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THE MYSTERIOUS BUT SAFE INNER WORLD OF CHILDREN

In two new books, photographer Cuny Janssen presents an attractive medley of portraits and landscapes.

AMSTERDAM

The Amsterdam photographer Cuny Janssen (1975) has added two new publications to what would appear to be her life work: photographing children. Her stay on the island of Amami in Southern Japan and the time she spent with Indian tribes in the American state of Oklahoma have culminated in two books in which the similarities are as striking as the contrasts. Here, as in her previous photo books (which focused on sites such as Macedonia and South Africa), Janssen displays an intense involvement with the children, who range in age from kindergartners to young teenagers. Most of her subjects have an earnest, thoughtful expression on their faces. They are usually shown seated, relaxed and at ease.

Here, too, portraits alternate with views of the landscape in which these children are growing up: prehistoric, parched, desolate (South Africa); rugged, wooded and mysterious (Macedonia); vast and empty, occasionally threatening (the American prairie); and tropically profuse or overly cultivated with bonsais (Japan).

In this way, Janssen links the children with the landscape. She gives them a place in history: they stand squarely in the landscape where their forbears were born, grew up, worked, reproduced, and died. This, too, is a constant in Janssen's work: a love of land with a history, centuries-old trees, and boulders from pre-historic times overgrown with mysteriously shaped coloured mosses. It is a locale totally foreign to Holland.

Fold-out book

Amami consists largely of fold-out pages. In its closed state, two photos of a landscape are visible. When the reader unfolds the adjacent pages, he sees a series of four – usually horizontal – photos. This broad, flat format is suggestive of Japanese prints, and the panoramas can reach a length of several metres.

Janssen's tetrptychs invariably consist of a portrait of a single child; a photo in which a parent, brother or sister is visible; another highlighting the children's social environment (group of mountain-bikers, school class, get-together with friends); and finally an intimate photo of the child absorbed in its play, or asleep in bed.

It is as if Janssen is inviting the onlooker inside: away from the noisy world of street and school and into the orderly, safe inner world of the children. There is a mysterious aura surrounding these photos: the sitters radiate a kind of wisdom which is perhaps not wholly in keeping with their age.

Carefree

Her book about the Indians in Oklahoma is a medley of landscapes and portraits. *My grandma was a Turtle* strikes a more light-hearted note. This may be due to its unorthodox design: all the photos have been pasted into the album by means of an adhesive strip. When the reader lifts up the lower edge of the photo, the caption becomes visible: a direct reference to the old-fashioned family album, whose intimate atmosphere is echoed in Janssen's book.

Cuny Janssen www.cunyjanssen.nl

The word 'Turtle' in the title refers to the Turtle clan of the Delaware Indians whose hospitality Janssen enjoyed, while 'grandma' testifies to the matriarchal family ties. Janssen shuns the clichés which still cling to the North American Indians (fearless, proud, invariably on horseback and adorned with feathers).

Turtles radiate an amiable calm. The children, many of whom have blond or light brown hair, are often portrayed together with their parents, carried in the crook of the arm. They sit with Pa on the veranda, gaze dreamily into the distance from the edge of a trampoline, or lean over the platform of a pickup truck.

The photo's are more casual, as if the photographer feels more at home among the Indians, even accepted into their company. On Amami, Janssen was more of an outsider, striving to fathom a foreign culture by means of visual schemata. There is another notable difference between the two books: the definition of the photos. Janssen uses a technical camera which produces an extremely detailed image, and almost three-dimensional definition. While the photos are a feast for the eye, they are occasionally a trifle too forthright and uncompromising.

Dark spots

In the American landscape photos, Janssen regularly relinquishes her striving for ultra-sharp images. The bisons on the plains are dark splotches – a shadowy reference to the distant past, when the prairies were grazed by herds of a million animals. This renders them more powerful than if she had opted for a sharp image. Her photos of flowers and plants are likewise less clearly defined, inviting the viewer to speculate about the spirits of Indian forefathers and empathize with their rituals.

Janssen's American landscapes also feature slanting shadows, mysterious caverns, hazy fields, and dangerous waters full of rotting tree trunks. These photos are filled with stories. She knows how to capture the atmosphere of prairies and forests, boulders and rivers, and to communicate it to the viewer, along with something of the subjective power of the landscape. For Dutch polder-dwellers, who lack centuries-old roots, this may be a way to intuitively understand the Indians' solidarity with the ground on which their ancestors lived.

Melancholy

Those who have absorbed the photos in these two books – all Janssen's work demands a certain measure of concentration – will be conscious of a gentle melancholy. There are countless references to the past in her photos of idyllic climes where danger has not yet gained the upper hand, and children grow up secure, seemingly well-balanced, and even happy.

And yet there is no escaping the transience and mortality which inhabit these primeval landscapes. In that light, the photo of a skeletal tree, with the odd over-ripe and already rotting fruit, set against a cloudless American sky takes on an almost ominous significance.

Invariably these photos also evoke the Japanese and Indian children whose secure and happy state, in the prime of their lives, will one day come to an end. We are reminded that our own lives are also slipping away. If the landscapes had not already pointed us in the right direction, the children's portraits would surely have done so. What Janssen's Japanese and Indian children have in common is that purity and receptiveness which is often lost on the road to adulthood. Reminded of that innocent, long-past childhood, we are conscious of both the touching and the painful aspects of that truth.