

MARGARET COURTNEY-CLARKE



Biography

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**Extract from
Foreword to *Cry
Sadness into the
Coming Rain***

In his foreword to the book, David Goldblatt writes “[the photographs] are eloquent of raw existence and offer faint glimmers of hope, of life scratched from an appallingly inhospitable terrain in the face of overwhelming societal transition. Yet these photographs attain a searing grace which is in no sense false to the reality but is, on the contrary, a rare synthesis of what is there with an intensely heightened and uncompromisingly honest vision.”



b. 1949, Swakopmund, Namibia.

Worked and lived in Rome, Italy
and New York, USA (1972-2009)

Currently lives and works in
Swakopmund, Namibia

Margaret Courtney-Clarke is a photographer whose aim is to bring historically situated socio-political injustices to light, educate (where governments and press have failed), and celebrate the resilience and creative impulse in the practices of women in the African context. Believing in ongoing relational conversations her work now focuses on the engagement with a people and environment in crisis in her home country of Namibia.

Courtney-Clarke began her career working under Italian photographer and filmmaker Pasquale De Antonis, photographing art, architecture and antiquities, thereafter freelancing on magazine assignments in Europe and Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1979 Courtney-Clarke became persona non grata under the Apartheid laws and renounced her South African citizenship – later returning to South West Africa asserting her Namibian birthright under the protection of the UN.

Author of 10 books Courtney-Clarke's work has received regular acclaim. *Cry Sadness into the Coming Rain* received a number of nominations and awards including, the 2018 Kraszna-Krausz Book Award (longlisted), in London, UK; and the silver award from Deutscher Fotobuchpreis, Stuttgart, Germany; The 16th Julia Margaret Cameron Award (Worldwide Photo) "Women Seen by Women", Spain (2021) and in 2022 Courtney-Clarke received the Lens Culture Critics Choice award for her series *Caged*, from the Namib Desert. In the same year British Journal of Photography and 1854, *Decade of Change 2022*, single image winner for *Singing the Rain*. In 2019 she was selected for the Prix Pictet global award in photography and sustainability - the exhibition *HOPE*, toured globally with exhibitions in London, Tokyo, Zurich, Moscow, Verona, Dublin and Shanghai amongst others. In 2019 she was shortlisted for the Contemporary African Photography Prize (CAP) - and was nominated again in 2020. For her portfolio *A Lifelong Obsession with Finding Shelter* in New York City, USA she received the Photo District News (PDN) Award in 2018 and she was nominated for the 2015 Henri Cartier-Bresson (HCB) Award for her series *On Borrowed Time* in Paris, France.

This recognition has led to invitations for exhibitions which include curator Ekow Eshun's *Face to Face*, on public display in King's Cross Tunnel in London (2020) & Guernsey Photo Festival, U.K. (2021); *Women on Women: Relationships, Identity and Power Explored Through Photography*, curated by Robert Taylor, Oxford Outdoor Photo, London (2021) and *Crossing Night: Regional Identities x Global Context*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, USA.(2019); *North East South West: Over the Edge* curated by Francesco Finotto, Civic Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, San Donà di Piave, Venice, Italy (2022)

In 2018 the Royal Photographic Society names her as one of The Hundred Heroines.

In 2021, Courtney-Clarke presented a solo exhibition *When Tears Don't Matter* at !Khwatsha San Heritage Centre in Yzerfontein, South Africa. Her forthcoming book of the material therein documenting the precarious lives of the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert will be available Spring of 2023 (Steidl.de)

Courtney-Clarke received Diplomas in Graphic Design and Photography (1971) at the then Technikon Natal (now Durban University of Technology), Durban, South Africa, and then enrolled at Scuola Libera di Roma in Rome, Italy in 1974 to study drawing and anatomy. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Photojournalism at New York University (NYU), in New York in 1978. Spending more than four decades working as a photographer between Italy, the USA and across the African continent she freelanced for magazines such as Life, Geo, Stern, Attenezione, Newsweek and Architectural Digest. Particularly focused on women's creative practice she worked on several collaborations with Maya Angelou. Her acclaimed trilogy: *Ndebele*: (1986), *African Canvas* (1990) and *Imazighen* (1996) has been exhibited in over two hundred museums across the USA, Africa, Europe and Japan. The trilogy is shortly to be republished by Steidl as a collector's edition with new material from Courtney-Clarke's travel notebooks.

