FEATURE

All images
© Gilles Nicolet

A VISION OF AFRICA

Documentary photographer **Gilles Nicolet's** new book is steeped in memory and nostalgia. He talks to Graeme Green about his personal take on Africa, collaborating with his partner and exchanging messages with Patti Smith.



French photographer Gilles Nicolet's travel adventures began at an early age. Born in Neuilly-sur-Seine, outside Paris, in 1960, his family moved to Argentina, where he grew up, when he was four. Having later studied tropical agronomy at university, he was assigned to work in Somalia in 1983. It was the start of a 35-year relationship with Africa – he also worked in Mali, Benin and Ghana. But company life wasn't for him and in 1992 he made the shift into documentary photography, landing his first *National Geographic* assignment just a few years later. His images have also been published in the *Sunday Times Magazine*, *Smithsonian*, *GEO* and *Paris-Match*.

As he writes in his new book, *Burnt Eyes*, changes in Africa (specifically Tanzania, where he was living at the time) pushed him to return to France in 2018: 'The world had changed, the rules were different, and we sensed that the time had come for us to leave and move on. It was difficult to go – heart-wrenching even.'

The book is a nostalgic, and sometimes melancholy, personal take on Africa, featuring images taken on return journeys between 2020 and 2025, including to Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, São Tomé and Príncipe, South Africa, Tanzania and Zanzibar.

The photos, featuring people and wildlife but most often singling out a quiet moment, are accompanied by poetry from Nicolet's wife, Tanur Shah.

The couple now live in Provence, France, where they run a bed and breakfast for seven months of the year, allowing travel, family visits and photographic expeditions in India and Africa in their downtime.

You lived in Africa for 35 years. What first took you there?
I trained as an agronomist. When I was a young man, fresh out of school, just 23, I was sent to work in Somalia. I spent three years there. I wasn't very keen on going to Africa, but I actually really loved it and stayed on until I was 58, when I decided to come back to France.

What made you leave?
I was getting a little tired. Things were changing. The Africa of 2018 wasn't the Africa of the early 1980s. It was getting tougher for people like me, expats, to stay there. It was difficult to get work permits and work.

Do you feel a strong connection with Africa?
Even though things have changed, I have a very strong connection. Going back to when I was a young man, I was very interested in ethnography, anthropology and tribes, and I did a lot of that stuff in Africa and Asia. Africa was fascinating from that point of view.

I also enjoy wildlife and the wilderness. There is less of that in Africa too now. I used to live in places where I had wildlife in my garden. Nowadays if you want to see wildlife, you've got to go and see national parks; it's much more expensive and it's a lot more contained. But I love wilderness and adventure.

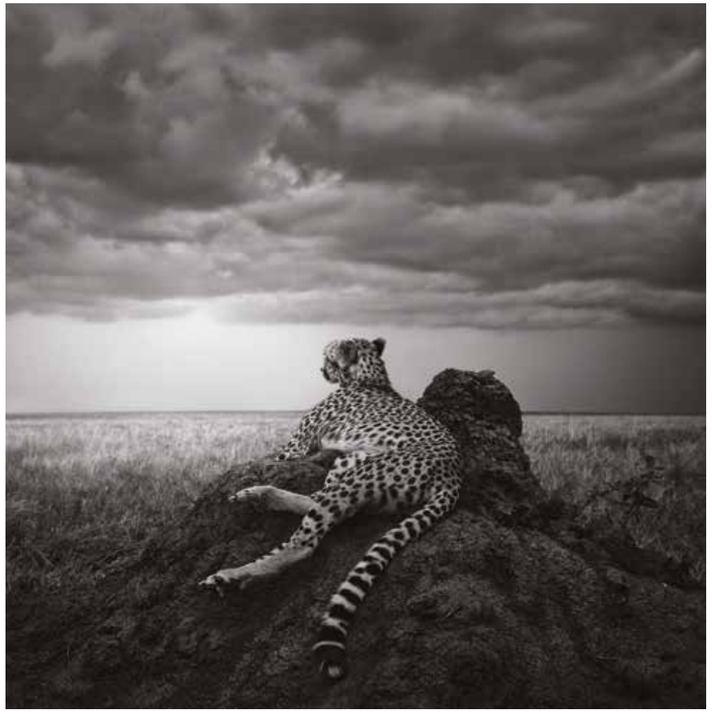
I used to be a professional photographer. I'm no longer a professional, in that I don't make a living doing it any more, but I used to. It's what I did for many years.

