

into the world

Adventurer-photographer-raconteur Peter Beard shoots the breeze about Africa's vanishing wildlife and wilderness, our inhumanity and his extraordinary life

by **britt collins**

Some artists, if they're lucky, have their moment in the sun. Peter Beard has had a lifetime. The photographer, author, conservationist, prophet, playboy is the last of the great adventurers. He has stalked crocodiles, roped rhinos, been jailed for trapping a poacher in his own snare, chased by lions and gored by an elephant – and when he arrived at the hospital 'bled out and nearly dead', while being anaesthetised, he asked 'Can I have some of that to go?' This habit of courting danger and shrugging it off is central to Beard's mythology.

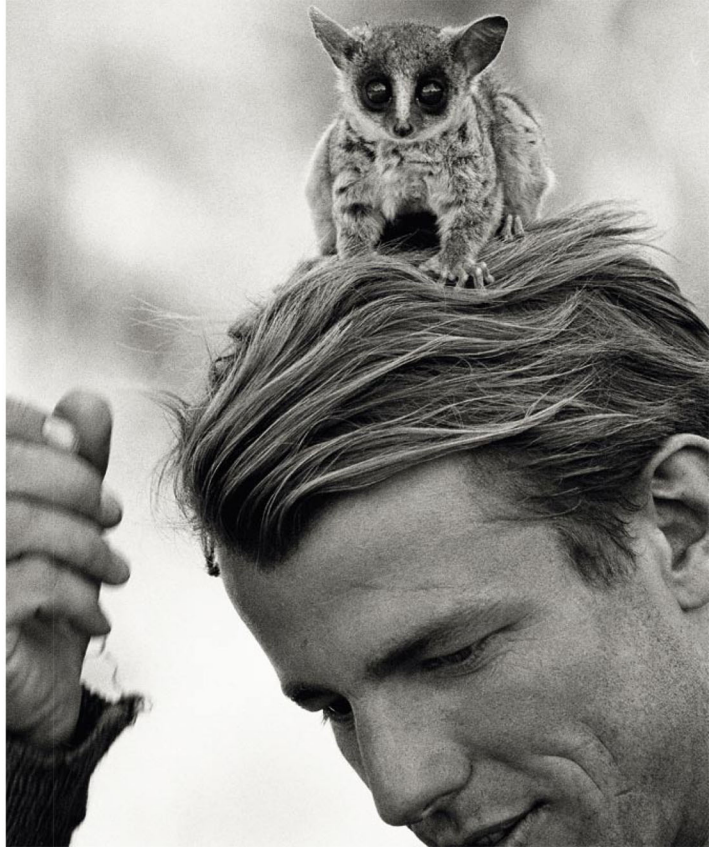
A New Yorker who fell in love with Kenya through the writings of Karen Blixen, he followed her to Africa, where he observed nature's cruelty and grace beneath a dramatic sky. It was in this lost paradise Beard felt so sure he belonged that he bought 40 acres of the Mbaqathi Forest, land edging the coffee plantation that Blixen owned and unforgettably described in *Out of Africa*. He pitched his tent, called his home Hog Ranch after the family of warthogs already in residence, and surrounded himself with the local population and wildlife that inspired many of his photographs, diaries and collages.

A living legend, whom Truman Capote described as 'half Tarzan, half Byron', Beard is as famous for his wild, whirling life as his art. He was painted by Francis Bacon and Salvador Dalí, parlied with the Rolling Stones, photographed and slept with hundreds of the world's most beautiful women, interviewed the Manson family in San Quentin

prison with Capote and created collages with Andy Warhol – all of who spill out of the pages of his work – that is scrawled upon, smeared and smudged with dirt, animal blood and remains, feathers, cocktail sticks and newspaper clippings in dizzying detail. As a fashion photographer for *American Vogue*, he took fabled Sixties faces like Veruschka to Africa and 'photographed her in her snakeskin leotard from *Blow Up*, standing in the bowl of a burnt-out baobab tree that had been totally eaten out by starving elephants.' Along the way, he discovered others like the Somali supermodel Iman (now married to David Bowie), a diplomat's daughter whom he claimed to have discovered in the African bush 'with nothing but a piece of cloth and a herd of goats'.

