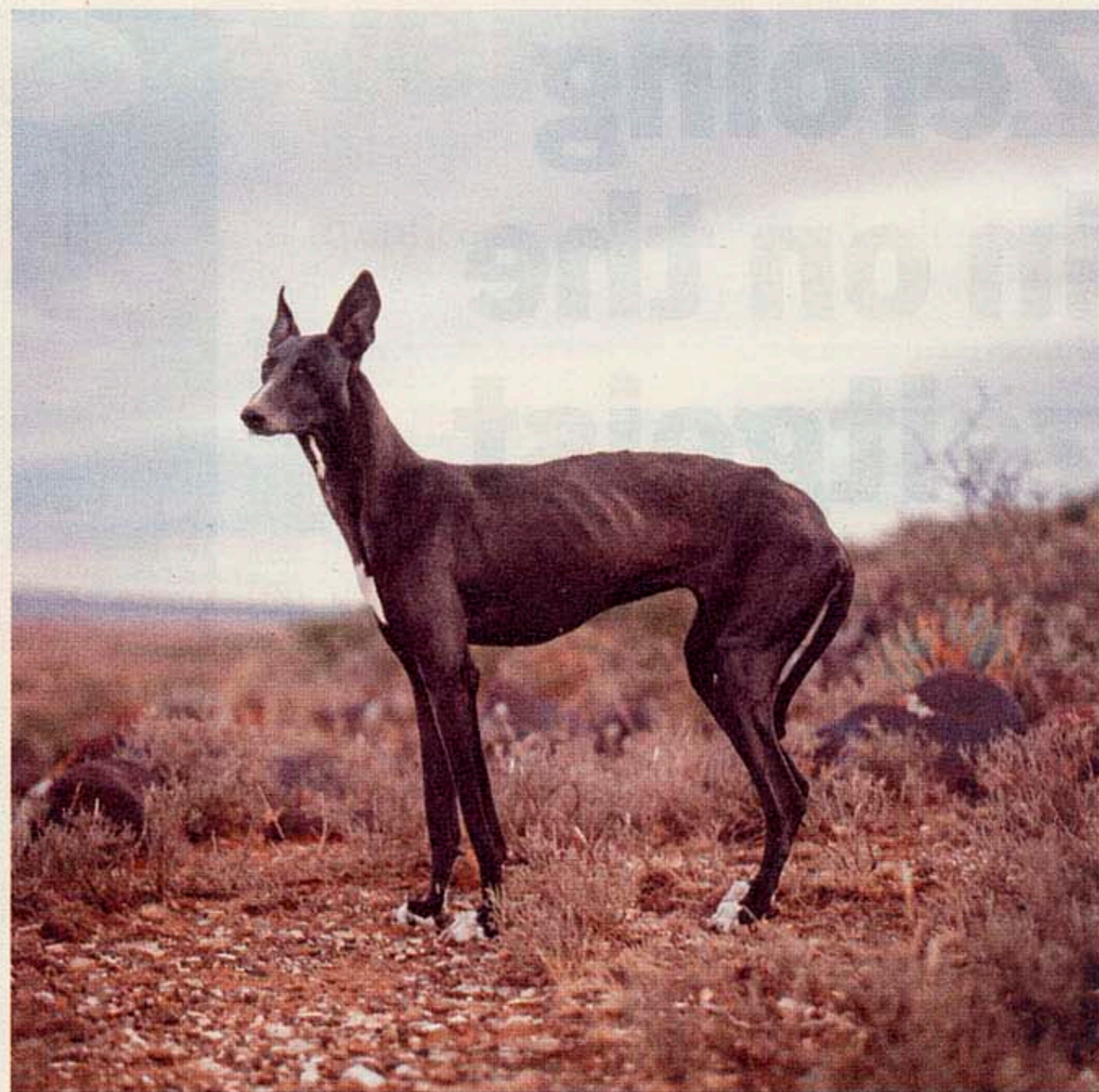


An artist's life Daniel Naudé



Left: Africanis 3, Strydenburg, April 1 2008; right: Africanis 1, Strydenburg, March 31 2008