What kind of photography did you mainly work on?
I was a documentary photographer. I wouldn't call myself a photojournalist. I did long-term projects. I often got stuck on stories that had never been tackled before, which made it difficult, working in remote areas. I don't think I ever finished a project in less than two years.

My first big break in photography was a story that ran in *National Geographic* in 1997. I stumbled on these guys called the Gbaya, who live across Cameroon and the Central African Republic. They're a very interesting tribe. They live in an area where there are forests and savannahs. They have a knowledge of both types of ecosystem. They hunt a lot.

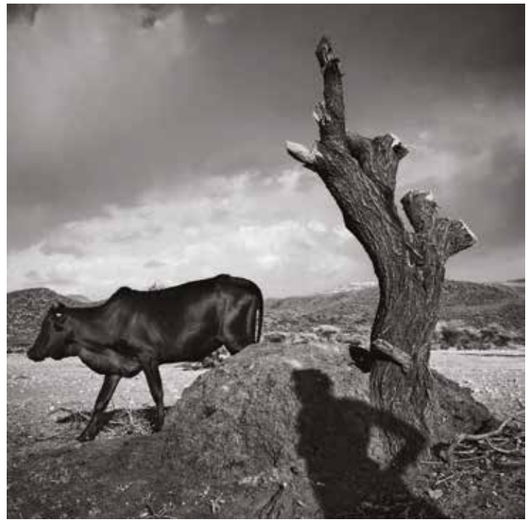
These guys are the only ones in Africa who can slide down into an aardvark burrow. ›











They can spend up to an hour in there. These burrows are used by a lot of different wildlife, including snakes. Female pythons in the savannah like to go down and lay their eggs there. Pythons sit on their eggs for 70 days. It gives them security from predators.

The Gbaya light their way and go in to get pythons. When they're hunting, if they come across a python track that's gone into a burrow, they will know there's a python there and they will try to get it, mostly for the skin but also to eat the meat. If the eggs are still edible, not too advanced, they'll also eat the eggs.

What makes it unique is their ability to grab massive pythons. I've seen them grab 6m-long pythons that weigh 80kg, but they have a way of getting them out.

I liked working on stories with a visually strong tradition.

Burnt Eyes is a book about memory and nostalgia. Did you miss Africa a lot after you left?

The project grew organically. I was trying to travel to different places in Africa. I don't exclusively move around these places for my work – I sometimes go to these places just because I enjoy travelling. This is one of the reasons for this book: to come back to Africa.

There's a very strong element of nostalgia. It's a very personal book. I've completely moved away from documentary photography. This is my vision of Africa. It has an element of nostalgia for things that are slowly disappearing.

I also tried to convey a sense of silence in the photographs. I try to photograph silence. Silence is something that really matters to me. Silence is something that's disappearing in Africa. It's becoming noisier and noisier, especially in the towns and cities. The book is my way of trying to induce a sense of silence in people who see the photographs. Silence teaches us. If we can go within and be silent, we can learn a lot.

I'm moving into a kind of photography that's more subtle. I don't want it to be immediately obvious what I'm trying to photograph. I want the photograph to slowly reveal itself.

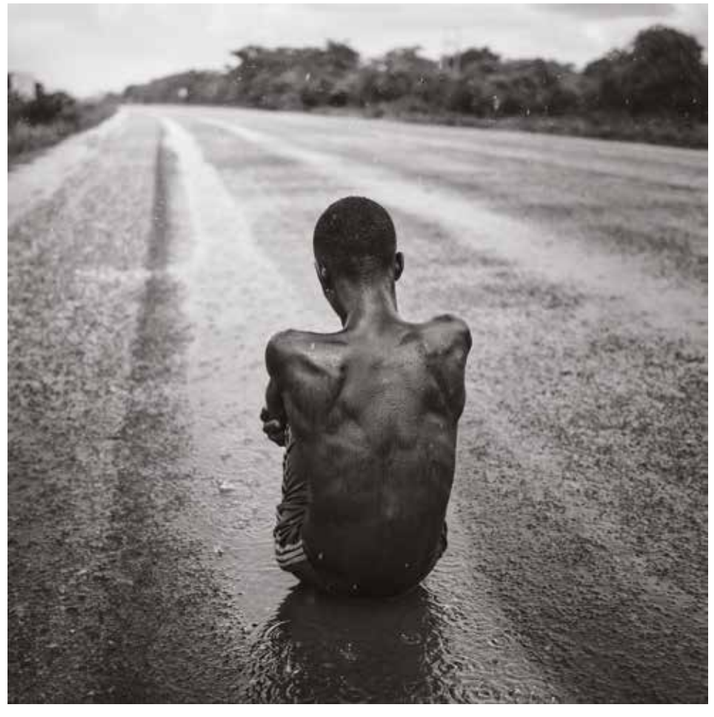
It's also a way to show there can be beauty in things that are very mundane.

