

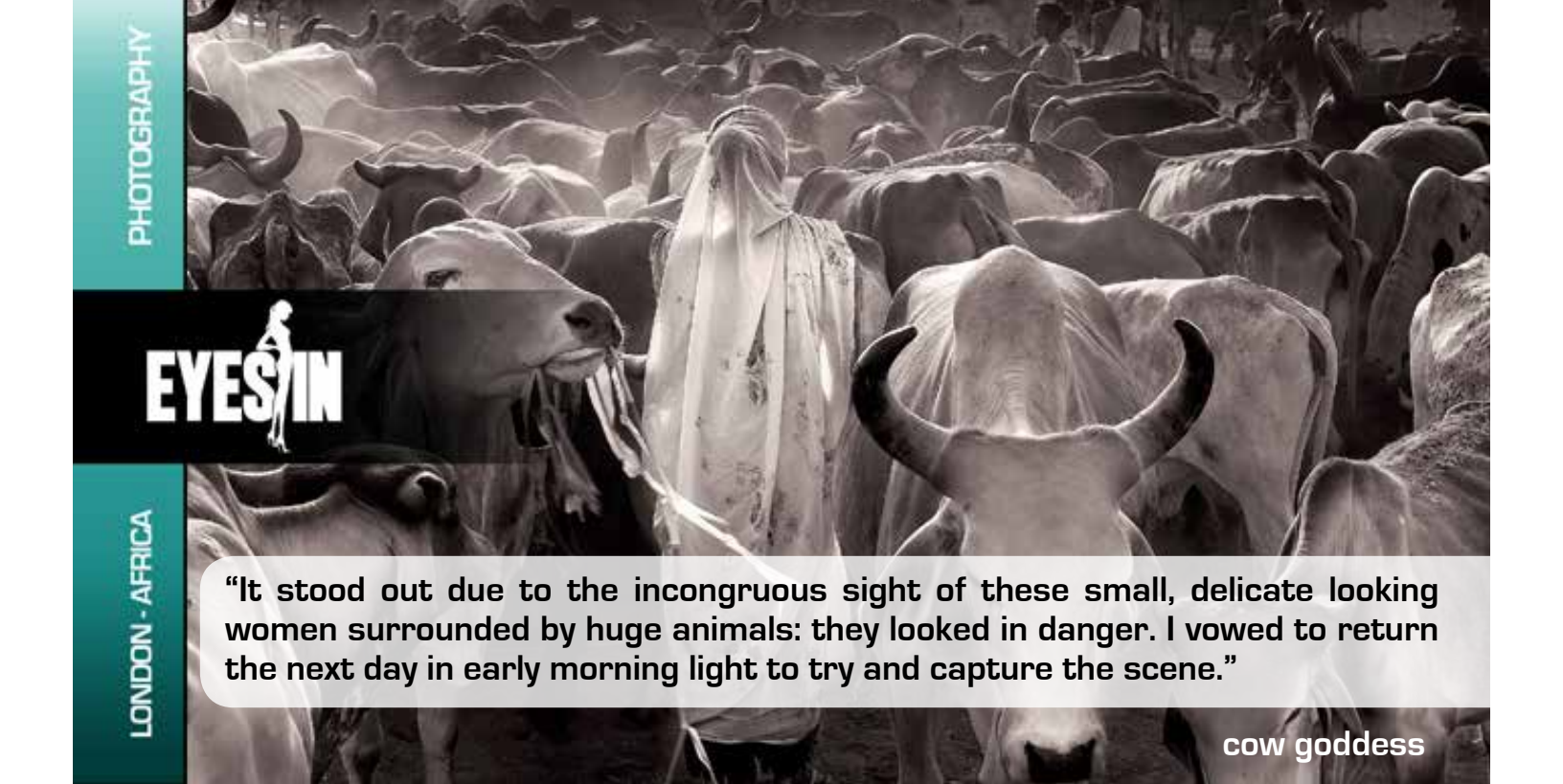
PHOTOGRAPHY

**EYES IN** EDITION 19

LONDON - AFRICA

## John Kenny and the Chiaroscuro of the African Plains

Taleiwo



**“It stood out due to the incongruous sight of these small, delicate looking women surrounded by huge animals: they looked in danger. I vowed to return the next day in early morning light to try and capture the scene.”**

**cow goddess**

It has been six centuries since the Age of Discovery, and mankind now thrives in the modern world of ever-changing technological advancements. It's easy to think that we've seen it all. But the photography of John Kenny will silence that idea. His stunning images remind us of a world still largely undiscovered and of fascinating people unencumbered by the entanglements of technology.

Photographer John Kenny has trekked all across sub-Saharan Africa, through 12 countries and has captured hundreds of images of the people he encountered in the remote villages along the way. He admits that he photographs for himself first, always moved by the individual's mysterious smirk, raw beauty or piercing glare. When viewers of his work see the images, Kenny's interest and respect for each of his subjects rise to the surface. It is clear he loves Africa. His fascination with the indigenous tribal communities that persist in the face of modernity and the intensity of the people who find a rich way of life on the difficult, arid African terrain is unrivaled.

