OVAHIMBA YOUTH

SELF PORTRAITS

KYLE WEEKS

OVAHIMBA YOUTH

SELF PORTRAITS

KYLE WEEKS

2014

johans borman

FINE ART

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

There is a palpable sense of brotherhood among the self-styled Himba men depicted in Kyle Weeks' powerful photographic series. Their bonds appear strong, and their faces depict universal expressions of youth: confidence, shyness, vulnerability, amusement, suspicion, reticence, self-consciousness, defiance. We recognize these markers and see ourselves.

But there are many layers of sameness and difference in these extraordinary images. Personal style is everywhere: brilliant colours and patterns, familiar corporate labels worn in unusual combinations, knife cuts on polo shirts. Fearless fashion. And the attitude is clear in the postures: we love who we are.

There is a complicated history around representation in Namibia – and elsewhere; we know this. But the artist's decision to put the shutter release cable into the hands of the subject shifts the power dynamic. We see these young men as they wish to be seen: traditional, contemporary, and proud.

Kenneth Montague
The Wedge Collection
Toronto

Kyle Weeks was born in Windhoek, Namibia in 1992, and completed his BA degree majoring in Photography from the Stellenbosch Academy of Design and Photography in 2013. He currently lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa.

KYLE WEEKS
IN CONVERSATION WITH
MICHAEL GODBY

Michael Godby: *Can we start with you telling me where you were brought up, and how the Ovahimba came into your life?*

Kyle Weeks: I was born and raised in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. Residing in the calm suburb of Klein Windhoek, our family of four lived near the edge of the city, alongside the eastern Khomas Mountains. My father, David Weeks, had always been a wildly enthusiastic outdoorsman; the vast landscapes of northeastern Namibia his preferred travel destination. Naturally, his affinities became my own, and as the years progressed our customary expeditions sparked my growing interest in the natural environment, as well as the Ovahimba culture indigenous to this remote area known as Kaokoland. Once I had been introduced to photography in 2009, I started taking pictures on our return later that year.

MG: *You say you were 'introduced' to photography in 2009. Were you trained in photography at that time? What were your interests at school? And did you study after leaving school?*

KW: That year I met a photographer by the name of Leigh Daniz. She had moved to Windhoek from Johannesburg in the hope of establishing a photographic studio. I quickly became infected by her passion for the medium, and soon after asked her to be my mentor. For the next two years she taught me and helped fuel my growing dedication for what would later become my chosen career path. Before that I never considered myself artistically inclined in the least. My previous interests had been related to my memorable experiences in nature, and Geography and Biology were my stronger suits at school. I had taken art as an elective subject, and once I began photographing it actually helped develop my visual inclination. When I matriculated in 2010 my career choice was as clear as day; I enrolled at the Stellenbosch Academy of Design and Photography, where I completed a BA degree in applied design, specializing in photography, by the end of 2013.

MG: *So the Ovahimba portraits collection is one of your very first projects? Did your studies prepare you for this project technically, stylistically, or theoretically?*

KW: Yes, it is one of my first serious undertakings. While I have taken on numerous projects over the past few years, this body of work has undoubtedly been my main focus. As for the Academy, it completely exceeded my expectations. When I started in 2011 my outlook was characterized by a certain naivety; all I wanted was to make good-looking photographs. My studies, however, quickly changed all that, shifting my attention towards conceptual imagery and providing me with the foundational technical skills to create rich visual narratives. Furthermore, the theoretical courses proved hugely influential in my gravitation toward representation of the African continent. Drawn to the idea of using photography as a means of reflecting and commenting on society, I developed a love for photographing people, which had never appealed to me before. The institution and its staff run an exceptional photography program, and I'd recommend it to any aspiring photographer, but at the same time, I can't stress enough the importance of dedicating those extra hours. You get out what you put in.

