

David Chancellor: Artist Questionnaire

IG: Which artists/photographers do you particularly respect?

So many and for so many different reasons; if initially an artists work doesn't strike a chord with me I'll all too often go back again and again until I get it. Sure sometimes it just doesn't resonate with me and I let it go, but not often. I have to say that 'respect' is an interesting way to put it too; I 'respect' artist/photographers on so many different levels. James Natchwey's work is extraordinary, and his bravery beyond my comprehension, and yet in these situations when most people would be running, I certainly would, he produces art, and art of real importance. Inferno is an amazing body of work, it's a book that I continue to go back too and probably always will.

And then Peter Beard, who I wouldn't say I 'respect' but I do adore his work and his apparent complete madness when involved in the production of his larger works inspires me. His work was hugely influential whilst I was both researching, and working on 'hunters' and still is very much so with my new work 'with butterflies and warriors'. I see his predictions for the future of wildlife in Africa being played out on a daily basis, in fact let's put it stronger than that, almost every second something stops me in my tracks and the reference is there. I have all of his works, in several editions, the 'End of the Game', 'Longing for Darkness', 'The Adventures and Misadventures of Peter Beard in Africa'..etc etc

Irving Penn I also adore and have been studying his series of skulls recently, very lovely, and strong, and unexpected.

From South Africa Roger Ballen (Outland) and David Goldblatt (Some Afrikaners Revisited). Now there's a case in point, with the exception of his 'De Hell' series, I really didn't see what all the fuss was about, but I continued to spend more time looking at his work and reading it. Living in South Africa one can't help but see his work and I really wanted to understand it, he's huge over here, not so elsewhere. Now I totally get his work, and when you consider when he shot a lot of it, and where, and who he is, a white jewish man working in apartheid South Africa, it becomes even more extraordinary and even more important.

There are many others, Joel Sternfeld, 'Oxbow Archive' in particular. Jane Hilton 'Dead Eagle Trail' wonderful. 'River of No Return' by Laura McPhee, I go back to time and time and time again..lovely lovely work...the list does go on I'm afraid.

But...the best till last..when I published 'hunters' I worked with a fabulous designer, Victor Levie, and we just got on as sometimes one does. He presented me with a plain black book when I left Amsterdam and it is without doubt the most wonderful book I've ever seen, and will always be so I'm sure of that..here's the story..

It's called Bagara, and it's by Ed van der Elsken. Van der Elsken was a Dutch photographer probably best known for his work on jazz musicians. But he took one trip to Africa, to the colony of Oubangui-Chari in the mid-1950s, and Bagara is the result. The book is divided into two sections. The first covers a journey he took in the area

around Bria, as he accompanied the local administrator on a tournée, walking from village to village, participating in funeral ceremonies and the colonial cotton-buying scheme. The second part covers safari hunting trips van der Elsken took together with guides' paying clients, also in the eastern part of the country. As you flip through the pages, you encounter not a single word, only people in all the fullness of their varied personalities and the situations they find themselves in. Inside the back cover is a small booklet that flips out to reveal van der Elsken's narration of his travels and the stories behind each photograph. In this way, it's possible to sync your reading of the text with the viewing of the photos, without either distracting from the other. This format comes as close to hearing the author tell the stories of these people and animals, as close to being there with him, as is possible with a printed book. I read the book cover to cover the moment I opened it; the whole experience was incredibly powerful. The photos are arresting, of course, but it is also the mixture of self-awareness and naivete with which van der Elsken recounts his adventures that makes the book so compelling. He knows how little he knows. But he also has an openness toward people and experiences that helps him learn quickly.

Bagara is not an easy book to find and if you find one I'll buy it from you at once and give it to my son.

IG: Why do you choose photography as your artistic medium?

