

W12 WEEKEND

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COLLECTING

'We are enemies of nature'

Anthony Haden-Guest meets a photographer who has always put wildlife and celebrity on an equal footing

Peter Beard's name was made by *The End of the Game*, a 1965 book of photographs illustrating the extinction of up to 40,000 elephants at Tsavo National Park, Kenya. Beard still owns a ranch in Kenya but has mostly lived at Montauk on the far end of Long Island since 1971.

The man-made ghastliness he saw at Tsavo has now reached the Montauk shore. Beard's recent photographs of woebegone elephant seals were taken on the stone beach a precipitous drop beneath us. "I've never had seals wash up sick like that," he says. "This is global warming."

The seals have been replaced by paddling surfers. The sky is luminous, the surf amorous. "Paul Simon says, 'you mean, you get all this for only money?'" says Beard. The musician is a neighbour.

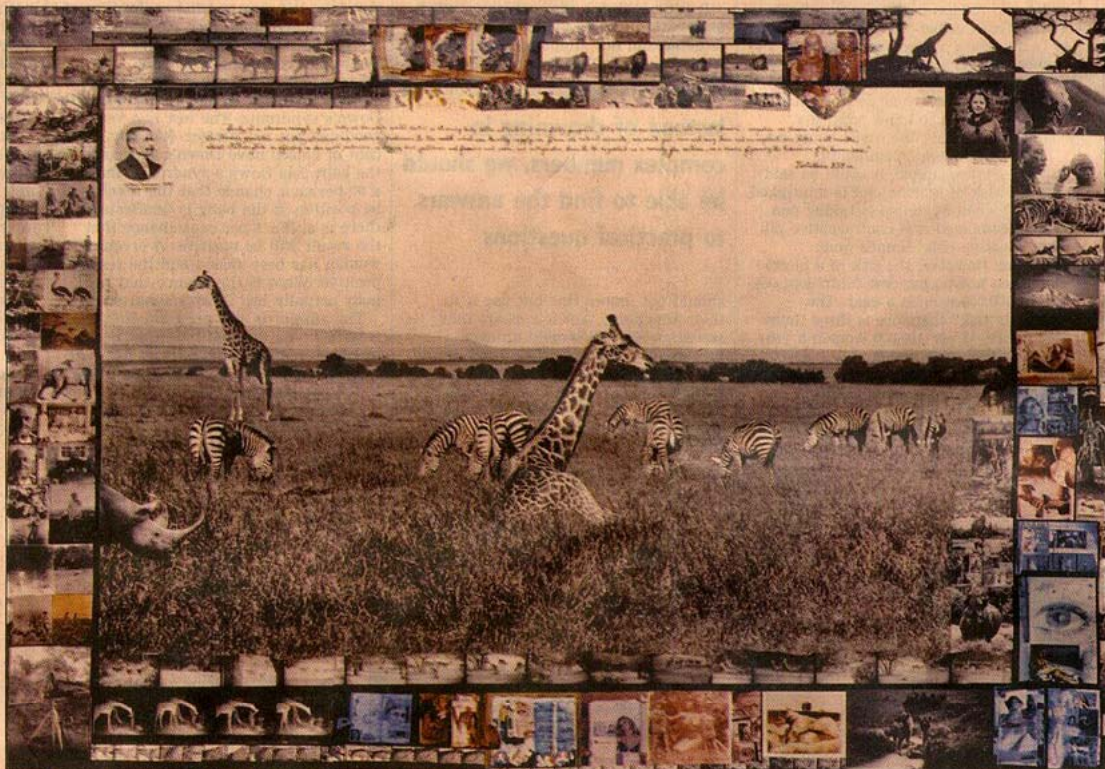
We walk into the house. Photographs are everywhere. Some relate to the show that opens at the Michael Hoppen Gallery, London, next week, some to the whopper of a Beard book just out from Taschen.

Nejma, Beard's wife, is putting a meal together. Zara, their daughter, vanishes upstairs. A television commentator is yammering away about Steve Irwin, the Australian crocodile hunter, recently killed after being stabbed in the heart by a sting-ray. "He made a great television show," Beard says. "He was a wonderful guy for kids and for getting the conservation message out. And he never tried to be pretentious."

Beard could not help, though, but be swept away by the notion of nature - that sting - striking back at the world of "reality" television. "The metaphor of that bloody torpedo that looked like a Brancusi sculpture, fashioned over millions of years! It's a miracle of evolution. Which we are enemies of. We are enemies of nature!" This darkly over-the-top bravura is pure Beard.

