

THROUGH MY OWN EYES

JOHN KENNY is a part-time fine-art photographer based in London. In 2006 he began his travels through Sub-Saharan Africa's remotest areas, taking portraits to highlight the effects of climate change on indigenous communities. **KELLY WEECH** finds out why, on his latest trip, he swapped his Canon EOS 5D Mk II for an 8 x 10 Chamonix large-format film camera

Warrior from the Rendille tribe called Pandilan Korole – taken at the singing wells of Songa, northern Kenya. April 2011. I met this young man with one other warrior at a place known for the sounds made by warriors as they sing and pass buckets of water to the surface from deep wells. Due to the drought there had been an escalation of conflicts with other tribes which had left this place almost deserted, but this young man and his friend knew the risks and seemed undaunted.

JOHN KENNY

{WORKING PRO}

When he first went to Africa in 2006, John Kenny was not envisaging a long-term photographic project, nor did he realise the impact the continent would have on him personally and creatively. In the remoter areas, the reaches of urbanisation and 21st-century living are sometimes barely detectable, with uncertain resources and enormous hardship a part of everyday life. These traditional societies rely on the certainties of tribal rites and a profound understanding of rainfall and pasture patterns to provide a way of life. Within this structure people live a modest existence, without the material wealth of the western world. He recalls: "I always knew I wanted to see the continent of Africa through my own eyes, mainly because the Africa that I felt 'familiar' with was in reality nothing more than an acquaintance with what I had heard through the news: a steady stream of stories focusing primarily on despair. It's true that I photograph for myself, first and foremost, but a close second comes my desire to show others the magnetism that draws one into the eyes of these fascinating people."

Hitchhiking and trekking to find his subjects, John has set out to capture portraits that act as a stark reminder of the impact climate change is having on these communities. He says: "I specifically chose to photograph the individuals that you see on my galleries because I had a real sense of wonder when I met them. Each one had something that attracted me, sometimes a piercing intensity, or an uncommon beauty, which I felt compelled to try to capture." The images he produced do just that, marking both the influence of the modern world and the pride inherent in traditional cultures.



Towards the end of 2010, John decided to take his photographic vision and way of working to another level, because he felt his working habits had become repetitive. His solution was a Chamonix 8 x 10 large-format camera, which would take him back to basics and allow him to hone his craft. He was not seeking to replace his Canon EOS 5D Mk II, but to augment his work with the smaller, digital camera. "I believe large-format cameras lend themselves to a more considered and contemplative approach to photographing," explains John "It's quite hard to contemplate, for us photographers, that there might be some sense of satisfaction in actually not taking a picture. In a strange way it can be quite rewarding not to take the picture when being ready to do so; I think it is the inner sense of quality control kicking in and telling you that the image would not have been good enough, for whatever reason, so why commit the money, time and hope into something you feel is flawed?"

This change in thinking and being more discerning when prejudging the success of each shutter click is something that is not often considered in the digital world. There are practically no penalties in pressing the shutter at will and although this freedom is sometimes of great benefit – for example when you are learning – John found it hindering his own photographic development.

The use of an 8 x 10 camera slows down every step of the photographic process and requires a more methodical working approach. But there is also the expense of film and processing to consider. Shooting with an 8 x 10 in addition to a digital camera obviously increased the cost of this project, which was completely self-funded. However, there are ways to make sizeable savings if you do your homework. John got all his film at 70 per cent off the retail price because it was slightly out of date, although technically perfect, and paid half the costs of 8 x 10 colour film development in London by sending them in large orders to Peak Processing in Sheffield

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John Kenny

(www.peak-imaging.com). In total he shot about 90 sheets of film and used no more than two sheets per person. The final stage of the process involved digitising the film; he selected only a small number of shots and used a drum scanning service in London. He reassures me: "It is still possible today to shoot 8 x 10 on a budget, but you have to shop around and be prepared to use the post a lot to buy and process your materials."

John found his old-school approach served as an ice breaker and talking point among traditional societies in northern Kenya. He says: "Some people were just amazed by the contraption, while others were simply amused

Left: Warrior from the Samburu tribe called Pitalo Lenjuo – taken at Archer's Post, northern Kenya, April 2011. I photographed this warrior as the light was fading in intensity and conditions were far from perfect for the way I photograph; nonetheless this young man was amazing to work with and his demeanour was one of the most natural I have ever come across.

Warrior from the Samburu tribe called Learnesi Learamo – taken at N'Donyo Wasin, northern Kenya, April 2011. I met this young warrior at a remote animal market that happens once a week. I had to photograph at the edge of the market, so by the time I took this shot I had a big crowd of people around me and it was becoming a little chaotic; so I worked fast and carefully to try to capture what I thought was an exceptionally beautiful and striking young Samburu moran (warrior).



