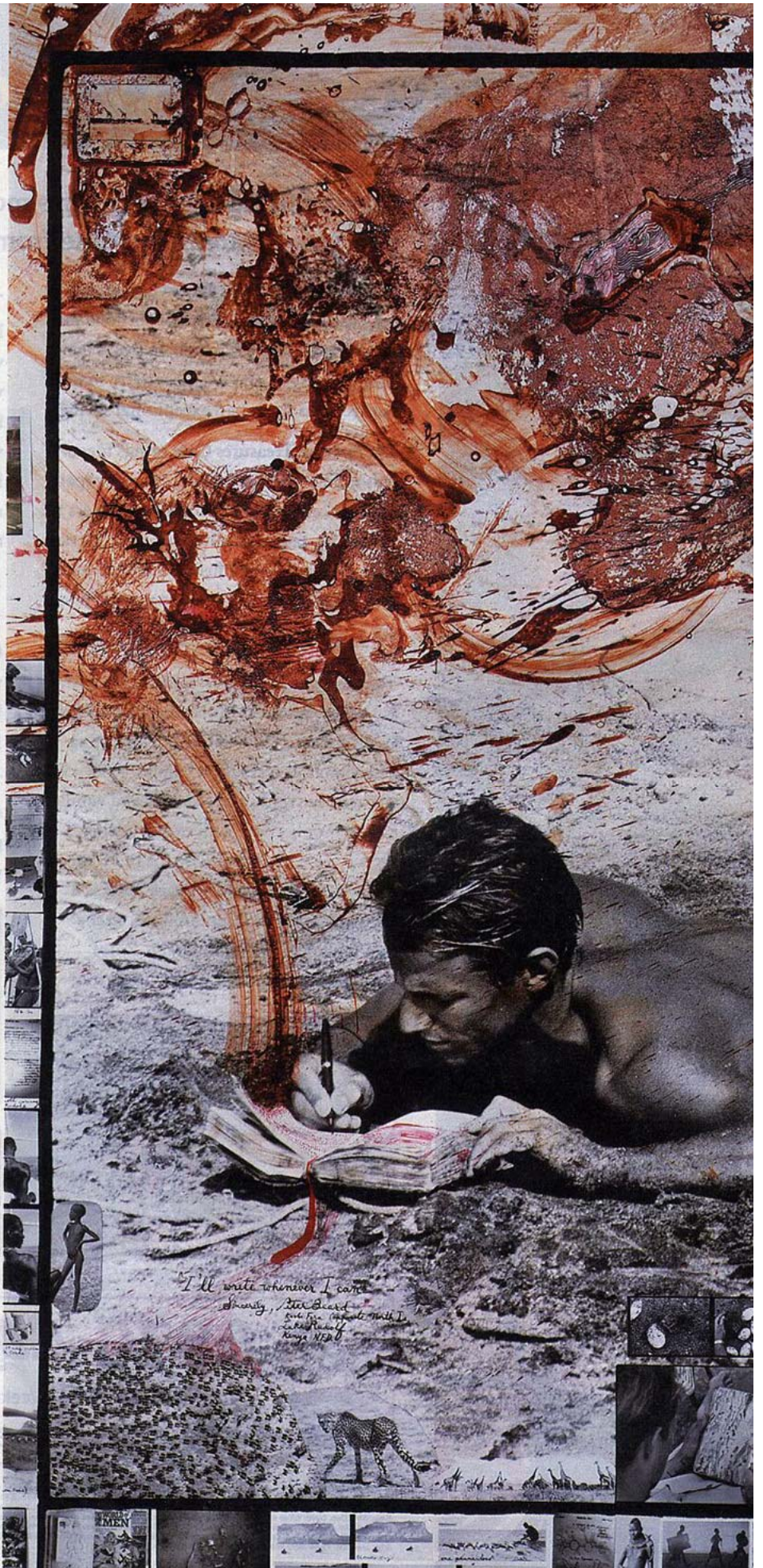
Bigger Picture

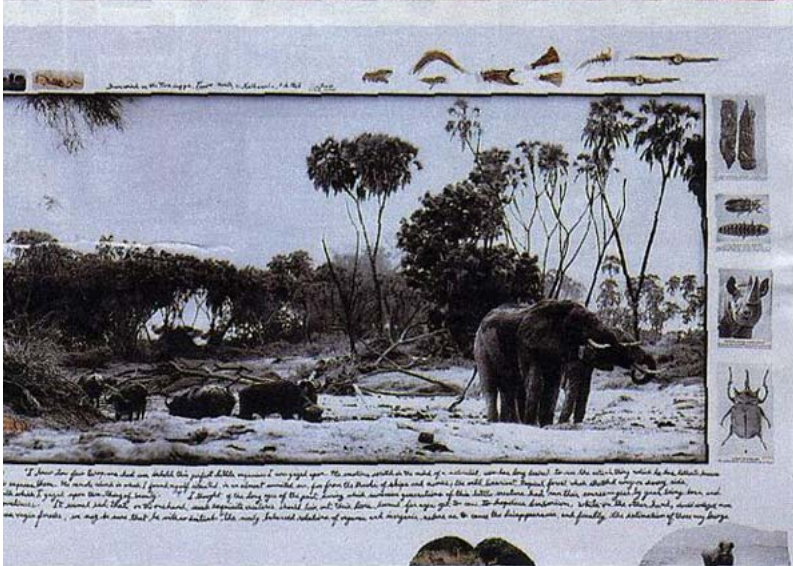
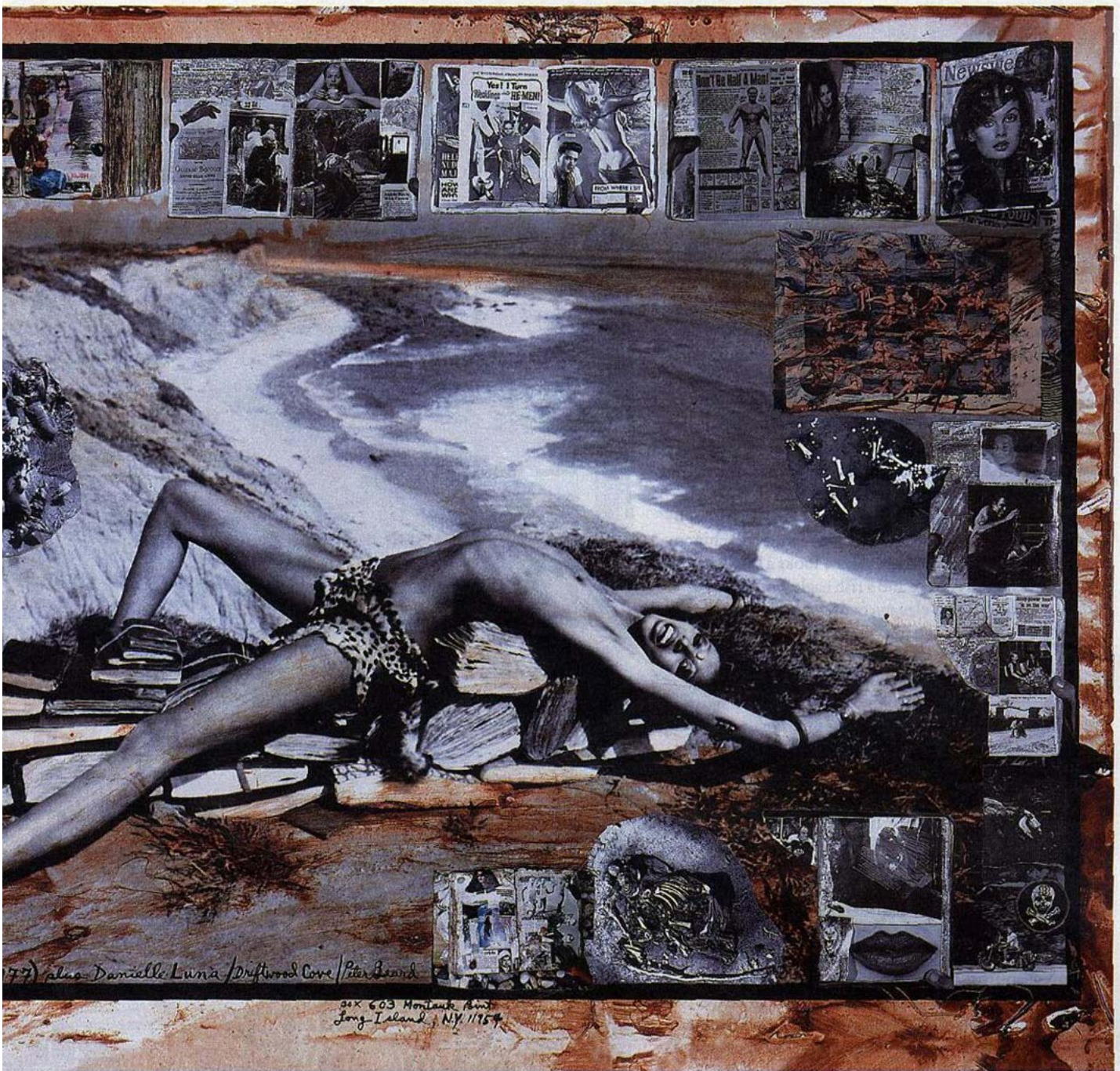
... to world-class wineries across Spain ...
Next, discover gems from some of the best
wineries in the rest of Spain. Triple Gold
winner Palacio de Moscatel 1998 falls
from the most awarded bodgas in the world.
While Ramon Rodero Reserva 2001 and
award-winning Finca Muro 2004 each cov...