I guess I'm a collector. I'm also inquisitive; people fascinate me on so many levels. My photography, my chosen medium if you like, allows me to explore, enquire, and collect what I see, and more importantly gives me the time and space to then pour over the subject. This is also why I think digital photography doesn't work for me, it actually made me speed up my process, which is the antipathy of photography for me. I remember Rob Hornstra describing his methodology as 'slow journalism' and that makes sense to me. I personally want to spend time with the subjects that I work with, that's not saying that the final image may only represent a milli second of the time spent, and may result from a fleeting moment, but the reason for me finding myself there at all, is almost certainly the result of a long road. I want the production of that work to be a journey too, not immediate.

My father was a passionate photographer and each and every holiday would be spent standing very still in suitable locations as he worked his way through the assorted instruments held in leather pouches around his neck. The results were always beautiful, and possibly slightly unrepresentative of the chaos of the actual holiday, however, they largely form my memories of my childhood. When we returned from our holidays the film would be sent away to Kodak for processing. We would wait until its return when the projector and screen would be brought out from behind the sofa, and we'd all sit and relive the holiday through his images. It seemed logical to me that this was the way to record my life, I don't know why I felt I needed to do that, but I did, and so off I went with his camera and his blessings.

I was passionate about natural history and it also seemed so logical to record what I was seeing and finding rather than to kill it, so butterflies in cases were replaced with pictures of butterflies. Birds eggs remained in their nests in favour of pictures of birds eggs in their nests. Unlike cycles, which were replaced by motorcycles and then cars; later to be reintroduced of course, the camera was not 'dropped' in favour of girls, and they were simply included as part of the story, my story. Little has changed, I'm still simply documenting my story.

IG: Why did you choose to do this project? What was the trigger?

I was intrigued on many many levels. Driving through Africa as I do a great deal, I was seeing more and more high fences going up indicating wildlife within, but clearly not for tourism per se. At airports I was seeing more and more people travelling in camouflage, too old and unfit to be soldiers but clearly carrying weapons. I started to research hunting in Africa and it was relatively easy to find locations and even prices of animals, this began to fit within a subject that I'd be looking at for a long while, our commodification of wildlife and the industry that perpetuates it.

I dug deeper and eventually identified those I wanted to talk to, initially in order to understand for myself what it was all about. I selected the best hunters, and the best animals to hunt in a specific manner, or location; Leopards with dogs in Namibia, Lion in the Kalahari etc, as I knew this would be largely defined by income and therefore I could understand the difference between subsistence and trophy hunting. Most professional hunters either didn't understand my interest or simply couldn't be bothered to talk with me so the road stopped there. So I began to follow the 'process' and started at the other end.

The Taxidermists are very proud of their work and were very happy to let me document it. The professional hunters drop off their work, the clients kills, at the taxidermists and so I could follow the route back. Eventually I met with a professional hunter who welcomed the opportunity to explain why he felt hunting such an important part of conservation, a man who I've come to admire enormously. He basically became the catalyst for all my subsequent work on this subject. It's a small very close community and once he understood that I simply wanted to understand his World, and that I thought others would want to, and most importantly that I wasn't following the well worn path of hunting is bad, conservation is good, and visa versa, access ceased to be a problem.

Once I had access it very quickly became obvious that I'd have to be very certain of my methodology. I'd researched a great deal of hunting literature, both imagery and text, and initially thought about isolating the portraits from the environment. I really wanted to reference the hunting imagery of the 20th century but instead here we would have hedge fund managers, attorneys, doctors, people of today rather than royalty and landed gentry of the past.

IG: What are your main influences and how have they influenced your work?

The work of Peter Beard became a great source of reference, but more as a visual reference of the environment than the staged portraits that all hunters take 'trophy pictures'. I re read the works of Jim Corbett 'My India, Jungle Lore, and Tree Tops' which I read over and over again as a child, and of course 'Shooting an Elephant' by George Orwell. Within all this work you can't help but feel the adrenalin, I felt I'd loose that if I staged grand portraits.

