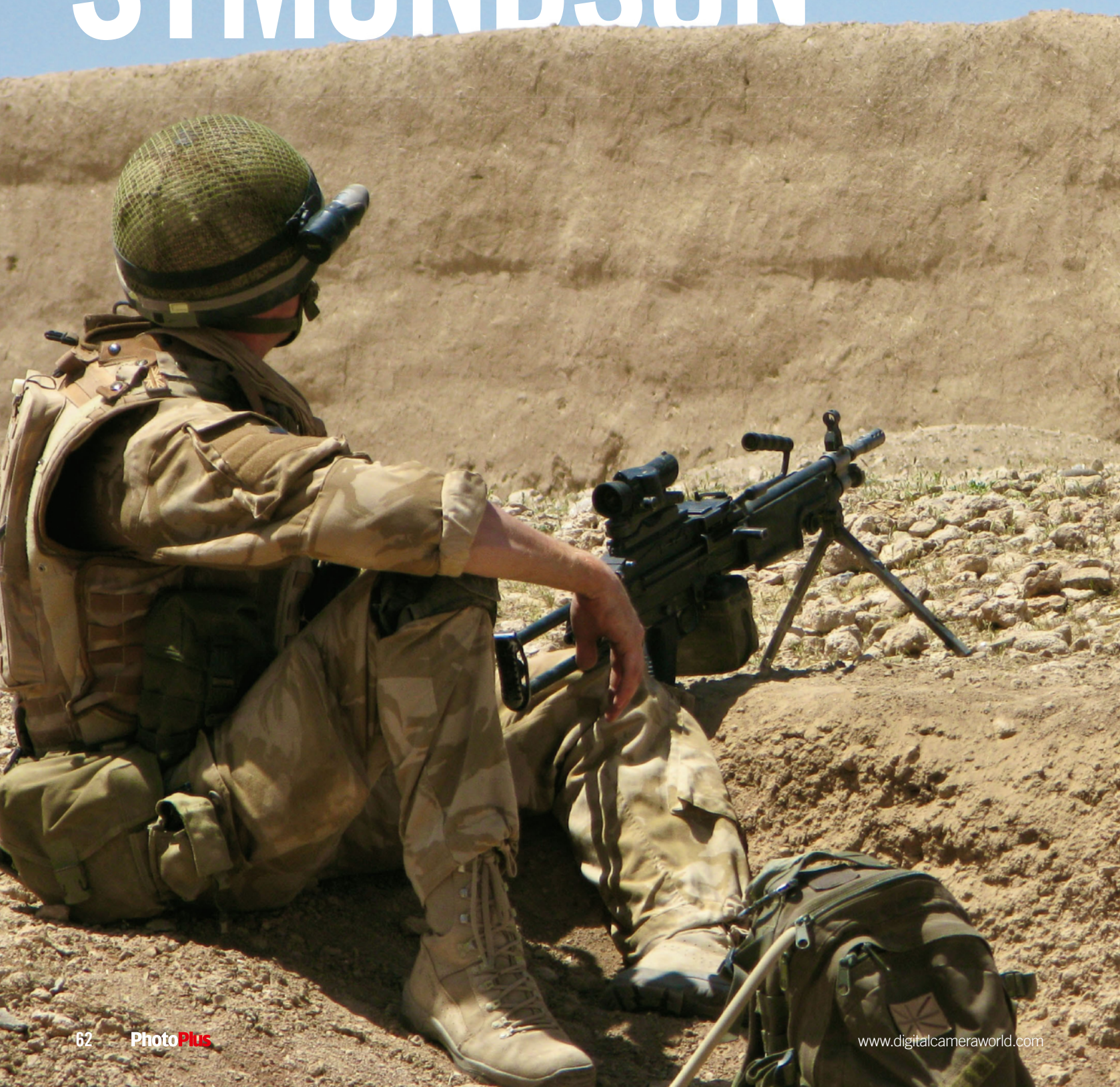


BRAN SYMONDSON



He's a photographer who became a soldier, but the camera came too. Today, Bran Symondson mixes sculpture and photography into creating work for the new digital art form known as NFT – using AK-47s. Keith Wilson fires some questions...

