# IN DEPTH: TIM FLACH

***Tim Flach talks to* Image *about the progression of his work from the first roll of film at London Zoo to the success of* Equus *and his different approaches…or are they?… to personal projects and commercial work.***



Windows – Chestnut

As things stand you will know about bats standing around talking to each other. About mountains made out of horses. About puzzled monkeys.

You will know that Tim Flach has been phenomenally successful as a photographer of animals for advertising and through Getty. Gold Awards and global campaigns jostle for attention on his cv. A new book *Equus*, no doubt his first of many, was published in October and already has glittering reviews.

Not surprisingly the mind behind the images is rigorous and enquiring.

His Hoxton studio is large but discreet. This is where the bats flew around downstairs where the temperature can be lowered to their liking. Today we are here to talk about *Equus*. Piles of packaged books lie neatly stacked by the walls. The floor is clear and flash heads are hidden behind closed cupboard doors. A framed horse image is framed perfectly within an alcove. A giant plan chest holds giant prints for forthcoming exhibitions.

Although born in London, Tim grew up in Sussex and Cornwall. In the country, intrigued by nature, around horses but not riding them.

An Arts Foundation course brought him back to London. "During Foundation we were introduced to different mediums and photography was one of them. The first project happened to be at London Zoo, looking at composition. It seems rather strange that twenty-five years later I'm still connected with animals." Literally the first roll of film he took was that roll of black and white at the zoo.

Commercially animals didn't happen for ten years.

Postgraduate Painting at St Martins was followed by evening jobs in hotels to pay the rent. During the day he was approaching marketing departments hoping to get his first few jobs.

"I needed to give up working in hotels which I'd done through college, I needed to make money through taking pictures. I would literally go to hotels and say 'where is your marketing department?' They'd have staff pictures they needed taking. Then I'd go to another marketing department and convince them to let me do an annual report. I just went on like this and built up."

Within about three years he was working almost every day, photographing people, computers, architecture, pretty well anything. "I think my background gave me a slightly stylized approach at a time when annual reports were beginning to become more of a statement. "I did about ten years of general corporate, financial work. I moved from marketing and PR into what you

Egyptian Bats

Bakarat Rising

might describe as financial advertising with a bit of architectural marketing work which progressed into more stylized architectural work.

Then I started working with design groups and the advertising moved into more mainstream, national campaigns. About ten years ago I started moving into the projects which expanded into global campaigns. It was just a very slow evolution."

The animal work started in the early nineties with pythons for Guinness. "It wasn't instantaneous, I was still doing portraiture, still life studio work, whilst proactively moving my into more and more animal work. From that the commissions would follow. But also in the early nineties I started submitting work to Getty Images. I really saw it as an opportunity to fund things I wanted to do and then put them through a stock library at a time when it was really quite new. That gave me an economic base which I could grow from. It worked out really well because it gave me the freedom to think 'what would I like to do?' 'How would I like to move my work?"'

The early days of stock were not seen as high end. But that totally contradicted Tim's experience: "Perhaps because I was doing what I wanted to do, it lead to fairly sizeable global campaigns through New York and LA. Getty used my work to promote their own brand during that period. Art directors were using my work for visuals then would not want to let go of it. That went totally against what anyone believed at the time."

He was never a stock photographer full time. "I spent most of my time on commissions."

Tim's advertising work came



Elvia's Eyelashes

through his agent Peter Bailey then reps in New York. Submitting work to awards in this country had been successful but entering them in America brought surprising consequences in terms of broadening a profile there. "I hadn't realized how important it was or how important that would then become."

***How did you develop the advertising work?***

"As commercial photographers, in a way we are much more overt about being an image tart but clearly the production of art also has its commercial aspects...it's just a little bit more covert.

When doing my commercial work I've been conscious that I can be proactive. In a curious way, when you work with someone you're trying to solve a problem. But the problem you're given to solve is often a consequence of what you have in your own body of work. And that is determined by you."

***What about the personal projects before the* Equus *book?***

"I knew that whatever I produced would have the possibility of being commoditised by a third party, stock libraries or whatever. I'd often do a shoot like the bats. I was photographing them flying in the studio and I noticed that they were far more intriguing on the perch chatting to each other.

I persuaded the trainer to come in on another day because I was genuinely intrigued by what was going on, not because I was thinking 'gosh I can make some money out of this'. With all my projects sometimes I pursue something just because I find it intriguing. Whether it's the flesh on a pig or it's monkeys I've just seen and thought 'I must get them in the studio'. So I've always done personal projects, even when I had no funds at all, I would help somebody out with a theatre poster or something. They have always been alongside my commissions and I've always seen them as a way of directing what I did."

