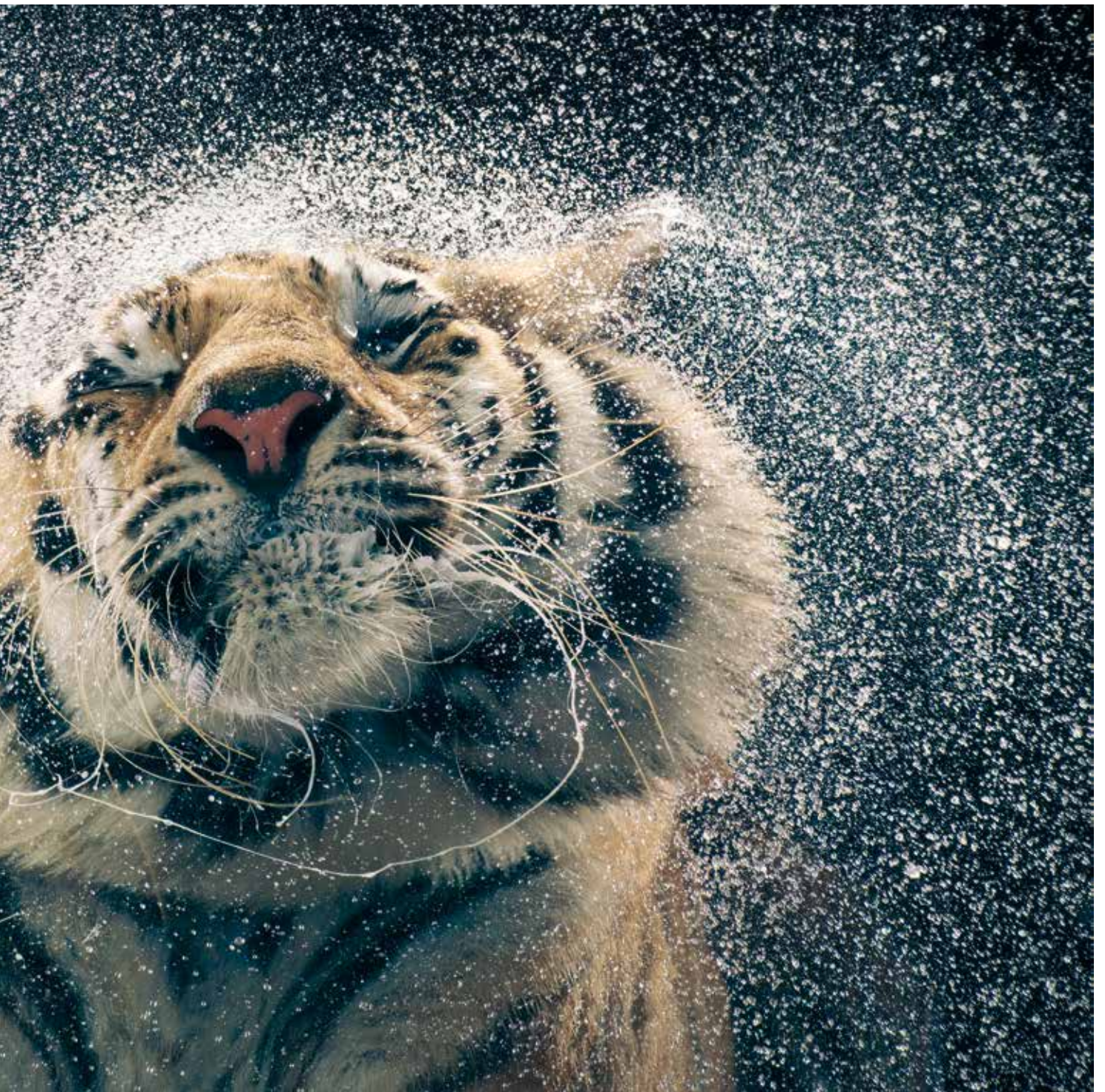


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More Than Human is the latest book by internationally renowned animal photographer Tim Flach. Exploring relationship between humans and animals, the results are thought provoking and awe inspiring in equal to David Land about the debates that he hopes it will spark, the challenges he faced, and the extortionate cost



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the complex measure. He speaks of hiring an elephant

“I wouldn’t describe myself as a wildlife photographer”, says Tim Flach. “I photograph animals, but I’m interested in their meaning to us, and debates around how we manage animals in the human space. There are over seven billion people on the planet – more than at any time in history. We’re at a unique point, and these debates are more relevant than ever.”

Born in 1958 and based in London, Flach is known for his innovative approach to photographing animals. He has produced work for many of the world’s top publications, including *National Geographic* and the *New York Times Magazine*, along with publishing the books *Equus* (2008), *Dogs Gods* (2010), and

his most recent, *More Than Human* (2012).