AT THE end of each year, the lexicographers who update our dictionaries, announce their 'word of the year.' Usually, it's a new phrase or piece of slang that has entered popular usage due to a major trend or change in societies.

In November 2021, the Collins Dictionary announced their word of the year was the abbreviation, 'NFT', which stands for 'non-fungible token.' According to Collins, use of the NFT abbreviation rose by more than 11,000 per cent in 2021. But what exactly is an NFT, and what is its connection with photography?

Collins defines NFT as "a unique digital certificate, registered in a blockchain, that is used to record ownership of an asset such as an artwork or a collectible." In other words, digital artworks – including original images, viral videos, memes and even tweets – that can be viewed only by the owner, who pays (often in a cryptocurrency, like Bitcoin) the seller for the privilege.

01 BRIEF ENCOUNTER

A moment of rest as a British soldier sits down while on patrol in the soaring heat of Musa Qala

Camera	Canon PowerShot G9
Exposure	1/800 sec, f/4.8, ISO80

02 CONTACT AND SMOKE

During contact with the Taliban, a smoke bomb was popped to mark Bran's position for air cover

Camera Canon PowerShot G9

Exposure 1/800 sec, f/8, ISO100

03 DANGEROUS GROUND

A soldier sweeps the waterlogged ground for IEDs in front of a vehicle patrol

Exposure 1/500 sec, f/2.8, ISO100

04 TEA BREAK

One of the tea boys in the Afghan National Police has a quick break while taking patrol in the poppy fields. This image was taken by Bran before he went on a foot patrol to the poppy fields

Camera Canon PowerShot G9

For example, a year ago the musician Grimes sold at auction nearly \$6 million worth of her own NFT digital art creations. With that much interest – and money – in this new art form, it's not surprising that some photographers are getting in on the NFT act, one of whom is the fine art photographer and sculptor Bran Symondson. Thankfully, the object of Bran's NFT desires are more coherent and recognizable than the video fantasies of Grimes; as Bran transforms one of the world's most ubiquitous weapons of war, the Kalashnikov AK-47, into collectible NFT art. The provenance of his unique work is simpler too – it begins with his life as a photographer turned soldier...

You've been a soldier, a photographer, an artist, a philanthropist. So where does your story begin? Is it with photography?

Yes. Years back I started assisting photographers purely to get into the industry. It was a passion of mine since I was a kid. I was always running around with a camera and fascinated with war photography. Don McCullin used to live just down the road from us. But then I started assisting some big fashion, advertising and portrait photographers, that's how I learned about the industry and the workings of photography and cameras.

How long were you assisting for?

For about eight years, so quite a while. I did a lot of travelling. It went very quickly, I went all around the world doing that. It was a very interesting period of my life.



Perhaps more interesting was your move from photography to the British Army and serving in Afghanistan. What compelled you to make that choice?

It was kind of a mental lifestyle change. I had been working in the fashion industry as a photographer for a while and it was all getting a bit vacuous and I wasn't enjoying it. The military side of me had always been an itch that I hadn't scratched before, and I wanted to test myself, to see if I had it in me, so I just went for it one day. Everything abruptly changed from that point. I was still working as a photographer while going through my training, then I'd go away with work, then I'd be away on military exercises. It wasn't until I got called up to

go to Afghanistan that I had to pack up my photography and go on tour.

How long was it for?

I was there for just over half a year and then came back, but I went back later as a photographer. Helmand Province, that's when I started taking pictures. The guys knew I was a photographer in my civvy life, so they were saying, "Why don't you bring your cameras with you?"

So, they didn't discourage you in any way?