In his photography, Kenny seems to follow in the footsteps of his subjects. While he could very easily put to use the technology available to him, he chooses to forego it. All of his images are captured without a flash and without reflectors. His makeshift studio is a borrowed hut and his only source of lighting is the African sun, both which speak volumes to the artist's talent and patience.

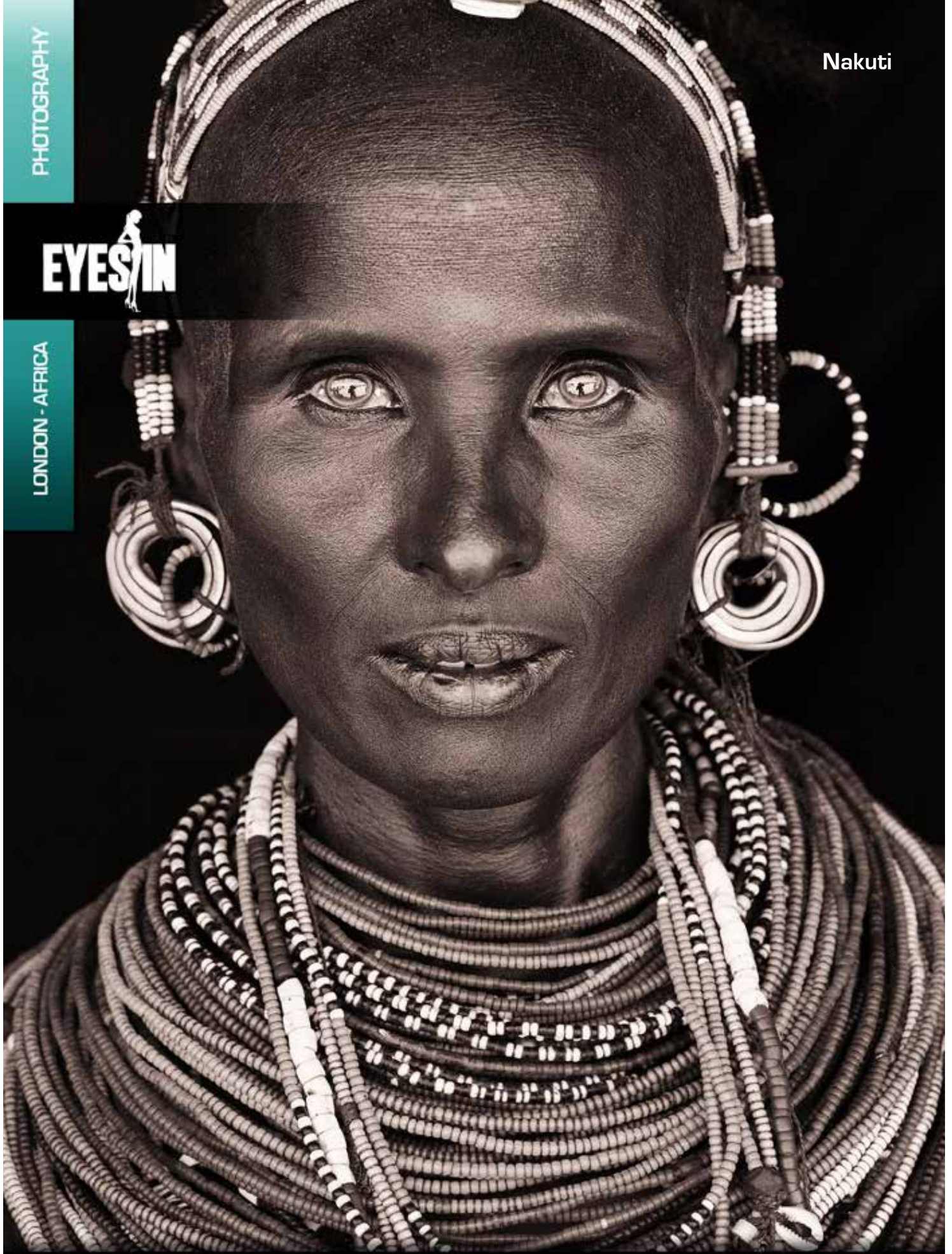
Understanding the way that the typical Saharan terrain of dry earth and scarce resources can affect the way a viewer interprets his subjects, he purposefully photographs against a dark background. This approach allows the beauty and detail of each person to come to light in the forefront, creating stunningly contrasted images. It is a technique referred to in the art of the Italian Renaissance as "chiaroscuro," describing that strong, bold contrast between light and dark. John Kenny has shown himself a master of the technique.

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Nakuti

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The London-based freelance photographer first discovered photography in 2003 when he started experimenting with an SLR camera. With no formal photography training, Kenny is remarkably self-taught. "Every time I had the camera in my hand I was looking to improve, needing to know what everything and anything looked like once it had been through the photographic process. It was a bit like a mad pursuit of alchemy—throwing everything into the mix to see if any magic came out on the other side. The process of photographic learning is very rarely a simple one, but to me it remains beautiful: discoveries, experimentation and seeing for the first time how a camera distorts and enhances the world," said Kenny.

