

# TIM FLACH

London's Shoreditch neighborhood has come a long way in the last twenty years. With the renaissance of Spitalfields Market, Brick Lane and the birth of a robust Silicon Roundabout (referring to residents Last.fm, Dopplr, 7digital and the like), the disrepair of this East End locale transformed into a rather fashionable district, rife with cafés, pubs and galleries.

And it is there, along Great Eastern Street, beneath floors of flats and offices, that a black unassuming storefront blends in subtly with its surroundings. Just inside the door, one would be hard pressed to fathom its long list of exotic guests. An open-space with shiny wood floors, exposed brick walls with artful prints and a spiral staircase leading below first greets visitors and sheds no evidence of the wolves, kangaroos and reptiles that have entered the studio of photographer Tim Flach.

"The studio has cooling, even in the basement," explains Flach. "The reason we have a basement is not just because animals could escape out onto the street, but we can cool the basement and control it." This basement is a far cry from a storage place. Its wide-open space mirrors the floor above and, again, it's hard to conjure up visions of wild life wandering about this pristine environment. It belies the chaos it has often contained.

"I love working with animals. I love the uncertainty," Flach admits, and then adds, with a smile, "The animals generally don't talk back to you."

With a career spanning 25 years that includes work in advertising, editorial, galleries and books, Flach is best known for his portraits of animals. "Though I photograph animals, I'm quite often looking at the human side, and actually using animals as a mechanism to explore it," he says. His book *Equus*, published by ABRAMS in association with PQ Blackwell in 2008, was seven years in the making. A tour de force, it presents a new way of looking at this family of animals. "In *Equus*, I didn't want to show people. What I did was use the mask series to show warfare and medicine." The results are anthropocentric, illustrating how we control nature.

"Tim's ability to chart and explore the relationships among animals, photography and the human imagination is unparalleled," says ABRAMS publisher Steve Tager. "His deliberately constructed, inquisitive and highly sophisticated images evidence a keen craft and sharp

Right: *Friesians*, from *Equus*. "For this shot, we had to use dogs to move the horses around in the snow. I sat in the snow, basically in the middle, and the horses ran around me. I was very conscious of the black against the white, as a strong graphic. The cropping gave it an energy, though I couldn't reason that crop—it was all happening too quickly. It was afterwards that I recognized that it worked." ABRAMS in association with PQ Blackwell, publisher.





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imagination. His photography continues to challenge the boundaries of aesthetics and science.”

“I don’t think making a pretty picture is enough,” admits Flach. “My interest has moved from just the aesthetic to this idea that photography is a form of evidence, a way of raising questions. What is the significance? What is the context? I’m fascinated by how understanding can transform the meaning. I think you’ve got to be interested in a lot of potential meanings that come from an image.”

As an example, Flach points to a large photograph hanging prominently in his studio. It’s a horse wearing head gear. Some people might think it’s head protection, others a fetish. It’s actually a fly net. “With image making,” he says, “how things are read are so dependent on the signifiers that come through the pictures.”

Flach’s inquisitive nature accounts for a philosophical shift—taking his image-making to a new level. “I am moving from *Equus*, which was aesthetically driven with some less-familiar type images of embryos, placentas and a few flies on shit, to the kind of work I’m doing with dogs: using dogs as a metaphor for how we engage with nature.”

*Dogs?* Avoiding the cute dog cliché is an ambitious undertaking, and Flach readily admits the subject is incredibly sentimentalized. “There isn’t an interest in dismantling a discussion on the gaze and concepts of cuteness,” he explains. “But merely that the very process of inquiry involves a journey—and it’s not the same as saying let’s get a load of these animals and photograph them on a white background and produce pretty pictures.” This canine expedition is taking Flach all over the world—from Tibet to Iceland—to explore aspects of cloning, plastic surgery, domesticity and, of course, how humans bond with dogs.

While his book projects command a great deal of time and travel, so do the commissions Flach works on simultaneously.

He brings his philosophy to advertising, though a much more condensed version. “When you are trying to support a brand value, the context has to be delivered in a few seconds down the motorway,” he says.

“It presents a challenge for the photographer to interpret the information presented by the art director and client, and reflect on the true values that they’re really chasing, not just what’s in the brief. I enjoy and appreciate the kind of trust somebody puts in me. A lot depends on how it comes out.”

“Tim is incredibly detail-oriented and so easy going,” says Natalie Fevig, senior creative at Saatchi & Saatchi. “I frankly didn’t have to worry about a thing. He took the concept and brought it to life with such beauty and artistry. His photographs say it all, beautiful light and textures no matter the subject.”