The work of Sir Edwin Landseer became a great reference too, he included the landscapes so powerfully in his work and yet still had the angst, adrenaline, and flush of the 'kill'. So I decided to include the landscape and committed to be at the side of every hunter throughout the hunt, sometimes for up to 10-12 days in the bush. I only really stepped forward when the kill was made and in this way I could truly represent the emotions of the hunter, and actually at the point of killing, and not some time later when the opportunity to portray themselves in the manner that they felt appropriate presented itself. 'huntress with buck' is a case in point, 30 seconds later her composure was very very different, the moment is lost, and so too is the power and complexity of the image. It's only later in the project that I became aware of a fabulous book 'Developing Animals' Wildlife and Early American Photography, this has since become an extraordinary source of information both for this work and the new work, ref: Allen Grant Wallihan, Mrs Wallihan's Double Shot, 1894.

IG: This work has been created over a number of years and must carry with it a huge number of stories. Do you have any particular moments to note, for example a place you've visited or person you have met?

Sure there are many, and the work is still ongoing. I have met some extraordinary people, many of them have had a profound effect on me, and my relationship with both the wildlife and the environment. In choosing the hunters that I did, I always felt confident standing shoulder to shoulder with them, I often questioned the result, but not whilst a Leopard was running full tilt in my direction, then I simply hoped my trust in them was well placed. There's a reason it's called 'Dangerous Game' and many hunters I worked with hunted it for exactly that reason, and several paid the price for that.

A Leopard attack was recently described to me 'like hugging a working blender with the cover removed, there was not one part of the animal that was not razor sharp'. To add, a Leopard is unquestionably THE most beautiful animal, it is also the meanest, most vindictive animal. I will never understand why someone would choose to trophy hunt a Leopard, but they do, and documenting it is mind numbingly frightening. A Leopard will run, for a while, and then it will just plain decide that it's had enough and it will attack. When it attacks, again unlike other animals such as Lions who will attack an unlucky

person and leave, it will come for every member of the party, in turn, one by one. Running is pointless and the Leopard is not interested in your 'project'.

'Elephant Story' is an incredibly important body of work for me and documenting the consumption of that elephant will always stay with me. I've witnessed too many elephants dying since that time but that is my Orwell ('shooting an elephant' by Orwell). He describes it so powerfully, the noises, the movements, and ultimately the transition to a better place than a pool of its own blood and a baying crowd. It took exactly 1h 42 mins to reduce a 65 years old bull elephant to bones, with nothing but bare hands and knives made from old tin cans. I will never forget the smell. I will never forget watching its eyes move from the gateway to its soul, to a reflection of the sky.

IG: Some of our visitors will be interested in the technical aspects of your project. What equipment did you use? And did it affect the way that you worked and the project outcome?

Equipment I used Mamiya 7II camera's, 80mm, 65mm, 50 mm, 43 mm lenses, a light meter, carbon fibre lightweight tripod and Kodak Portra 160/120 through out.

IG: What plans do you have for future projects?

I'm currently working on a project in Northern Kenya documenting the conservation work of the Northern Rangelands Trust. They work with local communities teaching them how to live alongside the wildlife and regenerate degraded lands allowing livestock, wildlife and people to live in harmony. These are tribal lands, the people mostly pastoralist and therefore their cattle is more important to them than life itself. Tribal conflicts are common, poaching is rife, and insurgencies from Somalia frequent.

This is conservation for the people by the people and unlike 'hunters' which looked directly at the cost to kill wildlife, this work 'with butterflies and warriors' looks at the cost benefit of keeping the wildlife alive and passing that income on to the local communities, and methodology on to the young warriors. Success however does come at a cost. As grazing improves more people move on to the land and incidents of human wildlife conflict rapidly increase, elephant clash with cattle over water sources, and Leopard move to areas close to villages and take sheep, goats, and villagers. So a balance has to be found. Managed hunting is not an option, Kenya banned hunting completely in 1977. So new methods must be found to allow us to live in harmony with wildlife as we both struggle to adapt to our changing environments.