



"School Boys in Bhutan," 2010. From the show "DIGNITY: Tribes in Transition," photographs by Dana Gluckstein, at the Lowe Museum of Art through April 22, 2018. Dana Gluckstein

She takes photos in faraway places to reveal how close we all are

By Jane Wooldridge

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Each unflinching gaze vies for attention, dragging you across the room for a closer look. The Haitian woman draped in beads and scarf, a pipe hanging from her lips. Four Bhutanese boys sitting cross-armed on a stone wall. The Herero man in the dark double-breasted suit and hipster hat, staring through shades cloaking the Namibian sun.

Though most are unsmiling, there's no sense of aggression or anger, but rather a fierce pride that photographer Dana Gluckstein aptly calls "dignity."

That is the name of her 2010 book, published in celebration of Amnesty International's 50th anniversary. It is also the name of her exhibition currently on display at the University of Miami's Lowe Museum of Art. Then and now, the images underscore the value of historically shunned Indigenous Peoples and the essential humanity that links us all, regardless of geography and genomes.



"Woman with Pipe, Traditional Medicinal Plant Healer, Haiti," 1984.

That same strength of connection has fueled my own travel addiction, drawing me to more than 100 countries around the planet. Words are unnecessary when you're playing with children in the misty mountains of West Papua, sipping tea with the bead-decked ladies of southern Ethiopia's desert or laughing with a group of soldiers sliding down the icy incline of China's Great Wall in a December blizzard.

For Gluckstein, such universal experiences underscore the relevance of current events. The racial tensions that have erupted across the U.S. are part of a wake-up call for action against prejudice that rise from a medieval notion that native peoples were more animal than human. "We are talking about the roots of racism," she said during a Miami visit earlier this year.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHxyXoZipZo&feature=youtu.be>

From South America to Alaska, Africa to Asia, the history of enslaving, starving and abusing native peoples and ethnic minorities goes back nearly to the beginning of time. From Gluckstein's vantage,

it's a path that destroys the perpetrators as well. "The indigenous voice is the voice of survival for the entire planet," she said.

Gluckstein echoes a refrain expressed elsewhere in the book by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Faithkeeper Oren R. Lyons of New York's native Onondaga Nation. "Indigenous Peoples throughout the world have something profound and important to teach those of us who live in the so-called modern world," Tutu writes. "They teach us that the first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of creation."

Gluckstein's portraits may seem like a natural fit with the Lowe's collection of ethnographic art in the museum's permanent gallery, a few rooms removed from entry space that typically showcases contemporary work. But Gluckstein says these images and the people they portray are no academic study but a personal calling.

After graduating from Stanford, Gluckstein abandoned her plans for a career in psychology and turned to photographic portraits for magazines and commercial clients. After a 1983 client shoot in Puerto Rico, she spent a few days in Haiti.

"I fell in love with the Haitian people and I was so pained to see the level of poverty," she said. It was on that trip that she shot the image of the woman with a pipe that appears on the cover of her book. "The work was raw and fresh. I was unleashed to do the work that was inside of me."

Still, it took a few more years before she realized that photographing Indigenous Peoples would be her life's core mission. "This was my calling ... to be a voice in support of Indigenous rights."

That calling led to the 2010 book and helped create a tipping point in the campaign for U.S. adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Though it had been passed by a large majority in 2007, the statement was opposed by the U.S. until late 2010. Her efforts also earned her a speaking invitation at the 2013 World Economic Forum in Davos. The topic: How art can impact the world.



“Campbell River Indian Band Teenage Girl,” 2008.

The Lowe show, “DIGNITY: Tribes in Transition,” spans 30 years of Gluckstein’s portraits. While many images depict that compelling, self-possessed gaze, some reflect cultural traditions and occasionally, anguish. Others reveal the clash between modern and historical: jeans hidden beneath the cape of a native dancer from Canada’s Campbell River; a Masai chief with stretched earlobes wrapped in a fluffy polyester blanket; a pair of Ovazemba girls in Namibia, one with an exposed bra, the other bare-breasted with a cell phone hanging from her neck.

To make her photographs, Gluckstein travels with a pair of heavy, square-format Hasselblad film cameras to remote locations. She engages guides conversant with local dialects so she can explain what she’s doing and seek permission to photograph local people. No artificial lighting is used, though she does take a bit of black fabric to use as a backdrop when the surroundings are visually distracting.

The images are always shot in black and white. “I try to make my work transcend reality. I don’t want it to look like a National Geographic color image,” she says. Those simple contrast “accents the soul and what is essential.”

What is essential, she says, is the human bond that transcends time, location and a pervasive pattern of cultural destruction.

And though some images date back decades, the exhibition feels particularly relevant. It opened in late January, amid the furor of the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment, and closes in late April, just weeks after the Parkland school shooting that spurred massive #NeverAgain protests against gun violence worldwide.

“This is a reminder that we and the earth are made for harmony, that we have to be interconnected,” Gluckstein said in January.

She hopes viewers will be inspired. “There is something they can do in their own life in their own community. There’s work to be done in everyone’s community to stop racism, to tear down walls, to help bring people together. There’s a oneness, a unity in people everywhere.”

Jane Wooldridge is visual arts editor of the Miami Herald and an avid traveler who blogs at fivestartounderthestars.com.

IF YOU GO

What: DIGNITY: Tribes in Transition, photographs by Dana Gluckstein

Where: Lowe Museum of Art, University of Miami, 1301 Stanford Dr., Coral Gables

When: Through April 22

Info: www.lowe.miami.edu, 305-284-3535

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/visual-arts/article207279374.html#storylink=cpy>