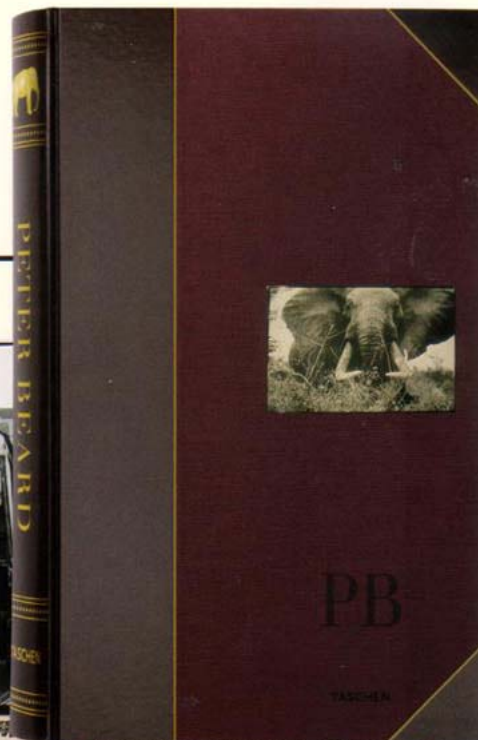
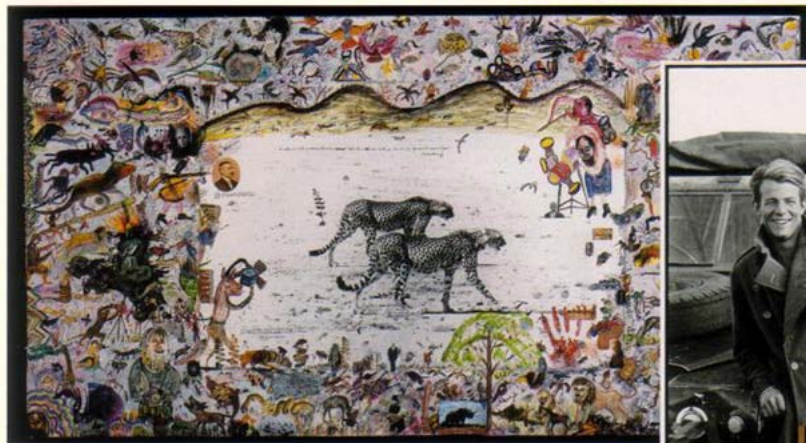


IN CONTEXT



PETER BEARD, THE ICONIC WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER, SHARES HIS TALES OF AFRICA & DISPELS THE MYTH OF HUMAN NATURE

Peter Beard has spent his life documenting wildlife in Africa. He witnessed the dawn of Kenya's population explosion and the scramble for finite resources it created; he watched as tens of thousands of starving elephants in Tsavo died in a wasteland of eaten trees. Documenting what he saw with diaries, photographs, and collages, he did not shrink from harsh reality – elephant corpses were laid bare, and the facts were carefully written down in type, by hand, and occasionally with blood.

Peter Beard is also an archivist of domestic wildlife. He made diaries with Andy Warhol, toured with Truman Capote and the Rolling Stones, and wrote books with Jacqueline Onassis. He was painted by Francis Bacon, painted on by Salvador Dalí, and as a fashion photographer, he brought supermodel Iman to the US.

Compiled for the first time, Beard's massive body of work will be released by Taschen this December as a striking collector's edition, signed by the author and crafted with its own clamshell case and wooden stand. His collages are reproduced at the size they have always meant to be seen, some as foldouts. Hundreds of smaller-scale works fill the remaining spreads that are magnified to show every detail, from Beard's own handwriting and drawings to stones, bones and bits of animals pasted to the page.

Ten years ago, you were trampled by an elephant. How did that happen?

I wasn't necessarily trampled by an elephant; I was skewered by an elephant. It crushed my hips, shoulders, and ribs. It was probably a wounded elephant. After being there year after year and thousands of instances, it just so happened that I go out on a picnic one day and this elephant comes out of nowhere.

Did you ever question your line of work?

A mountain climber once told me that if you're a mountain climber, you don't think about falling. And if you're doing wildlife photography, you're so happy to be on safari you don't think about being bitten by a snake.

What do you think of the precept that humans shouldn't touch nature, we should only observe it?

My thought on that statement is 'bullshit.' You walk on nature, so obviously you're touching it. If you use a branch to clean your teeth, it's nature. Every time you find an animal that's wounded and you take care of it, that's touching nature. Nature is authentic, nature is real, nature is gutsy and true. Of course, we're enemies of nature.

How are we enemies of nature? Do you have a bleak outlook on where humanity is heading?

