



TIM FLACH

SPECIALIZATION: COMMERCIAL AND
FINE ART ANIMAL PHOTOGRAPHY

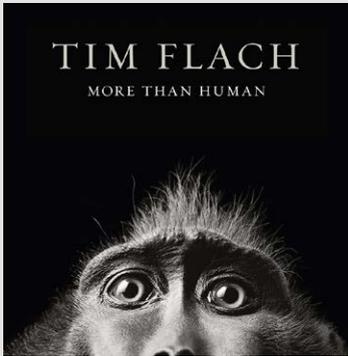
Tim Flach's studio is located just off a busy main road in Hoxton. Street names like Haberdasher Street, Curtain Road, and Boot Street indicate the area's past connections with the clothing industry. But today it's a popular area for designers, photographers, and artists, with a vibrant nightlife, a rather incongruous setting for Tim's photographic studies of animals. Creatures of all kinds have been photographed here at his studio, from beetles to wolves and even a kangaroo.

The first roll of film Tim ever shot was at London Zoo, while on a foundation course prior to doing his degree. It wasn't till much later, after becoming established as a commercial photographer, working for PR and corporate clients, that he returned to photographing animals. His clients now mainly include advertising agencies. He has a secondary career working on book projects and selling limited-edition fine art prints.





For the commercial shoots, he mostly photographs cats and dogs. The intimacy of the basement section of the studio is well-suited for this type of work, as the acoustics are similar to a domestic environment and ideal for putting the animals at their ease. In the UK, dangerous wild animals have to be photographed from behind bars, but this is not always the case when working in the US and the rest of Europe. “Most of the time I am working with a very good team around me,” says Tim. “And if they’re the people waving the bamboo stick, usually with a piece of meat on the end, the chances are they are doing all the movement and are therefore closer to the animal. I am relatively passive and farther back. So I feel they are taking the risk and not me. But we are not here to be heroes, so you have to think things through carefully.” Tim takes care to discuss each project before setting up a photo shoot. “I don’t ever feel I am at great risk but am respectful. If I have got a wild animal in front of me, there is always that sense of uncertainty. The trainers have to guide you as to where you should be and where you should move.” He will quite often arrange things so that the animal can move onto the set without going through too many stands. This gives the animal and its handlers the mobility to exit the studio easily. “These are all considerations you have to do as a team. You have to discuss the particular animal, and every animal is unique — it might be grumpy one day and good another day.”



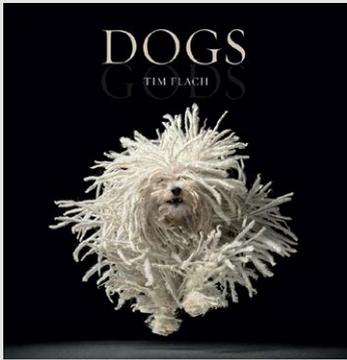
Book cover: *More Than Human*

Even with all the preplanning, you can never be completely sure what to expect. “There is a question of how things reveal themselves on a shoot and how that leads you on to explore other things. With animals you are inviting that uncertainty,” Tim explains. “Any project is an inquiry. And I am always of that view that if you go into a shoot, you have to go fishing to catch something. But once you are on the set you mustn’t be too wedded or presume what you are going to get. In fact, you have not just got to look but see. I am a great believer that you have got to have a presence, and as things reveal themselves you take that opportunity. With animals that’s obviously very true. We all know we can’t really control them, but you could argue that you can’t ultimately control anything. It’s that sense of being in a space and also accepting that even when you take the pictures, you’ve got to be intrigued as to how other people make meaning of them and have a sense of the big picture.”