MG: *What made you choose to work with the Ovahimba specifically, and how did you decide to make a collection of portrait photographs of these young men?*

KW: As I became increasingly magnetized to portraiture and gained a clearer understanding of issues surrounding photography and identity, my photographic efforts in Namibia became more directed at the people within this environment. When I had previously photographed Himba people, I had inadvertently adopted a kind of fleeting, unfiltered touristic eye characterized by the search for visual difference. I recognized that images of these semi-nomadic cattle herders were incredibly prolific, but that none of the portraits I had seen, or had been taking, were contributing in any way to the documentation of their contemporary cultural identity. The rift between the representation and the realities of these people became profoundly apparent. I suppose this is why I set out to create a series of photographs that would contest the view of this society as traditional and unchanging, when I could see that it is evolving because of the influences of modern culture.

The decision to photograph young Himba men arose from exploration and first-hand experience. In taking the time to sift through the mass of imagery of these people, I found that nearly all images depicted women and children, as if Ovahimba men didn't exist. The reason for this is probably that women remain more traditional in appearance, rarely appropriating any forms of Western attire, therefore visually reaffirming the perception of this culture as unchanging. I discovered that the men, especially those of a younger age, most clearly embodied the shift toward modernity, which is why they are so rarely photographed, particularly by tourists, who produce the bulk of photographs taken in this area. I'll never forget driving in Opuwo, the capital of the Kunene region, in January 2013 and seeing a group of fashionable young Himba men walking along, their self-confidence so obvious that it prevented me from approaching them. On leaving the town, I was surprised to see evidence of this hybridized fashion sense even in the more remote settlements, and all the way up to the border between Namibia and Angola.

These young men were consciously extending their individual identities and self-expression beyond the traditional, experiencing a transformation of identity, and maybe even a form of cultural and conventional escapism. The project evolved gradually. I had started by taking studio portraits of people in this area, and soon

came to focus on these young men. In April 2013, I returned to Opuwo and introduced the self-portrait process for the first time. Having used analog equipment I encountered various difficulties, and it was only on my third visit in June 2013 that I began to achieve the results I had hoped for.

MG: *But it cannot be coincidental that these young men are more or less the same age as you?*

KW: No. It was an intentional decision on my part. In carefully regulating the ages of my subjects I was attempting to narrow the societal and cultural gap between myself, a young white Namibian male, arguably Western, and them, as young, black traditional Namibian men. Moreover, this shared common ground allowed for a heightened sense of relation and interaction during the photographic process, which resulted in more natural performativity by the young men. The relationship between photographer and subject became of principal importance in this series, as I attempted to neutralize the power imbalances inherent in most representations of the Himba culture, particularly those by Western photographers.

MG: *These ideas put me in mind of the dissertation you wrote on 'Photographic Representations of African People' in which you demonstrate clear awareness of the problems of ethnographic photography. Perhaps you could comment on the ambiguity of such work which, on the one hand, demonstrates obvious power imbalances, as you put it, and yet, on the other, is often extremely beautiful? This comment can apply as much to contemporary ethnographic photography as to the work of A.M. Duggan-Cronin.*

KW: I think that every act of photographic portraiture is characterized by an inherent power dynamic between subject and photographer. Ethnographic photography, however, which is historically, and to this day, still produced mainly by Westerners, seems to be characterized by a pronounced imbalance of this dynamic in which the author assumes complete control of the creation of the image. While these portraits are meant to 'study' their subjects, their underlying aim is the articulation of visual difference, resulting in an ideologically tainted representation, based less on what is seen than on a predetermined view of the racial other; one that suits and favours current social and political endeavors of the West.

Moreover, these images are destined for viewing by a Western audience, which is why the subjects, although often objectified and exoticised, are depicted in such a highly aestheticised manner. This appropriation of European honorific portraiture is a strategy employed by photographers in this field to give their images romantic and iconic appeal, making the unfamiliar more desirable, and ultimately more suitable to feed the curiosity of those back home.

