

Animal photographer Tim Flach

Tim Flach's exquisite animal shots beggar description, but **Geoff Harris** tries to pin down the man and his unique vision



Profile

● Born in 1958, Tim Flach is a world-famous photographer of animals. His most famous collection is *Equus*, commissioned by PQ Publishing.

● Flach began his career as an artist and discovered photography at St Martin's College of Art in the early '80s.

● He went on to become a sought-after advertising photographer, and worked for numerous blue-chip clients including Lloyds Bank.

● Awards include Photographer of the Year at the International Photography Awards in 2006.

Dogs shot from below as they walk over Perspex. Bats shot like humans. People holding hands with primates. We've featured a menagerie of animals and animal photographers in this magazine, but Tim Flach is an altogether different species. Flach is revolutionising the way that photographers regard animals, and the way that the viewer relates to animal images. He may not be a familiar name, but you'll know his work – he made his name in the no-nonsense world of advertising photography, and his images for Dove, Lloyds Bank and others are iconic. Flach is best known as a horse photographer, and the equine connection reached its culmination in the *Equus* book project. So our first question was obvious – what is it about horses?

"It's not a fascination with horses per se, more to do with animals," the non-horse-riding Flach explains from his studio in London's East End. "I'm fascinated by how our consciousness has been affected by our association

with horses, this ancient partnership." While generous in his praise of conventional animal and wildlife photographers, Flach isn't trying to compete with them, or somehow undermine them by his more left-field approach. "My influences are very personal. I'm not borrowing from conventional wildlife photography and I tend not to shoot the traditional models of wildlife photography – I shoot bats, embryos and flies on shit. I'm fascinated by how we interpret and humanise images of animals."

A foundation in art

As mentioned, Flach cut his teeth doing advertising work and he's borrowed a lot of techniques from commercial photography for his personal projects – lighting being a good example. "Early images in the *Equus* project, like the Icelandic horses, were quite surreal. When I started the horse project I was more interested in aesthetic ideas. »

Flach on his horse images

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'Al Patia'

A stunning example of Flach's 'horse without rider' approach, taken in an equine hospital in the UAE. "The horse was wearing a head protector after surgery but was quite easy to photograph. He was used to having things on his head!"



Tim Flach



Tim Flach

Interview Tim Flach

The use of flash was borrowed from advertising, and I was going for quite a stylised, crafted approach."

Without wanting to pigeonhole Flach, he's a potent example of a commercially trained photographer who's now reaching a global audience through the boom in fine-art photography. But it's not as if Flach suddenly became 'arty' as his career progressed. Unlike most pros, Flach came late to photography. He discovered his talent in the early '80s, while doing postgraduate work at the prestigious St Martin's College of Art in central London.

"I was always more visual than verbal, and was naturally drawn towards drawing and painting," he recalls. "I seriously picked up a camera for the first time around 1983 while I was doing a foundation course. Word got around I was a cheap photographer, so I used to do PR events and things. Gradually I moved to annual reports, design work and advertising work, but I didn't serve

opposite page Turkey, shot for The New York Times

"From a feature about Thanksgiving turkeys. We got the turkey to show off his wattle and plumage by introducing a female into the room."

an apprenticeship as an advertising photography assistant or anything like that. My entry was quite chaotic!" Flach also reveals how the social side of photography attracted him. "As a painter you don't get to meet such a diverse range of people."

Horse, not rider

Enough back-story, let's return to the central themes of Flach's work – the multi-layered relationship between people and animals. Paradoxically for somebody who's absorbed with the complexities of this relationship, he chose to photograph horses without any kind of human presence. There are no cowboys or lone riders here. To understand why, Flach refers us back to the traditional way of depicting horses. "Historically equestrian art has essentially been a mechanism used to impose status upon patrons," he explained in an interview with *Equestria Arabia* magazine. "What I'm doing is »

above Blind horse eye

Part of a series on Arabian horses. "The horse's eye had mysteriously clouded over. I like the emotive quality of this shot, and wanted to create an association with a globe."

In the bag

For the *Equus* project, Flach used the 22-megapixel Hasselblad H1D to capture most of the images, and now uses the 39MP H3D. He particularly likes the way the camera enables him to work at higher synchronised speeds with flash and ambient light on location. For more general work, Flach uses the Canon EOS 1Ds Mk II. Photoshop is used for post-production work, primarily as a digital darkroom tool rather than for heavy image manipulation.



Baccarat Rising

"This horse, rising after a roll, evokes a Bedouin myth about the origin of the horse. I lit the shot with flash to create a sense of 'unreality' – I think this can bring the viewer closer to reality."