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WHAT'S IN YOUR KIT BAG?

- + Chamonix 8 x 10 large-format field camera (maple wood and carbon fibre)
- + Fujifilm Provia 100F slide film
- + Gitzo 5541LS carbon fibre tripod with Arca-Swiss Z1 ballhead
- + Canon EOS 5D Mk II
- + Canon EF 85mm f/1.8 lens



BIOGRAPHY

John Kenny lives in London and has been a part-time photographer since 2007. His images are the result of many years visiting remote cultures across the African continent. When not travelling or exhibiting, he returns to his job as a freelance technology consultant based in the UK.



Above: Warriors from the Samburu tribe called Imelesuan Arapo (left) and Lekeru Mirigishan (right) – taken at the singing wells of Songa, northern Kenya, April 2011. I met them as they rested at the wells; one warrior spent half an hour or so applying red ochre to the other's hair to beautify him.

by it; but there was almost never any ambivalence. I just wish that I had taken a picture of one of my subjects peering through the ‘empty’ camera as I took the lens off the front when packing up the gear. Many people I photographed were mesmerised that this camera – which is really just a wooden space box – had demanded complete concentration over a prolonged period from both of us. I never tired of letting people peer into the fresh air of the camera body to see their reaction.”

On the other hand, the 8 x 10 camera also presents practical and technical problems. In return for outstanding quality and resolution, you give up a lot of working agility when photographing subjects. Large-format cameras demand plenty of patience, especially when using only natural available light. On the most recent trip, the subjects were shot against a white background, simply to reflect and add more light because of the limitation of working with the 8 x 10 camera. “In northern Kenya I had real challenges with finding enough light. Previously I’d shot my subjects in the shade; however, my budgetary constraints meant I needed to adapt my working methods around the materials I could get hold of, in this case ISO 100 Fujifilm Provia transparency film. I was always faced with a judgment call on whether to sacrifice shutter speed for depth-of-field, or vice versa, even though I pushed the film and rated at ISO 200. It was a real challenge when people were standing for the shots, often in windy conditions. I think the fastest shutter speed I managed was 1/30sec – and clearly you need to be very careful in watching out for subject movement in close portraits at all stages of the photographic setup and image capture. The depth-of-field limitations with 8 x 10 are in a different world to that of digital formats, with the front-to-back focus sharpness being so much less than with 35mm full-frame capture.”

Sometimes John felt he did not have enough time to set up the 8 x 10 camera and he would rely upon his Canon EOS 5D Mk II. “You can’t capture everything with 8 x 10, especially when you may have access to a person for a very short time, and also because not every subject can give you the concentration to make the picture a success. So I shot both formats and I will definitely use this approach again.” He used his judgment to

{WORKING PRO}



Above: Young girl from the Turkana tribe called Alamach Allol – taken at Loiyangalani on the edge of Lake Turkana, northern Kenya, April 2011. I photographed this girl in intensely hot and windy conditions with my 8 x 10 Chamonix. It was hugely difficult to stop the wind from blowing the extended bellows with my 450mm portrait lens, and I also needed to wait for clouds so I could manage contrast on the transparency film. I took this shot during a very brief pause in the winds – by then both the subject and I were more than ready for it!

decide which format would give him the better chance of success with a particular subject.

In his new exhibition *Facing Uncertainty – Photographic Portraits from Kenya*, John’s images will be on display up to two metres wide by 1.6 metres high. However, at this large scale, John insists that he is not pushing the limits of this format, even with an 8x enlargement, simply because of its phenomenal resolution. Each image will be captioned to help provide context for the viewer. John feels the writing will counter-balance a tendency to romanticise the lifestyles of the people in the photographs. “It is obvious that there are compelling hardships that shape the daily existence of people who live among traditional societies. My exhibition aims to provide the viewer with a realistic view of how the communities in semi-arid areas such as northern Kenya are encountering enormous difficulties with the droughts of the last decade. At the moment I’m working with a community leader from a Samburu tribal village to construct the show’s narrative and provide an insight into the role that recurring drought and climate change plays for those who live there. I’ve seen first-hand the difficulties of a sustained lack of water and pasture for communities which live in dry areas with their animals.”

John will give some of the exhibition’s profits to community groups in these areas and will also ask visitors to the show to consider a donation. A selection of his work will be donated to the Africa Foundation in the UK and feature in its *Art for Africa* auction in aid of the countries where he has worked previously. ☑

www.john-kenny.com

Facing Uncertainty, Photographic Portraits from Kenya, by John Kenny, will run from 22 September to 3 October 2011 at 3 Bedfordbury Gallery, Covent Garden, London, WC2N 4BP. If you go along, let us know your thoughts by emailing feedback@professionalphotographer.co.uk