A young Himba man in Opuwo on a Sunday morning. July 2012

MG: *But surely you share this curiosity. You have chosen to depict these young men because they* are *different. Obviously, they are not untouched by globalization but, like the Maasai of East Africa, their culture – their dress, their adornment, their traditions and their value-system – is fundamentally opposed to the homogenizing consumerism of the Western world. Is this not part of your project also?*

KW: I do, yes. I believe that curiosity for the unfamiliar and 'exotic' is an innate human quality. We are all attracted by the lure of the unfamiliar. Although the difference of the Himba culture to my own certainly was one of the initial bases to this project, as I delved deeper, its foundation evolved toward navigating the politics and ethics of representing difference. Additionally, I simply wanted to make images that highlighted the individuality, creativity and unique fashion sense of these young men.

Young Himba men repair their vehicle's punctured tire beside the C43 road between Okangwati and Opuwo. April 2013

Up until now we have discussed the Western interest in people in Africa pertaining to this particular body of work, but these images clearly depict that this fascination functions both ways. The Himba culture at large is undeniably opposed to the homogenizing effects of globalization, and although the people fear losing their traditions, an increasing number of their youth are adopting a more Westernized lifestyle and expressing a change in aspirations. Aspirations which they believe cannot be met with a traditional subsistence lifestyle. So, to answer your question: The series does address the struggle to maintain tradition in the age of globalization. What arises is an apparent dislocation between what is read as traditional and what is read as Western. It calls for an end to preconceived visual assumptions, as the hybridization of their culture no longer facilitates such a clear-cut distinction between traditional and contemporary cultural identity.

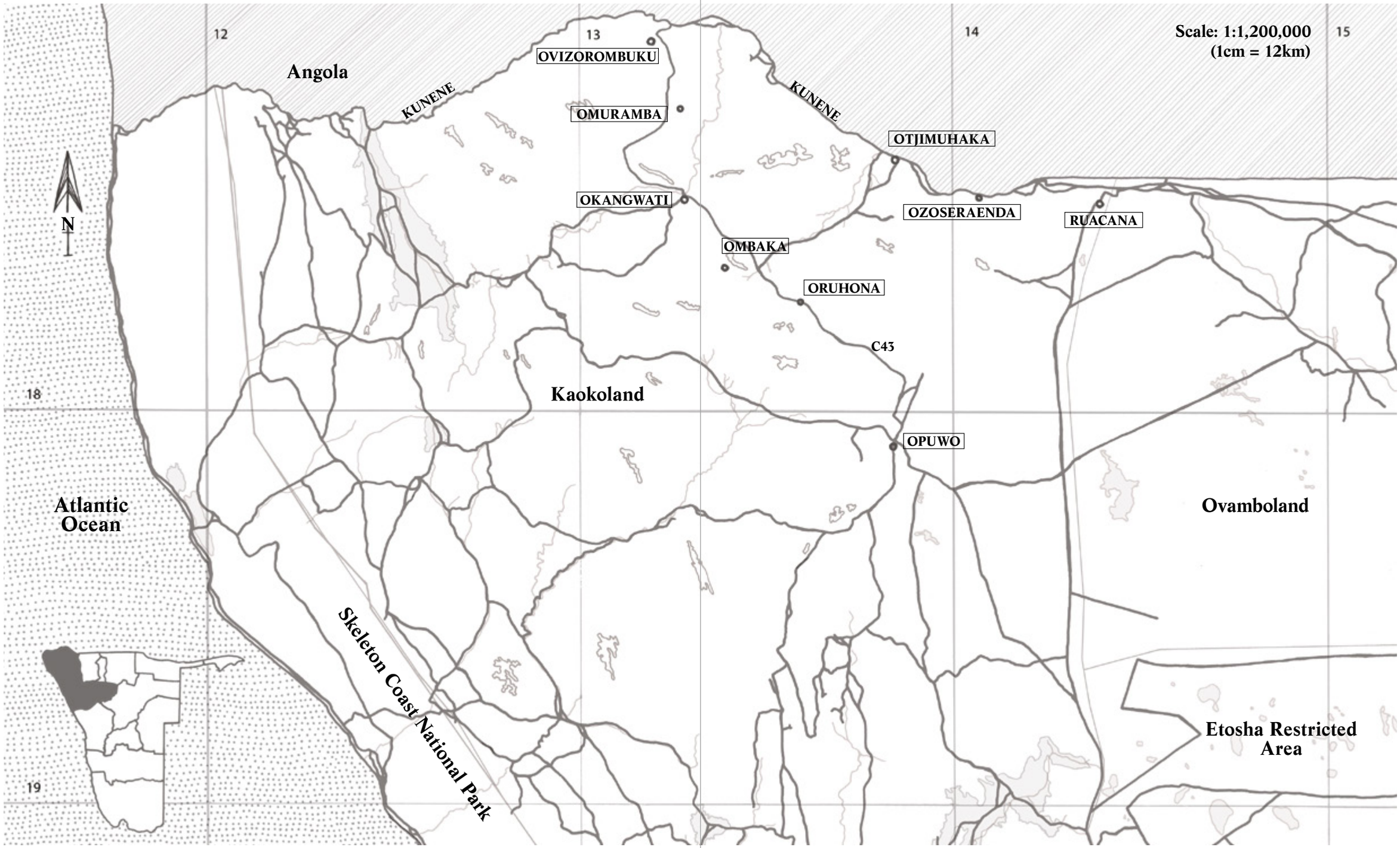
MG: *Let's be more specific about the people you are photographing. Who are the Ovahimba? Where do they live? How many of them are there? And, in relation to the young men you have chosen, who are they within Himba society? What defines their identity? And what do they do?*