Well, they did! Because we were special forces, photographs weren't allowed, but because they knew who I was they thought it would be good to have someone taking pictures, so I was kind of



04

the 'official photographer' of the tour, which was frustrating because I couldn't take pictures all the time. I had my big camera with me, but I also had a little Canon PowerShot G9. I had that in my webbing and I would pull it out when I could and take photographs.

So that was the most convenient to use most of the time?

Oh yeah, it was. It was pretty much the only camera that I used.

I'm sure you're not shooting with a G9 anymore, so what are you using for your work now?

This is my beast, an EOS-1D. It's probably a bit old now, but it's so rugged and tough, and that's what I use when I'm abroad, out in the field, and I've got an EF 70-200mm f/2.8L, and an EF 50mm f/1.4 USM which I love. It's a beautiful lens.

Is that your preferred lens, the one that's always on the camera?

Yeah, because the style I shoot, I tend to crop in the camera and I always like a three-quarter portrait, or full length, and obviously the 50mm is closest to what your eye sees normally, so that's why I like to use it, and because it's a very fast lens. My 50mm is f/1.4 and it's just a very good quality Canon lens. In the

moment, you can focus quickly on the eye. The 70-200mm is amazing, but you've got this great big thing hanging off the camera, but you can't beat that for quality. Taking a great portrait of someone with that is just amazing, but if I was out in the field all day and had to pick just one lens, it would be the 50mm f/1.4 prime all day long.

What sort of pictures were you taking in Afghanistan?

The whole atmosphere was a big culture shock, so I was taking pictures of everything and anything. The light was amazing, that was the first thing I picked up on, and the landscapes. But what was amazing was the locals and it was just a good way to communicate with them. The cultural difference was massive. I felt very privileged to have my camera there, but our lives were being threatened every day, so I had to balance the difference between being a photographer and being a soldier. There were quite a few times when the guys would laugh, because there would be bullets going down and I'd get my camera out and take some pictures, and they'd be going, "What the fuck are you doing?"

I'm not surprised!

Sometimes it was just the best way to

"If I was out in the field all day and had to pick just one lens, it would be the 50mm f/1.4 prime all day long"

engage the situation, and because I couldn't do anything anyway, taking some photographs seemed like a good idea at the time. It was when I started noticing the tea boy and the Afghan police and the characters within those groups; that's when I thought, "This is something quite special here." It allowed me access to something that normal people wouldn't be able to see. That's when I started taking their portraits.

Yes, you vowed that you would come back to photograph the people, so when were you able to do that?

I went back over in 2010, it was a couple of years later, after my tour. I showed *The Sunday Times* the photographs that I'd taken when I was a soldier and they found them to be really interesting. I said I'd like to go back and work on this more. The thought of going back to Afghanistan



05 MAKE ART, NOT WAR

Three of Bran's decommissioned AK-47 assault rifles transformed into artworks: *Blue AK-47* (main image), *Beat of a Wing* (bottom left), *Spoils of War Draco* (bottom right). Bran is releasing his first NFT collection, 2047 AK-47 artworks, in mid-Feb 2022. More info at www.kalash47.com

06 GUNS AND ROSES

An Afghan National Police Officer holding an AK-47 decorated with pink roses, in Musa Qala

Camera Canon PowerShot G9



seemed okay at the time, and they wanted to do a feature on my project, so I went back over there and I was embedded as a civilian photographer. A photo I took with the G9 ended up being on the front cover of *The Sunday Times Magazine*. That camera taught me that sometimes you sacrifice quality for ease. It's a good little camera.

Those photographs created a momentum for your work – how did things proceed from there?

When I was there the second time, I was out on patrol and photographing this kid who had pink stickers on his AK-47, and we came under fire from the Taliban.

We were in a ditch looking for cover and I had this moment when I was being shot at by an AK-47 and here was this kid sitting there with pink stickers on his AK-47. I just thought this is very surreal, so at that point I thought it would be great to take the AK-47 as a blank canvas and turn it into an art piece and have different narratives to it. When I came back, that's what got me into working with the AK-47. It was a long time in the process,

I was still working as a photographer for a long time after that.

