

My best shot
Art and design

Interview by **Edward Siddons**

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Pieter Hugo's best photograph: the hyena men of Nigeria

'They would beat drums to draw a crowd. Then they'd take the muzzles off the hyenas and put their heads between their jaws'



▲ 'There was something very strange going on, bordering on sadomasochism' ... the street performer and his hyena. Photograph: Pieter Hugo

I first learned about Nigeria's "hyena men" in 2005, thanks to a picture that had gone viral. The caption said they were debt collectors in Lagos. I knew I had to find them. The country has a population of 186 million people, though, so the odds were pretty low. But then in 2017 a journalist friend told me they come from his home town, Kano, in the north. Two weeks later, I was on my way.

The hyena men are itinerants: they never spend more than two days anywhere. I found them in a shanty town near Abuja, the capital. Despite the language barrier we got to know each other pretty quickly. Outside of Lagos and Port Harcourt, I didn't see a single white person in Nigeria. So I probably seemed as odd to them as a guy walking a hyena in the street seemed to me.

We smoked some weed to break the ice. It turned out they weren't debt collectors - they were more like town criers, traditional storytellers who performed in the streets and sold potions after their shows. It reminded me of stories I'd read about eastern European circus troupes in the 1930s - except instead of bears, these guys had hyenas, baboons and pythons.

Seeing them perform was unforgettable. It was a huge spectacle. They would beat drums to draw in the crowds, then take the muzzles off the hyenas. Next they'd put their arms and even their heads between the animals' jaws. The aim was to convince the audience they had special powers, and that the audience could acquire them too, if they bought their potions.

// The guys always had scratch marks everywhere from the baboons - they were always getting into fights with them

At first I tried photographing the street shows, but there was just too much going on. Then I realised that the relationship between man and beast was more interesting than all the fireworks of the performance. There was something very strange going on between the guys and the hyenas, bordering on sadomasochism. These animals had been taken out of the wild as pups. They couldn't return. They were entirely dependent on these guys for food. And these men were dependent on the animals for their livelihoods. They needed each other, but it wasn't an easy symbiosis.

I didn't have too much trouble with the hyenas. If you feed and water them, they're cool, they're happy. But the baboons were a lot more problematic. Baboons are just so close to humans. They have much more emotionally complex needs, I think. The guys had scratch marks everywhere from the baboons - they were always getting into fights. I don't think the baboons were happy.

I love how confrontational this shot is. At no point did I tell him how to pose. It's all him. He flexed his bicep, stared straight at me, while his hyena jumped all over him. Then in the background, there's this kind of Mad Max landscape strewn with broken-down trucks, though you can hardly see them because of the light. It was harmattan season, a time between November and March when the sands of the Sahara blow over western Africa creating this murky, diffused lighting, which I love. It's a simple shot with an incredible economy. I wish I could take more like it.

● *Pieter Hugo's Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea is at the Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon, until 8 October.*

Pieter Hugo's CV

Born: Johannesburg, South Africa, 1976

Studied: Self-taught.

Influences: "JM Coetzee, Claire Denis, Charlie Brown."

High point: "My mid-career survey show at the Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg, in 2017."

Low point: "Having all my equipment and film stolen after a two-month shooting trip in Nepal."

Top tip: "Be vigilant. Be pure. Beware."



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▲ Photograph: Alamy