Just three years later, in 2006, Kenny traveled to Africa and there developed his unique portrait style photography. "After a few days I started to imagine each of these people in front of me emerging from the nothingness of darkness, with no distractions, hoping that this would provide a real feeling of proximity between the viewer and the person in the picture. I made a conscious decision at that time to leave a more documentary style of environmental portraiture to others," Kenny added.

He ascribes his commitment to photographing the fascinating people of Africa to one particular image he took in 2006. It was the picture of a shy girl named Ancho who helped him believe in the power of his approach. Kenny recalls

that Ancho, who is part of the Hamar tribe in the Omo Valley of Southern Ethiopia, had "something quite magnetic about her." The enthusiastic reaction received from colleagues upon seeing her photograph is what set him on his professional journey. "I believe that without her it may have never happened" said Kenny.

Since then, his journeys have taken him all throughout Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia, Niger, Angola and West Africa. In addition to his remarkable portraits, Kenny also has a collection of stunning images he took of the African Bush. These landscapes are also captured in the chiaroscuro technique and successfully redefine the typical landscape interpretation and expectation. "This presence of the usually unseen, combined with exquisite focus, depth of field and the motifs of luxuriant vegetation that Kenny chooses, create the impression that nature has been hyper-revealed by the photographer." Kenny is clearly a versatile artist whose keen eye for creating beautiful portraiture photographs also instructs him on all the nuance of successfully capturing landscape images.

Adding to his finesse behind the camera, Kenny's background in theatre and television earned him two Emmy awards for "Outstanding Achievement in Art Direction." He has experienced great success and recognition with his images, and his collection of work has been featured at art exhibitions in London and New York. He is also actively involved with charities who seek to protect and support the indigenous tribal communities of Africa.

His collection "African Beauty: Visual Expression in Traditional Societies" will be featured at The Africa Centre in Covent Garden, London from Friday, May 24 to Sunday, June 9, 2013. To learn more about him and see his remarkable work, please visit [www.john-kenny.com](http://www.john-kenny.com).

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## A Conversation with John Kenny

### As a child, what did you want to become?

I wanted to be an airline pilot. Funny enough, I maintained a desire to pursue this right up until leaving University. I then found out that my late summer hay fever and lack of 20/20 vision counted against me. My eyesight and my attention to detail is, ironically, one of my core strengths that I use in photography, so I'm glad it didn't act as a brake on my ambitions.

### In which town did you grow up?

I grew up in Bury, an old mill town of the industrial revolution, in Lancashire, England. Growing up, I always gravitated towards Manchester, our nearest town, which had much broader cultural influences, particularly in music. It's a place I still love today and I may move back there when I'm a little older. That's if I can get over the climate: Manchester is a very wet place.

### Do you think your background has influenced your current photography style? If so, what specific element in your background is most pervasive in influencing your current photography style?

As a child, I loved to draw and spend hours in my room making quite intricate, detailed drawings. At the same time, I loved playing computer games and I remember creating lots of new 'worlds' similar to levels from a platform game like Pitfall on the Atari. I always loved intricacy and detail and being

somewhere far away. That has continued to this day with my geography degree and my love of travel since young adulthood. Both have influenced the subject matter and style that inspires me to this day.

### What inspires you in the job of being a photographer?

Looking at amazing paintings inspires me much more so than photography. I also get inspired when I go on the road. I feel a degree of freedom and excitement when I get on a plane to go somewhere. It somehow frees my brain from the clutter of modern life. Secondly, I am hugely inspired when engaging with Africans and being on their continent. They never fail to charm and inspire me, and they can always make me laugh. You can almost feel that smile spreading over your face in the first minutes of being with them.

### In which way do you consider yourself an innovative creator?

That's a difficult question. First and foremost, I think that the people I photograph fill me with awe. I have a strong desire to try and impart that very same feeling to other people who did not have the fortune to be in their presence. So, perhaps it is this combination of remarkable people and my own vision of how to render them that has been notable. I'll leave it to others to conclude whether or not this is innovative, however.