KW: The Ovahimba are semi-nomadic pastoralists, indigenous to the northwestern Kaokoland area of Namibia (now known as the Kunene district). While their population is rather small, it is difficult to determine the actual numbers that inhabit this area. The ancestors of these people, the Herero, are thought to have migrated to Namibia from southern Angola sometime during the middle of the 16th century. Although not proven, it is commonly believed that their settlement was obstructed by the powerful Ovambo people, who forced them west, into the inhospitable mountainous regions of Kaokoland where water was sparse. Here they lived for roughly two centuries, adopting a nomadic way of life, after which the majority of Herero people moved southeast to central Namibia, in search of improved living conditions. Those who remained would later become known as the Ovahimba, as they are still recognized today.

The young men depicted in the photographs all share a common position in Himba society. Hairstyle is the definitive indicator of social status, and the single plait extending down the back of the head, with the rest of the hair shaved, known as the Ondatu, indicates that these men are all unmarried. Their task is herding the

The vast, semi-arid landscape of Kaokoland is one of the least densely populated areas in Namibia. Here, the Ovahimba live in scattered settlements, and may move around several times a year in search of water and grazing for their livestock.
June 2013

larger livestock, specifically the cattle, and they do so everyday, with the utmost dedication. I recall a chance meeting that occurred when I spent a night near one of the villages; a young man walked past our camp, leading his cattle home while listening to music from his cellphone. I asked the translator to catch his attention, and enquired about the music he was listening to. It was a self-recorded song by the man himself, lyrically describing his devotion toward the cattle. I had seen numerous young men with cellphones, but this encounter got me thinking that although accepting certain aspects of Western material culture, these men still shared a strong affinity for their traditions and pastoral lifestyle.