How did you commission other artists to make their own interpretations of the AK-47?

It was a real case of learning as I go. I didn't know anything about the art world then either, I was very ignorant. I thought, "This is a cool idea, why don't we give it to lots of artists and we could



“A shot I took with the G9 ended up being on the front cover of *The Sunday Times Magazine*”

raise some money for charity?” I was very much involved in the project photographically as well, so I was taking the portraits of the artist and it just sort of snowballed. More and bigger artists wanted to get involved, and then the next thing I knew it was this massive exhibition. It was crazy.

I would have loved to have seen the reactions of these artists when you sent them an AK-47.

Sam Taylor-Johnson, Damien Hirst, Antony Gormley, the Chapman Brothers...

It was amazing. It was the higher echelon of the art world. My approach to some of them was that I would find out where they were, knock on their door, hand them an AK-47, and just say, “Look, do you want to be involved with this project?” To see all their different influences and what they did with the gun was amazing. It was a proud moment. It was shown at the ICA on The Mall in 2012 and it was incredible to see that entire room filled with all these artworks.

And it raised a lot of money on the night, too, didn't it?

Yeah, 450 grand was raised, which back then was unheard of, but you had all these amazing artists, so when the

STORY BEHIND THE SHOT

Remembering rhinos

Africa is a constant source of inspiration for Bran's photography. On a trip in 2018, a spontaneous meeting with Samburu warriors in Kenya resulted in an incredibly unique set of portraits...

“I go to Africa quite a lot and every corner you turn there's a photograph to be had, it's an amazing place. In early 2018, I took some portraits of Samburu warriors standing next to these decaying statues of rhinos and elephants, which had belonged to a plush hotel. There was metal and plaster hanging off them, and I thought that was a powerful image, because it was very much in keeping with what's going on in the real world in Africa with the eventual decay and destruction of wildlife. I'd been back to this place three times and each time I'd seen the decaying statues on the side of the road, and I thought “I've just got to make this happen...” So, I got talking to these guys on the beach, told them my idea – in Africa things just have a weird way of happening – and later that day they all met me there, all dressed up, and they were just hanging around, following my instructions. I bought them some lovely cold beer afterwards and gave them a little bit of money. It was like a day out for them.”





07 SILHOUETTE SOLDIERS

The unmistakable shape of two soldiers scanning the horizon in the bright March Afghan sunshine

Lens Canon EF 28-70mm f/2.8L USM

Exposure 1/2000 sec, f/16, ISO800

08 CANDID PORTRAITS

Portrait of two Afghan girls who came to the gates of Bran's camp in Musa Qala, asking for food and help

Lens Canon EF 28-70mm f/2.8L USM

Exposure 1/640 sec, f/8, ISO800

09 STREET LIFE

Three common modes of local transport in Musa Qala captured in one frame – bicycle, donkey and on foot

Lens Canon EF 28-70mm f/2.8L USM

Exposure 1/640 sec, f/8, ISO800

auction happened there was a lot of big hitters in the room, because there was a lot of big art in the room.

Now, you have taken the AK-47 to another level, with the NFT, the non-fungible token.

Whose idea was that?

I got approached by these guys who wanted an art piece from me and I was treating it like a private commission. Then I created this art piece using cryptocurrency and I thought why not turn this into an NFT? It seems like the

right thing to do, and take it from a real-life sculpture into this digital world, so then you'd have both. So, that's how it initially came about.

And what does this particular AK-47 sculpture look like?

It's got US dollar bills, it's got all the cryptocurrency involved as well, so Bitcoin, Ethereum, Litecoin; it's all being used within that, and it's all one really because I made the cryptocurrency logos in the same colour as the dollar bill, so you can't tell them apart. You have to look hard at the insignias to understand. (See AK-47 image on previous page.)

How much did it sell for?

It went for 20.4 Ethereum.

