

FD – Personal – 19 April 2008
Rianne van Dijck

Plants even grow on rocks

Photographer Cuny Janssen roams the world with a single message: these are the people and these are their landscapes. It's actually that simple. That's what a photographer does: record what he sees. Out of the thousands of different ways of recording what he sees, he chooses one. And it is that choice which determines whether the work of a photographer is special or not.

Janssen's main interest is children. She is fascinated by their zest for life, their intensity, their will to survive. She photographs them from the age of about three. Any younger and the eyes are still too empty, as we can see in the exhibition 'Baby', now on at the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam. The faces are almost expressionless: they have not yet been 'filled in'. And Janssen stops at twelve years or thereabouts. Adolescence comes with a form of awareness which does away with the candour she is seeking.

She photographed children in Macedonia to find out whether the photos would reveal traces of the war. And, perhaps more importantly, to demonstrate how flexible they are. These children are refugees who witnessed the armed conflict between the Macedonian authorities and Albanian rebels. No matter how harsh or difficult the circumstances, they have to live with them. 'You have no say in where you're born. All you can do is make the best of it,' says Janssen. 'It's the same in nature: plants will even grow on rocks, and in the shade. It's that survival urge which we see in nature and also in human beings.'

In the exhibition 'White Thorns & Tomorrow Leaf', now on at the Kunsthal, Janssen shows work she did during a trip to the village of Prince Albert in South Africa. A black South African girl is looking straight into the camera. She has on a red sweater and red pants with white stars, and she's sitting on a yellow metal bench. The white boy in a blue T-shirt is leaning against a white tree. These are not the children who have fared best, certainly not in a material sense.

Janssen detaches children from their surroundings. She makes portraits and photographs the landscape, and then connects these individual elements by hanging the photos side by side in an exhibition. As viewers, we immediately accept what we are seeing: the arid landscape, the cactuses, the rocks, the dust, the light. This is where these children live.

The contrast with children on the subtropical Japanese island of Amami Oshima is striking. They are surrounded by water: in the ocean, in the air, in the juicy leaves on plants and trees. These photos have a greater sheen than the ones taken in South Africa. A little girl is eating her noodles at a gleaming table. A child is lying on the ground, wrapped in a colourful blanket.

What makes Janssen's work exceptional is the way she looks at reality: the flowing transition which the viewer experiences between the landscapes and the portraits. There is an intense self-evidence about the photos, which lack the winsomeness one might expect in pictures of children. The photographs in the Kunsthal are hung somewhat haphazardly, but the viewer senses that in the combination chosen by the photographer, Man and Nature are inextricably bound together. They have to make do with one another.

Cuny Janssen www.cunyjanssen.nl