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TIM FLACH

ANIMAL MAGIC

DAWN SUMNER

ETERNAL SPRING

STAN DIXON ARPS

FORENSIC PHOTOGRAPHY

GLEN IRVEN

LRPS PANEL

DAVE MAGNER

A TRAVELLER'S TALE

KAREN HARVEY

COMING UP FAST

TECHNICAL

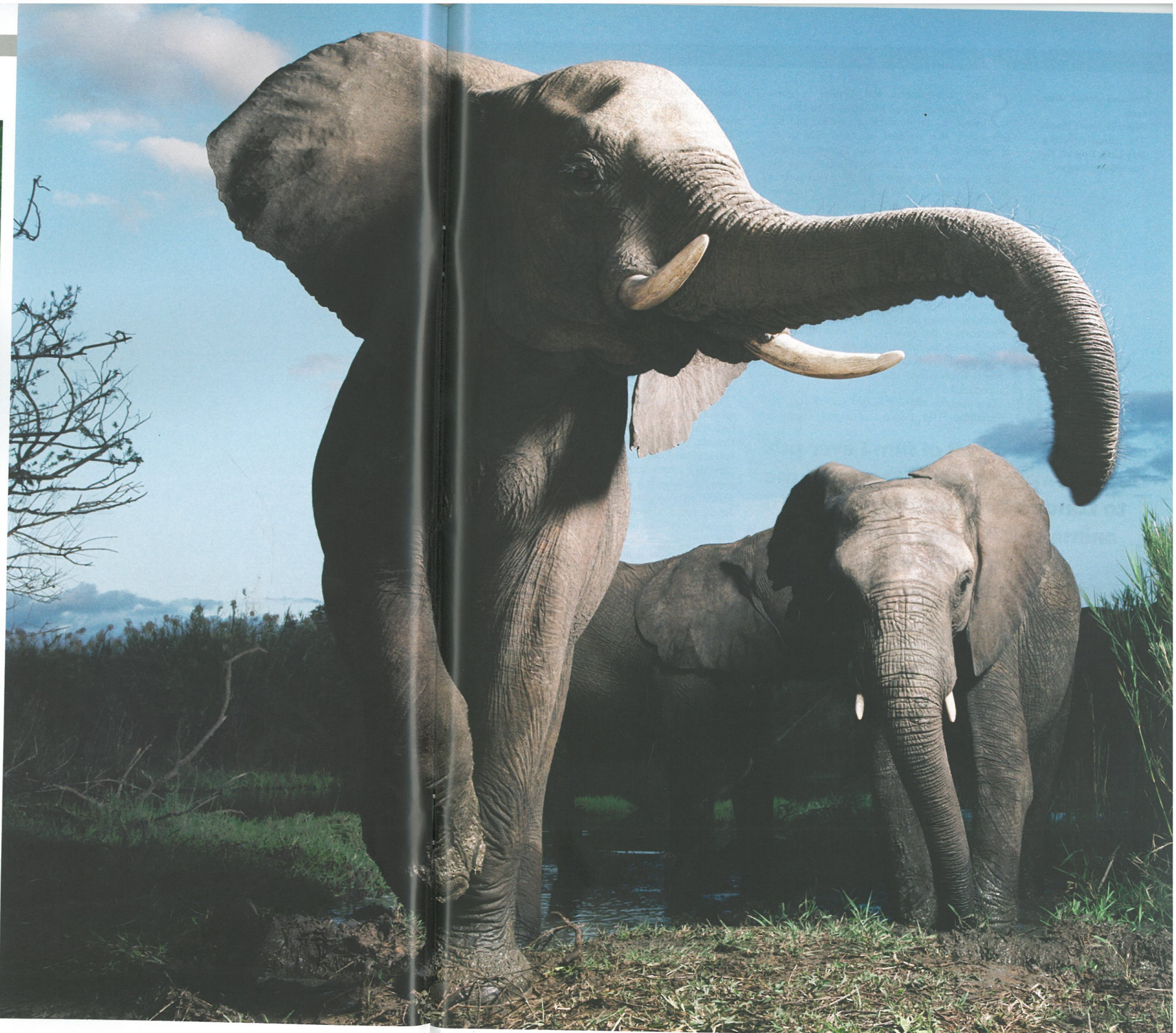
CANON EOS 1Ds Mk II & 20D

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TIM FLACH ANIMAL MAGIC

A deep concern with how his images are interpreted is a refreshing attribute in one of the UK's most successful photographers, says Katie Scott



Previous spread, above:
Frog.
Right: Elephant Marsh.
This spread: right: Big
Dog Little Dog, all Tim
Flach/Getty Images.

Some photographers will describe in great detail how an image was taken – the concept behind it, the moment of capture, and the technology that allowed it. As a talk to 40 members of the RPS Colour Group revealed however, Tim Flach is fascinated with how his work is interpreted, whether by those gazing up at billboard campaigns he has shot, or by visitors looking at his work in a gallery. “Tim Flach brought us a new insight into the creative side of photography, in one of our best talks in recent years”, said Alastair McGhee, Honorary Treasurer of the Colour Group.

“If you want to move ahead”, says Flach, “it is important to start producing work with some idea of what it might mean, even though you can’t control how other people will interpret it. This puts into context the process of taking an image, especially the technology. Indeed, critical theory is another aid which can facilitate taking a strong image. Context and situation become far more important.”