12
13
14
15
Scale: 1:1,200,000
(1cm = 12km)
Angola
KUNENE
KUNENE
OVIZOROMBUKU
OMURAMBA
OTJIMUHAKA
OKANGWATI
OZOSERAENDA
RUACANA
OMBAKA
ORUHONA
C43
Kaokoland
OPUWO
Ovamboland
N
18
Atlantic
Ocean
Skeleton Coast National Park
Etosha Restricted
Area
19

MG: *In all these answers, you indicate clear awareness of the critiques of ethnographic photography. Can you explain what strategies you employed to counter the imbalance of power which, after all, is still implicit in your representation of these young Himba men?*

KW: From the earliest phases of the project until the time when the first 'usable' portraits were taken, both my approach and my photographic process had gradually become more complex in an attempt to address the power imbalance which, as you say, is still implicit in these images. The most obvious strategy was to give the young men the shutter-release, and by doing that, I introduced the concept of expression through self-portraiture. Rather than taking something from my subjects, I wanted to give them the opportunity for mediated self-representation, literally inverting the power imbalance; drastically reducing my influence over the final outcome.

Having previously worked with numerous translators from varying ages and cultures, I could see from the initial images how influential this position would be on the performance and collaboration of the sitters. I needed the help of someone to whom they could relate in order to create an environment in which the young men felt comfortable enough to act spontaneously in front of the camera. I was fortunate to find a young Himba interpreter named Johannes Tjikongo whose youth and good nature helped ease the men into an otherwise unfamiliar situation in which they would create their own portraits, probably for the first time in their lives.

Another strategy, based on my own experience of having a formal portrait made, was to provide a one-day preparation period. The aim was to give the men time, both to round up their favourite outfits, and to consider their participation in the project. Johannes had made it clear that they should dress how they wished to be seen, in a way that was comfortable, and made them feel confident. Moreover, from the beginning I always carried earlier self-portrait photographs with me, both to distribute amongst the people who had already been photographed, and to help illustrate my aims to new participants. The men clearly enjoyed looking at these images, and they seem to have encouraged them to participate in the process.

MG: *Tell me how you improvised studio conditions in these remote places. How did you make the background, how did you introduce color, why did you photograph your subjects seated.*

KW: I constructed the makeshift studio from a simple gazebo structure with fabric stretched over the top and sides. My aim was to create constant, gentle lighting conditions, quite unlike the harsh sunlight in which the Ovahimba are usually depicted. For the coloured background I hung reddish, felt-like material down the back of the structure. While I wanted the subjects to construct their own portraits, I felt that I had to control all other aspects of the process. I decided to seat them in order to limit movement; as they were posing I had to control the focus of the camera, and their movement while standing would have made this extremely difficult.

MG: *Can you describe what you call the performance of your sitters? Did you tell them how many photographs you would be taking of them? Did you suggest any poses to them? And, looking at them in retrospect, can you sense where these poses came from – magazine images, movie stills, or whatever?*

KW: As one would expect of any group of people, the sitters behaved quite differently in front of the camera: There will always be those who are confident, and enjoy the attention, while others are more self-conscious and reluctant to act for the camera – each bringing their own personality to the encounter. Of course, I wanted this diversity to be evident in the final photographs.

Shooting film meant I had to limit the number of images that subjects could take of themselves. They were told both the day before, and at the beginning of the session, that they could take 10 to 15 images each. I also hoped it would enforce a more considered approach, urging them to think about their self-representation. Once a sitter was seated, I would begin by taking a few images with my digital camera, showing them the results, and then moving to the medium format camera, and explaining how to use the shutter release. My main intervention was to suggest straightened postures, explaining that it made them look proud; otherwise I occasionally helped with the body angles when the subject did not want to face the camera directly. For the majority, the first few frames were hesitant, playful and experimental, but as the session progressed, the process usually slowed down, and the sitters became more deliberate in their approach. It is difficult to say what, if anything, the men were modeling their poses on. Looking back at the portraits now, they definitely do evoke memories of certain

poses I've seen in glossy magazines and movie stills. While some of these young men will have been exposed to such contemporary imagery in the mass media, their exposure is still relatively limited. Perhaps the little that they have seen has left a lasting impression.