Hunter with a Hasselblad

In the wild beauty of Canis Africanis the photographer sees a dog untouched by colonialism and breeding

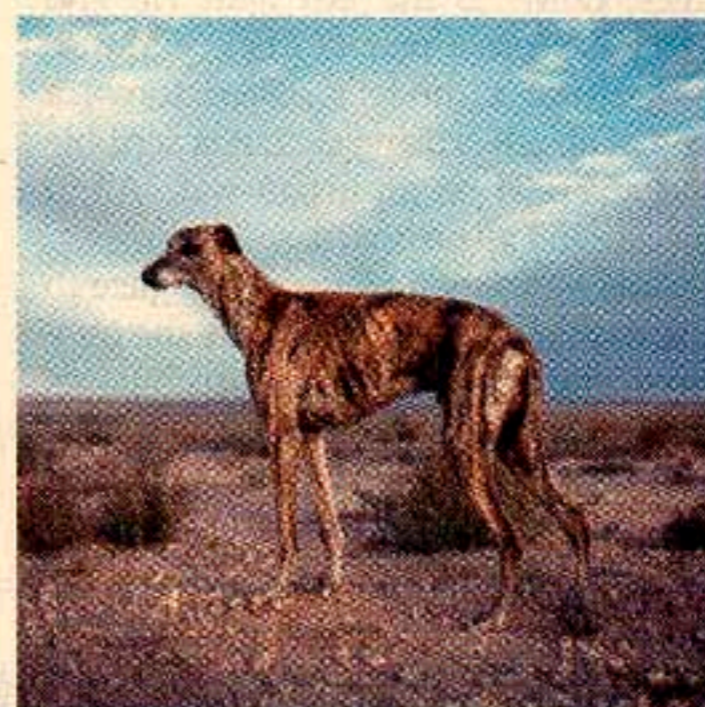
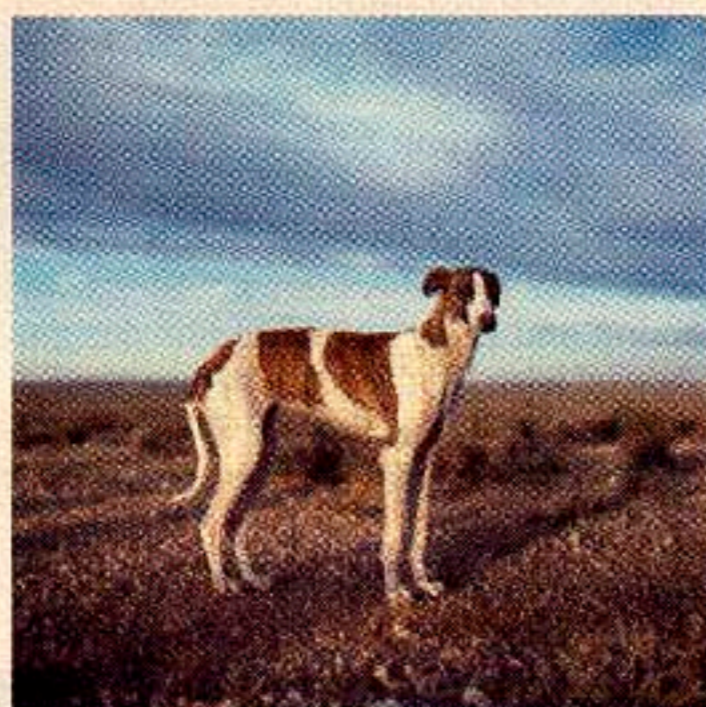
JANINE STEPHEN

IT HAPPENED on a surf trip to Mozambique in a space some would call nowhere, a hallucinatory moment in the deep Karoo. Across the highway, like a mirage or a wraith, an animal ran: tallish, viciously thin, foaming at the mouth, tail curled tight between its legs. Daniel Naudé, then 22, pulled his bakkie up short, grabbed his Hasselblad — a 21st birthday gift from his parents — and tumbled out in pursuit. The creature evaded his film with ease, but he could not erase this peculiar dog from his mind. It turned him into a hunter.

