



MINISTRY OF NOMADS

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Abyssinian Dreams

I worked in East Africa in Tropical disease control for years before I was able to photograph the people that inspired these images. Mostly I worked in camps for people displaced by the Lords Resistance Army, or in camps where political rebels such as the Sudanese Liberation Army were seeking refuge. It was always in border regions that have little or no economic interest to the central governments and so retain their tribal autonomy. I spent months working with and observing these unique and rapidly changing cultures, often without my camera as at various times a politically sensitive Nubian or a Dinka would remove my bagged camera from my shoulder and hold it hostage for a period.

On my last assignment to East Africa for the London School of Tropical Medicine I heard whispers of an area in southern Ethiopia untouched by the modern world. With some weeks spare from researching the economies of malaria prevention and at a point where my life was shifting from that of a scientist to one guided by photography, I first visited the Omo valley. The physical attributes of the inhabitants of the Omo inspired me to create this work and led me back to the wild border regions of East Africa where centralisation is only recently gaining a foothold and where the people up until now have been relatively isolated from globalisation.

Thousands of years of migration through the Rift Valley has resulted in a remarked diversity in its people and we can only wonder at the history of transition that has shaped the faces and the presence of the people who reside there. I have returned to the Rift Valley especially the Omo many times to try and capture the essence of its people and my emerging relationship with the area.

Despite its inheritance of change, the region's transformations over the few years since my first visit seem particularly extensive. Whilst visitors now are still at the mercy of the weather, vehicle breakdown and backbreaking roads, access has vastly improved. Roads are being paved and — with the development of the East African Highway running from Addis Ababa through the Omo Valley, and Kenya to Dar es Salam — traffic to the valley is rapidly increasing. Incoming road workers, truckers and tourists are changing tribal aspirations. My own interaction with the people there has metamorphosed in this short time; as the tourist dollar slowly becomes a way of life, tribal customs and traditional hospitality slowly fade into history.



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The images that fill the following pages are a tribute to the beauty and grace of the people of the Valley. They capture a time when tribal fashions — such as lip plates and scarification — are being supplanted by global fashions such as baseball caps, football shirts and, more sinisterly, the bearing of Kalashnikovs and the Chinese-made guns that flood all East Africa's borders. The cultural heritage appears fragile, threatened by the world encroaching upon the territory but the people, with their inherent capacity for transition, take incoming influences and fashion them into their own estimations.

In 2008 I started taking a portable studio to isolate the subjects from their surroundings, extracting the individual from his or her contextual backgrounds so as to bring their gaze, unmediated, into the image. The subjects confront the viewer, life size, they command immediacy and attention to the modernity of their situation; they are tangible beings looking directly through the flat image. Seeking to question further the limitations of this flatness, I have begun inserting the defining accessories that indicate the subjects' status and style back into the images. For example the ceramic and wooden lip plates that define a brides' worth, the Kalashnikov-bullet bracelets that signal wealth and the beads and pigments prized by the Hamar and Ebore. The formal ambiguity of these semi-sculptural works enables the viewer to consider both the space in which they stand and the space represented, allowing them I hope, a fleeting kind of encounter with the ever-transforming people of the Omo valley.