MG: *Yes, I imagine that the poses are bound to have complex references. Looking back on the photographic encounter now, what would you say you learned about the young Himba men through it? And, more to the point, do you think that your viewer will learn more about them through your work?*

KW: I certainly did. The level of engagement that I required from the sitters to produce this body of work was profoundly revealing. I realized that these men, like others of their age, portray similar complexities and nuances of young adulthood. This period of introspection is characterized by the urge to evolve, to expand the self and embody the changes on both physical and mental levels. In the case of the young Himba men, their growing intrigue with Western society, as well as the desire to distance themselves from the purely traditional, comes in the form of appropriating Western dress, and their ability to perform, so freely, the various poses and identities that are evident in the work.

After seeing, first hand, the drastic transformations that many of them underwent before, during and after the shoot, I would argue that this generation of young men has come to understand the constructed nature of both personal and cultural identity. Furthermore, this understanding has, I think, fostered a sense of control, and given them power to manage their own identities. Nevertheless, they seem to maintain a balance: Although there clearly is a shift toward modernity, a strong kinship to tradition is sustained. The northwestern Kunene region has previously provided a secluded environment suitable for their traditional lifestyle to flourish, however, it has become increasingly susceptible to foreign cultural influences with the current influx of entrepreneurs, a rise in tourism, and mass media with its proliferation of socially constructed concepts such as fashion, and an idealized lifestyle. Creating this body of work has instilled in me a heightened sense of awareness, in which I recognize something of the complexities and dynamism of Himba culture.

As for what the viewers might learn from these portraits, I obviously cannot answer for them. I hope that they would recognize the difference between my work and both the typical ethnographic photography as well as the superficial imagery generated by tourism. They would hopefully read into this difference something of what I am trying to attribute to these young Himba men around the ideas of agency, mobility and self-fashioning.


KODAK PORTRA 160

PORTRAITS

Nduombe Ndjundja, 18
Ovizorombuku
2014

Ndepee Muundjwa, 22
Ombaka
2014

Vevakeramo Ngombe, 22
Ovizorombuku
2014

Mairoko Tjiumbwa, 20
Oruhona
2014

Ngatangwe Tjiuma, 24
Ozoseraenda
2014

Kandu Kapika, 21
Ovizorombuku
2014

Kakuvarurwa Tjeerengera, 25
Ozoseraenda
2014

Zatumbwamo Muniombara, 22
Ovizorombuku
2014

Kazeru Muundjwa, 22
Ombaka
2014

Utoto Hembinda, 19
Ovizorombuku
2014

Vanavaina Tjiumbua, 23
Opuwo
2014

Vezepaumwe Hembinda, 26
Okangwati
2013

Kaondi Mbendura, 19
Ombaka
2014

Maezepako Tjindunda, 21
Ozoseraenda
2014

Waandja Rumuno, 25
Omuramba
2014

Ketumba Ngombe, 24
Otjimuhaka
2014

Tjimbininyama Hivita, 22
Okangwati
2014

Veripura Tjiuma, 24
Ozoseraenda
2014

Vapanenamo Tjiposa, 26
Okangwati
2013

Vemuvirira Mutambo, 20
Ozoseraenda
2014

Nambata Tjiposa, 19
Ozoseraenda
2014

Tjivekara Hembinda, 24
Omuramba
2014

Kaunda Muhenye, 23
Otjimuhaka
2014

Maerivanga Ndiaombe, 24
Omuramba
2014

Wakarerera Tjondu, 22
Otjimuhaka
2014

Vapwakuapi Thom, 18
Okangwati
2013

Kaepueneha Muhenye, 19
Ozoseraenda
2014

Kapanda Mbendura, 21
Ozoseraenda
2014

Matuvetwapi Tjiposa, 22
Ombaka
2014

Vasongonona Muniombara, 23
Ovizorombuku
2014

Dibonded C-Type photographic prints on 250g Fuji Crystal Archive paper, signed and numbered by the photographer. The images are available in:

