





AFRICAN DREAMING

‘When I’m out in the wild, in a small, tented camp and there’s no one much about, I’m really happy.’

By Don Norris

Adelaide-based photographer Hilary Hann spent her formative years in a world very different from the sedate and orderly City of Churches. Born in Singapore, her family spent time in North Borneo before moving to East Africa and settling in Kenya where she was raised.

Her emotional connection to Kenya and East Africa, its people and its spectacular animal life, profoundly informs who she is as an artist and a person. 'My work,' she writes in her blog, 'is the product of passion, love and deep respect for the land and the people of East Africa. In reality, it is an extension of the spiritual response I have towards African wildlife, its struggle to maintain relevance in a diminishing wilderness and its importance to the lives and history of people the world over.'

Confessing that while she loves her Adelaide home and life in Australia, photographically speaking Hilary finds it a challenge to connect with the Australian environment in the same intensely emotional way she does with East Africa.

'I need the drama of the animals,' she said. 'A landscape without the intrigue of what may happen today or tomorrow or in the next hour,

lacks a little bit of excitement. If I was a true landscape photographer, it would make no difference. But I'm an animal person and I just don't get the same feeling here.

'When we were growing up, there were coups, there were assassinations, there was gunfire and there were all sorts of things that you wouldn't experience in Adelaide. You need some excitement in your life that's not going to kill you. Life would be pretty dull if you're totally safe and cared for by the state and nothing ever happens. I just don't want to be that person.'

It's a dilemma familiar to many an expat - being tugged in two directions, between what was and what is. Asked if her 'dreaming' was in some sense African, Hilary replied, 'some people have said there's a sort of dream-like quality to my photographs. Maybe that's really what it is, it's part of that connecting to how you felt about a place when you were younger and it was your home, where you lived, and how you interacted with people.'

The emotional intensity of Hilary's award-winning African images puts them outside what might be called the wildlife documentary tradition.



The March - minikin

*One dreamy evening when the sun had almost dipped below the horizon and the clouds had dulled any brilliant sunset colours, I lay on the crusted surface of the dried pans of Lake Amboseli and waited. Elbows sunk into the dusty earth, braced in support of my camera, breathing slow and steady, I saw the approaching elephant bulls and tried to still my racing heartbeat. As the lead bull came nearer, looming over us, I never felt more vulnerable nor alive. The camera's shutter broke the silence and the bull glanced in my direction, his foot raised as he hesitated for a fraction of a second, before he and his friends silently continued their journey.**

** The ability to photograph potentially dangerous animals out of the vehicle is only allowed in specific reserves and conservancies and always with a professional guide.*



Calf Charge I



Spirit Guardian



'It's not so much the colours of the light, but often the way it reflects out of the image.'

Her photographs are the products of a painstaking process of layering textures and paring back of the extraneous details.

The 'base images' as she calls her original raw files, are just the first step in a journey, the course of which will be shaped by everything from the particular textures she selects to the music she's listening to as she works.

'I don't pre-visualise, I don't see [the final image] at all [when taking pictures]. Sometimes I don't know if I'm taking something that isn't any different from something someone else has taken. But when I look at the pictures later, I [find] I've shot a certain composition. I take things that through experience I know work. Big open skies, lots of space, paring it right back.

'The fun thing is doing the journey, taking the images, letting them sit there for a few weeks. When I go through them later, maybe only one will say "pick me! pick me!" because that's how I feel that day.

'I rely on post-production to express myself. The image tells me what it needs to have done and that's why it gets tricky. Sometimes I just can't see it, I'm not picking up the "vibe".

'You can look at something 10 times and on the tenth time, after weeks or months, you think: "I know what to do with this now". Maybe you've aged, you've got more experience or something happened a week ago or you read some poetry - any of those things can trigger something that makes you respond to an image and then you can start.'

