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CRAFT & VISION

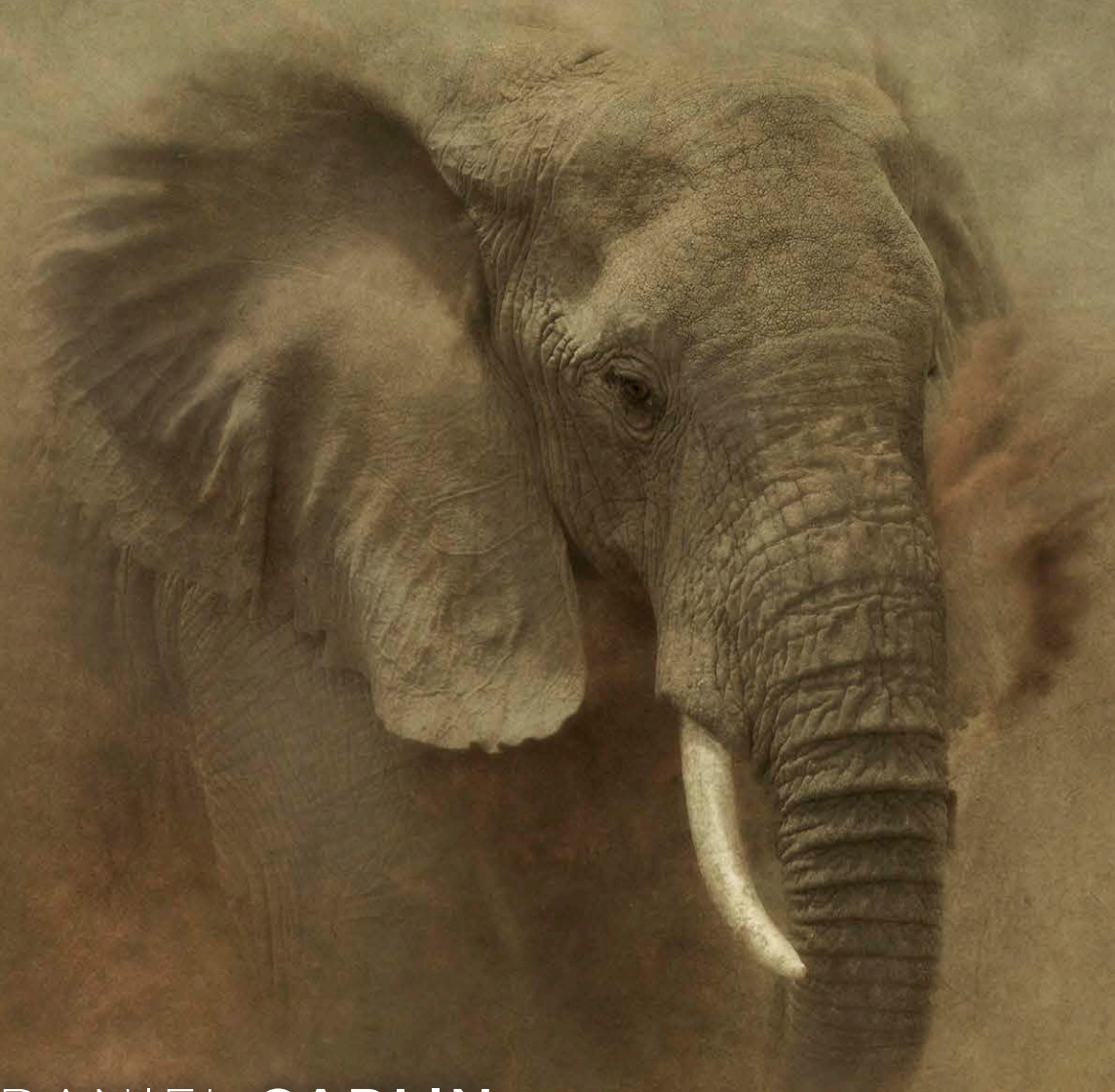
MAGAZINE

DANIEL **CARLIN**

DAVID **DUCHEMIN**

HILARY **HANN**

KIRK **MCELHEARN**

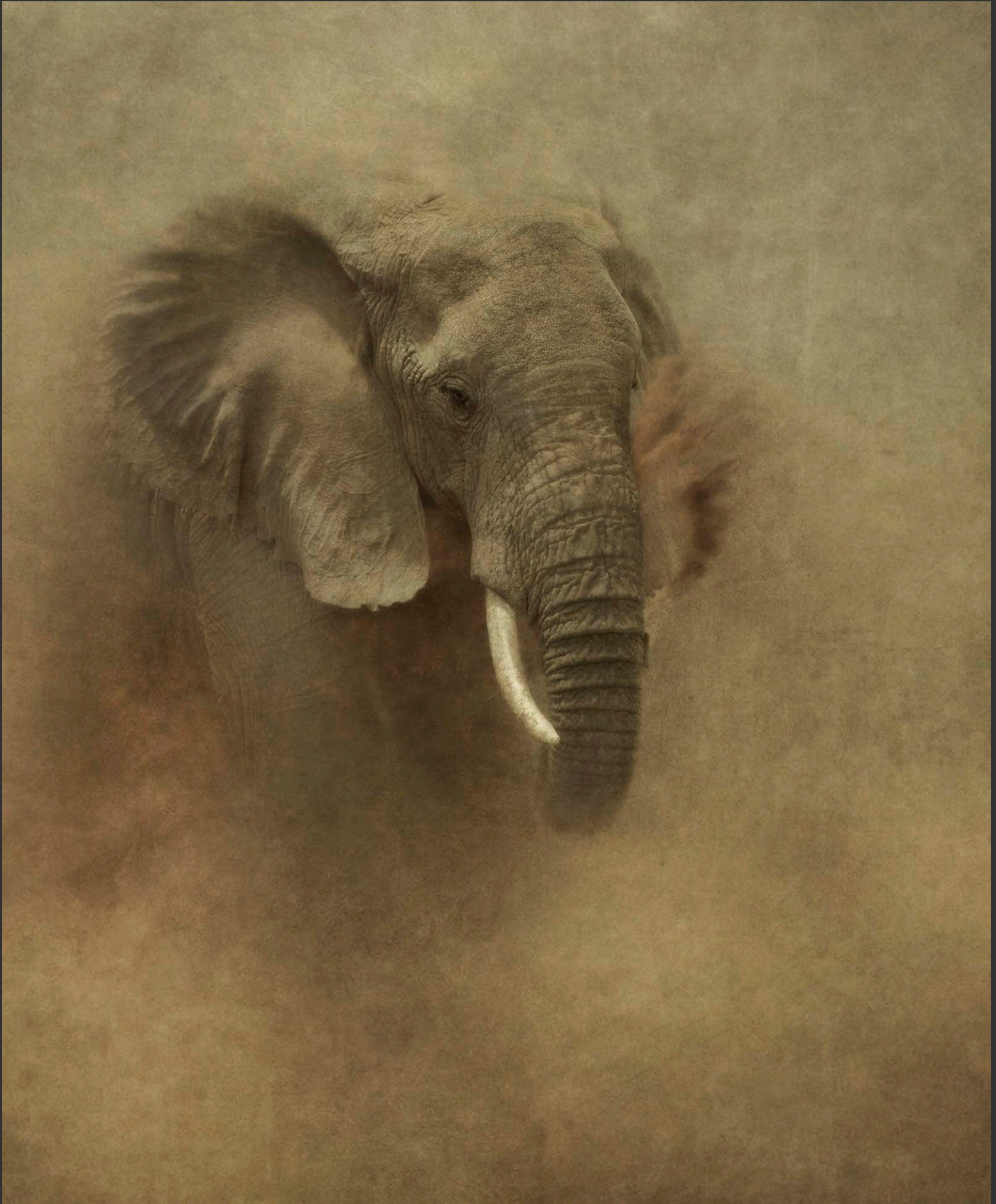


WILDHEART