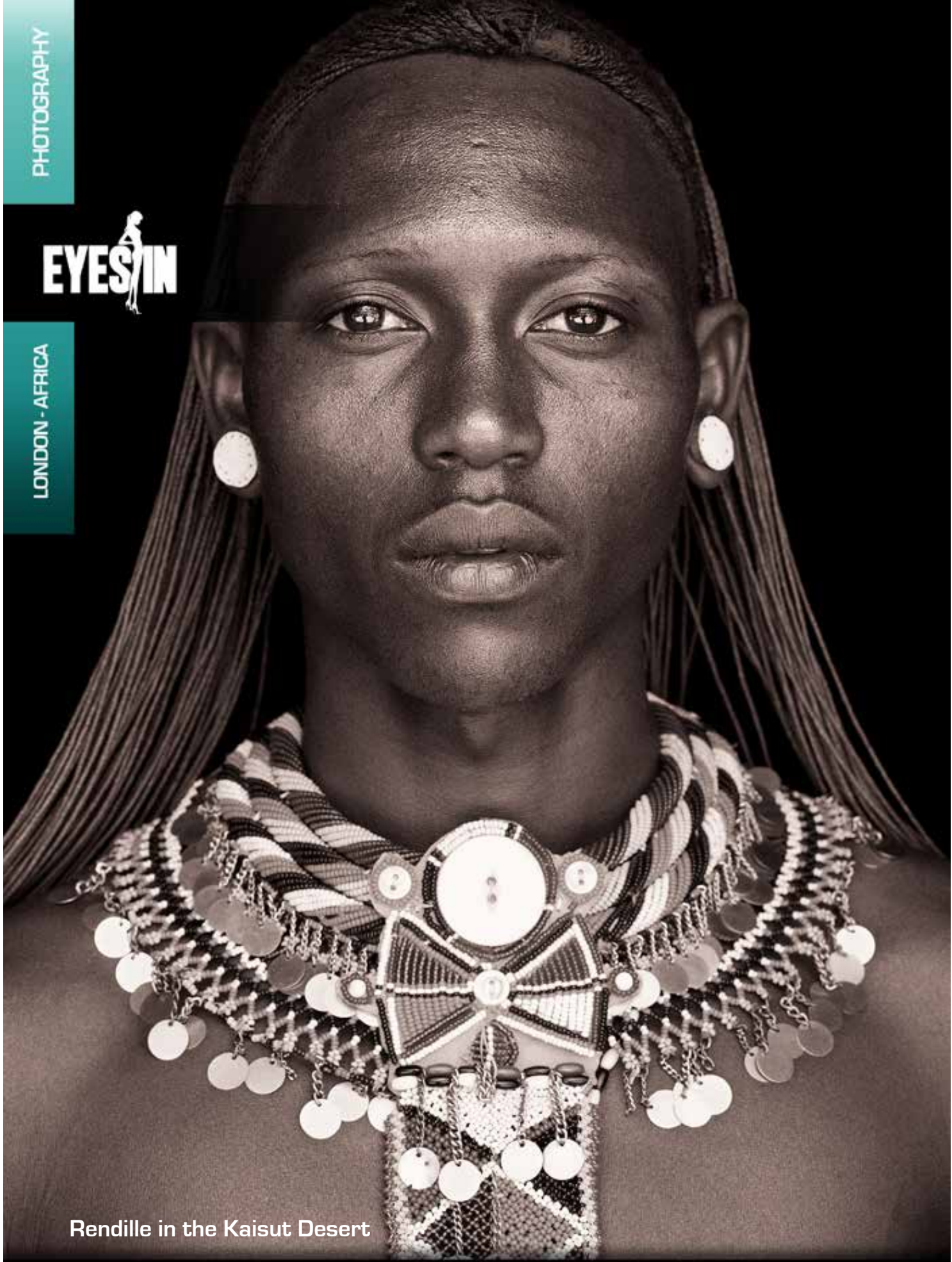
### In which way do you use different technologies in capturing your artistic photography?

I'm not afraid to use a variety of tools, in both digital and analog formats. Fundamentally, I have a preference for the 'signature' and feel of analog much more than I have for the digital format. This also extends to my taste of other art forms, for example, the sonic traits of the analog and digital music format.

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Rendille in the Kaisut Desert

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**Karepo\_NawaHimba, Eastern Kaokoland**

For film photography, I've experimented shooting with tools that require a great degree of craft, as when I shot a portraits project in the northern Kenya deserts in 2011 with 8x10 inch large format camera. I also shoot enthusiastically with digital formats, but am careful to try and produce a film-like aesthetic at the end of the process. Whatever varied technologies I use, the emphasis is always on an end product being consistent.

### Which basic elements of creativity did your family teach you?

My parents always let me do what I wanted to, in the nicest sense of the word. I have a very creative sister, too. She was always pulling in influences that stretched a long way from our small town in Lancashire, from an early age. That opened my eyes to the world of music, of art, and of exploring the world far beyond the confinement of my home.

### How did you get the idea for creating your photography this way from these areas?

In 2006, I had my first prolonged interaction with an indigenous tribal community, the San (or bushmen) in Northern Namibia.

I was mesmerised by these people, whose relationship with their environment and knowledge of ancient cultural practices was so different than my own. I left charged with many wonderful memories, but knew that the photographs hadn't done justice to the captivating people I had met. I felt sure that there was an essence to the people that, even accepting photography's limitations, was missing from my portraits. I had to devise a better way to show others the captivating beauty and aura of my photographic subjects.

The style of my photographs emerged in response to this challenge. The portraits were also influenced by the dramatic contrasts, and use of light and darkness, that I had seen in the work of 'Chiaroscuro' artists such as Rembrandt (in Italian the term 'Chiaroscuro' literally means 'light-dark'). In the days that followed my encounters with the bushmen, I felt that to meet my artistic aims the portraits would need to abstract the 'remarkable' person from their often 'not so remarkable' backdrops: typically dusty, sparse and arid environments.