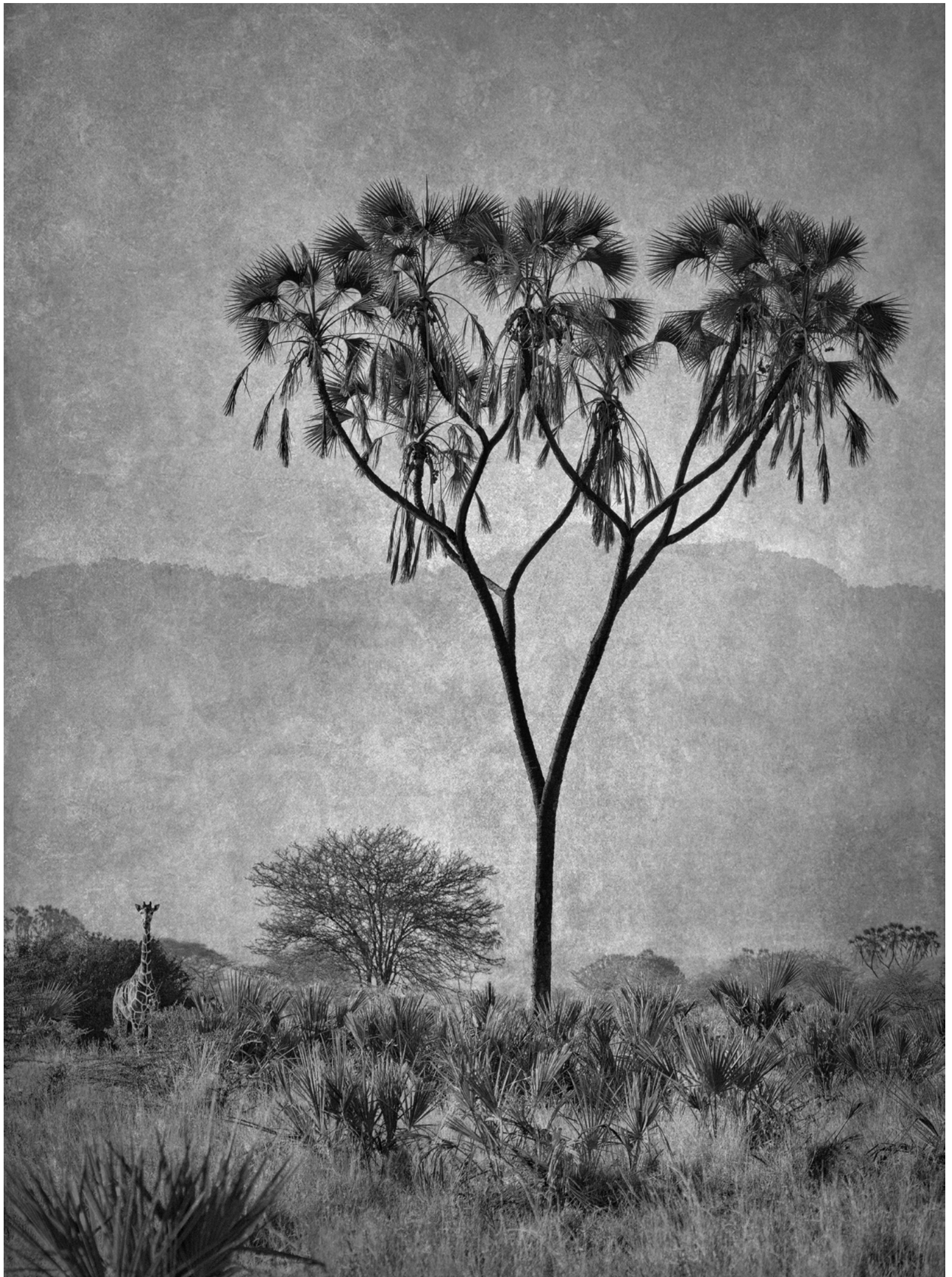
The process of transforming what she originally saw through the viewfinder into a final print typically involves an extended period of experimentation.

'I explore different things, like changing the way we see the light in the image instead of just using what I captured. It's not so much the colours of the light, but often the way it reflects out of the image. I play around a lot with that and then I'll play around with the point of interest.'

