

'The last thing left is the beauty of women'

The legendary photographer Peter Beard discusses his latest shoot

It is 1964 and the supermodel Verushka is clad in a skin-tight snakeskin jumpsuit, brandishing a rope victoriously above her head as a captive rhino lies bound at her feet. The man behind the camera, the man capturing the shot that is about to change the world of fashion photography, is Peter Beard, a photographer determined to break the boundaries between nature and artifice by mixing model beauty, African beast – and the occasional splattering of blood – on polaroid.

Now Beard and his marriage of beauty and beast is back, thanks to Above, a new luxury magazine dedicated to environmental issues. There is the actress Eva Mendes draped over the lobby of Beard's New York studio, here are companion images of feral big cats, and everywhere is visceral power. How and why he does what he does, from Eva to elephants and the end of the world, is the subject of his following discussion with Above's editor, Nicolas Rachline.

Nicolas Rachline Above aims to make people aware of issues in a way that actually might work. We're all getting bored with reading in magazines about the fact that the climate is changing... [so] with Peter we are trying to glamorise the issue but keep things interesting.

Peter Beard I like fashion because it is so far from common sense, though at the same time it is about the separation of the sexes and stress and density and pecking order – money, bling, the newest and the most talked about, the most publicity...

NR Fashion has an important part to play in the global [environmental] debate because it influences people.

PB At the same time, I would say most of what fashion is doing in this area is all lip service with no real substance... aside from – maybe – [Beard smiles] green skirts. Fashion is really very politically incorrect. I'm pretty much making a pitch for humans as enemies of nature. The last thing left in nature that fashion can't corrupt could be the beauty of women. This is one thing Eva represents [in my photographs for Above]: she is naturally beautiful, cooperative, nice, fun, humorous, and I was always anxious to photograph her. I did it in my studio in

New York, and it's double-exposed: you'll see her face with the light coming through. But then it's juxtaposed with a couple of rhinos and elephants – I was trying to put things together that work; kind of last minute, spontaneous.

NR Above was initially steering as a fashion magazine but, after a conversation with Peter, the pictures with Eva were very much given a more ethical steer.

PB Norman Borlaug, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his work on the "Green Revolution" [boosting grain production to keep pace with worldwide population growth], wrote the afterword of my *End of the Game* [1965] book with me. He was, he said in his acceptance speech for the prize, very honoured to get the award but did they realise he was pouring gasoline on a fire? Because more food means more people. [Borlaug] knew the end result would be over-population, and nature's destruction but nobody listened to him. Leonardo da Vinci talked about this in the 1490s; he said humans are monsters with these enormous teeth eating up the world and, when they've eaten everything, they'll want to go up to heaven but the weight of their stomachs will keep them down and their bodies make a tomb... Sorry, what were we talking about?

NR Peter has been saying all along that over-population is creating the biggest problems with the environment.

PB We did a short film with Borlaug and he said until we learn to understand about elephants, we're doomed. That's what I was working with here, and also in my Pirelli calendar. And God – if you could see the blogs – how infuriated the masses were by the calendar, saying, "what are those girls doing next to the beautiful elephants? What's his point?" Well, the tree that the girls are on is bare, because all the bark has been eaten by the elephants. It's all related. We're trying to create things that balance the clichéd formulas.

www.above-magazine.com
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Wild Eva Mendes (above) photographed by Peter Beard for Above magazine; top: images from Taschen's two-volume 'Peter Beard' (centre, Beard)