Flach has always taken an interest in photography that extends beyond the purely superficial, studying influential texts such as Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*. “I’m dealing with a broad audience, from scientists to those interested in philosophy”, he says, “and not to take an interest in debate would be to remain ignorant as to how things might be brought to meaning.”

Exhaustively researched, *More Than Human* is nothing less than an enquiry into the nature of humans and animals at this unique juncture in our history. One area it brings into the spotlight is the way in which human decisions can affect the future of various species.

Above: *Panthera tigris* (Bengal tiger).



Above: *Battus polydamas* (gold rim swallowtail butterfly) pupa. Right: *Mastigias papua* (Lagoon jellyfish).

“Many people are aware of the case of the harlequin ladybird”, says Flach. “It was used in America to control aphids. But it has now come over here, and is undermining our own ladybird.”

“Another case is the lionfish from Asia, which was inadvertently released off Florida as a consequence of the pet trade, and is now causing potential collapse of the reef there. These are the consequences of our actions.”

One of the strongest sequences of images in *More Than Human* is of a featherless chicken. Recent research suggests that the chicken is the closest living relative of the tyrannosaurus rex, which this set of photographs brings graphically home.

On first encountering the sequence, as with many pictures in the book, you get an uneasy feeling: it is strange, yet it is strangely familiar, too.

Is it the result of photo trickery? you wonder. Is this one unfortunate plucked individual? Or is it perhaps the result of genetic modification?

In fact, as it turns out, the answer is relatively prosaic. The featherless chicken is the result of a selective breeding programme aimed at creating a chicken that can be intensively reared in hot countries where cooling systems would be unaffordable, and feathers therefore an impediment.

“It’s actually what we’ve been doing for

thousands of years”, says Flach. It’s how we take the grey wolf and create a Chihuahua or a Great Dane. It’s just a result of cross breeding.

“We’re at a point where we know animals better than ever, but in reality, we’ve never been further apart. The chicken’s interesting because it looks like this balletic figure, but it’s also recognisably the chicken with no feathers as we know it in Tesco.”

Flach naturally has an opinion on human exploitation of animals, but does he see his work as a vehicle for changing people’s opinions?

“Being the parent of a six year old child has made me more aware of how future generations will have to bear the consequences of

some of our decisions today”, he says. “But I’m not trying to say whether or not we should have featherless chickens. I’m simply saying, ‘This is what’s happening’.

“If I was too opinionated, I would lose my ability to bring to people’s attention the things that are going on. As a photographer, there are limitations on what you can achieve, but I believe that I’m planting aspects of how we operate with nature into the collective psyche.

“*More Than Human* encompasses everything from livestock and genetics, to philosophy, symbolism and conservation. But my concern when making the book was that, when things are aesthetic, it’s often presumed that they lack any kind of enquiry.”

While Flach’s work exhibits aesthetic aspects such as tonal changes which move the eye through an image, he has respect for the

evidence in front of the camera, and seldom undertakes elaborate manipulations post capture, although he points out that the series of pupae he shot for *More Than Human* are an exception to this.

“I did about 80 exposures of each of the pupae, varying the point of focus slightly in each, and layered them”, he says.

“One of the completed images is currently on display, printed to about 5ft high. You see it at this size, with an apparent depth of field that you would get with a bigger object, and you engage with that picture in a different way. It’s important to understand the potential of your medium, so that you can use it to achieve your ends.”

Flach typically shoots on a Hasselblad H4D with a 50MP Hasselblad back, switching to Canon where necessary. “The facility that you have with digital of being able to review

what you’ve shot as you go along works very well with animals”, he says. “I don’t want to be pushing for something when I’ve already got it.

“I’ll use a Canon for shots that require high repetition, or where there’s movement. Often, it’s for very small subjects, or those that are far away. I’ve got a 100mm macro, and a 180mm for when I don’t want to pressurise an animal, but I want detail.

“I use a Hasselblad because often I want to take something and scale it up so that it creates a sense of hyper reality. We can do this so easily now that it has changed the nature of photography, in terms of how work is seen.”

Flach sells Lambda photographic prints through Osborne Samuel Gallery in Mayfair. “We currently do editions of five big prints and 10 small”, he says. “The large prints sell out faster than the small ones, to the point





that we're wondering about the validity of doing small prints."

Flach started out in photography when, following a stint at art school and a post-graduate course in painting at St Martin's, he helped out a press photographer for a year. "I was given a camera, and asked to take some retirement pictures at corporate offices, and help with the odd chairman's portrait", he recalls.

"I'd been working in hotels at the weekends to get some money, and I started to

approach them to ask if they had any photography requirements. That led to my doing some corporate portraits. Having done property, PR and marketing, I established myself in advertising about 10 years into my career as a photographer. I worked with design groups and ad agencies, starting with UK campaigns, and progressing to big global campaigns."

