

Wolfe's world



At 63, **Art Wolfe** retains his boundless

energy and his passion for exploring and photographing the natural world. The key is to keep a positive outlook, he tells **David Clark**

Through his photography, Art Wolfe is on a mission to change the way we think about the world. At a time when negative stories fill the news and we're constantly being reminded of the damage being done by climate change, deforestation and plundering the Earth's resources, Wolfe's work strikes a positive and optimistic note.

'People live in a technologically driven world. Everything's cut and dried on the news, and they lose track that there are amazing things going on around the planet,' he says. 'I want to remind people that there are snow leopards stalking ibex in the Himalayas and whales are migrating. There are people cutting salt out of the middle of the Sahara

and carrying it south to Timbuktu, as they have for 500 years.

'People get demoralised because of the negative news. I tell people, once in a while, "Turn off the goddamn news, and go out and walk in a forest and reconnect with nature."

Wolfe has spent most of his life travelling the globe and has long been established as one of the superstars of nature photography. His career statistics speak for themselves: he has been a professional photographer for almost 40 years, has published more than 80 books, and taken over two million photographs. He spends around nine months of the year working in locations around the world, and his TV nature documentary 





Above: Karo warriors, Omo River Valley, Ethiopia

of people living in traditional ways. Wolfe is keen to point out that it's not a career retrospective, as he isn't quite ready to hang up his camera, but it is a look back over some of the highlights so far. 'When I've worked on books in the past, I've deliberately adopted a different style for a particular subject,' he says. 'For example, *Migrations* was about patterns in nature and *Vanishing Act* was about camouflage in the wild, and was shot using long, impressionistic exposures. This book

series, *Travels to the Edge*, has been screened in more than 70 countries worldwide.

The source of Wolfe's prolific photographic output is his relentless desire to experience and create. 'I'm insatiable in what I want to see and do,' he says. 'I'm all the things that add up to a Type A compulsive person. I'm very organised and driven and I'm always making lists of what I want to do the next day or the next week.'

'In terms of my work, I learned at art school back in the 1970s that if you become too pleased with your work and sedentary, it's the kiss of death. Therefore, I've always evolved my work, never sitting happily with what I've achieved but always moving it forward, pushing things a little further. Finding a new way of showing an old subject, or finding a new subject, is kind of the juice that runs through my body.'

Now, at the age of 63, the Seattle-based Wolfe has produced what he calls his 'magnum opus', the 400-page book *Earth is My Witness*. He describes it as 'an encyclopaedic project of my best work over the past four decades'. Shot from the ground, the air and underwater in diverse environments around the world, it includes majestic landscapes, stunning wildlife shots, and fascinating portraits of remote tribes

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Above right: African elephants, Okavango Delta, Botswana

is a nice way of bringing all those different genres into one collection.' Some of the pictures in the book are established Art Wolfe favourites, but there's also a substantial selection of new work. The reason for this mixture, he says, is that when he began collecting images for the book – some taken 20 or more years ago – he noticed a distinct difference in image quality between his film and digital work. 'Almost without exception, when I was comparing those film images

Above right: Young Jat women, Kutch, Gujarat, India

Below right: Asaro mudmen, Eastern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea



with anything I've shot in the last six years, they fell down because digital capture is so much crisper,' he says.

Reshooting some subjects, such as tribes that have changed or to which access has been closed, was not possible. However, many of the landscapes and wildlife shots in the book were taken during the past two years. Wolfe hasn't returned to locations to simply copy what he did previously, but to shoot new work on the same subjects.

Digital capture, Wolfe says, has

profoundly affected the way he works in the field. 'Historically, if there was an amazing shot, I'd often put two rolls of film through the camera, with slight changes in how I captured it. Now, once I've verified I've got the shot, I move on to a different subject and the result is a more productive day. I'm shooting three times the number of subjects because I can move on quicker.'

'Digital has also enabled me to capture subjects in ways I couldn't have done even three or four years

ago, such as cultures illuminated entirely by firelight without the use of flash. The sensitivity of the ISO now is permitting exposures that were only a fantasy a couple of years ago. It's really opened up a load of new possibilities.'

However, beyond saying that he shoots with a Canon EOS-1D X, Wolfe prefers to steer clear of discussions about equipment. 'When I lecture, I hardly mention cameras because I'm all about the image and the aesthetic,' he says. 'I find



Aerial of camel train, Sahara desert, Morocco



➤ it inordinately boring when people start talking about the differences between Sony and Nikon and Canon. That's not where my interest lies.'

He's much more enthused about discussing the style and content of the images he shoots, and maintains that he now sees and photographs things that he would not have seen ten or even five years ago.

'Whether I'm in the mountains or in the city, I now look at the subject in much more graphic terms,' he says. 'I detach myself from the fact that I might be looking at wildlife, culture or landscape, and I start to see it in terms of graphic elements – positive and negative space, balance, the subtleties that people often don't see because they're so engaged with the subject.'

'I don't spend any more time photographing than I did before; I just go straight to the point. I look at form first and subject second. I'm also less concerned about the technical perfection of a digital capture and more concerned with the gut reaction that people have to an image.'

Wolfe continues to live life at a great pace and the next year or so includes a busy programme of seminars and photographic tours to destinations including the Antarctic, Myanmar, India and Namibia. Even for someone as well travelled as he is, there are still places on his to-visit list, including Spain, Israel and the Egyptian pyramids.

'I recognise now that there is a finite end to a life, which I didn't really perceive in my 30s,' he reflects. 'Now I'm in my 60s, I do recognise that the clock is ticking and there are a lot of places I want to see and a lot of things I still want to accomplish. Retirement is not a word I've ever associated with myself.'



Earth is My Witness by Art Wolfe is published on 14 October by Insight Editions, priced £65. For more details, visit www.artwolfe.com or vimeo.com/83539841

Left: Emperor penguins, Antarctica



Snow-covered branches in front of a brightly coloured wall create a peaceful scene at the Koyasan Shingon Temples in Japan

ART WOLFE ON 'SPIRITUAL JOURNEY'

'MANY OF my images are completely candid and in the spirit of the moment, including most of the wildlife shots. Then there are other shots where I can see the potential for an image and I construct it, such as this one, which I call "Spiritual Journey".'

'In 2001, I spent five days in Uttar Pradesh, in northern India, and every day at a certain moment I saw the sun rise as a red orb above the Ganges. One evening, I saw somebody rowing along in a boat and I asked if they could come back to this exact spot an hour before sunrise. He (or she, I can't remember) was a pilgrim going to Kumbh Mela, the great gathering of Hindus, which happens every 12 years.'

'The next morning, they showed up and we virtually pulled the boat up into the

mud. Through an interpreter, I asked the person to remain perfectly still, as I had to take a 1sec exposure. I was using a neutral density filter aligned with the distant shore, and I used a polariser, which darkened the water at the foot of the picture. By darkening the water and taking the shine off it, it makes a nice contrast with the boat, but it also obscures the fact that the boat is in mud.'

'So the image is constructed in the sense that it wasn't just a candid snap, which would have been impossible to shoot. In a 5sec period, I got three shots – and this was with film – before the sun rose above that very thin layer of cloud and became too bright to include in the image.'