Whether the subject is the wire-like eyelashes of an elephant, swarming bats or jewel-like ice blocks in Iceland, Flach’s keen observation brings much to the creative process, with light and composition playing key roles. Some photographs present an almost abstract view of his subjects, which might be attributed to his artistic background and early influence of Pablo Picasso and Paul Cezanne.

Yes, Flach’s first artistic endeavors were drawing and painting. In fact, he exhibited work at an early age. Drawing came naturally. “I’m clearly wired visually,” he acknowledges. Being admittedly better at non-word things was in stark contrast to Flach’s father, a barrister and practiced orator. Thankfully, there were no pressures of expectation for Flach; his father knew Tim was ill-suited to becoming a lawyer—and didn’t even try to persuade him. While his father had a somewhat difficult time grasping where his son was heading artistically, Flach’s mother took a keen interest and encouraged his painting.

From there, the journey toward photography was serendipitous. After finishing school in Cornwall, Flach received his first degree in communication design. “Because I’d always painted and drawn, I felt I didn’t need to do my first degree in painting. It sounds silly but as a child I drew a lot. I even exhibited in my early teens. So it didn’t feel like a rush to go and be a painter. [And] then I went to Saint Martins and did a post graduate in painting.”

During his last week at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London, a friend asked Flach to help out with

Right: *Flying Mop*, for *Dogs Gods*. “I’d been trying really hard to get this Puli to look at the camera. The only way I could get him to look at the camera dead on was to get on the floor and shoot through his trainer’s legs—not a very dignified pose.” PQ Blackwell, publisher.

*Chico Hair*. “With this Afghan, I was conscious that I was visiting something cliché, a breed similar to human hair. This shot was not planned, rather more observed. The subtleness of the gesture, of looking down, just seemed right.” PQ Blackwell, publisher.

“This is a Poodle that has been groomed in the **Creative Grooming** category. It’s part of a competition called Grooming Expo, where the dogs are groomed on stage. The interesting thing is that the dogs actually lie there content because they’re getting five hours of grooming and attention. I’m hoping to go to Beijing where there is this person, who was the first to groom his dog to look like a panda, a Panda-Dog. There is a really cool Chow Chow, which looks very similar in shape to a panda, and the owner’s been arrested 30 times by the authorities for having an endangered animal.” PQ Blackwell, publisher.



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a project. She was in the press and following an attempt on the balloon altitude record. “I was cheap and I had a camera,” Flach says. “I went along and just enjoyed the engagement with people. I moved from essentially taking pictures at press events to annual reports and corporate brochures.”

He dove straight into photography and gained a general grounding in the field that’s served him well. “I felt a certain confidence of image making that I could actually draw it if I had to—and figure out how to get there.”

In 1993, Flach was working on a campaign for Guinness that involved getting a twenty-foot python and a vulture into the studio. “The guy that brought the animals said, ‘I’ve got big cats,’” Flach says and recalls how this sparked his curiosity. “I thought they would be so cool to get in the

This page: **Kinda Ready**. “This Greyhound won the premier event, The Derby. The data from the scales are used in betting odds. This dog, like other athletes (boxers, jockeys), is weighed in, analogous to humans.” PQ Blackwell, publisher.

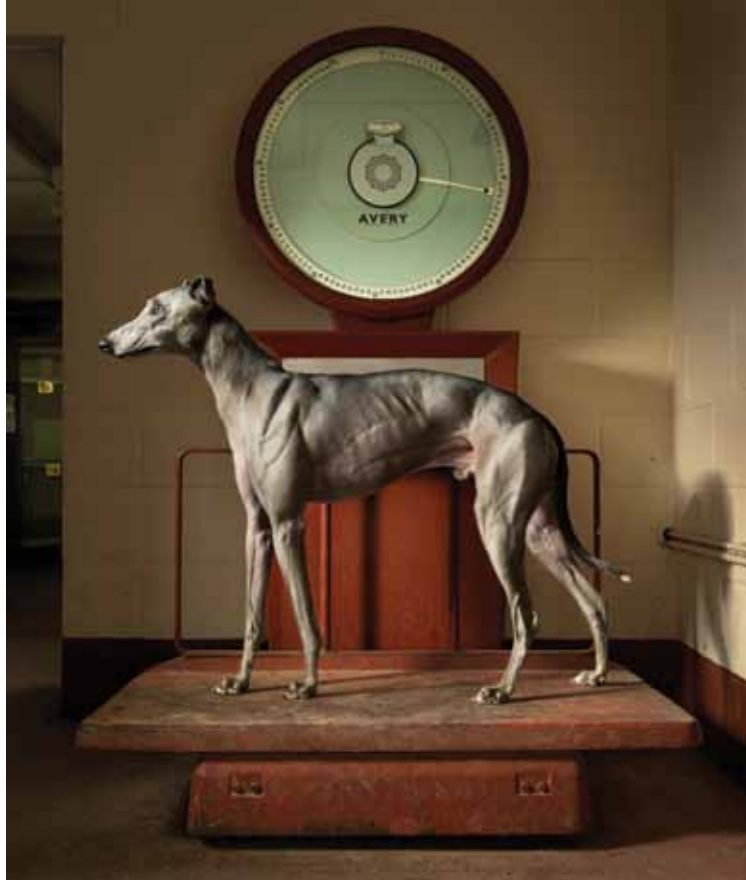
**Japanese Sea Nettles**, personal work. “I was in Vancouver, B.C., for a project in Minnesota about Sea Otters. I saw these Jellyfish. They look like parachutes or a space ship. The plankton floating around them, adds a magical quality. Jellyfish are extraordinary; a subject matter that I’d like to explore one day.”