Recent Work

- Caged
- When Tears Don't Matter
- Cry Sadness into the Coming Rain
- Prix Pictet

Caged

Margaret Courtney-Clarke's exquisite eye for composition immediately drew me in. Her decision to portray the effects of a seven-year drought in the Namib desert by focusing on one subject – caged animals and flora – struck me as an original way of telling a story about a landscape in crisis, and the tight edit of the series — each image as arresting as the one before it — is commendable.

Emma Lewis, Tate Modern





The effects of climate change are impacting us in tremendous ways. This series of beautiful and simple shots offers an arresting look at the harsh impact of the changing landscapes with such careful consideration — a consideration we all must begin to take before it is too late.

Rhea Combs, National Portrait Gallery



When Tears Don't Matter

Book with 240 pages

98 black-and-white and 68 color photographs

Clothbound hardcover with a tipped-in photograph

Published by Steidl, Germany, 2023

ISBN 978-3-95829-877-4



As a photographer, and a white woman at that, it is important — before releasing the shutter — to connect with the land and with our shared humanity; to capture history and her story, not fabricate it; and to make even a small difference where possible towards helping future generations to see.

Margaret Courtney-Clarke



Cry Sadness into the Coming Rain

Book with 200 pages

Clothbound hardcover with a tipped-in photograph

Published by Steidl, Germany, 2018

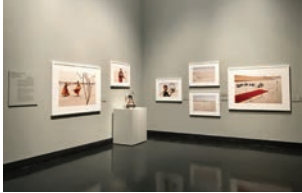
ISBN 978-3-95829-253-6



With strong memories of my formative years growing up on the edge of the Namib Desert in what was then known as South West Africa, I have returned to explore my obsession with this place and my lifelong curiosity for the notion of shelter. I have covered thousands of dusty kilometres across remote plains, through dry river beds, over sand dunes and salt pans, through conservancies and communal lands to photograph families in desperate, forgotten outposts. I try to capture the ‘transhumance’ – the search for work, forage and water – and the remnants of former habitats alongside once productive land.



Prix Pictet HOPE

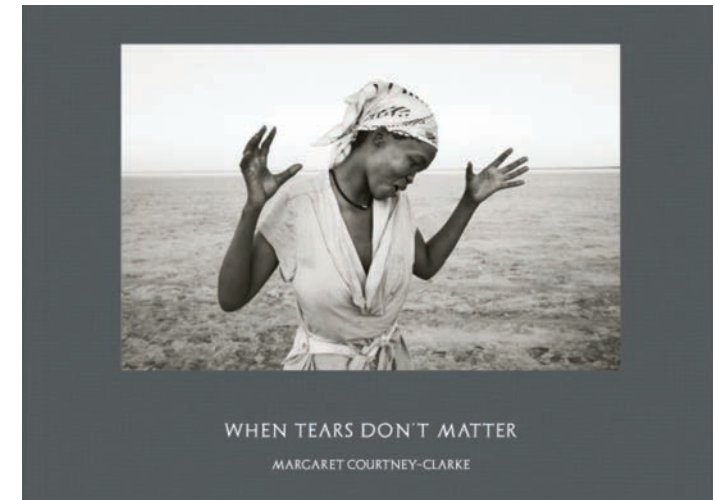


Victoria & Albert Museum
London UK, 2019



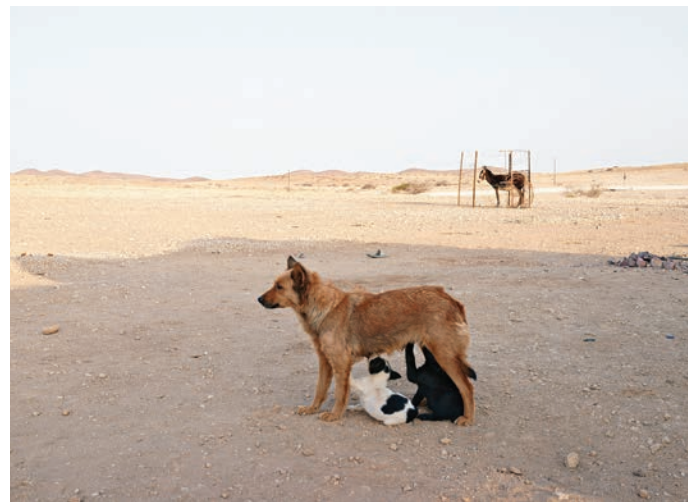
Recent Publications

- Cry Sadness into the Coming Rain
- When Tears Don't Matter



*Margaret Courtney-Clarke series
Caged is a striking study of life in the
Namib Desert where a traditionally
nomadic land has become fenced in
and depleted. The consequent caging
of domestic animals and even plants
to protect them from predators provides
an apt metaphor for the people who
still live there.*

*Clare Grafik,
The Photographers' Gallery, London*



As a photographer, and a white woman at that, it is important—before releasing the shutter—to connect with the land and with our shared humanity; to capture history and her story, not fabricate it; and to make even a small difference where possible towards helping future generations to see.

