

# NEW YORK POST

## HERO BY NATURE

By **BILL POWERS**

*January 7, 2007* -- IN a career spanning five decades, Peter Beard has captured the beauty and deterioration of Kenya, elevated the practice of journaling to an art form, discovered the model Iman and collaborated with everyone from Salvador Dali to Andy Warhol. Oh, and nearly got trampled by a charging pachyderm in the mid-1990s.

In "The End of the Game," his first book published in 1963, the Yale graduate warned of an impending environmental doomsday, examining the dwindling elephant population as a model for what might happen to humans in the future.

At 68 years old, he continues to raise awareness for these issues with the same conscientious pugnacity.

For \$2,500 (yes, \$2,500), you can snag Taschen's recent signed and numbered compendium of his African photos and notes that arrives in its very own velvet-lined crate, as if fresh from the continent itself. Or, you could hold out a few weeks (maybe save an elephant or two with the extra cash) and grab the smaller "Scrapbooks from Africa and Beyond" (Empire, \$55). Either way, revel in the beauty that is Africa, and Beard's views of it.

What can people expect from the "Art Edition" book?

It's a kaleidoscope of work from my archives. I have some pretty dramatic pictures, including elephants devouring the last blades of grass in Tsavo National Park, or "Starvo" as we called it. We have devastated the largest living land mammal on the planet and we're next in line.

Did you ever fear for the safety of the models?

Not really. The crocodiles were on muscle relaxers so they couldn't do too much harm. When Janice Dickinson was licked by the cheetah she wound up with a terrible case of hives, and had to get an antihistamine shot. Though, that particular cheetah was tame.

Reports from Africa these days seem to focus solely on the humanitarian crisis or on celebrities adopting babies. What are we to make of these developments?

We've entered Pandora's Box, and whatever bandages they put on these wounds are superficial, like trying to cure cancer with Band-Aids.

Is there any country in Africa that seems to be heading in the right direction?

Botswana is on the best track. They have more money and very few tribal differences. The people are pretty homogenous, so there's stability, but it's also a slightly boring country.

Does making art give you hope?

Not at all. We're in a demographic trap, adding almost a billion people to our population every decade. Things have to be altered on a radical basis. Instead, we redecorate the pansies on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

When will people wake up?

The worse the economy is impacted, the more people will rally. But our fixer policy has always been in direct ratio to the degree that it's too late. We address these emergencies after the fact. I think it's the state of man. Usually people pick the wrong things to challenge while the truly egregious violations are left alone. The logistics are pretty frightening. We're on that road they talk about - the one paved with good intentions.

There is a photo of you sitting in the gas chamber with a smile on your face. Is that San Quentin?

I used that picture as my New Year's card. Life magazine sent me there with Truman Capote, but he never wrote the story. I met the wardens who push the cyanide buttons. They were tough men, and most of them were against capital punishment.

Are there any living contemporary artists whom you admire?

Ed Ruscha, Damien Hirst, Chuck Close. I really like Julian Schnabel, the world he's created. The sculptures, paintings and films - they all echo each other.

You've been featured in several fashion magazines, but have a love/hate relationship with fashion. Why is that?

For the most part, people in that industry are social climbers who use other people for their connections. Diane Vreeland, Anna Wintour, Andre Leon Tally and Alexandra Shulman [are] all right, but you can keep the rest of them.