Samburu Shepherd, Kenya

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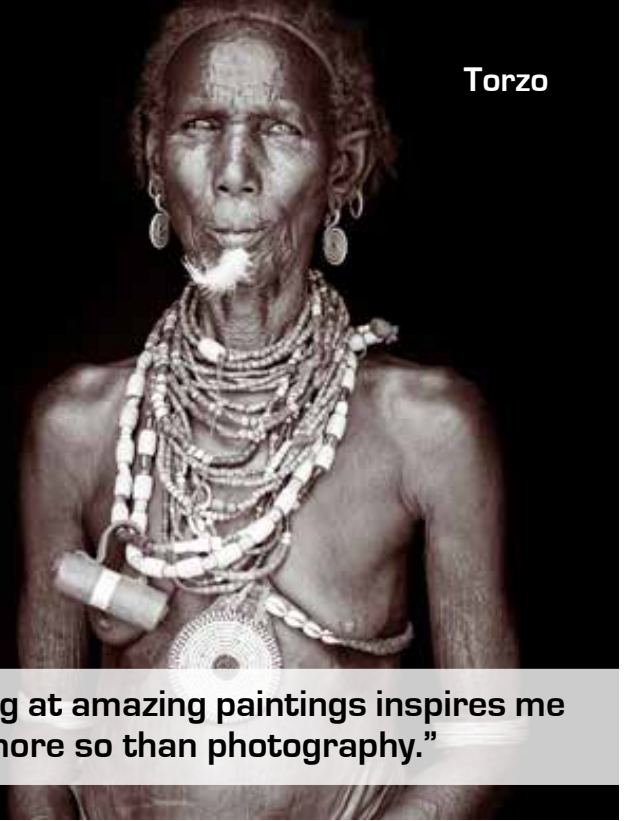
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**"I hope it contributes towards a positive discourse on Africa. There's a need for that, I think, because I believe that we in the West are influenced hugely by current affairs, which often engages with this remarkable, diverse place in largely negative terms. Those stories are often true, but the problem is we don't hear nearly as much about the 'other' Africa. That's not 'news,' so I think it is for other channels to take up this challenge—particularly art."**

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**“Looking at amazing paintings inspires me much more so than photography.”**

I believe the darkness around the subjects in my portraits helps provide a more intimate feel of the person being photographed. To me at least, creating portraits with ‘negative space,’ using art so to speak, is one of the key ways to capture the subject’s likeness and their essence. I find it greatly assists the transfer from a physical interaction to a two-dimensional photograph.

### **What do you like to communicate with your photography and artworks?**

Something of the remarkable contribution to humanity that traditional communities bring through their artistry, creativity and ability to live in the most threadbare of places (in terms of food and water). I hope it contributes towards a positive discourse on Africa. There’s a need for that, I think, because I believe that we in the West are influenced hugely by current affairs, which often engages with this remarkable, diverse place in largely negative terms. Those stories are often true, but the problem is we don’t hear nearly as much

about the ‘other’ Africa. That’s not ‘news,’ so I think it is for other channels to take up this challenge—particularly the art channels.

### **Next to being a photographer, do you consider yourself an anthropologist too?**

That’s an interesting question. Perhaps my artwork could be aligned to visual anthropology and perhaps one day my photographs might be documents of cultures and individuals who are different to the prevailing time. At a deeper, more fundamental level, I am certainly fascinated by groups of people who have such very different ways of interacting with their environment and making sense of the world around them. Plus, I’m interested in what materials they use and how they express themselves visually. My exhibition in London in a few weeks, African Beauty, frames my portraits in exactly this context: how individuals use visual expression to exhibit a degree of individuality whilst at the same time exhibit conformance to the wider community that they belong.



### Do you learn from the different cultures you visit and, if so, what specifically stays with you?

Absolutely. I have learned that humankind is remarkably creative and knows how to survive with humility in some of the difficult, barren places on earth. I've also learned that the lessons I learn from the communities I visit do start to fade with time, unfortunately. It's almost inevitable and reflects the fact that I spent much more time at home than I do in Africa. So that conveniently gives me an excuse to go back there and re-educate myself.

### Was there ever a documentary made about you while doing your work traveling to those remote areas?

No, but a few people have remarked on the utility of doing exactly that. I do feel privileged to have seen some extraordinary places and people. Whilst I'm alone or with my translator, working in remote parts of Africa, I've often smiled at the incredible things I've witnessed and wished others could have witnessed it too. Luckily, I do have a permanent record of 'place' about the people that I photograph, although I'm afraid that a large amount of that is only of resonance to me, because my artwork deliberately concentrates on emphasizing the individual without their background environment.

### Do you have a favorite photographer yourself?

No, but there are photographers whose work I love. Sebastião Salgado, the great Brazilian artist and photojournalist, always produces resonating work and he is a pioneer in creating aesthetically beautiful pieces of fine art that are at the same time extremely powerful storytelling works. I was motivated to shoot my portraits on 10x8 black and white film through Richard Avedon's "In the American West" series, which always leaves me mesmerised when I view the images. In general, however, I find more inspiration in art forms such as painting, in preference to photography.