Margaret Courtney-Clarke

Selected Past Work

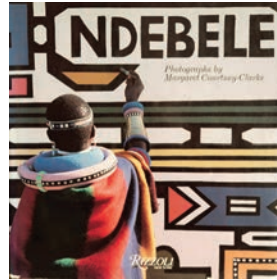
Trilogy

- Ndebele
- African Canvas
- Imazighen

Extract from *Communion across Geography and Time* by Sean O'Toole

Margaret Courtney-Clarke's trilogy of books, Ndebele (1986), African Canvas (1990) and Imazighen (1996) are an extraordinary document of the artistic traditions passed between generations of agrarian women in three geographically and culturally distinct regions of the African continent. The books respectively focus on creative labours of women in South Africa, West Africa (in particular Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria and Senegal) and the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). Geography and gender are central to an appreciation of the book series. But even this is too broad a characterisation...

Sean O'Toole is an art critic, editor and writer living in Cape Town





My Painted House. Photo book cover for her 2018 book, My Painted House. Photo: Courtney Clarke. © Courtney Clarke. 2018



The Chair's Daughter. Photo: Robert J. Gordon. © Robert J. Gordon. 2018

An extract from Virginia Mackenry's Foreword in Margaret Courtney-Clarke's book When Tears Don't Matter

[Born and raised in Namibia] Margaret Courtney-Clarke's enthusiasm, energy and love for Namibia and those she photographs is palpable in the narratives she shares. [One of the few documents] of indigenous women's artistic practice in Africa, via Nababebe: The Art of an African Fibre (1986), African Canvas - Art of West African Women (1990) and Imagination - the Vanishing Traditions of Berber Women (1994), she is well versed in seeking out that which exists beyond the public realm. While men's art in Africa during the 80s and 90s was gaining visible traction through museum shows and gallery support, women's creative endeavour rarely made its appearance due to its close connection and literal attachment to the domestic sphere. Courtney-Clarke travelled solo to remote homesteads in South, West and North Africa understood this and made a point of photographing what could only be seen in situ.

[Her latest book] When Tears Don't Matter ... engages the lives of the remaining Bushmen in the Katohani in eastern Namibia. ... She is interested in the people themselves, scattered Bushmen who seek out a living facing the daunting demands of the natural elements - including a seven-year drought - as well as the appalling bureaucratic neglect by a government which fails to honour its constitutional mandate to look after its peoples equally...

I was pulled into this journey, albeit vicariously, as sharing interests in art and environmental resilience. I became the recipient of many photographs produced en route that have now found their way into this work. I would receive text messages, terse indicators of the raw experience of the journey. A constant reiteration of 'no water, no shade, no nothing...'. and the endearment of the road ahead - 'journey south will take 5 days in thick sand!...', '100s kms in 4x4 low gear...bone rattling tough shit!'. The impacts of the never-ending drought came through: 'our campsite at Oqotho...Nyae Nyae conservancy...destroyed few days ago by elephants. It doesn't get bleaker than this...'

Her anger and sense of helplessness were palpable: "My heart cries out for these people" and later "desperately heartbreaking" - when she found "pockets of Bushmen here and there...all in search of water (many batheholes down and tanks tipped open by elephants), it's hard to stay positive". She notes with typical directness that it's "hard to 'frame' distance and space in this fucktleness". "Re think. Re frame."

How does Courtney-Clarke manage to keep on returning? Because of the pain, she says: "the spirit of the people keeps me going...". This is key to her work which, while recording a deprived people living on the barest of means, also reveals a resourcefulness and stamina for life. Courtney-Clarke, a veteran of the desert... seeks out the small incidents of resilience in the larger crisis of survival.

... She sees not with a detached, dispassionate eye, but a profoundly personal one. She is acutely aware of the legacy she embodies, the "baggage of childhood, capitalism... and [her] grandfather's inability to change things". Given photography's dark role as a mechanism of imperial rule one could default to a place of easy critique of [her] forays into Africa. However, Courtney-Clarke, unlike many predecessors does not 'look at' her subjects from a distance, but 'walks with' them. She feels acutely, she gets heartbroken and outraged at the inequalities she sees and in response she gets active.