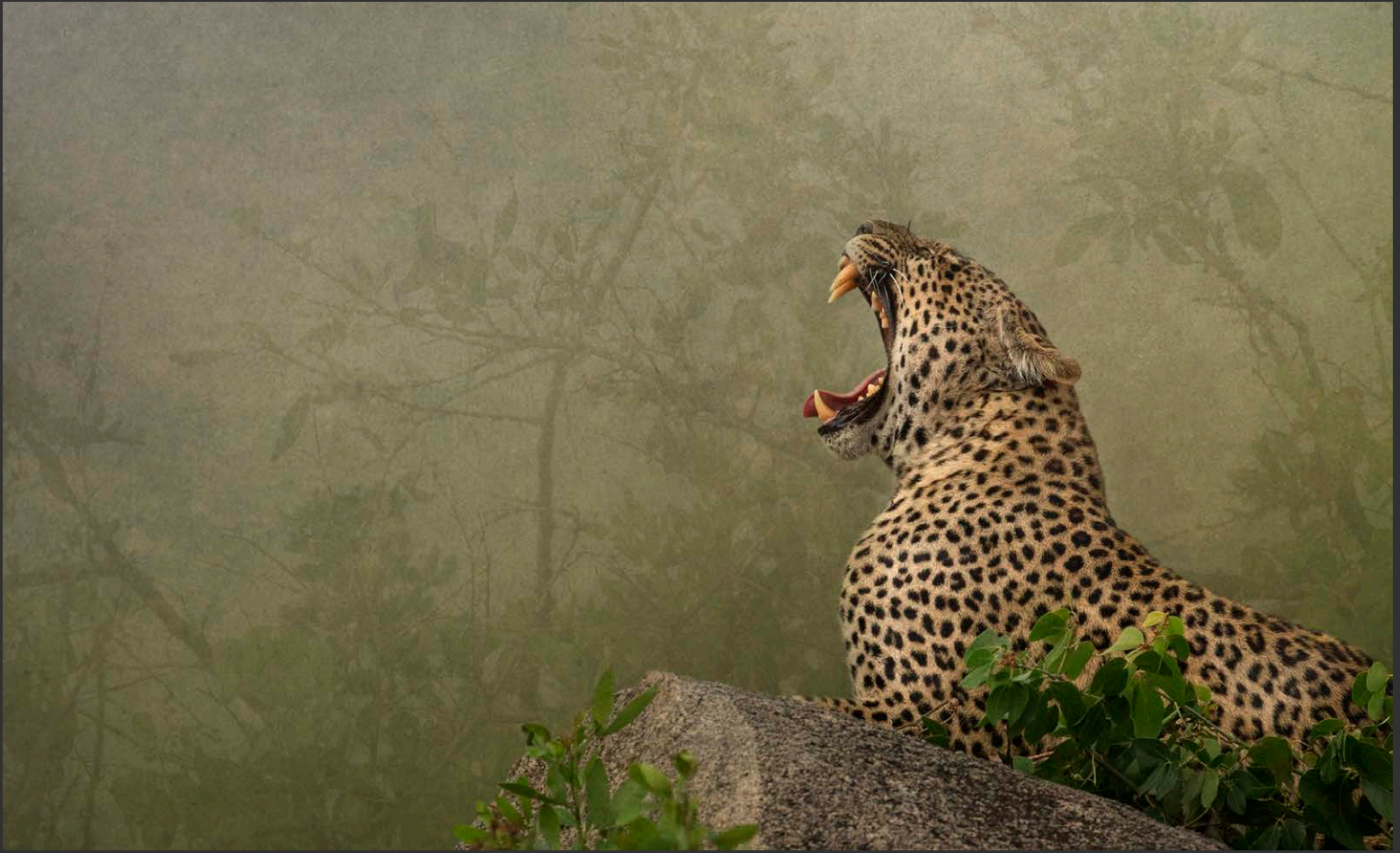
in conversation with Hilary Hann
by Cynthia Haynes

Born in Singapore and raised in Borneo, Malaysia, Uganda, and Nairobi, Kenya, Hilary Hann relocated to her native Australia with her family at the age of 14. Since then, she's built a thriving photography business with her husband, raised a family, and with a scientific mind and an artist's vision, has returned time and time again to the place that speaks to her through the call of the wild: Kenya.

