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Children as portrayers of the human paradox

The intimate, monumental photos of Cuny Janssen on display in Amsterdam and Tilburg

In Cuny Janssen's portraits, children look straight into the lens – no funny faces, no suspicion. Two series are now on exhibit in the Netherlands.

By Tracy Metz

When Cuny Janssen (35) graduated from university in 2000, she knew exactly what she wanted to do: travel the world to photograph children, starting in India. Six months later, she was back, with 'a pile of photos and a suitcase full of life experience'. Since then she has photographed children in Macedonia, Iran, South Africa, Japan, and the United States. From 2003 on, she has combined her portraits with images of the surroundings in which the children live. Cuny Janssen – herself the mother of a three-year-old – has worked in various locations worldwide. In 2008, for example, she had exhibitions on four different continents: in Japan, South Africa, the United States, and the Netherlands (in the Kunsthall in Rotterdam). Her most 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*, refers 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 wanted to know how much of their background was reflected in their faces. In some cases, there was nothing there; in others, the difference was obvious: one man was known as William Scott Burks, another went by the name of Johnney Sheeky Welit Poloche Lee Tucker.

She found that in the children, aged roughly between four and twelve, the paradox was portrayed directly and honestly: both the universal likeness and the unique nature of each child. Looking into the camera lens, their gaze was candid: they did not pull faces, and there was no trace of either suspicion or coquettishness. This may have to do with the fact that Janssen uses a technical camera - a hefty piece of equipment mounted on a tripod - and that just before taking the photo she disappears under a dark cloth. 'It's clear to the children that taking a photograph is serious business.'

The power of these portraits is rooted in that repose and that directness: they are at once monumental and intimate. In the book entitled *Amami*, a Japanese student describes his own 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. Today 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.'

Quoting the art historian Simon Schama, Janssen says that what she wants her photos to evoke is '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. www.foam.nl

'Amami' is on until 23 May at Museum De Pont, Tilburg.

Book: €29.80 www.depont.nl

Photo books

Cuny Janssen transforms her photo projects into exceptional publications, in collaboration with the graphic designer Sybren Kuiper. Several of those publications have already become collectors' items, such as *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 2005 exhibition in London. The book on Macedonia has been included in a leading work on photo books by the English photographer Martin Parr.

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