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A RARE SPECIMEN

ART JACKIE ONASSIS, BRIGITTE BARDOT, DEAD ELEPHANTS: PETER BEARD'S CAREFULLY DEFACED SNAPSHOTS COMBINE HIGH SOCIETY WITH HIGH ANXIETY. 'WE ARE ALL ANIMALS NOW,' HE TELLS NIGEL FARNDALE

THERE IS INCONGRUITY IN WHAT PETER BEARD DOES.

He is a fashion and wildlife photographer, a man who occupies the space between frivolity and substance. His diaries of photographs, cuttings and annotations reflect this paradox: in between the arresting, black-and-white images of elephants, lions and giraffes are glimpses of his life as a socialite in Manhattan and the Hamptons: the former wives – supermodel Cheryl Tiegs on the loo – the lovers, such as Lee Radziwill, and the bohemian friends and neighbours, from Andy Warhol and Mick Jagger to Brigitte Bardot and Truman Capote. This month, the art publisher Taschen is issuing a limited-edition book of these pictorial diaries, a large monograph with more than 624 giant pages. The collectors' editions cost £3,500 each.

Beard is certainly collectable. In April, one of his works sold for \$156,000 at Sotheby's New York. When I ask him if he thinks price is a reflection of value he says: 'Well it's like grades at school. I think grades are an indication of success, they are an acknowledgement. I am personally rather embarrassed about my prices now because I did these for fun, and I don't really think that photography is art.'

Upstairs at the Michael Hoppen Gallery, which – oh dear – is 'wholly devoted to the photographic image as art', Beard is hovering over a work in progress: a black-and-white photograph of an African tribeswoman with a cut-out of a bush baby on her shoulder. The piece has a border of paint drips and much white space on which to place a dead stag beetle, should he feel so inclined. The beetle is in his hand but he cannot decide whether to glue it or pin it. 'What do you think?' he says. 'Here? Here? I think I should place it here so that the bush baby is looking at it. Now I think I'm going to go with the glue.' He squeezes some UHU on to the brittle underbelly of the beetle. 'How do you like it? I like it. It's one of my favourite pieces. I think it works. I was so pleased with my Jackson Pollock addition round the edges here. Jack the Dripper. Very pleased with that.'

Not lacking in self-esteem then, this Peter Beard. Nor is he one for avoiding confrontation. Around us, the final pictures are being ▶

Call of the wild
Beard in London (above), 2006. Left: the photographer's portrait of Brigitte Bardot with his cousin Jerome Hill, Cassis, Provence, 1959



unpacked and hung, but he is not happy with the frames and tells the gallery owner so. Nor is he best pleased with the way the works were shipped from his studio in Manhattan. Indeed, he is in a state of agitation. 'I don't irritate easy. I'm normally not a whiner. The works were held up by Customs then you have to pay £60,000 to get this shit in here. I'm very irritated today.'

He seems distracted, too, as if unable to catch his own attention. He is tactile man, a toucher of knees and shoulders, who has to have something to occupy his restless, crooked hands: a cigarette, usually. At 68, he is still assertively photogenic, with all-American looks that are as tart as a lemon sorbet. And he has the bearing of one who is used to being surrounded by sycophants. He carries neither mobile nor wallet, and he wears neither watch nor socks. When I ask him why this is, he says: 'I've never had underwear of any kind, anything that you have to wash.' Instead of shoes he wears chappals, African sandals.

He is described on the dust jacket of his last but one book as an 'adventurer, explorer, photographer and writer', but pointedly not an 'artist'. Yet the way he decorates his black-and-white photographs – large, hand-made silver gelatin prints – with splashes of paint, leaves, feathers, butterflies, insects, bones, and cuttings from magazines in a collage is artistic. They are also written upon, his pieces, in a spidery hand. Usually they are smeared with animal blood.

The subject of his new work is Kenya. That is the subject for much of his old work as well. In fact, since becoming captivated by east Africa on his first visit in 1955, when he was hired to work on a documentary about rhinos, he has returned to it as the tip of the tongue returns to a nagging tooth cavity. The reclusive Karen Blixen, author of *Out of Africa*, allowed herself to be photographed by him in 1961, they became friends and he bought a 40 acre farm on the edge of her coffee plantation. 'I put up a tented base camp there and called it Hog Ranch, after the clans of bristled warthogs that lived all around and still do.' He has a home there still, but lives with his wife, Nejma, and teenage daughter, Zara, in Manhattan and Montauk, Long Island. Nejma is from east Africa, but her family was originally from Afghanistan. She is his agent and his minder, keeping an eye on him, making sure he isn't too rude or, when talking to the press, slanderous.