While chasing beauty with her camera, she's come face-to-face with a lion in the middle of the Serengeti, had cheetahs jump on her car in the Maasai Mara, walked alongside elephants at the Mana Pools in Zimbabwe, and won an impressive list of awards for her work. But what scares Hilary Hann the most is not being true to herself and her art.



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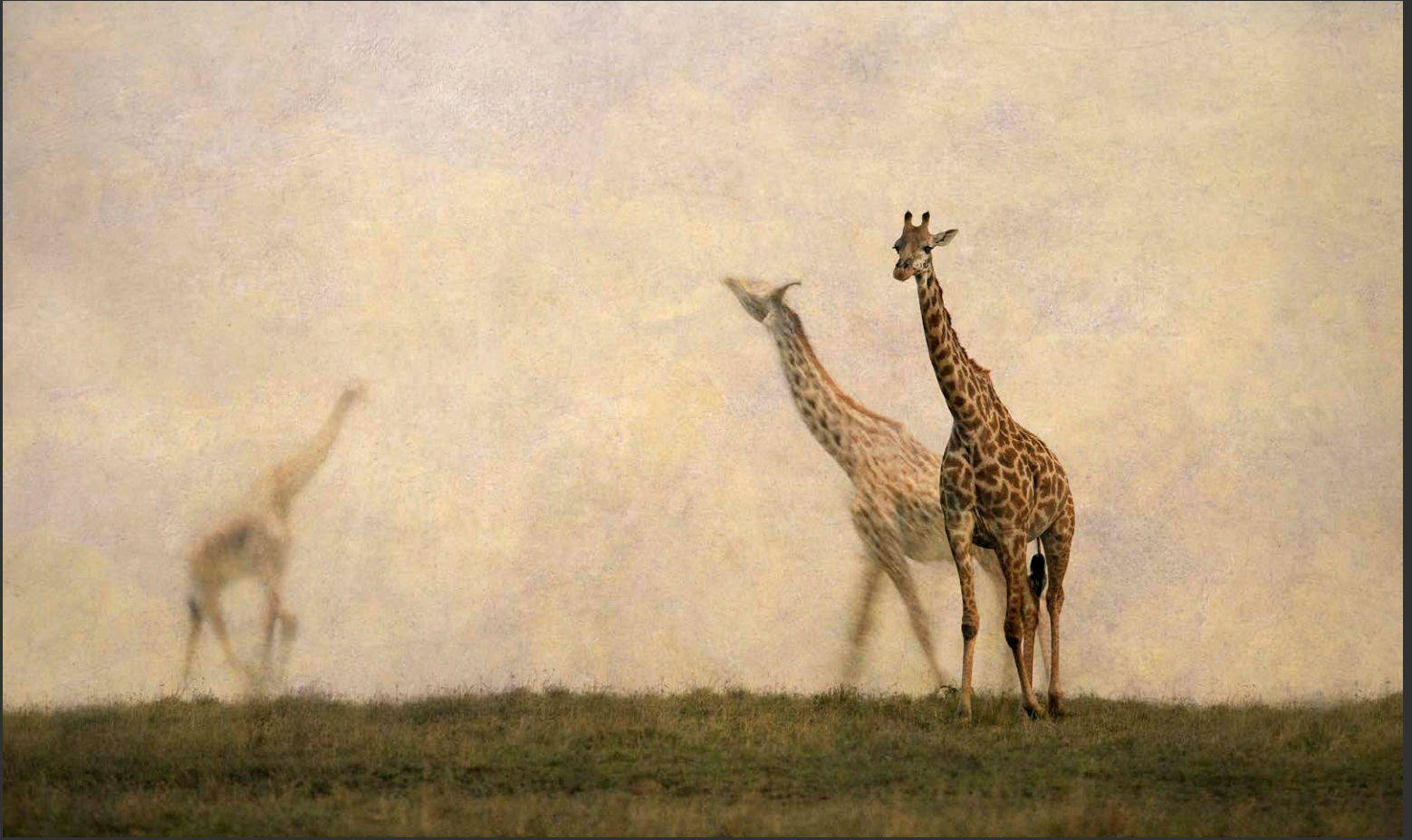


























“**E**very photo else has to tell a story. I look for interesting photographs that give me a window into something else. If I don’t feel anything, if I don’t see a story, what’s there to hold me at that photograph? What will keep me there longer than a visual appreciation of it?”