That said, he adds, “I’ve just started using the Hasselblad H1D. Because of digital, clients do

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TIM FLACH

expect things to be turned around more quickly because they can be. You are still working at a manageable pace. The client usually comes in at lunchtime after we have been shooting all morning, and by then we have tethered up the digital back to the computer and can then present the images to them. We then choose the images and send them off to the retouchers.”

“The first roll of film I ever put through my camera was on my foundation course. They sent me to London Zoo to take pictures of animals. I had a list of geometrical shapes I had to find. It is funny how close the link is to what I do now.

“When I finished college, I did a post graduate course in painting at St Martins School of Art. I never studied photography formally. I moved into design, and ended up doing a lot of corporate work, that then led to a period in advertising. Times moved on, as did technology, which allowed me to get involved in retouching and printing. It meant that the role of photography had changed. I hadn’t quite finished my painting degree when I decided that photography was more fun. I went off to record a balloon record in the US, and I enjoyed the social side of this. Also, I fundamentally believed in a future in photography.”

A recent exhibition in China of Flach’s work drew more than 20,000 visitors in one day, his portraits of animals being among the work

receiving the most attention. Flach recounts, “Having a subject matter that is very acceptable, like an animal, can be interesting. The number of visitors in China revealed that this work had meaning for that audience, which was rewarding. Images of animals resonate in Chinese and Japanese culture.”

Many of these, including what have become almost iconic images of bats, monkeys and elephants, are sold through the Getty Images stock library. It holds 600 of Flach’s images, some of which appear regularly on the image giant’s own promotional material. Some sell better than others, the most successful being one of two dogs, one giant and one miniature, which echoes a canine portrait by Magnum’s Elliot Erwitt. It sells at least 500 times each year because, says Flach, it has a universal appeal. “The notion of the dog being faithful is so firmly integrated into society. The dog has almost become a cipher. It is employed the same way around the world.”

Flach’s portraits of fruit bats are also in the library, and again have what he calls ‘shared significance’. “The bat resonates strongly because it has a lot of meanings attached to it. It has a split press – good and bad. There is the vampire bat and Bram Stoker’s Dracula, but also Batman.” However, by turning the bat upside down, it takes on a different aspect, becoming almost human. Flach explains, “Fruit bats turned the other way up are a kind of anthropological gesture. When I showed the images to an audience in Japan, they described the single bat as looking like a geisha girl. We are used to seeing the eyes above the feet, but the bat is the exception. This image plays to our idea of what is normal, and it is amazing how people do not try and flip the bat the right way up again.”

Flach adds that these images came about by accident. “I brought some fruit bats to the studio, as I wanted to try and fly them. However, they aren’t all that good at flying, and just sat there chatting away on their perch. I took some Polaroids, and then saw that, the wrong way, they up made for some interesting images.”

The results are a kind of visual game, and this is a trait of Flach’s work. He likes to open images to interpretations beyond the literal. He explains, “You can impose a meaning on an image, but I think a far more interesting approach is to open a window. An image like the one of the pig is quite literal. But the image of the neck of the horse looks also like a mountain. It’s all about reaching the point where the truth pivots, or oscillates between being clearly what it is and being open to other interpretations. This is not abstraction, because abstraction amounts to taking away. The idea here is about not losing anything. You take the viewer to something they know, but also offer this other route, which allows them to find something for themselves in the work.”

The bats, monkey and pig were shot for personal projects, which Flach later added to his stock collection. He says he has a lot more freedom when shooting these sorts of projects than he does with his commissioned work, because they are not shot with money-earning potential in mind. He jokes, “I’m sure that if I had an image of a couple laughing, holding hands and running into a sunset, it would do better than many of my animal images. I am not doing these





things to be commercial, but if they do sell, all the better, because this then allows me to do more work."

Flach does not, however, bemoan having to work to someone else's brief for his commissioned projects, which have included campaigns for Whiskas, Sony, Dulux and Greenpeace. "I don't find it restrictive. I think you just have to respect the fact that someone has taken a risk to go with you. An art director has probably put their job on the line, and you want to make sure that you do the best job for them. If there is some flexibility, obviously I will tell the art director that I believe the image will be read in a certain way, especially if I think the reading is different from the one the art director believes it will have. I will try and steer the project, but I try not to be driven by self-interest. They are paying you to solve a problem for them. If you don't want to do that, then you shouldn't be doing the job."

All this said, Flach enjoys a balance between commercial and personal work, and is also now dedicating more time to producing prints for four galleries: Bonni Benrubi in New York; Manuela Hofer and Michael Hoppen in London; and Martin Kudlek in Cologne. He explains that his work for these galleries is more reflective than his commercial work. "This is a different aspect of photography from the commercial side when, often, a visual has been agreed by a creative and a board of directors. There has been a chain of events to lead to the concept, and therefore there has already been a lot of reasoning. There is more freedom when you produce work in an



art context."

Some of his images have been successful both as prints and as stock. The image of the horse's back is one such, but he explains that this riles some curators. "It is not in the interest of curators that work comes to them having crossed over from the commercial side of photography. But I think one of the changes that is afoot is that images now really do reach out and touch. Because of this, there is no reason why images can't be accepted by different audiences."

And he argues that photographers can take advantage of this to work across genres. "Photographers, although they won't admit it, have always been quite general. The difference, at the moment, is the nature of the medium. Photography is the most read medium of our time. There is much more of a cultural investment in it now, which means there are a lot more opportunities to apply it."

Katie Scott

www.timflach.com



Top left: Lurcher, Tim Flach.
Bottom left: Monkey Eyes, Tim Flach/Getty Images.
Below: Horse Tongue, Tim Flach/Getty Images.