We are adding a billion people to the world's population every decade and nobody even mentions it. We think AIDS is just something to cure, but AIDS was sent by nature, like heart disease and cancer. There are limiting factors when you exceed carrying capacity. When you overpopulate, every single species has these effects. Separation

of the sexes is the first limiting factor and we're full into that. Second is territorial neurosis. Third is density-related illnesses and diseases. AIDS is the classic density-related disease, so is SARS, mad cow disease... We are such enemies of nature that we spin it so that nobody ever mentions our density and our destructiveness. We're in the demographic trap. It took over 8 million years to get a billion people on earth. And now we're adding a billion every decade! We're destroying the planet. We're disgusting, and we're going to get what we deserve very soon.

Do you think the planet is somehow going to purge itself and the human species will be destroyed?

I don't think it'll be that bad. It'll be cockroaches and us. We'll adapt to the damage we cause because we're like elephants. The entire ecology of the elephant is more similar to human beings than any other animal. They could live on hardwood and die of constipation.

You say we're an enemy of nature, but isn't man part of nature?

Human nature is an oxymoron. We're enemies of nature. Wherever we go, we destroy the quality of life there. Africa is a classic example. There were about 5 million Africans in Kenya when I first went there in 1955. There are now 40 million. Does that mean anything to you? Just look around the world. When Norman Borlaug got his Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for inventing the 'green revolution' – high protein legumes for 200 million more people – he

said something like this to the Nobel audience: 'I am extremely honored to accept this prize, but I hope you realize it's like throwing gasoline on a fire. All the food means more people. I'm giving you an emergency crutch on which you can hobble.' They didn't listen to him, you'll never hear that speech, and you'll never hear his attitude. Nobody has sustainable yield. We're a monstrous species!

Do you feel some people might interpret your comments as callous?

Look, the average mature female Kenyan has 8.2 children; in Madagascar it's 11 children. And it's the same in America. We're in deep shit, and we're denying it.

Switching gears a little, it's well documented that Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* inspired you to take your first trip to Africa in 1955. Tell me about that.

Well, I went to do a film on white and black rhinos with Charles Darwin's great grandson. We traveled the continent quite a bit, but Kenya was the best, so I moved there.

Why did you fall in love with Kenya?

I don't like to use words like 'fall in love.' It's authentic, it's challenging, it's real.

You were also one of the original jet-setters, photographing and hanging around the New York art scene, the fashion world, and Hollywood – something that seems to contrast the work you were doing in Africa.

There used to be a lot of rhinos in the United States, but those days are over. So what have we

got? We've got living sculpture. I went to Studio 54 when I was doing my books; I actually did my books right next to the club at 195 Hudson Street. Studio 54 was wildlife, believe me. Everybody always asks the question, 'How can you photograph models when you photograph wildlife?' Well, I admire beautiful women; it's like sculpture.

Have you ever considered yourself a rock star of sorts?

Are you kidding? I'm a lowly hand-to-mouth bum, and I take pictures like a parasite on the subject matter. There's nothing glorious about being a photographer. But I did go on the Rolling Stones tour in 1972, and that was great. They're the greatest band in the history of the world.

What are your thoughts on the expansion of Western capitalism in Africa?

Interference is the enemy of almost everything, and we have interfered beyond control. Do-gooders are doing bad, and interference is the problem. It's this notion of 'we're gonna hug the babies and adopt them and give them to Madonna,' and it's bullshit. It's like grabbing authenticity that doesn't belong to you.

What would you like to see for the future?

How about sustainable yield for a start, so you're not dependent on foreign oil? Let me finish giving you the list of characteristics of every single species that is overpopulated: separation of the sexes, territorial neurosis, density-related illnesses and diseases, falloff in behavior – there was a recent story in *The New York Times Magazine* about elephants killing people;

that's because elephants are now dysfunctional from being manipulated and crowded and hemmed in. Humans also have falloff in behavior – going to Iraq, everything we're doing at Abu Ghraib Prison, school shootings. Next is competition for diminishing resources. A prime example of this is us going to Iraq for oil. Another is elephants eating trees and getting stressed and getting heart disease, which is the biggest killer of elephants.

Heart disease is also the number one killer of humans.

Exactly! Elephants are just like us. Norman Bourlag used to always say that until we understand the metaphor of the elephants, we ourselves are doomed. We're next, but I think our demise is going to do more with nuclear waste and poison.

For the average person who has never visited and may never visit Africa, what should he/she know about it?

It's losing its authenticity, so they better hurry. Stay out of the city, and get into the bush.

After all is said and done, are you happy?

I'm happy to be conscious. Consciousness is great. I hope people laugh at the human comedy.

Peter Beard, Art Edition No. 251-2500 signed by Peter Beard with hardcover, clamshell and bookholder, \$2500USD (Taschen)
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words / mar yvette