What's that in real money?

About \$70,000. It obviously depends upon what Ethereum is worth at the time. There's an exchange rate.

For their money, the buyer got the real sculpture itself, as well as the NFT with its own unique code?

Yes, the NFT is basically a photograph that I shot of the art piece. That's then turned into an NFT and given a code, and that's one of one, it's unique. That's where the value comes into it, because I won't produce any more. That will be it, and then obviously there's the physical artwork as well. So now the owner has the freedom to keep one, sell one, move it around, display it – whatever they want.

The whole concept of the NFT with its unique code is like photography going full circle, like when we used to shoot slides – if you lost the slide you lost the picture if it hadn't been duped. Or the most unique one-off print of all, the Polaroid. So, with the NFT are we making a single digital file truly unique?

Yeah, I think so. To simplify it in my head, I see the NFT as basically a digital version of a photograph, it's in the same area as that. I agree with you, it's having that individual piece that no-one else has, that creates the value to it. Like you said, it's like having that one Polaroid, or that one bit of film that you can't recreate. It's just there on film, you can recreate a picture from it, but if you've got that, no-one else can recreate anything from it.

And in the art world the NFT can be a representation of an actual object or artwork, like your AK-47 pieces, for example?

Yeah, I think putting a physical artwork with it did confuse people, because they're typically sold completely on the non-fungible token side of it, but I think it

"I would find out where they were, knock on their door, hand them an AK-47"



PROFILE

Bran Symondson

Photographer and sculptor

Bran is a British photographer, sculptor, artist, philanthropist and entrepreneur. He began his photography career in the '90s, working with David La Chapelle, Nadav Kander and other renowned pros. In 2004, Bran started the selection process to join the British Army Special Forces Reserves and was deployed to Helmand Province, Afghanistan in 2007. His experiences under gunfire, documented with a Canon G9, culminated in his first exhibition, *The Best View of Heaven is from Hell*. Since then, Bran's works have been exhibited worldwide. His 2012 exhibition, *AKA Peace*, proved to be the pivotal point of his artistic career, turning decommissioned AK-47 rifles into works of art. Collectors include Elton John, Jake Chapman and the Prince of Bahrain. In 2021, Bran's debut digital artwork *Crypto Kalash*, depicting analogue currency merging into a digital formation on an AK-47 captured from Afghanistan was sold at auction for the equivalent of \$70,000.

www.bransymondson.com



will start happening a lot more. I think when the NFT thing kicked off, people were trying to reinvent the wheel and come up with all this crazy art and moving stuff and not actually really understanding the aspect that it's just another medium to work with. It's just another way of getting your work out there and being seen – and collected.

Yes, making it more collectible by its limited availability...

Yes, exactly. I think digital art will become more user friendly. We'll come up with better ways to have it, to visually show it around the home.

Was this the first NFT that you'd ever made?

This was the first proper big one, yeah.

I'm working on a project at the moment where we're doing 2047 NFTs. They're all AK-47s that are all individual as well. They're going to have stickers on – flowers, hummingbirds, butterflies – and within that are going to be my actual art works that I have made and photographed, and everyone will have an opportunity to buy one of these.

How do you get hold of an AK-47?

There's quite a few people in the UK that deal in deactivated weapons and they'll source them from various parts of the world. They send them to a proof house in London, which is then proof that they are completely deactivated and safe, and they get a certificate, they get shipped to me and then I can make an art piece with them.

It's a strange end for a weapon you find in virtually every war zone...

I've got one here. This came in the other day and you can see the butt damage there. A lot of these have been used in conflict zones around the world, so a lot of them have a history. Often the names of guys are carved into the wood, so it's incredibly weird working with them because you remind yourself that these have come off conflict zones and potentially killed people.

That is surreal...

Yeah, but there's a satisfaction as well that you have taken a weapon out of a destructive mode and made it into something of beauty and intrigue, so I guess that's the bit that makes me feel good about myself. 💎