### Are you ever afraid you will run out of inspiration and creativity in your job?

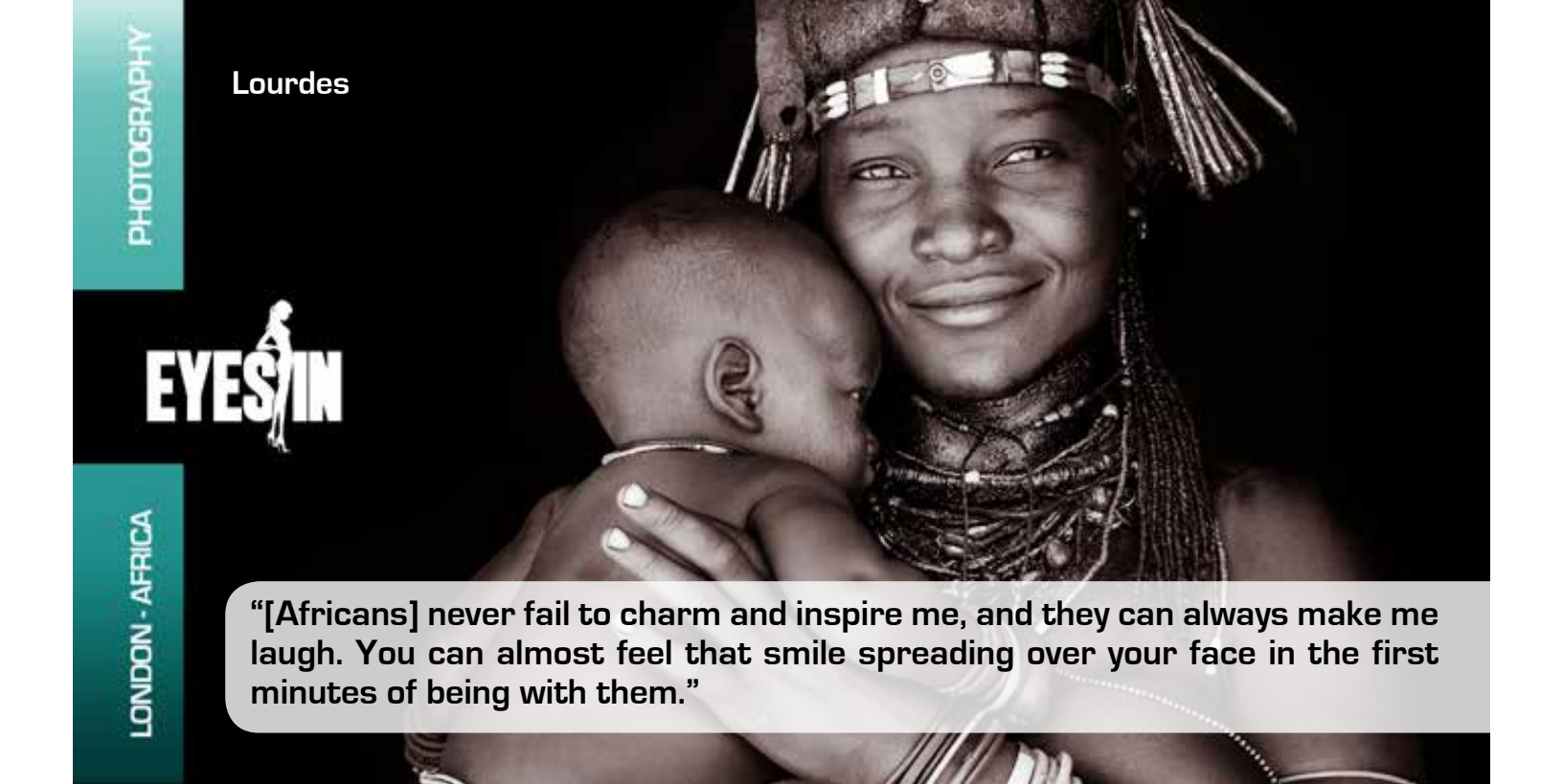
Yes. My current project in Sub-Saharan Africa has luckily been a long term one to come face-to-face with remarkable people and cultures across the African continent, because it is such a vast place that has kept me inspired and motivated. I do, however, now feel the need to start a new project with a different aesthetic angle, in a different location of the world. The only thing I know about it is that it will involve further exploration of the world, certainly outside my own country, and ideally be something that again keeps me inspired and motivated for many years to come.

### What is the most difficult thing in your job?

Self-promotion, and the press and social media side of things.

### What is the most fun part of your job?

That's easy—looking at a map and planning a new project. That's a terribly exciting prospect for me, and that continues all the way through to my interactions with people and communities whilst I gather the images in the field.



**“[Africans] never fail to charm and inspire me, and they can always make me laugh. You can almost feel that smile spreading over your face in the first minutes of being with them.”**

**Do you embrace the changes in the photography industry regarding social media and technology influences?**

Yes and no. I'm happy to embrace new technologies, but I'm not so enthusiastic about social media: for me it interrupts life in more ways than it compliments it. I'm fine with not being so focused on PR to fans or potential customers within social media. I do, however, love to meet people at my shows who enjoy a passionate discourse about the work. I have also engaged a lot over the years with people over email when they contact me.