Hilary Hann is reflecting on what makes a good photograph. A long-time entrant and judge of photo competitions in her native Australia, Hann brings a unique perspective to visual storytelling in that she’s been both in front of and seated on the panel. She says competitions have helped make her a better photographer by helping her to learn about telling a story in a photograph, and to help her develop a thicker skin, much like the elephants of Kenya she loves.

AS A TRUE ARTIST, YOU WANT TO STAND UP AND SAY, ‘I MUST SAY THIS. THIS IS WHAT I NEED TO DO, AND **EVERYONE ELSE CAN DO WHATEVER THEY LIKE.**’

“When I first started, I was so uncertain that I had anything of value or anything to say, I thought the only way I had a chance to find out what artists and photographers—people who had some standing in the world—would think of what I was doing because I couldn’t find anyone doing anything similar. So I entered quite a number of competitions, not really sure where my work would end up.”

“And it actually did all right. It wasn’t a disaster, and I didn’t go away feeling too devastated. It was the first step to say, ‘I’m onto something. People can see some value.’ As a true artist, you want to stand up and say, ‘I must say this. This is what I need to do, and everyone else can do whatever they like.’ Reality for most of us is probably a little less certain. The competitions were just one way that I got a bit of reassurance.”

THE ART AND STORY OF THE PRINT

Hann says she always wasn’t a believer in the power of the print until she entered The Australian Professional Print Awards (AP-PAs). For the texture-rich photographs she creates, printing is essential. “The photo-

graph isn't finished until you've printed it, because all the texture and all that feeling that you've put into your print comes to life when you put it on the right paper. The APPAs were a kick-in-the-butt revelation: Print your work. Have a look at it. Get the right print. Go to a master printer. Learn your craft."

"Because I'm a bit of a procrastinator, entering the APPAs meant I had a deadline. Since my work had to be done by a certain date, it pushed me to finish things instead of half-heartedly starting something and saying, 'Oh, this has possibility. I'll finish it later.' No. 'Later' is next week."

"It was a part of building my confidence and ability to finish things and learning to see a story in an image. It was about reading the stories in my work through the eyes of others. And interestingly enough, other people's stories were often quite different

than the one I thought I had told in my photograph. I'd look again at my image and think, 'I can see that now; I'm impressed.' If you're doing your job, your photograph has your story in it, and that's what you send out to the world. So while you may not agree with what your viewers see, they could look at your work with a whole different story wound up in it."

The opportunity to see the different stories in her work was an exercise Hann found illuminating. She notes that it's not for every photograph, neither hers nor the ones she judges. "Some people's photographs have no story. They may have put one in there, but perhaps it's not well told, or I just can't see it. The whole thing is really tricky. But when people see a story in your work and they get excited about it, it's like no feeling on Earth because it's something that you didn't put there intentionally, but they found it. I don't know how to describe that."

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THE CONFIDENCE GAME

Despite her multiple turns as a judge and the numerous awards she's won (including twice being named South Australian Professional Photographer of the Year), Hann confesses that, like so many photographers, self-confidence is still her greatest creative struggle. "When you have confidence, you shift the way you sit in the world and how people see you, and you know that this is your right. You've made a spot and you belong there, and no one can take it away."

But she finds maintaining that confidence is difficult—you can achieve almost anything if you're confident, but how do you hold onto it when just one person on social media criticizes the work that you do? The work you love, agonize over, question, and eventually share? "It's easy to be demoralized by other people's beliefs, so these days, quite frankly, I just give them the middle finger," she says.

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If you haven't thought about a competition as an opportunity to hear about someone else's version of your story, or if your thoughts lean toward, "I would never enter; what if my work gets ripped to shreds?" or "What if people hate it? I don't think my ego could take it, my heart would break, and that would be it for me," Hann empathizes with those feelings. "You fight through it if there's a bigger reason to. I've been destroyed by what people have said. But it's only an opinion, and you cannot separate the opinion of others from your own self-worth. It's part of the developing. And it's not for everybody. If you're secure in what you do and you love what you're doing and you have a market—whether you're selling or exhibiting or just sharing your work—then I believe competitions help you

grow beyond Instagram. Not saying that's not a worthy goal. But I guess I wanted more."