**Monkey Eyes**, personal. “This macaque is only eighteen inches high. The greater depth of field helps throw off the reading of scale. We engage with him differently, relating to it like a primate.”

Right: **Compassion Bats**, personal. “This image was not planned, it unfolded. We brought fruit bats to the studio. They’re not very good flyers, as they don’t have to chase anything. So these two were simply chatting to each other and I found that interesting. By turning the photograph upside down, they seem rather human. We’re used to animals with their heads above their feet.”

**Simiform 5**, personal. “In this series, I was exploring different forms and contrasts. The translucence emphasizes the bat’s anatomy.”

**Red Kite Perch**. The *London Sunday Times* and the National Trust co-commissioned a photographic feature for *Spectrum* magazine, which celebrates the spectacular landscape in the Trust’s care, and specifically how people interact with it. The Red Kite is subject to the longest continuous conservation project in the world. The first Kite Committee was formed in 1903, by concerned individuals appalled at the continuing destruction of Kites, who initiated the first nest protection schemes. This photograph was taken at the National Trust site, Bradenham village located in the Chiltern Hills. “Most people see these birds flying in the distance. In this image, the proximity is unusual, and gives the image an intimate feel. And, of course, it evokes wilderness; because of the cropping and its gesture.” Monica Allende, *The Sunday Times Magazine*/Antony Westover, The National Trust, clients.









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studio. This was just when stock library was emerging and...I thought there might be an opportunity to photograph something and put into the library. In a sense, make it fund itself, because [photographing animals] is very expensive to do. The panther that arrived wasn't so cooperative. It actually got so annoyed that it snarled at the camera. And that picture paid for itself and allowed me to go on.

"We always see animals as chaotic, uncontrollable. Perhaps they are going to shit or pee in the studio. Or they're going to decide that they've had a bad day," Flach muses. "But in a way, that's the condition of everything. There's always that uncertainty. It's just a bit more present with the animals." **CA**



Left: **Cremello**, from *Equus*. "A Cremello horse has blue eyes and pinkish skin underneath its fur, due to a gene mix. I wanted to match the background to the white horse, to evoke the feel of a fashion shoot. The warmth in the background gives it a delicate quality." ABRAMS in association with PQ Blackwell, publisher.

**Icelandic Beach**. The May 2010 issue of *Patek Philippe*, an international arts and culture magazine distributed worldwide in seven languages, and sponsored by Swiss watchmakers Patek Philippe, will include an article on horses bred in Iceland. "The brief for this assignment was very free. I thought the icebergs on the beach were surreal, jewel-like forms that were in keeping with the clouds. The experience was a strong one and had everything to do with an extraordinary location." Anne Bourgeois-Vignon, The Forward Group, creative director; Patek Philippe, client.

This page: **JJ Ballarina**, from *Equus*. "This image was very much about the Royal Yard of Ahjiman in the United Arab Emirates. I used a flash to lend ambiguity to the image. Is it a frame? Or a window? This Chestnut is celebrated as a supermodel of the equine world, and this photo was taken in front of its stable window. The photograph is reminiscent of *Whistlejacket*, by George Stubbs, a British sports painter." ABRAMS in association with PQ Blackwell, publisher.

**Fetus Day 85**, from *Equus*. "There is the moral issue surrounding embryo transfers, especially for polo ponies. Gestation is considered a waste of good playing time for mares. This is an existing specimen that was aborted because the mother died of colic." ABRAMS in association with PQ Blackwell, publisher.

**Dantes Neck**. "One of my favorites in the series. We engage with it as form first. I was very conscious of that." Alan Smith, MJH Consulting, art director; Sarah Kitson, SPILLERS® Horse Feeds, client.