'In New York I live on a compost heap of all the stuff I accumulate,' he says. 'Cuttings and so on. Have you seen the book? The size of it is just obscene. I've got a mental problem, I think. I'm a parasite on subject matter. I keep going back to it. I like to leave air but it gets crowded.'

So he abandons a work rather than finishing it? 'I love the idea of work in

Friends in high places

Andy Warhol, Truman Capote and Terry Southern backstage at a Rolling Stones concert, 1972. Top right: Beard with his former wife, Cheryl Tiegs, 1979. Above right: a section from one of his pictorial diaries from March 1978, featuring Elizabeth Taylor and a Francis Bacon image

'I'VE GOT A MENTAL PROBLEM, I THINK. I'M A PARASITE ON SUBJECT MATTER. I KEEP GOING BACK TO IT'

progress but I do sometimes suffocate pictures, like that one over there.' He points across the room. 'I get obsessive. I think it works, though, don't you? With this one,' he gestures towards another image, stuck with tiny photographs of skeletons, 'I kept adding dead bodies. You'll find a couple of hundred dead bodies in it. I wanted to emulate the leaves.'

'He's obsessed by them,' Nejma says, handing her husband an ashtray. 'I was photographing them from the air and you could smell the bloody bodies. The extent of mismanagement in Kenya is shocking. The elephants had eaten 8,000 square miles: 40,000 elephants leaving a desert behind them.' Beard claims that outlawing game-hunting has upset the natural balance and created elephant overpopulation, which means that many have died of famine.

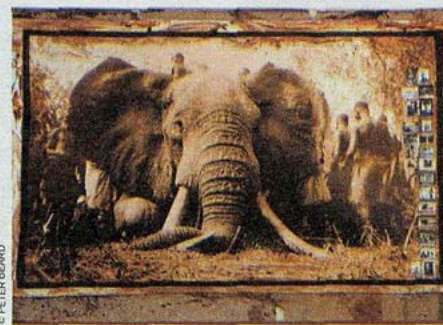
Does he wake up feeling angry about it? 'I'm pretty angry about it right now actually. There's nothing that can be done. We're next. We are the problem. We're adding to it. We're adding a billion people every decade. We're just spin doctors. Whatever we do is supposedly great and yet it's always at the expense of diversity and nature. We're like elephants. The ecology of the elephant is more similar to human than any other.'

Meaning? 'Altruism. Nuclear families. Longevity. How about the ability to adapt to the damage they cause? The elephants are raiding villages now. Killing rhinos. Competition for diminishing resources. Like us going to Iraq and wrecking it for oil. We, too, are animals: rather dangerous, territorial, and greedy, but animals all the same.'

He is not sure why he first went to Africa. It might have been the hand-painted screen in his nursery: it showed towering giraffes. Also, from an early age, he was interested in natural history and kept a menagerie of salamanders, newts, chipmunks, racoons and possums. His mother would tell him to keep them out of the house – 'But the animals were all that interested me, and they always ended up indoors.' He probably went to Africa, though, because he could afford to indulge his whims. His grandfather was the American railway tycoon James Jerome Hill, and Beard inherited a seven-figure trust fund as a young man.

His best-known book, *The End of the Game*, was first published in 1965. It ends with a series of photographs of dead and desiccated elephants, victims of starvation. I ask if his heart hardened after seeing them. 'I did thousand of them, over several years. It was like an Easter egg hunt. The diversity of each carcass was overwhelming: they are running, they are smiling, they are incredible sculptures.'

The book was admired by Francis Bacon. They became friendly and Bacon painted Beard some 20 times. Images of Bacon crop up in Beard's



ROBIN PLATZER/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES
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own work. 'I did Polaroids of him when he was working. I once asked him what he had been thinking about when he was painting this strange Martian figure in the foreground and he said: "The last thing I want to do when I'm painting is think."'