Edition of 5

image size: 59,4 x 49,6 cm
paper size: 66,4 x 55,6 cm

Edition of 5

image size: 84 x 70 cm
paper size: 91 x 76 cm

Nduombe Ndjundja, 18
Ovizorombuku
2014

Ndepee Muundjwa, 22
Ombaka
2014

Vevakeramo Ngombe, 22
Ovizorombuku
2014

Mairoko Tjiumbwa, 20
Oruhona
2014

Ngatangwe Tjiuma, 24
Ozoseraenda
2014

Vanavaina Tjiumbua, 23
Opuwo
2014

Vezepaumwe
Hembinda, 26
Okangwati
2013

Kaondi Mbendura, 19
Ombaka
2014

Maezepako Tjindunda, 21
Ozoseraenda
2014

Waandja Rumuno, 25
Omuramba
2014

Nambata Tjiposa, 19
Ozoseraenda
2014

Tjivekara Hembinda, 24
Omuramba
2014

Kaunda Muhenye, 23
Otjimuhaka
2014

Maerivanga Ndiaombe, 24
Omuramba
2014

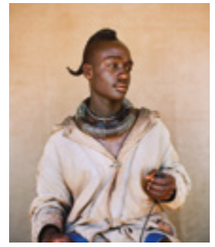
Wakarerera Tjondu, 22
Otjimuhaka
2014

Kandu Kapika, 21
Ovizorombuku
2014

Kakuvarurwa
Tjeerengera, 25
Ozoseraenda
2014

Zatumbwamo
Muniombara, 22
Ovizorombuku
2014

Kazeru Muundjwa, 22
Ombaka
2014



Utoto Hembinda, 19
Ovizorombuku
2014

Ketumba Ngombe, 24
Otjimuhaka
2014

Tjimbininyama Hivita, 22
Okangwati
2014

Veripura Tjiuma, 24
Ozoseraenda
2014

Vapanenamo Tjiposa, 26
Okangwati
2013

Vemuvirira Mutambo, 20
Ozoseraenda
2014

Vapwakuapi Thom, 18
Okangwati
2013

Kaepueneha Muhenye, 19
Ozoseraenda
2014

Kapanda Mbendura, 21
Ozoseraenda
2014

Matuvetwapi Tjiposa, 22
Ombaka
2014

Vasongonona
Muniombara, 23
Ovizorombuku
2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to my father, David Weeks, for accompanying me on each of the numerous expeditions into Kaokoland, and for his on-going devotion and support throughout this project. I'd like to thank Johans Borman for his belief in the work since its infancy, and for all his hard work in making this exhibition possible. Thanks to each of my sitters, not only for their valuable time, but also for their trust and active collaboration in creating the portraits. Thanks to Johannes Tjikongo for travelling with us, and for clearly translating my intentions and the aims of this project to the young Himba men. Thanks to Kenneth Montague for the wonderful introductory text, and to Michael Godby for conducting the 'in conversation' piece for the catalogue. Thanks to Max Siedentopf for the beautiful catalogue design and layout. Many thanks to the following people for their invaluable contributions throughout the past two years: David Southwood, Andrew Putter, Mark Antonello, Hylton Boucher, Robin Bernstein, Ruan Van Jaarsveldt and Andrej Von Walter.

Art direction & design by Max Siedentopf
Cover illustration by Adam Villacin
Map illustration by Andrej Von Walter
Proof reading by Amy Catchpole

Edition of 200 copies
Printed by Hansa Print

johans borman
FINE ART

Published by Johans Borman Fine Art, Cape Town, 2014

16 Kildare Road
Newlands
Cape Town
7700
Tel: +27 (0) 21 683 6863
E-mail: art@johansborman.co.za

johans borman

FINE ART