The book also contains poetry from Tanur Shah. How did that idea come about?

Yes, the book is something we did together. Tanur is my partner. We met in Tanzania in 2011. She came from India and she was volunteering in Tanzania on an elephant-human conflict project just outside Ruaha National Park. At the time, I was working in the park. That's how we met.

She started writing, I started reading her stuff, and I felt it was very good and that she had things to say. Photography is often something that takes us away from our partners. It demands a lot of involvement. Usually when I'm taking pictures, I don't want my partner ›











to be around because it takes away from my focus. But I wanted her to be on board, and we wanted to be in Africa together. I said, 'Why don't we try a project?' I wasn't sure where it was going. I wasn't sure if photography and poetry could work together. We decided to try it.

She writes whatever comes to her. We would be in a place together, and I'd go off and do my thing, photography, and she would write when she was inspired. I felt towards the end that there was a kind of chemistry. I thought we could combine my photography and her poetry. It was a desire to do something with her and involve her and try to do something about Africa, which we both love. She's like me – she's very much in love with Africa.

In the book, you describe your visits to Africa: 'There we wander, sometimes aimlessly, sometimes not, taking the measure of change and of our own alienation from this land, and, always, searching for that particular beauty and silence that have touched us in ways we still can't understand – and perhaps never will.' Is the book quite melancholy?

Yes, there is a melancholy. None of the pictures are staged, but every picture is a choice. I make that choice and that choice reflects where I am as a photographer. I even made very conscious choices in order to get to that sense of melancholy and nostalgia.

African towns are full of people and quite noisy and can be quite joyous, and I made a conscious choice of not wanting people in my photographs, or, if I put people in, then only a few. I made a conscious decision to usually have just one person in the photograph and to not have the subject facing me.

These are artistic choices that I made to get to a certain feeling. We are not talking about documentary photography here. Even though I come from that field, I've left it behind.

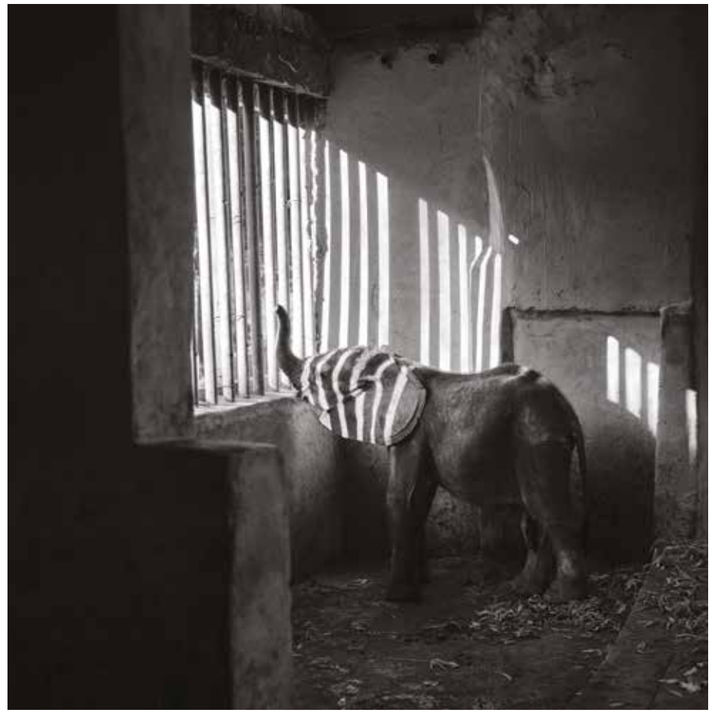
The poet and singer Patti Smith has said that you have an exquisite eye. Do you know her well?

I have never met Patti Smith in person. We've only exchanged on Instagram – we follow each other. Our exchanges, few and far apart, have been mostly about Arthur Rimbaud. We both have a passion for his poetry and a deep interest in the man. Rimbaud also lived in Africa and Arabia, after he stopped writing poetry. His life is fascinating.

It started like that, talking about Rimbaud 10 years ago, and we've followed each other since then. Sometimes she comments. I used to listen to her music when I was a young man.