As a child Naudé was surrounded by dogs (at one stage his dad had nine). They lived in symbiotic proximity with their masters, creatures of routine, well fed, disciplined, bred for the fenced, middle-class suburban space. These dogs, though loved, were the antithesis of the Canis Africanis that captured his imagination in late 2006.

As environmental historian Sandra Swart has said, "The institutionalised dog breed was founded on Victorian thinking about race, quality, purity and progress." Value was based on "ideas of human aristocracies and thoroughbred animals, and was to resurface in the Nazi endeavour to breed an Aryan superman".

For Naudé — an Afrikaans, Stellenbosch-based visual arts student whose influences include Richard Avedon's American West series — Africanis held a fascination that revolved around complex ideas of race and identity, yet subverted the crass stereotyping of his-



Far left: Africanis 10, Strydenburg, April 1 2008
Middle: Africanis 7, Barkly East, June 30 2007
Left: Africanis 2, Strydenburg, April 1 2008

tory: "(The dog I saw) had no master. There was no planning, no breeding, no hand on it." It was impossible to define or control, "yet it knew its path".

For the next two years, he tracked down subjects from Strydenburg ("in central SA; like the heart of the country") to Britstown and Egypt. He slept in or under his car; he spent days stalking the dogs, rejecting the machine-gun accuracy of digital, reloading his Hasselblad at crucial moments. "That's the challenge," he says. "I mean, life is easy. What's the fun of having a digital camera if you can shoot film?"

Two portraits (one black and one white animal, named Cain and Abel) were shown at the AVA's Greatest Hits in 2007, where they caught the eye of representatives from Michael Stevenson. "What stood out was how the photos were so sculptural," Joost Bosland recalls. "The stillness of the dogs and their form almost goes beyond the medium of photography."

Naudé wanted his photos to raise

questions about what it is to be African. But it isn't just that the Africanis is one of the few remaining "natural" breeds that he finds interesting. It's that they were here long before colonialism and can't be linked to a certain kind of person (as Alsatis are associated with police, Boerboels with Afrikaners, Corgis with the queen). Instead, their environment makes them who they are.

"Nature is the connection," Naudé says. "The dogs connect to and reflect the identity of an area. In the Transkei they are medium-sized because you have bushes and tall grass and the dog needs to move through it. In the Karoo the dogs are more slender and greyhound-like. I try show the connection between where they are, what they are and how they are formed."

Although we fall into a tricky conversation about how mongrel African dogs are a "lower-level category of dog ... not the pure blood of the Africanis", and so not right for Naudé's purposes, it's true the particular history of Africa-

nis aids his interrogation of identity and belonging. "Our country was an apartheid state; now it's that rainbow nation: an unexplainable mix," he says. "And you can't say what kind of dog the Africanis is, but it's an African dog ... I'm not hectic into politics, but I'm trying to equalise things in a way."

The photographs also complicate the loaded history of portrait photography in Africa. "While issues of 'the other' come up, it's not a human being and I don't connect it with humans," says Naudé.

He says it's different to shoot a being that does not assume a mask. On the walls, his dogs stand upright, solidly in contact with the earth, oblivious to the metaphors swirling around the gallery.

"I see them as heroes," Naudé says, "saying, 'Here I am. I'm ugly, but I'm trying to look the best I can.' I want people to see a portrait of something that's broken down, but beautiful in its own ideal way."

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MICHAEL Stevenson's Joost Bosland says Naudé's work caught their eye as it raises interesting metaphors about the country, identity and African heritage — in a way that "takes the discussion a step beyond the ordinary".

At Naudé's initial showing at the AVA, prints cost about R4 000. He showed as an associate at Michael Stevenson's (www.michaelstevenson.co.za) 2008 summer show, where large prints were priced at R22 000, excluding VAT, and smaller prints at R11 000. Bosland says pricing at the beginning of a career is difficult, but "the international response has been strong and the work has sold well".