Tim’s *More Than Human* book explores our relationships with animals. As much as the publishers would like illustrated books filled with pretty pictures, Tim felt it important to look at the various issues debated and the different ways we shape meaning around images of the animals. “For me, what I find really interesting is using aesthetics to bring people to something, but then I hopefully introduce them to a new thought or an idea,” he says. “For example, the featherless chicken, for me, represents quite a few things. Look at this picture of what looks like a chicken with no feathers, who’s prancing like a plump ballerina across the stage and looks back at you. For me it provokes quite a lot of things. I like the idea that it’s not a pretty picture, it’s not something you would necessarily put on your wall, but what it provokes is this idea of, did he pluck the chicken? Is it genetic engineering? It’s actually a naturally occurring mutant. But if you think of the supermarket, there you’ll have your packaged chicken without the head on, naked. I like the way those kinds of images operate but accept the fact they will upset people. But maybe they’ll provoke questions?

“I do my best to explain the background and context, but quite often it gets detached, and I find that very frustrating. What I want to do now is attach some of that context and meaning within the image. Now here we are in this mechanistic world where for most of us our only contact is with a dog, or a cat, and we are more likely to encounter a chicken in the supermarket than one with its feathers on. That is something I am really interested in. How do we engage with animals? We have somehow been separated. We know animals in a virtual sense better than ever before through the films of [David] Attenborough and such. Yet in actuality, we have never been more separated. So this definitely is something always in the back of my mind.”





Book cover: *Dogs: Gods*

FRUIT BATS

One of Tim's first series of animal photographs to achieve awards was of fruit bats. His initial idea was to photograph these animals in the studio and somehow comp in a night scene. However, "I discovered that fruit bats are rather big," he says. "They're not very agile and didn't fly very well in the studio. In the break we had them on a perch in the corner. I saw them chatting away with each other and thought, this is very cool, so I asked the handlers if they would bring them back into the studio the next day. When I photographed them on the perch I had a Polaroid of them the wrong way up and thought this looks cool, so we proceeded to photograph them with the photographs the other way up and I kept that in mind when lighting them. So you have these bats where the eyes are above the feet and you find they become much more figurative.

"One of the things connected with my work is the idea I make things very human. I am very interested in the idea of gaze and also very aware of the way in which we work with cuteness. We have to centralize who we are and relate to things in our terms and that tendency, that anthropocentrism we tend to have, inevitably veils everything we do. I am very conscious of that in the way I manage images of animals and how we make meaning from them."

TONE MANIPULATION

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Tim's switch to shooting on a digital medium format system happened in 2005. This was just before he started work on his Equus book. "I took the studio to the animal. I had much more freedom of choice and it put less stress on them. I would say the majority of the work I do now is outside the studio. The use of digital imaging does raise questions as to how much you see in a photograph is real and how much has been manipulated. I am very conscious that I have chosen to stylize my work, and as such there is always a suspicion as to what people are looking at. Is that chicken really there? Is the dog that looks like a mop actually real? Has it been sprayed in some way and been suspended?"

Tim asserts that he mainly uses Photoshop to make tonal changes. "I like to shoot everything in camera and go to lengths to do so. I always feel it is a bit tough for me, because it is always assumed there is a degree of construction. But I believe that by making tonal changes alone you can hugely influence the way the eye moves through the space, and that's what I am mostly doing through my work. I'm a great believer that the eye has a tendency to follow certain lines. Compositions that are particularly successful tend to have an entry in the lower left and scoop around. I am not suggesting that all images

share that, but iconic images have certain tendencies within the structure, and I certainly have been very much informed by painting rather than photography in that respect. When I am shooting I am conscious of it. Actually, changing tonal values has a huge impact. I try to avoid adding bits, so you could argue my pictures are more authentic than some less transparent documentary photography. But ironically, they will be perceived as more of a construction because they are stylized."



FINE ART SALES

COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY
CAN LESSEN YOUR
STANDING AS AN ARTIST,
WHILE BEING AN ARTIST
IMPROVES YOUR STANDING
AS A COMMERCIAL
PHOTOGRAPHER, AND
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BALANCE THE TWO.