"I wanted to be accepted by my peers because I'm still asking, 'Am I a real photographer? Am I a real artist? Is my work worth anything?' And I don't know how you change your thinking around that because it comes from inside. It doesn't matter if 1,000 people tell me they think my work is amazing; it doesn't intrinsically change what's inside."

"So I'm changing that myself. I'm to the point where I can claim, 'This is what I want to do.' But it's taken me ten years to wind through all these little avenues of acceptance. And what I do is really lonely. I sit in my office and I do my normal work and I do my artwork, and I listen to music. It's a pretty lonely place if you don't then go out into the art, photographic, wildlife, or some other world, and have people to talk to and share what you love or what you're doing."

She finds all those worlds in her beloved Kenya.

THE ART OF IT ALL

So how *does* returning to Kenya factor into Hann's art? Science may not seem the likely answer, but the woman who originally studied to be a research scientist says wildlife is the reason she says she's a photographer at all. "The wildlife is number one; photography is second."

Although science led her to photography, it's the art that keeps her there. Hann has applied the science she loves with the creativity that drives her to pick up her camera. "I'm not a scientist. I'm an artist. That's how I see myself. But I do love the science behind it."

I'LL WANDER THROUGH THE OLD MASTERS AND LOOK AT THE BRUSH STROKES AND THE WAY THEY PUT THE LIGHT AND SHADOWS DOWN ONTO THE CANVAS. THEN I THINK, **'I CAN USE THOSE SORTS OF TECHNIQUES IN MY WORK'.**

She still studies reference books on wildlife, admitting her bookshelves groan from the weight of the knowledge she hungers for. “If I’m going to a new area, I study what new animal species I might find and I do a lot of work to investigate their familial habits. How they group together. How they live their lives. Their behavioral patterns. Anything that would mean I can sit there with them and understand what they’re doing. Wanting to understand and learn more about what I photograph is really important. The photographs I take and the ones I work on usually have a lot of research that may not be obvious, but for me is really important. It’s all part of it.”

THE PULSE OF ARRHYTHMIA

Through the years, Hann’s art has found its voice, much as she has. Her latest series, *Arrhythmia: The Art of the Elephant* (some of which appears in this portfolio) is focused on the elephants of Kenya.

When asked, “Why elephants?” Hann’s voice grows softer, cracking with emotion. “I think everything that’s really good about the animal kingdom and maybe even how

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we behave towards it comes together with elephants; they have an intelligence that is astronomical. We haven’t even begun to tap into what they can do. The research on the way they communicate and what they can achieve with their communication is mind-blowing. Their sensitivity. The way the cows come together with their calves. The way they landscape the environment to the benefit of other animals. The way they live their lives is so mesmerizing.”

What breaks Hann’s tender heart the most is knowing that, between poaching and degrading natural environments, humans are leaving the intelligent, family-oriented pachyderms reeling. “I’ve walked alongside elephants. I’ve been sitting quietly, and they’ll come close because they don’t feel threatened. You feel almost like you’re part

of the herd because they've allowed you to be. And they're being destroyed."

But she doesn't downplay that they can be dangerous and unpredictable; she never does any of this without an elephant guide. "You don't know what happened in a particular herd's life ten minutes before you see them, so you can never assume you know what to expect." But she's eternally fascinated.

"Elephants are so big, yet they have these tiny little delicate parts of their bodies. And it's not easy to photograph them. When I first took my first serious photos of elephants, they looked like everyone else's. 'There's an elephant in the landscape. There's a herd of elephants. There's an elephant by a tree.' I couldn't help but think that there was more than that."

Hann wanted to tell the story of what's happening with elephants without being brutal.

She found she was drawn to them artistically more than pragmatically, and that eventually became the exhibition she named *Arrhythmia*. "I wanted a title that described what I felt about them. And what's happening to elephants makes my heart miss a beat."