By using texture layers, many of which are so subtle that even a practised eye would not discern them, Hilary is able to delicately re-work the original lighting in her pictures. Citing an American landscape photographer, Michael Frye, who has influenced her approach, she said 'I'm trying to take away all the distractions. One of the things he says is that you should look at your landscape and take away all the least interesting things. You keep paring away until you come to what is really the interesting point of your photograph.

'Sometimes that means I have to use selective blurring of parts of the background, or to change a little of the light. I'm experimenting with what keeps the photograph looking real because I want my photographs to look like something anyone could have experienced.

'If you looked at one of my more recent photos, and you loved the soft lighting, quite often that's due to very low opacity textures that I just build up over parts of the image.'



Dwarfed



Jewelled I



Migration Mayhem

It [creates] a flow through the image, [taking] your eye where I want it to go.

'Some of my best textures are mistakes I've made when I've been out shooting and I've accidentally hit my shutter. Those are overlaid and then I use different opacities and blends. So, [if areas of an image] are quite contrasty, it can soften them so they have a little more of a mood to them.'

When it comes to presentation of her work, Hilary is adamant on one point. 'For me, the print is absolutely everything. Every time I'm designing and working on an image, it's with the final physical print in mind. The way I work using textures, I don't really want to end up with a slick looking image. It doesn't have to be over-sharp or over-coloured. I'm looking for a mood, for the right paper texture that will bring out the blacks really well and until I see it in print, it's not finished.'


'I've participated in online competitions and my work that does really well as a print never does as well online. It's a tactile thing I think, isn't it? Looking at it on a glossy screen just isn't the same thing.'

Although she owns a big Epson printer, she doesn't use it for her exhibition work.

'I get all my art prints done at Atkins' pro lab [in Adelaide]. They have a department that's just for fine art printing and David Hobbs, their master printer, knows my work pretty well by now. We talk through the options and he does proofs for me. Then we work from that. I find I get better result [that way].

She says she's toying with the idea of printing some smaller things on her own, but when it comes to the exhibition prints, she will continue to rely on David Hobbs' skills. 'I just wouldn't have time to get the sort of knowledge he has about printing and how the effects work on different papers and profiles. I've spent years learning to be really good with my post-production skills and with my shooting. But with printing, I don't have enough knowledge and I'd rather go to someone who does.'

The photography, the untold hours spent in meticulous post-production and her beautiful final prints are as much as anything a way of honouring and celebrating her enduring love of East Africa and its threatened wildlife.

'Really for me it's all about the animals, conservation and the wildlife.' A committed conservationist, she has taken her fair share of images that tell the stories of the terrible pressures on rhinos, elephants, lions and other iconic species. But, she added, those images 'won't make it into my art. My art's got to be beautiful. It's got to make people feel like they want to be with these animals in the great outdoors. It's got to make people want to save them.' 

► You can see more of Hilary's work at her website: www.hilaryhann.com.au

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Hilary Hann's Safari Tips

As one of the moderators at www.safaritalk.net (a forum for people interested in safaris and related subjects), Hilary frequently answers photographers' safari questions. Herewith a few tips:

- Do your research, know the kind of animals and landscapes you'd like to photograph and choose the appropriate location(s) accordingly;
- Avoid off-the-shelf tours that only visit destinations for a day or two and which are not designed to cater to serious photographers;
- Try to spend at least three nights in a place (Hilary prefers five or more nights so that she gets to know the staff and the location);
- If you can afford it, get your own guide and vehicle for maximum flexibility. If you can't, then go with a small group of other photographers;
- You don't always need a 600mm lens. In some places the bush is so heavy, you'll only see something if it's reasonably close. Hilary's usual kit is a Canon 1DX, a 200-400mm zoom with built in 1.4 teleconverter, a 24-105mm and a 70-200mm;
- Take plenty of memory cards (Hilary fills a 32GB card most days);
- Have a backup strategy (Hilary takes a portable hard drive with a built-in card reader).