Flach's specialism in animals came about shortly afterwards, when he received a commission to photograph some big cats. He

has been in his current studio, on London's Great Eastern Street, for 15 years. It had previously been derelict, and he was able to renovate it in a way that made it specific to his needs as a photographer of animals.

"Most work takes place in the basement, as it's better for temperature control", he explains. "I have cooling systems, and a floor section that lifts out to allow for adaptability of lighting. I can put sections of glass across it, which allows me to shoot back up through the floor. I have systems for drainage, too."



Flach has a full time assistant and a full time studio manager, and will often bring in an extra person on the day of a shoot. He will even take a scientist to locations such as the Amazon, to help him better understand the subject he's working with.

"I encourage my staff to find people who know what I should be looking at", he says, "and also to find out what already exists in these areas photographically.

Flach produces commercial commissioned work simultaneously alongside his own proj-

ects. "I have different hats according to the context in which I work", he says. "The gallery calls me an artist, my advertising rep a photographer, and my production company a director, while my publisher calls me an author."

Books are the most time consuming aspect of Flach's work. "For *More Than Human*, I shot about 150 pictures over the course of a year which, along with research, was quite challenging", he says.

"I'm not just finding exotic animals and

shooting them on a white background. I'm chasing down particular animals because of what they represent, right across the globe."

Projects such as this are not only time consuming, but also incredibly expensive. Taking on fewer commissions in the last year may have provided the much needed time to complete the book, but it's a balancing act, as it's the commissions that fund his projects.

"The books don't fund themselves", confirms Flach. "Despite the fact that *Dogs Gods* sold in excess of 120,000 copies, and *Equus*



Previous spread:
Elephas maximus indicus (Indian elephant).
Left: Pan paniscus (bonobo).
Bottom: Pongo pygmaeus x Pongo abelii (Orangutan hybrid).
Right: Tolypeutes matacus (Southern three-banded armadillo).
Below right: Gallus gallus domesticus (Domestic chicken).





100,000+, I might only get 70p-£1.50 per book, while I may have to spend \$10,000 to hire an elephant to photograph for a day. Add to that the cost of studio hire and moving a team and equipment around the globe, and the numbers really don't stack up."

Although the books have been a great success and an essential part of Flach's commercial strategy, he feels that there are aspects of the medium that fall flat. "While I may reach 200,000 through the medium of a book, through online digital media, I have a potential audience of millions", he says. "And trying to do *More Than Human* in a year meant that I was too short of time, and failed to get my idea into a pure enough form. My plan now is to take certain aspects that I feel were successful, and add new images to produce a touring exhibition."

It is clear that Flach is interested in the various evolving ways of presenting ideas and images, so it is unsurprising that he is developing an interest in social media.

"As well as being rooted to the gallery platform, exhibitions today should be based on participation", he says, "and I plan to evolve my work to incorporate this. I have 10,000+ people on my official Facebook site, so the potential is big, and I've just started tweeting as well."

Looking to the future, Flach is about to begin a project about algae, in collaboration with the Horniman Museum, working with experts and historians to produce a project that encompasses industrialisation, history, and current debates about deforestation.

"Algae might be a somewhat less glamorous sounding subject than a tiger or a panda", he says, "but it is responsible for the majority of the oxygen produced on the planet, and the project has a correlation to Anna Atkins and her *Photographs of British Algae*."

Botanist Anna Atkins (1799-1871) learnt about photography from William Henry Fox Talbot. Published in 1843, her *Photo-*

graphs of British Algae, illustrated with cyanotype photograms of algae specimens, was the first photographically illustrated book, predating Talbot's *Pencil of Nature* by some eight months.

"I will start the project with research, to find varying ways of engaging with different

groups of people", says Flach. "The initial idea is to create photograms, and to print them large, so that they become a metaphor for woodland and trees."

Film is another area that Flach is moving into. He has recently signed as a director with Annex Films. "I've done some TV





Left: *Columba livia*
(rock pigeon/dove).
Bottom: *Mandrillus sphinx* (mandrill).



commercials, and I recently shot a campaign that is about to run globally”, he says. “I’m excited by how today’s digital technology enables you to make changes to the moving image similar to those you would make to the still in Photoshop. I plan to do all the post production personally, as I do with my stills.”

The fact that Flach is embracing new media shouldn’t be taken to imply that he is any less interested in stills meanwhile. To the contrary, in fact. “What I’m interested in is rich media”, he says, “which can incorporate the still image. And we must never forget that there are unique characteristics to the still image.

“I plan to concentrate on getting the right information together, then using the internet and social media to reach a much larger group of people than you usually get visiting a museum or reading a book.”

David Land

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