WILD AT ART

Lions and crocodiles
mingle with beautiful
women in the visual
feasts of Peter Beard.
A A Gill hunts the
king of New York's art
jungle to his lair

40





The rain fell in gusty curtains. Rills hissed in the cracked pavements, torrents twisted in the gutters, skateboarders finally surfed, gobbets bounced and skipped like a million wet exclamations on the pavement. The sultry New York evening looked like a Blade Runner premonition of some microwaved, overpopulated, washed-away endgame. Africans appeared on every corner selling collapsible umbrellas, happy in the monsoon. They were strangely prophetic, appropriate.

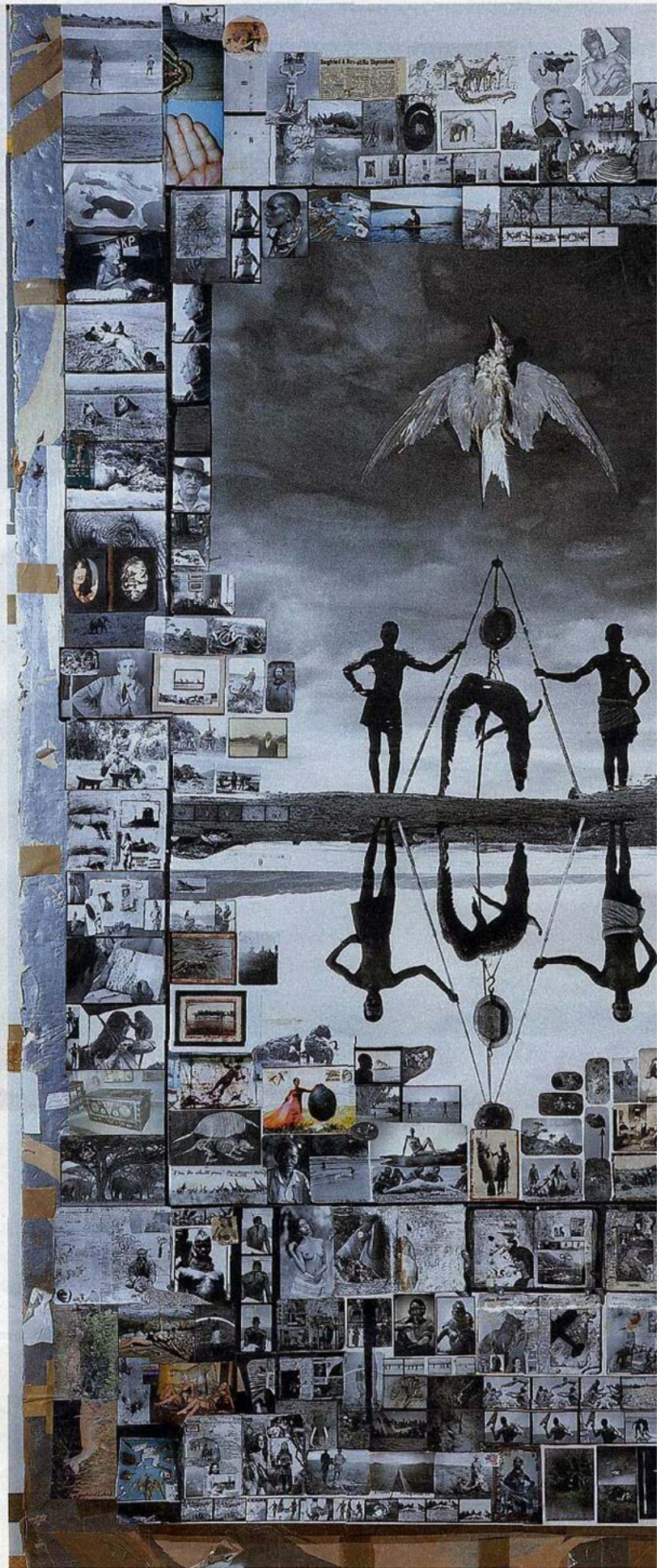
Peter Beard's apartment is just opposite Carnegie Hall. I asked how to get there, but nobody said "Practise". The block is a huge, landmark Gotham-gothic mausoleum of marble and sentimental-robber-baron cake decoration. I squelched to the lift. A voice from above shouted, "Use the stairs", and there is Peter Beard, standing in the service door of the most surprising grotto of a flat, a cave of magpie booty, a witch doctor's warehouse of spells. Every ➤➤➤



