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A look that says: Who are you?

Cuny Janssen's Iran is not exotic. In her work she searches for universal values, and her photos portray *the* child and *the* landscape.

Cuny Janssen photographs children. In Iran, for example. They appear in her photo book *Finding Thoughts*: children with dark hair and dark eyes looking into the camera lens: curious or cautious, seldom smiling. They are often photographed in the yard behind their house, since she works solely with natural light.

Cuny Janssen also photographs landscapes. Mountains and trees, like those along the road between Teheran and Chalus. Not general views, but spacious landscapes which make the viewer feel as if he is standing in the very centre.

She believes that photography helps us to discover how the world is put together, how beauty and survival work – how people find their own way to survive and to lend value to their lives. She smiles charmingly, not wishing to seem weighty. But that is what she is searching for: 'I want to understand it, I want to see it.'

In Iran she saw the difference between public and private life. She was there in 2004, on behalf of the Tropenmuseum Junior in Amsterdam, for a project involving Dutch and Iranian children.

She worked with an interpreter, who took her to the families. She prefers to photograph children in their own home. 'The important thing is that I am their guest, and that the parents have given their permission, so that the child will be at ease.'

She was received hospitably wherever she went in Iran, but in the homes the atmosphere was much more cordial than elsewhere. 'Once indoors, the headscarf is removed, and the interaction between men and women is different.' But there, too, the influence of life outside the home was evident. 'People are on their guard. They have always lived under the authority of the shahs, the threat of the secret services, the regulations laid down by the ayatollahs. And this has had a considerable influence on the way people interact with one another. Children are quick to take their cues from adults.'

She points to a photo of a pretty little girl in jeans and a pink T-shirt, leaning against a cabinet and looking straight at the photographer. Her face, while not unfriendly, is almost totally expressionless. 'Just look at this girl and you'll see what I mean.'

In Iran she was asked to photograph children. But her landscapes are just as important, and this was a project she had to organize herself. Together with a friend of a friend, she explored the road to Chalus, which everyone had recommended because of the magnificent scenery. It was Ramadan, which meant that her chauffeur had to stop for prayers at regular intervals and was also fasting. 'It was pretty scary on those narrow mountain roads.' Iran was her most arduous trip thus far. It's a country where you never really feel safe. Moreover, she stayed in hotels, rather than with a family, as she had usually been able to do up until then. 'It was often lonely. And if you went out for a sandwich, you had to remember to put on a headscarf.'

Janssen doesn't consider herself an adventurer. 'The essential conditions have to be met.' With her huge technical camera, she can't leave things to chance. She needs a roof over her head, a logistic network, a contact to help her arrange meetings with the children she photographs. For someone who's not an adventurer, she's seen a great many countries.

Cuny Janssen www.cunyjanssen.nl

Cuny Janssen photographs children and landscapes. In Iran, among other places. But her Iran is not exotic. What makes her photography so unusual is the fact that it doesn't matter where she portrays her subjects, or what their background is. Her work is universal: both the photos of the children and the landscape shots could have been taken anywhere. They stand for THE child and THE landscape.

Pausing in front of a landscape on the Chalus road, she says, 'You see universal elements like silence, light and time. The important thing is that here, on this very spot, something is going on, and that that, too, is interchangeable. It's the same with the children: it's all right for you to see that the sitter is a Moslem girl, but it is not important that she is a Moslem girl.'

In *Finding Thoughts* she uses many of her favourite quotations, including one by the American poet Carl Sandburg: 'There is only one child in the world and the Child's name is All Children.'

She nods. 'But on that same page there is an important addition, a statement by the American art historian Robin Resch: 'But we must not oversimplify the world's cultural complexity.'

Her portraits bear simple titles: *Teheran, Iran 2004. Skopje, Macedonia 2003. Prince Albert, Karoo, South Africa 2005*. 'I'm not trying to prove anything. Culture, land, time, history: that's what's important. The name of the individual is too personal. You have to look at who the person is. Someone who already knows that a particular photo was taken in Macedonia is quick to say: "You can tell, can't you?" Even though you wouldn't necessarily be able to see that those children have been through a war if you didn't know. That's just the way it is. I don't go looking for bullet holes, but I don't try to avoid them either.'

It is a fact that not all the children she photographs have had a carefree life. She has portrayed Dutch, British, and Norwegian children, but also children in India, in Macedonia, and in South Africa, as well as landscapes which Armando has characterized as 'guilty'.

And yet her work is optimistic. She looks for 'positive things', and talks about the forward energy of children, and about young lives that hold a promise for the future. 'Children are very clear in the way they present themselves, and that makes for a good photo. It's like the beginning of something, the podium for a play.'

There are few smiles on the faces of the children she photographs. 'I tell them "You don't have to smile." And they immediately stop smiling. Often there is something searching in their gaze. Something that says: "Who are you?" That's what I'm looking for: a kind of mutual expression of interest. It's all about what happens when a child looks at you. Children are naturally curious and eager. They enjoy helping, creating something together. And that's what I tell them: that we're making something together.'

But they also seem somewhat reserved. 'Or perhaps focused', she adds. 'They have to wait a long time.'

She takes her photos with a large technical camera, where the photographer disappears under a cloth. This expands her possibilities – when it comes to regulating the focus, for example – but she also uses the camera because of the impression it makes. 'They know I'm not just fooling around. And that gives them the feeling that they're important.'

In Janssen's experience, children have more patience than adults. 'In many countries where I work, I'm not alone. When I'm photographing a family of refugees, for example, all the neighbours come to watch. Suddenly I see a child in a really great pose and I say

"Don't move!" I start making adjustments, defining the image – all that can take as long as five minutes.'

The poses of her models are not always spontaneous. 'Sometimes I ask a child to adopt the same position as before, but in a different spot, because of the light or the background. I give them instructions, since children are almost never conscious of how they were sitting a minute ago. The important thing is that you sense that the pose is one which the child would actually choose itself.'

For her most recent work, due to be published in book form in early 2007, she spent six weeks in Prince Albert, a village in the lonely desert of Karoo province in South Africa. It is in the heart of Gondwana: the huge continent out of which Africa, South America, Antarctica, India, Australia and various other islands once emerged. 'In a country where race plays such an important role, this is the spot we all came from. There, in the heart of nature, the dinosaurs are still roaming around.'

Cuny Janssen photographs children. And landscapes. After talking at length about the children she photographs, she says, 'The landscapes are also very important.' But it's more difficult to talk about the landscape photos, just as it's more difficult to take them.

'It challenges you to go further, and it requires a totally different approach. I can't combine the two. I usually photograph the children first, and then start looking for the landscapes. It's a very time-consuming process. Often it takes days of roaming around, searching. I always want to see a landscape more than once. And often in a particular light.'

She looks for links. Between children all over the world, between landscapes, between children and landscapes.

'I'm always trying to renew myself: it's an ongoing search ...'

I ask her if she would ever consider doing something else. She doesn't even stop to think: 'You can photograph anything everything. But why would you want to do that?'