The great-grandson of the American railway tycoon, James Jerome Hill - "My grandmother knew Sitting Bull" - Beard was left a trust fund in the low seven figures and sent to the English public school Felstead. He took up photography at Yale and, when he left, he picked up a \$1,000-a-month contract to shoot fashion for American Vogue.

Beard first visited Kenya in 1955, hired to work on a documentary about rhinos. The reclusive Karen Blixen, author of *Out of Africa*, allowed herself to be photographed. He bought the Hog Ranch, a 50-acre farm on the cor-



Animal magic: 'Giraffes and Zebras', a new piece by Peter Beard, whose work has moved beyond pure photography into collage

Michael Hoppen Gallery

ner of her property. His African oeuvre followed.

The End of The Game was admired by Francis Bacon. They became friendly and Bacon painted Beard some 20 times. Images of both Bacon and Baroness Blixen recur in Beard's own work, which had moved beyond pure photography into collage. Beard sometimes likes to affect a dandyish disdain for the notion of "career" but actually works harder than just about anybody I know. He simply doesn't stop.

His diaries include photographs of wildlife and of fashion models, tabloid clippings, pages from trashy magazines and images of famous folk with whom he is or was well acquainted, from Andy Warhol and Bacon to Salvador Dali and Jacqueline Kennedy.

They are written upon and often smeared with animal blood. Many have drawings round the edges, made by Africans who work at the Hog Ranch, notably Kamante Gatura, Beard's major-domo.

I see photographs of former wives - model Cheryl Tiegs on the loo - and lovers, such as Lee Radziwill, but I observe that although there is lots of autobiography in Beard's work, there's little by way of intimate revelation. "Well, good, good. I hate whining, don't you?" he says.

Beard once told me of his photography: "I was very busy trying

to avoid anything that might entail illustration of my feelings." Indeed, he only began to organise his archive of a couple of million negatives when he needed something to occupy him in a hospital bed in 1996 after being trampled by an elephant.

Beard's photo-art career came into focus post-pachyderm attack. His wife is now his dealer/manager. "They chucked me in at the deep end," she says. "And, bit by bit, I'm learning."



A chimney sticking out of a knoll above the cliff where we are sitting is all that remains of the windmill where Beard lived after acquiring the Montauk estate. It burned to the ground in July 1977 and many of his diaries went with it. But some charred pages survive. "I like that. There's quite a lot of that in the Taschen book," Beard says, in a typically off-hand reference to the event.

We climb down to the beach the Beards call Driftwood Cove. "Long Island is a glacier push and

the best rocks on Long Island are here - right below my house," Beard says. We poke through rock-piles and are soon accumulating rocks to our liking, mine minimal, his surreal.

"We're going to eat in the garden," he says after our return, handing me a plateful of meat and potatoes.

Inside, I leaf through more of Beard's images. Here's Andy Warhol, a former Montauk neighbour. Here's Mick Jagger - Beard went on a Rolling Stones tour as photographer for Truman Capote. Here is Picasso, there is Brigitte Bardot chatting to a Beard cousin.

This celebrity quotient isn't frivolous. "There is something to the pecking order in reality," Beard says. "In these interesting cases, it usually comes in a fairly authentic way." The Celebrity as Alpha-Force Wildlife. Sounds right to me.

In the Beards' Montauk demesne, nature is as rabid as ever. The raccoons kill chickens and smash the shells of turtles with rocks. The guinea fowl gobble the chicks. One of their cats, Obelix, has been shipped to their Manhattan flat, traumatised. Nejma explains: "She was almost taken off by a red-tailed hawk."

"Zara threw a sea-horse into the sea," Beard says, enacting his daughter's throwing motion. "A seagull got it."

That's nature's way. That's as it should be. It's man that's messing up. "It's the Galloping Rot," Beard says. "It's all around us. Even in Montauk."

He sees the vanishing great beasts as our advance patrol. "Bacon has foreseen all of this," he says. "The cry of the last man in a vacuum."

We are now concealed within the outside shower, which is also a permanent blind for a wildlife shoot. We watch through transparent plastic as two stags and eight hinds come down to feed. Beard flicks through the shots stored on his digital Leica as we wait. "That's Sean Lennon... some Russians at Bungalow Eight... the guy who did the Idi Amin movie... that's a big rhino. Have you ever seen a rhino that big? It's not alive now, for sure..." Some guinea fowl move fussily around. The deer come closer. Beard puts his camera to a small opening and gets to work.

SNAPSHOT

■ 'Peter Beard', edited by Nejma Beard and David Fahey, is published by Taschen, www.taschen.com

■ New works by Peter Beard are at the Michael Hoppen Gallery, London SW3, from November 30, www.michaelhoppengallery.com