A WILD ENCOUNTER WITH

DAVID YARROW

Interviewed by Alexander Moust

'I hope my audience will learn about the biodiversity of our planet, the extreme climates, extreme topographies and the extraordinary photography equipment with which to record it with.'

David Yarrow's book, WILD ENCOUNTERS on people and wild animals in remote and extreme conditions is in focus here. The artist born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1966 has sold $14 million worth of photographs last year. $1 million of which went to charitable organisations.

No Nearer © David Yarrow

The animals you have portrayed in WILD ENCOUNTERS are almost all mammal. And people all live in extreme conditions. Why have you chosen these specifically?

The most likely alternatives are fish, insects, and birds. However we ourselves neither fly in the sky or swim in the sea. It's difficult to have your own personal narrative or context.

I like documenting HUMAN life on the edge and I didn't feel there was as much engaging content in other locations than in extreme conditions; high up north or around the equator.

The most important variable is the strength of the photographs. They need to be visually strong and compositionally powerful. Every photograph had to merit its place in the book.

What was the most dangerous encounter ever for you and why?

People are always more dangerous than animals. People can smoke weed, drink alcohol and operate guns – sometimes all at once. Those are the most dangerous encounters.

How would you describe the word: TRIBAL? How could you compare wild animal life with that of (indigenous) life forms of fellow human beings?

I think to ascribe the word tribal solely to indigenous communities is a little old-fashioned. Many would contend that the cop at Liverpool football club is tribal and the yellow wall of Borussia Dortmund is tribal. Tribal has become a word with a small t rather than a capital T. But herein lies the answer to your question – tribal communities have a capacity to collectively look after their own, as do some animals. Manhattan is a Noah's ark of 40 or 50 different tribes – Italians, Irish, Orthodox Jews, Mexicans, their communities are more cohesive than Manhatten as a whole. When I think of tribes I think of solidarity.

In my work, I have also learned that the fortitude of family values are not determined by race, creed, climate, wealth or location.

'I have wrecked over a dozen cameras during the last years in trying to get the ultimate photographs I was looking for.

From all the animals and people you were able to get up really close to; which ones did you bond with most?

'The Dutch' -- only joking. I would say simians as we are related. We are going to always find a bigger connection with a gorilla than a zebra. I have no idea what is going on in a Zebras head, and I'm not sure the Zebra does. But a mountain gorilla high up in volcano national park in Ruanda – when face to face – damn right there's a connection. To borrow from Jane Austen – I'm in awe of the sensibility of elephants. They are majestic mammals with far bigger brains than we could ever comprehend. It is the one animal in the world where I think I can detect not just anger but happiness and sadness.

Quite a large sum of money of sales of your work goes back into TUSK, which helps preserve wildlife. Have you considered giving back to the indigenous people you photographed or how do you deal with them after their photographs get published? How do they react to their photos being published and sold worldwide?

I've never been asked this question before and I respect you for asking it. There is no point sending money – our preferred routes of emotional investment in tribes is to look after them when we are there rather than retrospectively. If you do that and come back you will always be remembered. Whenever we go to so-called tribal communities we bring Polaroid cameras so that they can take pictures of their loved ones, see them develop in front of them and then keep the pictures. – That little bit of magic goes a long way.

How do you feel about trophy hunters who spend 100 thousands of dollars on shooting (killing) wild animals like lions, rhinos, giraffes for their own fun?

GANGSTA © David Yarrow

The Departed © David Yarrow

This is a question that deserves a 20,000-word answer, not 100 words. Of course, I question the strength of character of those that indulge in this medieval behavior in the same way that I question the strength of character of someone entering a brothel. But – and here's the thing, paying prostitutes and paying for the right to kill animals are often both legal and we should respect the law to the extent that in most places common law is deemed to be the derivation of a democratic process. The problem is that the issue is complicated by the fact that these hunters are a big income provider from income-starved parts of Africa. Generally – people who pay big money to shoot big animals are those same arseholes that maybe need to go to a brothel too.

Photographic art is about the content in front of the lens and the soul of the person behind it.'

A Dutch NGO (Stichting Aap) bought a huge plot of land in Spain recently to give shelter to underfed or neglected wild pets (tigers, lions or bears) coming from bankrupt, abolished and redundant circuses or private collectors. How do you believe that preservation of (wild) life should continue in the future?

By doing exactly that – by buying land. It's about the only way. The other charity I work with – Wild Ark – focus their efforts on this.

What would you think Charles Darwin writer of 'on the origin of species', published on 24 November 1859, would have thought if he were able to research the current ecological and social issues humans and animals are facing?

I think he might have said that he had misjudged totally the issue of population growth. I think he would realize that population growth is the major threat to the biodiversity of our planet.

As we are in Amsterdam, home to a large range of museums and galleries which are often testimony of the preserved life of both wealthy and common people of ages ago in paintings, objects and etchings:
How do you see your work in relation to old masters?

Holland has punched above its weight in the art world for 700 years. People can look at a Rembrandt for two hours and people should be able to do the same with a photograph. The level of detail Johannes Vermeer managed to get into his portraits is something to aspire to. The RIJKS museum is, in my opinion, is the best in the world and it makes me want to get better and better as an artist.

Kunsthuis Amsterdam will do a solo exhibition of David Yarrow's work in spring 2018.