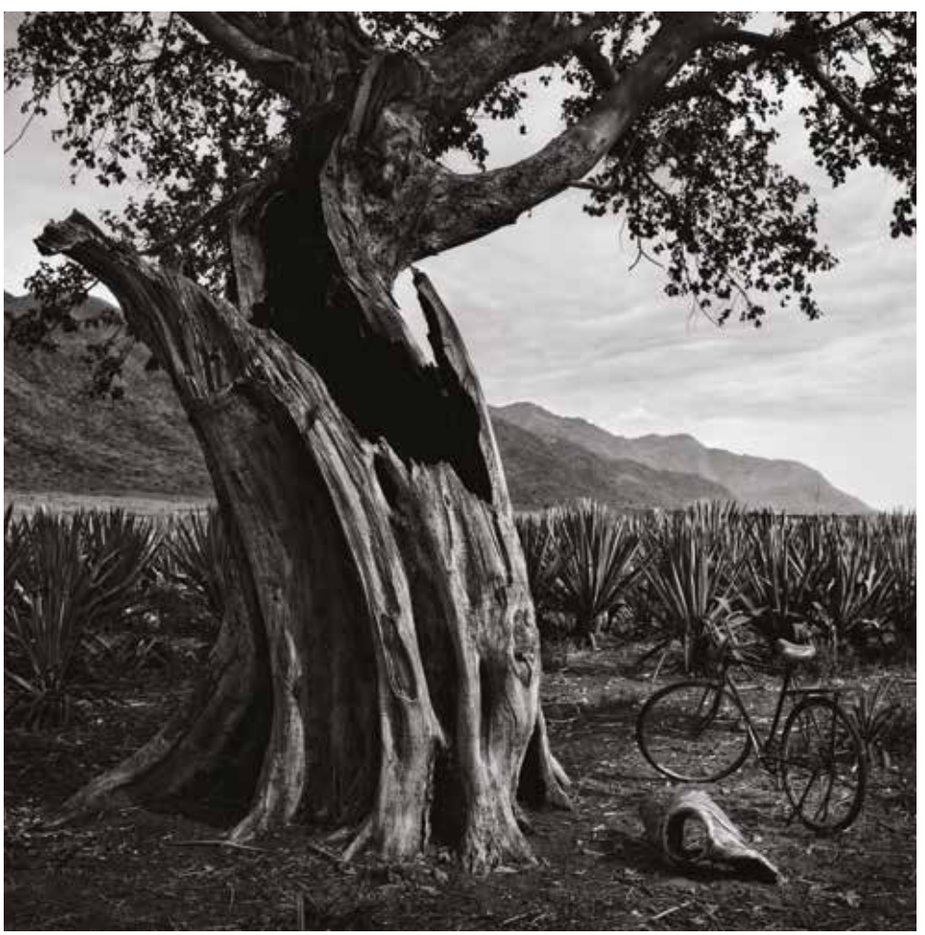
You started out working in agriculture. How did you make the move into photography?

I was an agronomist for about nine years, ›









working in Somalia, Mali, Benin and Ghana. But I was unhappy. I worked for a private company. I lived in Africa, but I didn't like working for a company. I didn't like having a boss. I'd had an interest in photography since I was 14. It came from my brother, who was extremely passionate about photography. I started taking pictures, but always as an amateur.

At one point, I was very unhappy with the job I was doing. I had moved away from who I am as a person. I wanted to try to make a living from the things that I love, which is the wild and tribal life. I was married at the time and my wife said, 'Well, I'm going to get a job, and you can try your luck at photography'.

That's how it started.

Do you think there are advantages to being self-taught?

I'm not sure. It was very tough, starting from nothing. I was lucky – I got my break with *Nat Geo* after two years. But I would have liked to have gone to a photography school. There are a lot of things I could have learned faster, but it's hard to tell. A lot of good photographers are self-taught. A lot of people who went to the best schools never really do anything with it.

Will you return to Africa to do more work?

I stopped shooting *Burnt Eyes* last year and I've already been back. I have a seasonal business in the south of France, a big bed and breakfast place in Provence. I do that for seven months of the year, then I shut down because there's not much business in the winter, and that allows me to travel. I go to India because my wife is from there, but I also spend a lot of time in Africa.

I was back in Africa last winter. I'm already working on another book. I've realised that Africa is my thing. It's not just what I love but it's my strength – it's where I'm good. This is where I have lived for so long. I have an understanding of the people. I speak the local languages very often. I'm in my element and it speaks to me. Those things make it very good for me.



***Burnt Eyes* by Gilles Nicolet, with poetry from Tanur Shah, is published in hardback by Skeleton Key Press, price £44.**

gillesnicolet.com

skeletonkeypress.com