Tim Flach

Icelandic horses

"These horses are shot relaxing, near one of the largest glaciers in the world. The sky shows a storm coming in, which hit minutes later."

**Interview
Tim Flach**

distinctive because it chooses not to show man with horses. By separating the horse from man, I'm able to focus upon celebrating the horse itself."

This idea of celebration is crucial, as Flach's work reveals a genuine affection with, and fascination for, his subjects – but not in a sentimental or ecologically preachy way. And it's not all about photographing glossy mustangs or perfectly toned dogs, either. Flach is equally fascinated by a much less photogenic species, namely the bat.

His bat photographs have an amazing intimacy, which, to borrow the lamest of phrases, makes them look almost human. This is totally deliberate, and Flach has worked hard to convey the 'humanness' of bats, whether in the studio or in the wild. As you'd expect, he has plenty of anecdotes about shooting these enigmatic creatures. "I've not had that many dangerous moments in my career, but I'll never forget the time I went into a cave with seven million bats in Mexico. There was a constant drizzle of urine, while the floors were covered in

bat droppings and flesh-eating beetles were running around trying to bite you!"

Know your subject

As Flach's career developed, he recalls how he started to go for a more 'authentic' approach. "As the Equus project moved on, I didn't let the craft of photography get in the way. For instance, I took a shot of horses fighting using the available light rather than flash. It's all about being interested in how the viewer experiences my photos. They should never be consciously aware of how I'm using the craft, or the equipment." What's particularly impressive about Flach is the sheer ease with which he moves between

different photographic environments, be it a carefully controlled studio or the wilds of Outer Mongolia. His eclectic approach is reflected in his choice of camera equipment, and he's equally comfortable using a medium-format Hasselblad or a Canon DSLR. It's all about using the best tool for the job, enabling him to give an image 'emotional value'.

Flach also points out the importance of understanding the animals he's working with, and compares his role as a photographer to that of an actor studying a new role. "I have to understand my subject inside out." As part of this process, he worked with some very big names on the Equus project. Monty Roberts, aka the

Flach on his 'authentic' approach

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Behind the picture Eyelashes



Tim Flach

COMPOSITION

"I framed the elephant this way as I was trying to reduce the image down – I remembered the saying, 'less is more', so the eyelashes grab you first, then you're drawn to the eyes and the rest of the head."

CAMERA SETTINGS

"I used a fast Hasselblad 100mm lens mounted on a Hasselblad 203. The aperture was f/2 and the shutter speed 1/160 sec."

LENS AND SHUTTER

"I used the lens wide open, so I could control sharpness carefully. I wanted the shallow depth of field to echo the relationship of the eyelashes with the eyes and the rest of the head. I tried to capture the elephant's humanness."

'Man Who Listens to Horses' advised him when photographing wild mustangs, and he gained access to the royal stables in the United Arab Emirates.

Flach is still working as an advertising photographer and he's the first to admit the huge influence of commercial photography on his personal work. "My personal work has been a way for me to explore other areas of photography, and the ad work financed my personal projects. I've moved on from photography as applied art – for example, advertising and design – to a space where my work now hangs on people's walls. The pictures don't have to be absorbed as quickly as they do with advertising images... it's a different kind of information."

Bigger questions

The move to digital came a couple of years ago and Flach has never looked back. "Digital means I can get a shot quickly and move on, rather than making creatures hang around in the studio. With animals, you often have a small window to check the shot so digital's been

great." Flach's assistant will often stand in for the animal subject to minimise the amount of time the creature has to spend under the lights, and an elaborate system of remote camera triggers is used to capture small and fast-moving animals. The camera is then adjusted until the shutter speed is spot on.

As for future projects, Flach hopes to turn his attention to the very building blocks of life. "My next project may be to do with the human Genome projects, dealing with the bigger questions of life. I see it more as a research project that has a visual dimension." So does this mean he won't return to his beloved horses and bats? "As for photographing animals, I'm not saying I won't go back to this. The more doors you open, the more possibilities you become aware of – it's not a finite thing, and I certainly haven't explored everything there is to explore." 📷

SEE MORE of Tim Flach's photography at www.timflach.com. Share your views on the images with other readers by heading to our forums at www.digitalcameramagazine.co.uk

**Be inspired
Flach's tips**

- If you want to make it as an advertising photographer, try to find a way of reflecting your passion for a subject that's also relevant to a client.
- There's no quick formula to success in advertising and certainly no correlation between success and photographic quality! You need to embrace changing trends, so you stay relevant.
- For photographing animals, ask yourself what you want to achieve. What's your vision? Then you'll find your craft.