**What do you consider to be your greatest masterpiece?**

I'd never call one of my own compositions a masterpiece, but there is certainly a picture that I consider to inhabit the perfect space between place, my own inner vision and serendipity: *Lady in White*. It is an environmental portrait taken from behind in Gujarat, India, a long time ago (early 2005). It was long before I decided to come closer with my portraiture and so it has a much more complex composition with shapes, tones and

ambient light distribution that feels satisfying for me to look at, even years after taking it. I enjoy its light contrast and compositional balance – but more than that, it feels a little mysterious.

I am also close to the image because it means a great deal to me. The circumstances leading up to the shot were very challenging: I was in a dusty town in the east of Gujarat and I had spent a week trying to gain access to the infamous ship-breaking yards of Alang. My hopes were dashed after a week of pleading: after four months of walking the streets of India, I was finally growing tired of the dust, heat, flies and cattle.

One day, I spotted what looked like a cattle ranch on the outskirts of town. It stood out due to the incongruous sight of these small, delicate looking women surrounded by huge animals: they looked in danger. I vowed to return the next day in early morning light to try and capture the scene.

*“My parents always let me do what I wanted to, in the nicest sense of the word.”*



When I arrived just after dusk, the scene was frenzied and at times resembled a stampede, as hundreds of animals made a charge for the feed. With more than a little trepidation, I put myself into the middle of this and searched for an opening where I could frame the surreal scene. I was lucky, as for one brief moment the cows separated and gave me chance to frame this single shot. The lighting and her image were almost ethereal. I was standing maybe 7 feet behind the woman, with a wide angle lens, and I left without her knowing I was ever there.

**Do you have any preferences for an artist? And/or for creators of artistic or innovative works?**

Gaudi was one of the most complete artists for me and his arrangement of materials, forms, shapes and colors appear almost supernatural to me. He was so very different to anyone before or after him. He's like a silent friend in Barcelona who somehow never stops haranguing me to come back every few years.

Stefan Sagmeister is a whirlwind of creativity in graphic design, and the number of ideas he has in Things I have Learned is beautiful to behold. I think the French painter Jules De Balincourt has the most perfect understanding of color composition. He's one of my favorite painters alive today.

In terms of art that I own, I have two wonderful original paintings by a Brazilian street artist called Bruno 9li. They are huge, beautiful and sumptuous colour pieces. I love his imagination and more importantly, his ability to execute that same imagination in much of his art works, particularly the work he did around 2008/2009. A few good friends of mine are disturbed by the literal representation in the pictures, as the human-like characters in them are often quite distorted. But for me, I don't even see that when I look at his art works, because I just feel the perfect colors and forms in the composition. To me, it is just fantasy and I don't feel any need to try and put a human meaning to it.

**Could we feature your favorite photographer, author, artist, designer, architect, filmmaker, etc. in our magazine and/or online?**

The French painter Jules De Balincourt

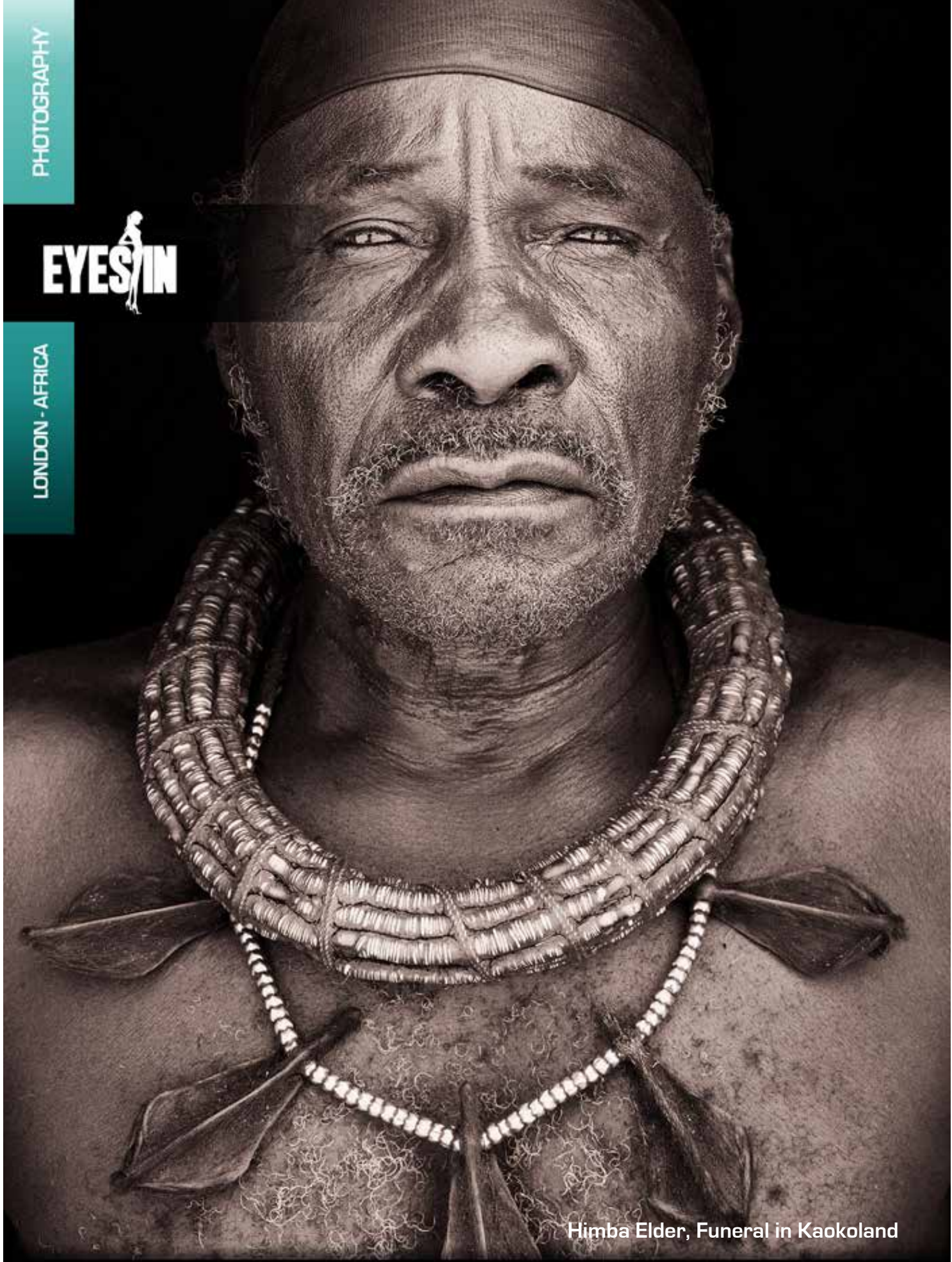
**Do you aspire to collaborate in your creations with an artist or innovative creator from another discipline?**