When we meet, on the opening night of his show inside a chic London gallery, Beard is holding court, surrounded by collectors and acolytes like an emperor-out-of-exile. Dressed in a crumpled shirt and chinos, with a cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other, he is a ruggedly handsome Renaissance man of an indeterminate age who is every bit as exotic and graceful as the wildlife and women that he photographs.

Watching him in the glare of flashbulbs amid a swarm of star-struck girls, I tell him he is something of a rock star. 'Are kidding?' he says, raising an eyebrow. 'The truth is I'm a miserable bum who's never had a job. It's always been a scavenging hand-to-mouth existence. I take pictures like a parasite. There's nothing great about being a



photographer. But I did go on the Stones tour in '72 with Truman Capote, who was kind of like the Napoleon of gays. It was an amazing time."

I mention our meeting some years ago at his New York show, where the Rolling Stones provided the soundtrack. "Well, the Stones are the greatest band in the world. And what did I say?" he asks, with an amused curiosity. Probably something about animals, the decline and foulness of the world.

"Well, little has changed. The world is going to hell," he says, cheerfully. "Humans are parasites. We're destroying the global habitat with our greed. Because we have no respect for the laws of nature, we have to deal with the consequences. The theme for the future is going to be grim survival. We are going to live like cockroaches," he continues while flitting around, smiling, winking and scribbling messages – all sauciness and sincerity: "Hey, I didn't see you last night," he shouts out to a languid, luscious-looking blonde model, snatching one of her cigarettes as she swoons over. "Those photographs we took were great."

What about his style icon status? At last year's New York Fashion Week, he was cited as "the muse of the muse" by big-name designers such as Robert Cavalli and Alexander McQueen who paid homage to his elegantly disreputable safari style.

"It's pretty weird," Beard says, puffing on his Marlboro and flashing his movie-star smile. "Designers have always referenced my archives, some more shamelessly than others. I don't enjoy that superficial world at all. I have a healthy disrespect for fashion, I'm with Thoreau, who never understood why a monkey in Paris changing his hat influences thousands of Americans."

From the start, his life was wildly romantic, scenes straight off the pages of Fitzgerald – the gorgeous, golden-haired boy who moved between rambling houses, exotic travels and grand ancestors. In fact, his great-grandfather, James J Hill, a railroad tycoon, was mythologised in *The Great Gatsby* as a 'great man' who 'helped build up the country.' Beard grew up on Park Avenue, went off to Yale to study medicine, before he 'realised that humans weren't worth saving', and took up photography. Bored with urban life and wearing shoes, he fled to Africa, looking for adventure. "I'm an escapist," he says simply. "I never had any plans. I went for selfish reasons and that was to have as much fun as I could." By 1960, he was roping nearly-extinct white rhinos, already involved in an urgent effort to round them up and releasing them in the park, from



PREVIOUS PAGE Beard with a bush baby, 1965. THIS PAGE A self-portrait, writing his diary in the jaws of a dead crocodile, Kenya, 1976

'Africa's lost its authenticity. The wide open spaces are gone, the animals are skittish. Africa is revolting. It's all slums and parking lots. It's not worth visiting. Unless you want to be mugged'

where "they would run back immediately".

And by 1967, he was shooting elephants for cover stories for *Life* magazine that claimed to be "a last look at unspoiled Africa."

His memories of this vanishing Africa of his youth – where "time slows to infinity in a great bottomless, bottle-green underworld and common sense prevails", and "lions and leopards roamed down the streets of Nairobi, a quaint pioneer town full of characters, where the local residents went to the movies in

pyjamas" – are as luscious and vivid as they are wistful and mournful. He says he barely recognises his ranch which has been swallowed up by Nairobi's expanding swell of 'overcrowded suburban slums, parking lots and barking dogs.' The wide-open spaces are gone, the animals are scared and skittish. You can forget any romantic notions you have of Africa. It's lost its authenticity and grace. Africa is revolting. It's not worth visiting. Unless you want to be mugged. The saddest thing of all is that we've lost nature

from our lives. The Natural History Museum is as good as it gets. And while he is disturbed by the wildlife and wilderness that has disappeared since he set up Hog Ranch, he doesn't delve too deeply into environmental woes but remains a noble outsider who reveres nature.