Beard took up photography while studying art at Yale and, when he left, he picked up a contract to shoot fashion for American *Vogue*. He can be quite the drama queen and name-dropper when talking about his colourful past. He likes you to know, for example, that when he first went out to Africa it was with Darwin's great-grandson. He is also quick to tell you that his grandmother knew Sitting Bull and that when he met Jackie Kennedy – through her sister Lee Radziwill – he taught her how to use a camera properly.

He can also be a bore but, to be fair, he does know he is and doesn't feel comfortable talking about himself. 'I want to puke when I hear myself talking,' he says. Is he a difficult subject for other photographers? 'I was extremely irritated being photographed for a long time, then I gave up caring. Photography is a nauseating cliché, but there is a lot to it. You can tell so much about a person from it. You are exaggerating the consciousness. It's life-thickening, photography.'

He's not vain? 'Well I don't like to walk around nude. In Africa people don't give a shit, they walk around and don't care. I've always thought male nudity was grotesque.'

I find myself wondering what manner of man he is. Pessimistic, certainly, and boastful, and not a little pretentious. When asked how he squares his frivolous love of celebrity with his work with endangered wildlife, for example, he talks about celebrities in terms of Darwinian natural selection and you find yourself thinking: hmm. One of his claims to fame, meanwhile, is 'discovering' the Somali supermodel Iman. He spotted the 19-year-old university student on a busy street in Nairobi and then later claimed that she had been a teen tribeswoman tending cattle and sheep. When she arrived in New York in 1975, Beard secured her promise that she would play along with his story.

The opening night of his exhibition in London a few days ago was packed – more than 500 guests, including Sabrina Guinness and Nicola Formby, had come along to pay homage. At one point it was so busy that the floor upstairs was shaking – this led to large queues outside as the management were afraid to let too many people in.

Beard is used to crushes: he was hospitalised in 1996 after being trampled by an elephant. 'Got skewered right through my leg,' he says of it now. He is made of strong stuff, it seems. He has even survived a spell in an African

Big names, big game
Iman, whom Beard 'discovered' in Nairobi, and, right, an elephant brought to the ground – Beard is a firm believer in the need for hunting as a way of keeping the 'natural balance'. Top: with Jackie Onassis, 1983

prison. 'I got a year and a half and 12 strokes for arresting a poacher. He was kept in jail then they released him and put me in instead, because I was a pale face supposedly guilty of wrongful arrest and confinement. It was the prison where they torture all the politicians.'

Was he properly fed and clothed? 'No f---ing way, it was like a zoo. You had to shit in a hole in the floor and lie on the cement. You are an ape in a zoo.'

Did he manage to keep his composure? 'No, I was extremely upset. But I can adapt because I'm a human being. I learned my Swahili in there. I was in solitary for a while, which was heavy. Nothing to read all day, just sitting in a cage.'

Despite that ordeal, he still loves Africa. 'I like the authenticity of east Africa,' he says. 'I was over there recently, thinking this is better than New York, much better. New York is so phoney.'

So why does he choose to live in New York? 'Well I do books, so that is where you've got to do it. Also my daughter is at school there.'

A new edition of *Zana's Tales*, his collection of children's stories about Kenya, is brought over for him to look at. 'I'm so irritated today. Everything I see makes me furious, like this cover. This is the cover I did and these wormy f---ing people ...'

'Different publishers want different things,' his wife says diplomatically.

'Naj, this is moronic. This is just some art director who wanted a stake in the book. They snuck this in on me.'

His temper does not improve when the subject turns to George Bush. Indeed he imparts several defamatory stories about the President which I am not going to repeat here. He knows people who know him, you see. 'I also heard from some Texas friends, one of them who owns the ...' His wife shakes her head emphatically, but he overrides her. '... Think about that,' he says when he has finished his story. 'I am not bullshitting about that lying son of a bitch.'

He can be just as slanderous about artists. 'I know Lucian Freud very well,' he says. 'And he owes everything to Francis Bacon. Lots of hate there ...' Perhaps it is simply that Beard feels no tribal loyalty to Freud, because he doesn't consider himself an artist. He prefers 'adventurer, explorer, photographer and writer' and also, I see when I look again at his dust jacket, 'pied piper'. ☺

'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 Hoppengallery, London SW3, until 25 January. Visit www.michaelhoppengallery.com

'I GOT A YEAR AND A HALF AND 12 STROKES FOR ARRESTING A POACHER. HE WAS KEPT IN JAIL THEN THEY RELEASED HIM AND PUT ME IN INSTEAD ...'