

HOTSHOE

Katharine Cooper - White Africans

Katharine Cooper was born and raised in Africa, but as an African of European descent, she was part of the minority growing up. She talks to Alia Thomas about the significance of her series, “White Africans”, and touches upon the issues that are still present within parts of the African community.

Deryl Barlow Dressed As Cleopatra With Greyhounds - Montagu, South Africa 2013

AT: How did your interest in photography come about?

KC: I grew up surrounded by it. My father is a photographer – he studied journalism, edited the local paper and had a darkroom at home. At first I swore I would never become a photographer – I hated the chemicals and the hours of hard work. Then one day, I picked up one of my father’s cameras – a Nikkormat – and began photographing one of my girlfriends from school. I developed the film and made a contact sheet, and loved what I had done. I was hooked.

AT: You seem to focus mainly on social aspects of life within your work. What made you look into the particular subject of ‘white africans’?

KC: Because I am one. I am an African of European descent; by nationality I am South African. I seem to be able to take good pictures when the subjects (people) are familiar and beloved to me. In the case of the White Africans, I was seeking only to confirm visual images and memories of the beauty that surrounded me in my childhood.

Stacy & the Little Boy - Harare, Zimbabwe, 2013

AT: There is a quality to the series feels as if it may have come from another time, and another place rather than modern day South Africa. Was this part of your thinking for the series and does the black and white imagery have any significance to the nature of its subject?

KC: No, I am not clever enough to calculate such things. I never made the switch to digital; I still use the Hasselblad 500c given to me by my father, and I like the Black & White because it makes everything softer yet harder at the same time. I also enjoy the elements of hazard and chance that are inherently tied to analog photography. My work is totally intuitive; the minute I start thinking and worrying and having a purpose other than to capture the soul of beauty within my subject, then generally the image doesn’t succeed. Often my best work is made when I am tired and when my automatic pilot takes over; when I’m not really thinking about it, then the magic happens.

Declan & Polly - Ledbury Farm, Mazowe, Zimbabwe, 2013

AT: The portraits in the series are predominantly of young and much older people, but not a lot of the middle aged. It seems you were looking at either end of the spectrum. Was this intentional?

KC: No, not at all. I have no idea why it comes across this way. I think I photographed people of all ages, but in the editing perhaps the pictures of these categories of people were more striking.

AT: The portraits have quite relaxed feeling to them. It seems that some may have been posed to an extent, but the majority are how the subjects would have acted in front of the camera either way (for example the groups of young boys). What made you choose this style over a more structured style in terms of consistent posing, lighting, background, etc?

KC: Thank you, I am glad you feel this, because that's how I do work. As I said earlier, I love hasard. There is a magic that occurs when people are allowed to interact spontaneously. This applies especially to groups. I love the body language and the beauty of the attitudes that people quite naturally assume. I am quite blown away by the beauty of human beings. I don't mean beauty in the classic sense, either, but rather the amazing individuality of each person's makeup. Ugly people are often far more beautiful than plastically beautiful people. But I digress... My god in the photographic domain is Irving Penn. The way he groups people is pure Art to me. Every now and again, I will nourish my mind's eye by looking at his images and how he arranges people. However, I prefer to let their environment creep into the shot, even if it is only a hint of hills or the ocean in the background — it is so interesting when one has these details to nourish the shot. Avedon's work « In the American West » with its systematic white background and lighting, is stunning. But I prefer in my case to let what is naturally-occurring remain in the frame.

Coronation Park - Naughty Boys, South Africa 2013

AT: There is an image of a white african mother and her two sons stood by their home with, one would assume, her black african maid. It seems like quite a poignant image within the series. Was it important to you to have such an image?

KC: Extremely. Anyone who has grown up in Africa will understand why.

Karin & Family, Jeffreysbaai, South Africa 2013

AT: I would imagine that it was a very interesting and enjoyable project for you to carry out, and rather poignant. During your revisiting of these places, did you notice much change with regards to the caucasian minority from your childhood e.g. the way they felt being part of a minority, the way they were treated by other black Africans?

KC: Not really, no. You see I did most of my growing up in Zimbabwe, although the formative years (0-7) were spent in South Africa. In Zimbabwe when I arrived in 1986, there was no apartheid, and I did not really notice the fact that now there were little black girls in my class at school instead of only white ones. As children, we are not inherently racist, though indoctrination does begin at an early age, especially in these countries! As for the white minority in today's South Africa, I would say that not much has changed. The white man still fears the black man — Fear is what creates racism — and money sees no skin colour. There is an ever-growing population of Poor Whites in South Africa today who are extremely vulnerable because they have no means of protecting themselves against the poor black people who naturally target them because of their difference. Such is human nature. Unfortunately.

Divers At Kooelbaai, South Africa 2013

See more from the series [here](#).

Cooper is represented by the Flatland Gallery in Amsterdam.
<http://www.flatlandgallery.com>

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