Inspired by Nick Brandt, Hann started out emulating what he did. "I created some work that I liked, but it was empty because my soul wasn't in them; it was someone else's soul." That was in 2009, the last true flirtation she had with another artist's style. She says she still admires and enjoys other people's work, but doesn't have a desire to imitate them. "There are plenty of photographers who inspire me, but not to create in their shadows."

Instead, Hann finds herself pulled to art galleries. "I love artists and painters, mostly older ones, like J.W. Turner. I'll go into a gallery and not necessarily look at who the painter is. I'll wander through the old

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masters and look at the brush strokes and the way they put the light and shadows down onto the canvas. Then I think, ‘I can use those sorts of techniques in my work to get a different feel to the light that I see in my photograph; I can change everything around.’ I can change how you perceive what you see because it’s all about the quality of the light and the shadow and the tonality—that’s what the older painters demonstrate so beautifully for me. And so I experiment with textures to find different tonalities and work with that.”

THE PROCESS

The painterly effect of textures provides a panacea to the overly sharp, high-resolution world we live in, and with her love of the old masters, textures are a natural fit for Hann’s work. They enrich her photographs with an emotional tactility—a timeless grit that provides viewers with something they can hold onto, both visually and emotionally.

But textures are just the finishing touch on an image that’s been carefully composed and thought out while she’s in the field. “I don’t have preconceived thoughts about

what I’ll get, but I do practice good technique. It’s just not more important than how the photograph feels or the emotion I have for it. This is how I choose to go about my work nowadays.”

So where does Hann find these textured overlays for her photographs? “In the field, I photograph as many textures as I can. I like things like old walls, doorways, and worn concrete because it gives such interesting patterns. On safari, if there’s a concrete floor on the balcony or veranda that’s been there for decades and it’s weathered, there are amazing colors and patterns in there.”

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Hann not only doesn't delete her photographic misfires, she values and makes use of them. "If I'm walking and accidentally fire the shutter, I might get this wildly out-of-focus image that might just be a colour with a tiny bit of the earth tone through it. I've quite often used those as textures, not to put detail onto the image, but for changing the colour and the light tonality, which I accomplish by layering in Photoshop and blending at different opacities."

"For example, if I get something that's a pale brown earthy colour that's out of focus, it's like putting a smooth layer over the image and blending into parts of it to give it this otherworldly, surreal feeling, even before putting anything that has lines to it or obvious texture marks. Depending on the image, I'll build up the layers: some photos will have five textures on at 3–5% opacity. Then I'll use layer masks to brush away from the animal so he (mostly) won't have visible texture, but it might have some of that warmth from that earthy brown layer that acts like a filter. But because it's a filter I've made in camera that's not just a colour, it gives a warm, incandescent glow. The difference is

that if you fill a new layer with a colour in Photoshop, you get a very artificial result, almost like it's under fluorescent lights."

"Once the colour is where I want it, I open up all my textures and start experimenting. Sometimes it takes up to 15 or 20 different textures, trying different blends, opacities and combinations, taking them off, putting something else on, trying to find something that worked. It's not an exact science for me. It just has to feel right."

"If I had a paintbrush and a palette, it would be me just trying different paints and finding which colours and brush strokes worked together for a particular composition."

Hann's goal is to light her own inspirational spark to try something different, a trait she holds valuable. "As a creative person, if you just sit in your ivory tower, you get a bit stale."

And what, after all this technique? Hann says she sits and looks at an image, listens to music, and looks over and over again at the image—for hours, days, months, or even

MAKING THE IMAGE: DUST FALLS

I spent some time with the small herd of cows and calves, photographing them in the dust as they bathed. When I came home, I thought that I had “pleasant” rather than “exciting” images. When I tried a vertical crop on this image to eliminate the head of the elephant and the calf that was by her feet, it became more interesting. Less is more.