IF I WERE TO DECIDE TO DO
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PUBLISHERS,

Tim's commercial background was in PR, design, and advertising before he got into publishing books. What he never anticipated was the growth in print sales and the positive financial impact this would have on his business. "The art world in photography has gone through such shifts, and the role of photography is now so much more central as a medium. There are many different levels to the art world, from the salon galleries to conceptual galleries, which are more linked to the museum space [just like within the commercial world]." For him it's been a gradual thing because the amount you command for a print needs to be significant enough so that by the time you've done the print and the gallery have taken their 50 percent that the numbers make sense. "Certainly in recent years it's allowed me a certain amount of freedom," says Tim. "I do my own retouching, and I like that connection, being able to spend time working on individual images. Art prints provide me with that opportunity."

Balancing the commercial and fine art careers can be tricky, though. Basically, commercial activity can lessen your standing as an artist, while being an artist improves your standing as a commercial photographer, and you have to carefully balance the two. "I am sure art buyers and art directors like to see something in a supplement discussing an exhibition, but I think in practice their concerns are often, 'Am I actually committed to what I am doing in terms of the commissions?' I would say it can actually undermine you being perceived as someone who might be commissioned. And vice versa, if you are very active in the commercial world, someone buying something to put up on the wall will be suspicious of the integrity of that work. It will almost be seen as being polluted, or contaminated by the other side." It's a difficult area. "You find yourself in a situation where what would be relevant, like an award or something in one industry, is irrelevant in the other."

As for creating more illustrated books, "these aren't totally finished, but they certainly are a stressed industry. If I were to decide to do a panda book tomorrow, I am sure there would be lots of willing publishers, because cute animals definitely sell. In terms of projects in the future, I want to concentrate on areas like museums where they have a vested interest in communicating and the debates around such projects. I'd like to not just be more involved with the art world, but step outside that and debate about how we handle animals in the human space."

Tim is currently interested in exploring the work of fine art masters and the compositional tricks used to direct the viewer. "I am going to spend time working with scientists to look at the way we seem to navigate certain pictures."

The nature of advertising has changed a lot in recent years. With the growth of Internet advertising and use of digital signage displays, ad campaigns have to accommodate a wide variety of media, which can now combine moving images in ever more inventive ways. “Today we don’t know what the format might be. Because of the nature of digital, print, and moving image, it has to be left open. If I am doing something for underground tube stations with some moving images, it’s called a tunnel with D6s. If ten years ago I’d been given the brief I got last week, I wouldn’t know what was being talked about. When clients talk about things like rich media (which is hugely changing the way we operate), these would have been new words to me a few years back.”

The changes in the last few years are profound. As Tim explains, we are in a unique period right now. “There was a statistic bandied about last year that said 10 percent of all photographs that we have ever taken since the beginning of photography were taken in the last 12 months. Apparently mostly of food, but even so, we are becoming more dependent on images than ever. We have had over 150 years of photography, and suddenly we are not dealing with prints anymore, we are dealing with this virtual space. I think it is hugely challenging. Someone of my generation, though fascinated by it, accepts that we have to be much more responsive.

“In the commercial arena I am finding we are in really unusual times again. When I receive a brief it doesn’t talk about photographs, it talks about ‘assets’—things you can upload and download. What I feel I am doing most of the time is managing the production of bringing these elements into different formats, which could be what we call a skyscraper, which is a very long digital format. It could be a very long banner, or it could be a 96-sheet. But this kind of range of end usage means those in the creative agencies have to know how the elements will be put together according to the demands and media required of them. I myself am at two ends here. I quite like the flexibility of how we can do things in post, which we couldn’t do before. I no longer have the traditional idea of a composition that I can see in one go. What I have is the visualization and the flexibility of options that I am offering the client. So on the one hand I am like a banker; I deal in ‘assets.’ Yet on the other end I am producing prints that are bigger than ever, and I’ll spend days finessing them and have the potential to sell them as art prints, where that input will be appreciated.”

Tim’s main advice to those wishing to become professional photographers is to embrace change and be responsive to it. At the same time, it is important to always remind yourself of the reasons why you chose the medium of photography, the things that touched you and were relevant when you first picked up a camera, and not lose sight of that. Tim hasn’t—he first became interested in photography on a day trip to London Zoo and today has successful commercial and fine art careers doing what he loves: photographing animals.



Video interview with Tim Flach

<https://vimeo.com/99215820>

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