"Hog Ranch," he recalls dreamily, "was the greatest show on earth. From the Ngong Hills, you could see everything, warthogs and wildebeests, giraffes, zebras. I had a one-eyed pet vervet monkey and one night a leopard



scooped him out of the tree that he lived in next to the tent. That leopard must have been scooping out the situation for weeks.

Beard is wonderfully complicated. A free spirit in a troubled world, he is endearingly childlike, a sparkling presence who loves to socialise, yet is deeply misanthropic. He thinks people are generally 'vile, selfish and rapacious.' Modern society and its ills is a subject that often clouds and colours his conversations.

'We're like elephants,' he says, gesturing towards his hauntingly beautiful photograph of two elephants standing forlornly on a barren plain, 'the only creatures that destroy their own habitat, then we cunningly adapt to all the damage that we've caused.' He uses an analogy about the stressed and starving elephant herds of Tsavo National Park in Kenya, dying in their thousands in a wasteland of eaten trees. 'Every species expands until limiting factors are necessary,' he continues in his fast-talking New York patter. 'Aids is a classic density-related disease. Cancer, Sars, Ebola are all sent by nature. There was a recent story in *Time* magazine about elephants killing people. That's because they are now dysfunctional from being crowded and hemmed in. We're also having a fall-off in behaviour. Like going to iras, school shootings. The greed and fight for diminishing resources, terrorising tiny Third-world nations for theirs after we've squandered ours.'

'We're a monstrous species. Our disregard for population, the animals that we squeeze out of existence is disgusting. The average Kenyan female has eight children, and it's the same in America. All of our cities are full of breeding pus. It took us 80 million years to get a population of one billion by 1930, and we're now reaching a billion every decade. We're in deep shit and denying it. We're going to get what we deserve very soon.'

While his work, evoking the beauty and horror of nature, is keenly observed and deeply felt, he is unsentimental and scathing about the 'well-intentioned but willfully



ignorant charities that rush over to save the starving Africans. All the food means more people, it's just giving them an emergency crutch to hobble on. Natural disasters and famine exist for a reason. Sure nature is red in tooth and claw. Lions kill deer, racoons smash the shells of turtles with rocks. Whales get washed up on the shore. But that is the way it should be. It's only man that is messing things up. We're so far removed from the realities of nature. Our views and claims to civilisation are ridiculous.'

While he vanishes momentarily, swept away in the swelling crowds, I flick through *The End Game*, the controversial book of photographs that made Beard an international cult. The book, first published in 1965 and reissued ever since, was revolutionary – a devastating chronicle of the savage and senseless slaughter of over 50,000 elephants in

THIS PAGE Lone rhino in Tsavo National Park, Kenya, 1976. **OPPOSITE** A woman and giraffe, entitled *Maurens and Late-night Feeder*, Hog Ranch, 1987

Tsavo National Park. It's disturbing how darkly prophetic and current its content still seems.

Beard insists he's not a conservationist, but his photographs, mostly black and white and grainy sepias, document the death and decay of the African wilderness. Cheetahs, gazelles and giraffes slink gracefully amid striking nudes and tribesmen. Among the more gruesome offerings, such as the zebra remains, is an aerial shot of dried-up scorched earth cluttered with bloated elephant corpses, graveyards of piled up bones and the perfectly formed embryo of an elephant whose mother had been killed by poachers.

'Nothing is sacred in this world any longer,' he says, the lightness disappearing from his voice. 'Taking photographs is like collecting stones. What you stumble upon is sheer, blind chance. But it's like a disease or drug,' he adds, lighting another cigarette. 'Once you start, you can't stop. I guess it's an awareness of the pettiness and futility of life. You sometimes wonder where the hell you're going. It clarifies thought and it's a way to pass time.'

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