[Courtney-Clarke] has a special eye for the experiences of women who are celebrated here in their role not only as mothers, homemakers, gatherers and nurturers, but individuals who, in later life, hold sovereign dignity as matriarchs; no less regal under their shredded canopies than queens of old. In an extraordinary series of black and white photographs, women's deep satisfaction in the ancient pleasures of smoking is palpably evident, as is their independence of being.

...
1 Courtney-Clarke's grandfather was Secretary for South West Africa from 1925-30.



The Wind Always Blows Towards You. Photo: Robert J. Gordon. © Robert J. Gordon. 2018

This is a people caught between worlds. Youth who still hunt porcupine, mimic the moves of city life learnt not from real experience, but from Smart phones. Young girls learning ageless rituals of rain prayers pantomime the language of the catwalk, and the enticements of their congealed lion drug dens corrode traditional values. As silver shoes cross ochre sands for weddings held in churches created in honour of a foreign god, and finances occur not under the night sky, but in plastic, pentacostal tents, where the barely able lead the blind, the images layer one upon the other - expanding the viewer's sense of a people most often portrayed one-dimensionally.

[The photograph] Singing the Rain is a form of praying into being - an invocation arising from an inner split towards an outer manifestation. If the world pandemic of COVID has taught us anything it should be that life is tenuous, that we can expect to disappear as suddenly as we came, and that we should care, for others, for community, for touch, for connection - tasks that Courtney-Clarke's work calls for us to do.

Virginia Mackenry, August 2020

Associate Professor of Painting, Michaels School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town

An extract from Robert J. Gordon's essay 'Report of a Journey into the Land of the Bushmen' in Margaret Courtney-Clarke's book When Tears Don't Matter

On Framing Margaret

I seek to frame Margaret's praxis by providing a socio-cultural context in which her work can be appreciated. Indeed, I directly wish to emphasise why it is important, straddling, as it does, the ambiguous divide between documentation and art...

Margaret's work is not some brief opportunistic foray into the old areas of Namibia to see its spectacle offset by the misery of its peoples, but a sustained commitment over years to the land and its inhabitants. Her photographs show us the indignities of life on the periphery and yet they also reveal how people resolutely savage and maintain human dignity. We see people in the round of life and well-rounded. They are not limboes or anonymous, but contribute to the storyboard of history with names, dates and places.

Being on her home turf, as it were, gives Margaret's actions a deeper emotional and ethical imperative. She is able to compare, over time, changes in the wider context of Namibia - a privilege mostly available to those who have knowledge of the terrain. For the art critic John Berger, an outsider perspective is a key ingredient of documentary practice as that key ingredient, critical distance, generates a broader view. One must traverse beyond the constraints of one's own parochialism in order to see. It is no accident that, contemporarily, the classics in the documentary photography canon are largely the work of outsiders. But, Berger says, outsiders come in two basic types: Reporters and Recorders. The former, commonly photojournalists, work to please their patrons or the market, while recorders work for those involved, documenting them in the interest of the subject. Margaret is clearly in the latter camp.

For Margaret, photography is not a career as much as a way of life. It brings her compassion to the fore much in the vein of the aesthetic criterion Berger famously outlined: "Does this work help or encourage [people] to know and claim their social rights?". The images are expressive in that they evoke the imagination - not only in terms of empathy, but also in terms of guiding one to act. Very much an immediate hands-on activist, an healer, a litany of complaints against a local councilor, Margaret suggested and helped facilitate a meeting to air these grievances to the satisfaction of everyone - including the councilor. Discovering a school toilet lacking mattresses she has already mobilised her network to do something about this. Her intense engagement is integral to her hope that her work is faithful to the people with whom she has spent time.

In Margaret's hands photography becomes an instrument for saying the unsayable. She observes and interprets without disturbing or provoking. She responds rather than interjects. While photographers might not always change the situation, in this case they have changed the photograph. Margaret is fond of quoting Henri Cartier-Bresson: "It is an illusion that photos are made with the camera ... they are made with the eye, heart and hand".



Historical photographs from 'Report of a Journey into the Land of the Bushmen' by Robert J. Gordon. Photo: Robert J. Gordon. © Robert J. Gordon. 2018

Margaret's compassion is obvious not only in her photography, but also in her body language. She will spontaneously hug and if offered a home brew will sip it, thereby infringing one of the many inter-caste taboos still found in the benighted country. Fictive-making is a performative event when people who allow themselves to be photographed assume someone will see their image and do something in response. Taking a picture is a ceremony, a social situation in which social relations are affirmed and ultimate doctrine announced. The human behaviour displayed by gestures, postures (or kinetics), proxemics, artefacts and other props reveal cultural values of both host and visitor. Margaret seeks to portray the Bushman lived experience. Her subjects are portrayed not in their docility or even servility, but as struggling, imagining, dignified human beings in control of their actions.