surface sags with objects and juju. Shards and glitter, bones and stones and muti. The detritus of a life if not well examined then at least well travelled. There are books and bits of paper, ashtrays and glasses, and a plate full of little chunks of stone that Beard thinks are meteorites from the Sahara, but I think look like constipated dinosaur coprolites from a midden. The walls are covered with his photographs of Africa. Pressed into their frames are other pictures, postcards and snapshots. Beard himself is a beguilingly handsome man of indeterminable age, though he is 68. He is wearing a worn workman's shirt and chinos, and has bare feet, and when he talks he looks a bit like a cross between Fred Astaire and a fish eagle, but mostly I notice his hands: strong, elegant, expressive, self-possessed, and stained with paint and ink. They are constantly restless, *picking things up, smoking cigarettes, tinkling glass, touching up the world.* A couple of blind, restless lechers out on the pull, bored with being attached to these wrists.

A blow-dried grey cat picks its way through the *tchotchke*. If you've never come across Beard before, don't know who he is or what he does, it's difficult to describe, or rather, difficult to encompass. But then if you haven't come across him, you are in a sorry minority. Almost everybody I speak to seems to know Peter, everyone has a story – generally unprintable, usually libellous or illegal or licentious – but all of them uproarious and all of them fond. He has a reputation as a bad boy, but it's the sort of bad-boy reputation that reputable good boys would behave very badly to get. He makes pictures but adamantly refuses to call himself an artist or the pictures art. He decorates photographs with *butterflies, insects, bones, pages from magazines, found objects and drawings done by Africans.* And there's a lot of blood. They are memorable, unclassifiable, and latterly have become immensely, globally collectable. One of his works sold for \$156,000 at Sotheby's New York in April. This month, Taschen the art publishers are issuing a limited-edition book of his work, of gargantuan size and opulence, which is likely to be oversubscribed by two or three times before it even makes it to your Waterstone's.

Beard was born into an old East Coast banking family, had an Ivy League education and inherited the sort of athletic good looks that Ralph Lauren devotes entire ad campaigns to. He set off for Africa as a teenager for no better reason than it was there and because he says that on a rainy day when he was six, his nanny took him to the African Hall of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which is still an amazing place of glowing, hyperreal dioramas. Outside is the statue of Teddy Roosevelt, the white-hunter president. Beard made his way to East Africa and clicked. He found his space in the sun, discovered a place, a life and a people that he was made for. He led a semi-nomadic life working, socialising and *safariing, and out of that grew an astonishing book:* ➤➤➤



Elephants are the only creatures, apart from us, that destroy their own habitats. They died in Tsavo through population density. You look at the corpses; they all have constipation from eating the heartwood of trees. What happened to the elephant is happening to us. It's simple. Look at this city, the density and stress. It's all coming to an end, but no one will talk about the real crisis: it's us, too many of us. From the first hominids, it took 80m years to reach a population of 1 billion in the 1930s. Now we add a billion every decade. It's finished. Stress and density; everything else is irrelevant."

Beard lives with his wife, Nejma, and teenage daughter, Zara, in Manhattan and Montauk, Long Island. Nejma is from East Africa, but her family were originally from Afghanistan. She has the steely handsome predator's look of a Pathan and she organises or disentangles his life. She does his sales, his galleries, she is his agent and bodyguard – mostly protecting him from himself. And she sits with us, nervously listening to the stream of consciousness.