In making the dust more prevalent, I knew that the eyelashes, tusks, and craggy elephant skin on the trunk would come to life. I added three different textures with different blend modes and opacities to make the background look the way I wanted. I used a layer mask and soft brush to remove around 50% of the texture that remained in the image from the animal's skin, removing all but a small amount of texture. I experimented with black and white conversions using Silver Efex Pro, but the initial efforts were too coarse and contrasty. I ended up making a second conversion and masked out the animal from the softer one, leaving me with a soft and mellow background with a slightly more striking surface for the animal's skin.

If there was a surprise in this image, it was the realization at the final chord of the creation that the dust looked like a soft scarf draped over the bottom of the elephant's trunk.

MAKING THE IMAGE: DARK GHOST

This image is bound up in all my thoughts and fears regarding the conservation of rhinos. In this instance, a white rhino.

My initial thought was to have a handsome rhino head and powerful shoulder in an artistic, painterly environment. In the way that art sometimes takes charge of the subject, I ended up a million miles away from that.

I used a number of luminosity masks to control highlights, and as I was working on that, I inadvertently turned off the other layers and was left with a fascinating residual image left on my screen. Ever the opportunist, I began layering various luminosity layers that I had created until I built

up an image of the animal—except that I wasn't using any of the original pixels of the photo.

To make the rhino show up more effectively, I used a misfire image that I had taken on safari when I'd accidentally fired the shutter when pointing my telephoto lens at the ground, resulting in a rich, soft, flowing image. With that underpinning the above layers, I ended up with a dark, slightly melancholic image of a highly endangered animal that clearly showed the physiology of a rhino as we know it, but photographically, was just a ghost of the original. This is not a technique that I've found easy to replicate, neither technically nor in subject matter.



IF I HAD A PAINTBRUSH AND A PALETTE, IT WOULD BE ME JUST TRYING DIFFERENT PAINTS AND **FINDING WHICH COLOURS AND BRUSH STROKES WORKED TOGETHER FOR A PARTICULAR COMPOSITION.**


years. “I’ve had some images that I’ve gone back and forth on for maybe two years. I have one that I worked on for five years. I just didn’t know what to do with it.”

“I’m always surprised by how an image turns out, to be honest. If I’m not, then I’m usually disappointed in the photograph.”

SOUL JOURNEY

So with all the surprises she’s had with *Arrhythmia*, what’s next for the series? Hann admits she’s pulled toward it in a way that she’s never felt before, saying that the best way to describe it is like falling in love with someone and having no idea why. “You see them. You may talk to them. You may have seen them around. And you think, ‘I can’t be without this person. I can’t live my life without them. I don’t know what it is, but they’re going to be part of my life.’ It’s beyond a pure word or one description of how you feel about them because on its own, it means nothing, really.”

“Ultimately, it’s connecting with them deeper than you would think possible—and to do that, you have to keep going back.”

Going back: a fitting return to bring her home to her own wild heart. 

Hilary Hann is a passionate advocate for wildlife, wildlife photographic artist, and lover of all things wildlife. She’s channeled that love into small, personalized group safaris (www.hilaryhann.com.au/photo-safaris), where she shares her vast knowledge of the landscape and animals of Kenya with other like-minded photographers.

Hilary’s art is an extension of her spiritual response toward African wildlife, its struggle to maintain relevance in a diminishing wilderness, and its importance to the lives and history of people the world over. The landscapes the animals inhabit echo their spirit, and

her passionate desire is to help preserve them through her art.

Her greatest photographic achievement (so far) is being included in the Remembering Wildlife (www.rememberingwildlife.com) book series, a humbling and emotional experience far beyond gold awards and trophies. She's proudest of her children and the life and business (www.atkinsphotography.com.au) she's built with her husband, Terry, and that she's finally found her artistic voice, one that allows her to advocate for wildlife in a way that isn't brutal, instead showing what we stand to lose. She hopes that if others feel that what she's done with her craft brings value to wildlife and to art, she'll be remembered for that.

When she's not exploring the savannas of Kenya, Hilary is (mostly) at home in Adelaide, Australia, seeking visual stories and dreaming of returning to safari.

See more of Hilary's art and read her poetic words on her website (www.hilaryhann.com.au), or find her on Facebook (www.facebook.com/hilaryhannphotographer), or Instagram (www.instagram.com/hilaryhannphotographer).