***Is there a different mindset between commercial and personal projects?***

Icelandic Lagoon

Mask - Bodysuit

Day 85

"I do the best I can. With personal projects you can afford to make mistakes. You can afford to just observe and be more fluid. If something unexpected happens you can take advantage of it. In a way it's important not to presume anything when you go into a project. So the difference between personal projects is that you don't feel you have got to deliver a certain type of product. You can be more playful."

***Does that feed into the commercial work?***

"Absolutely. By equipping yourself with new experiences through your work you have new tools and new possibilities to offer to clients in the future."

***But also a looser approach?***

"It's looser but in a way you should always observe even when it's commissioned work. We always evolve, you evolve as a different type of person, you observe and maybe by doing more personal work you become a different type of commercial photographer."

***How did the book come about?***

"The first pictures I took of horses were about six or seven years ago a series which was in the AOP Awards. About three years ago I was in discussion with a publisher who wanted to do something with me. We discussed possibilities and thinking about it very commercially dogs were suggested. He'd done something with Elliot Erwitt before, I really felt that Erwitt had done his documentary style…I didn't really want to go down the Wegman route and I felt that maybe that's a big challenge and I'd tackle that later on. The horses were images that already existed and I felt a real possibility of taking it as a subject and working with an extended project. Horses are maybe sentimental in a way but not as bad as cats and dogs! Above all I felt I could look at it as an enquiry into a unique relationship with another

species. To reflect on the bigger questions by exploring one subject."

***Were you interested in horses before you started or did you become interested in them?***

"A bit of both. I'd grown up with horses around me although I didn't really ride. I'd grown up with people who were passionate about them so I knew how it resonated with many people. But I approached the project by accepting the fact that I didn't know a lot about horses. I was about to make a contribution to a genre of work where most people spend their lives only doing that subject. To guide me I explored peoples' experiences of how and what resonated with them. I used their experiences to explore their relationship to the subject. If not careful in my approach I could easily have ended up with a directory of horses. This book was intended as a horse book…not pretty photographs of horses…but about exploring a subject so that somebody who spent their life with horses would find it intriguing. They would find things that perhaps give them expanded understanding of the subject. For example, you might never see an embryo in great detail, you might not see a horse in the water, you might not see a certain species in their landscape. It was really using photography as narration."

***But you could have done that without being so photographic?***

"Coming to it with my background as an commercial artist I bring to it certain craft skills which inform me in the way I've done all the images. I didn't want to escape that or try to play that down in my work because it was a way of forming a kind of glue to allow me to be very diverse in treatments and mediums."

***In your introduction in* Equus *you talk about not wanting to do certain pictures like the zebras crossing a river during their great migration.***

"That's why I focused attention on the bank. I had certain clichés in the book like the rearing horse that looks like a Ferrari logo, or Monument Valley, which is where the John Wayne films were made. In a way those clichés fulfilled peoples preconceptions of a shot of a horse. But I wanted to explore the idea that the clichés are also part of the iconography of the subject matter. I also have what I would describe as quite quiet images of Przewalski horses in Mongolia. Clearly they are not dramatic images but they are there because they explain something significant within the narration of the horse. In a book you have the luxury of actually constructing a whole discussion. Out of that comes a bigger picture.

"I think that imagery should still translate beyond its subject. The very ambiguity of a picture is sometimes one of the unique qualities of photography that allows it to have several different meanings. Sometimes when you can extend beyond the subject so that a neck becomes a mountain or some backs of the horses become human or an embryo becomes like a planet. It starts to give this layering which I think adds richness."

***That ambiguity seems to run through the book.***

"If you reduce the evidence, in a way you expand the possibilities for the viewer.

It's something I'll be developing in the future, this layering. The horse book is now done and I want to go on and do something that's much broader. I've started the research. It will be a book and will take about three years. It's all in place I've been working the ideas out. Hopefully I'll be able to integrate some of the images like the bats because they are part of that enquiry and now I can give them some context as part of the broader discussion."

***This next series may be viewed in a public space. Are you moving to being an artist?***

"Let's put aside the word artist. I have a passion for making images and I'm looking forward to having a more autonomous role in working with concepts and ideas. Clearly I will do commissions and hopefully be in a position where I can be quite selective. But I think we all want to grow in the way we do projects, to learn new skills, explore ways in using photography in different types of spaces and contexts. To be able to do something in a public space that's there to communicate ideas that people may not have seen in certain visual forms will be a great privilege."

GS

*www.timflach.com*

**Equus** *is published by Abrams £30*

Monkey Eyes

Chinese Pig