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### Eyes filled with gravity and experience

For years the Utrecht photographer Cuny Janssen (29) has been taking pictures of children all over the world. She suspects that she may well devote the rest of her life to this project. In Holland, Norway and India she created warm and intimate portraits of children at home, in their own familiar and trusted environment. Janssen submitted photos for the Prix de Rome 2002, the major Dutch award for artists aged 35 and under, and they earned her the second prize.

Among the jury members for the Prix de Rome was Oliviero Toscani, the famous Italian photographer and creator of high-profile advertising campaigns for fashion giant Benetton. He praised Janssen's ability to connect with her young models via the camera, and the intense interest she showed in them.

But Toscani also had points of criticism. He felt that Janssen ought to take greater risks, by photographing not only children growing up in a relatively safe and nurturing environment, but also those caught up in dangerous situations. He encouraged her to seek out those situations.

Janssen followed his advice. In 2003 she travelled to Macedonia, then a bone of contention and a potential hotbed in the Balkans. She remained there for several months, visiting refugee camps and reception centres, photographing children of various nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, including Macedonians, Albanians and Roma gypsies. Not that their background made the slightest difference where Janssen was concerned. Her aim was to examine how children survive such traumatic experiences as warfare, life-threatening events, and the sudden need to flee from one's home.

The initial results of Janssen's research are contained in her photo book *Macedonia*, published this week. There are no photos of children with mutilations or amputated limbs. Only one small boy with a few scratches and a slight abrasion above his upper lip. But such subtle damage as this is not caused by acts of war.

On the surface, the children – most of whom live in a one-room flat together with their entire family – seem to have adjusted. They have clothes, they are not undernourished and their attitude is blasé, if not entirely relaxed. Resigned, they await better times.

But appearances are deceiving. Take a longer look as you leaf through *Macedonia*, and you'll see that an expression like 'on the surface' is ill-chosen here, even inappropriate. If ever the reality of persecution, fear and trauma has solidified, then it is in the eyes of these children with their terrible gravity. When they look at you, their expression reflects experience, a kind of wisdom, which is frightening because it is so at odds with their young age.

In *Macedonia*, the children's portraits are interspersed with photos of empty landscapes – unspoilt images of Macedonian mountains, lakes and forests. These landscapes merge with the unwritten stories of the children.

And inevitably the forests and mountains lose their blissful innocence.