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Cuny Janssen's open-minded children

Globetrotting photographer Cuny Janssen and her monumental photos of children and their surroundings

The power of Cuny Janssen's photo portraits lies in their candour and their serenity. Two series are now on exhibit in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam and Tilburg.

By Tracy Metz, 15 April.

When she graduated from university in 2000, Cuny Janssen (35) had an ambitious plan: to photograph children all over the world, starting in India. She was back six months later, 'with a pile of photos and a suitcase full of life experience'. Since 2003, these portraits have been accompanied by photos of the surroundings in which the children live.

Cuny Janssen, herself the mother of a three-year-old, has photographed children all over the world. In 2008 she had exhibitions on four different continents: in Japan, South Africa, the United States, and the Netherlands (in the Kunsthal in Rotterdam). Her more recent projects took shape in the United States, and on the sub-tropical island of Amami Oshima in Japan.

The title of the American project, *My Grandma was a Turtle*, is a reference to a sub-clan of the Delaware tribe. Other tribes – such as Creek, Seminole, Cherokee, and Chickasaw – are also represented (occasionally in a single individual). Janssen travelled to a small town in Oklahoma called Bartlesville in order to photograph young Indians. This time the focus was not on the all-too-familiar problems and clichés, but on their everyday life. She was curious about modern 'native Americans', in particular the degree to which their faces betray their origins. Sometimes nothing characteristic could be discerned, one man is known simply as William Scott Burks, another goes by the name of Johnney Sheeky Welit Poloche Lee Tucker. But in the children, aged between about four and twelve, the paradox of mankind was visible in a direct and artless manner: not only the shared characteristics, but also the uniqueness of each human being. Janssen's children looked straight into the lens, frankly and candidly, with no trace of either suspicion or coquettishness. This may have to do with the technical camera Janssen uses: it's a hefty piece of equipment mounted on a tripod, which means she disappears under a dark cloth in order to take the photo. Clearly, taking a photograph is serious business. 'The power of these portraits lies in their calm and candour: they are both intimate and monumental. In the book entitled *Amami*, a Japanese student describes his reaction to one of the portraits: "I was dumbstruck. The girl in the portrait was not being polite or trying to conform to some rule of etiquette. Such useless considerations had been swept aside. It was as if I was hearing the heartbeat of life. If only I could be that honest with myself!"

Janssen's choice of subject matter has gradually broadened: she focuses on adults as well as children, and her images increasingly reflect a human presence: a car wreck in an Oklahoma driveway, or artfully pruned trees in front of Amami's timber houses. 'I'm not after topographical highlights,' Janssen explains. 'It's all about intuition. I'm not looking for anything, and I'm not trying to prove anything. Nature is constantly changing, of course. But my photos focus on nature where time stands still. All the circumstances converge: the colours, the atmosphere, the light. This is where I see harmony in the arbitrary.'

Cuny Janssen www.cunyjanssen.nl

Quoting the art historian Simon Schama, Janssen says that she wants her nature photos to evoke 'life itself, the complexity, the delight, and the beauty', in all its intensity. At present, she is involved in two projects: one centres on the sacred mountain of Yoshino in Japan, while the other, for the De La Mar Theatre in Amsterdam, involves talented children. And her own daughter ... is she also a 'photo project'? 'We probably have close to a thousand photos of her, but they're all private!'

The exhibition 'My Grandma was a Turtle' is on until 2 May at FOAM, Amsterdam Book: €39.80. See www.foam.nl 'Amami' is on until 23 May at Museum De Pont, Tilburg. See www.depont.nl

'I'm not searching for anything, and I'm not trying to prove anything.'

Photographer Cuny Janssen

Photo books

Cuny Janssen transforms her photo projects into exceptional publications. She invariably collaborates with the graphic designer Sybren Kuiper. Several books have already become collectors' items: *India* (2002), *Portrait/Landscape, Macedonia* (2004), *There's Something in the Air in Prince Albert*, on South Africa (2007), and *Finding Thoughts*, which accompanied her exhibition in London in 2005.

Above: photos from the Japanese series *Amami*, on exhibit through 23 May in Museum De Pont, Tilburg.

Below: photos from *My Grandma was a Turtle*, focusing on young Indians. On exhibit in FOAM, Amsterdam