Most definitely. I'd really like to work with a mixed media artist or a graphic designer to use some of the essence of my portraits—the light, contrast and emotional feel—and come up with something very different. I'd also love to work with an artistic set designer and collaborate on some room sets and arrive at a complex arrangement of found objects. The colors, forms, textures and lighting would be carefully arranged parts of the composition that would be captured with my 10x8 film camera to produce some huge, immersive artwork that we both put our name to. One day, I'll find someone to do that with.

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Himba Elder, Funeral in Kaokoland

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### Do you have a favorite company with whom you would like to work?

No. I haven't looked to do commissions in the past and so my projects are all self-funded, which brings the greatest freedom to follow my own briefings.

### What is your favorite building in the world?

La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. Everything about it is fascinating: from its ambition and its unique appearance to the fact that it is still in construction since commencing in 1882. I go back to Barcelona every few years to see what has changed. I love Gaudi's work, and I love Gothic and Art Nouveau architecture styles, so there could only ever be one favorite building!

### What is your favorite hotel?

Hostal L'Antic Espai in Barcelona is my favorite hotel. I spend a lot of time sleeping in the simplest of places (often outside) in Africa, so I have far more experience of the other end of the scale than places of finesse! This hotel I love, however, and it is a wonderfully affordable and stylish place to sleep in the heart of Barcelona. It's full of period touches, gilt-edged artwork, stained glass lighting and every room is different. It's small, lovely, and my favorite place to sleep in my favourite European city.

### What would be your ideal home?

The one that I have just bought! For the first time, I bought a place in London. It's only a one bedroom garden flat in Peckham, but I'm very excited about finally having a place

to put up my artwork, house my books and entertain friends. I'd like to accumulate pieces of furniture and art from different times, with different but complementary styles, gathered from over many years. Like my favorite hotel, I think this is the key to interiors that I admire: the furniture and objects have a carefully collected inventory of colors, shapes and forms providing an insight into many years of our own material history. My sister, Lisa, is a master at this and her place in Yorkshire is fascinating. I think she has inspired me to think this way.

### What is your favorite working location?

There was only ever going to be one answer to this: Africa. Ethiopia feels like my favorite "home away from home" in this regard, and I've certainly accumulated a lot of love and affection for the place and its people. My favorite project, however, was my first trip to the very remote parts of Northern Kenya. I've also had many wonderful experiences in other African countries, including the people of Niger and Sudan, in particular. Outside of Africa, I was mesmerised by the time I spent in Yemen in 2006 and also the Himalayan landscapes of Ladakh in the far north of India in 2005.

### Do you have any personal and/or professional dreams for the future?

Tough question! My personal hope is to stay healthy and meet that special person who I decide to spend my life with. Professionally, I am excited about my book coming out in September 2013, called Facing Africa/ L'Afrique en face with Five Continents Editions. Next to that, I'd like to have my first exhibition in Africa, because I've never had a chance to view the work with a purely African audience before, and this is their home that I'm obsessed about. Lastly, I just hope to continue doing interesting work and to be able to look back one day and feel that I contributed something positive to the world.