Robert J. Gordon

Research Associate, University of the Free State
Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and African Studies,
University of Vermont



Small grid of historical photographs from 'Report of a Journey into the Land of the Bushmen' by Robert J. Gordon. Photo: Robert J. Gordon. © Robert J. Gordon. 2018

Biography



- 1949** Born in Namibia of Anglo-Irish descent
- 1954 - 1968** Formal education in Namibia and South Africa
- 1969 - 1978** College education in Art and Photography in South Africa, Italy and USA
- 1970** Begins career in Photography in South Africa
- 1972 - 1990** Based in Rome and New York
Travelled as freelance photographer on magazine assignments in Europe & Africa
Involved with 20thC photography collections and exhibitions for the Obelisco Gallery, Rome
Worked under Pasquale De Antonis photographing art, architecture & antiquities
- 1974 - 1994** Documented the simple and humble country life in La Ciociaria, a remote mountainous region south of Rome. Donated her collection to the Municipal Region in 2009
- 1978 / 1979** Journeys to South West Africa (now Namibia) and South Africa
Becomes a persona non grata under the Apartheid laws.
Photographs are seized by authorities. Renounces SA citizenship
Meets David Goldblatt. In 1980 they co-author the book Cape Dutch Homesteads
- 1979 - 1996** Pursued personal projects in Africa documenting the physical manifestations of shelter, mural painting and personal identity associated with the feminine domain
Photographs and writing published as books and widely exhibited, including trilogy on the Art of African Women (see book publications below) that has been translated into five languages/multiple editions and numerous reprints over 20 years
Ndebele brings about collaboration with the late poet laureate Maya Angelou to whom she remained close
- 1988 - 2008** Photographs distributed by Hoa-Qui (Paris), Speranza (Italy), Anzenburger (Austria), Mega Press (Tokyo), Photo Researchers (NYC)

1989/1995	Returns to South West Africa under UN protection and claims birthright to newly independent state of Namibia Photographs evocative slivers of desert landscape which leads to the publication of a book on childhood memories <i>Places in The Sand</i>
1990 - 2000	Represented by the Witkin Gallery, New York (they closed in 2000)
1990 - 2016	Photographs distributed worldwide by Corbis (USA)
1994 - 1999	Collaborated on two award winning children's books with Maya Angelou. Photographed Maya Angelou and interviewed contributors for an inspirational book on her philosophy, <i>The Poetry of Living</i>
1999 - 2010	Established the Ndebele Foundation, a non-profit cultural organization for the Ndebele women and youth of Mabokho, Mpumalanga province in the new South Africa. Built a training centre and accommodation for facilitators and tourists. Drove fundraising for training and workshops, as well as for running the centre Enabled Ndebele women to travel to Europe and the USA to promote their culture and learn marketing skills through museum exhibitions, college scholarships and live installations. Photographs the Foundation advancement over the years
2013 - 2018	Returns to Namibia to work on <i>Cry Sadness into the Coming Rain</i> that marks a new phase in her photographic work, documenting her engagement with its people and a landscape in crisis
2019	Begins a new series of work Kalahari documenting the human endurance of the Bushmen in Namibia
2020 (Covid Lockdown)	Re designs her Trilogy, <i>The Art of African Women</i> into a 4-book series for reprint (Steidl 2022); Design & layout of new work on the Kalahari When Tears Don't Matter (Steidl 2023)
2021 - ongoing	Burning Beasts, a collaborative project (Courtney-Clarke and Mackenny); found material on site forms improvised constructions/ hybrids in conversation with land under duress, transformed by fire, photographed & sketched.

Further Reading

Margaret Courtney-Clarke:

<http://www.margaret-courtney-clarke.com>

<http://www.margaret-courtney-clarke.com/work.html>

<http://www.margaret-courtney-clarke.com/books.html>

<http://www.margaret-courtney-clarke.com/exhibitions.html>

Full biography:

<http://www.margaret-courtney-clarke.com/biography.html>

Reviews:

http://www.margaret-courtney-clarke.com/assets/pdf/MCC_Biography_CV.pdf

Links:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/dec/14/hundred-heroines-outstanding-female-photographers-around-world-in-pictures>

<https://www.lensculture.com/articles/margaret-courtney-clarke-cry-sadness-into-the-coming-rain>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jul/05/prix-pictet-2019-shortlist-photo-essay>

<https://www.target.com/p/margaret-courtney-clarke-when-tears-don-t-matter-hardcover/-/A-84901845>

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