We go back out into the sodden evening to dine in a favourite Greek restaurant. Most of the Upper East Side has had the same idea. Two or three dozen suited bankers and media types, with their chisel-faced, overexercised dates, mill around waiting for food and liquor. The analogy with Tsavo's elephants is satisfyingly inescapable. There is one table free. Peter sits at it without asking and then taps me for \$5. "I want to tip the barmaid; have you seen her?" Nejma rolls her obsidian daocit's eyes. I mention that I think she is probably a better story than he is: "If you write about me," she says, "I'll kill you." She slaps me then laughs. Or maybe she laughs then slaps me. "Let me tell you the things I don't have," says Peter. "No watch, no cellphone, no computer, no underwear, no wallet, no plastic, no belt, no socks, no shoes." He wears chappals, the sturdy sandals originally made on the northwest frontier but taken by Indians to Nairobi. Men's Vogue has done a feature on him and his sandals. "Let me tell you what he does have," adds Nejma. "Two assistants, one archivist, one child and a wife."

The next day I meet Peter in his repository, an artist's warehouse on the Lower West Side. We go up in one of those terrifying industrial lifts with one wall missing, and stop in a large storeroom packed with archive photographs, diaries, rolled pictures, framed pictures, stacked and torn pictures. This is where the nice, harassed archivist and researchers work. "This is where they stored the uranium for the Manhattan Project," says Peter. He is sitting on the floor working on photographs and books, annotating them. Dipping his hands in ink to leave fingerprints. Working myopically in corners or smearing great smudges. On a table beside him are black-and-white prints of lions, elephants and cheetahs swagged with blood, with dead birds stuck on them. The cat supplies the birds, the blood comes from a sausage factory run by the aged sister of his childhood nanny. Some photographs are sent back to Africa to be decorated by Kenyan artists in a very African form of co-operation. Beard is remarkably unsentimental about the Dark Continent and hopelessly realistic about the state that Africa has been led to. He is scathing about the charities and initiatives set up to save rhinos, elephants and pretty animals. He has no plans to go back. "I'm simply a curator of my own back catalogue." On the shelves are the famous diaries: huge, bursting, gravid books stuffed full of collaged additions. I flick through one at random; along with the odd appointment for lunch or drinks, the birthdays and phone numbers, there are hundreds and thousands of newsprint clippings of accidents and murders, but mostly of girls, girls with big knockers. A lot of Peter's stories end up with



Above: Beard with a pile of his diaries going back to 1977. The many volumes mix lunch appointments and birthdays with a prodigious quantity of collage

What makes him such attractive company is that he is a child – Just William being Just Picasso

death, lawyers or girls with fantastic tits. Watching him perfectly contented, lying on the floor painting his thumbs, sticking photos with tape, while the nanny archivist fusses around him, I realise that what makes Beard such attractive company is that he is a child – Just William being Just Picasso. Not childlike in the sickening Californian therapy sense of getting in touch with your inner toddler, but properly childish: scraped knees, dirty fingers, big grin. He has somehow managed to save the age-endangered, anarchic, exciting, didactic bit of Peter Pan and combine it with the loungeish charm, danger and flirtatiousness of Captain Hook. It is a pretty neat combination. His images aren't quite art and they aren't quite photography. They're the leaves of a well-thumbed life.

We go to Condé Nast, to have lunch in the lobby of the huge office block on Times Square. The security guard asks us to show some Al-Qaeda-beating identification. I produce a driving licence that proves I'm me and that I'm a grown up who does what he's told. Peter says he doesn't have any. The security guard, who is of African descent, regards this little awkward Greystoke with a steely politeness. "Do you have a credit card, sir?" "No plastic," beams Peter. "What do you have in your wallet, sir?" "I don't have a wallet or a computer or underwear. But I do have a book that I wrote. Look, here's my name and here's my photograph [being eaten by a dead crocodile]." "I'm afraid that won't do, sir." Peter couldn't be happier. The security guard sets his jaw. Look here, I say; he's with me. He's fine, honestly. I'm sorry; say you're sorry, Peter.

That night on the news, it was announced that America's population had just reached 300m ■

Peter Beard, edited by Nejma Beard and David Fahey, is published by Taschen (www.taschen.com) in 2,000 Art Editions (£1,350) and 250 Collectors Editions (£3,500). New works by Peter Beard are at the Michael Hoppen Gallery, London SW3, from November 30 to January 31, 2007. Visit www.michaelhoppengallery.com