

MARGARET COURTNEY-CLARKE



Biography

MARGARET COURTNEY-CLARKE

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 Apartheid laws and renounced her South African citizenship – later returning to South West Africa asserting her Namibian birthright under the protection of the UN.

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, Attenzione, 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.

Author of 10 books Courtney-Clarke's work receives regular international acclaim. She is nominated for the 2015 Henri Cartier-Bresson (HCB) Award for her series On Borrowed Time in Paris, France. For her portfolio A Lifelong Obsession with Finding Shelter in New York City, USA she receives the Photo District News (PDN) Award in 2018 and, notable among her publications, Cry Sadness into the Coming Rain (Steidl, 2018) receives the 2018 Kraszna-Krausz Book Award (longlisted), in London, UK; and the silver award from Deutscher Fotobuchpreis, Stuttgart, Germany. In that same year the Royal Photographic Society names her as one of their Hundred Heroines. In 2019 she is selected as a finalist for the Prix Pictet award in photography and sustainability - the exhibition HOPE, tours globally with exhibitions in London, Tokyo, Zurich, Moscow, Verona, Dublin and Shanghai amongst others. In 2019 she is shortlisted

for the Contemporary African Photography Prize (CAP) - and is nominated again in 2020. In 2021, Courtney-Clarke presents a solo exhibition When Tears Don't Matter at !Khwa ttu San Heritage Centre in Yzerfontein, South Africa (her eponymous book of the material therein documenting the precarious lives of the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert is forthcoming from Steidl) and she receives the 16th Julia Margaret Cameron Award (Worldwide Photo) "Women Seen by Women", Spain (2021). In 2022 the Lens Culture Critics Choice award is given for her series Caged, from the Namib Desert and in the same year the British Journal of Photography and 1854, Decade of Change 2022, name her the single image winner for Singing the Rain.

This recognition has led to invitations for exhibitions which include Crossing Night: Regional Identities x Global Context, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, USA. (2019); 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 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 2024 Francisco Carolinum, OÖ Landes-Kultur GmbH, Linz, Austria invites her for a solo - Dust on the Wind, curated by Virginia MacKenny.

2025 sees her Geographies of Drought win an open call competition to represent Namibia at REM – Reiss Engelhorn Museum in Mannheim, Germany. Part of a twin-city project in conversation with Windhoek, Namibia the exhibition returns home to be exhibited there in 2026.

Courtney-Clarke received Diplomas in Graphic Design and Photography (1971) at the then Technikon Natal (now Durban University of Technology), Durban, South Africa, then enrolled at Scuola Libera di Roma in Rome, Italy in 1974 to study drawing and anatomy and obtained her Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Photojournalism at New York University (NYU), in New York in 1978.

Recent Work

- Geographies of Drought
- Dust on the Wind
- Caged (ongoing)
- When Tears Don't Matter
- Cry Sadness into the Coming Rain
- Prix Pictet



Geographies of Drought

Courtney-Clarke wins Open Call "Namibia – A Photographic View" as part of an international city partnership, the Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen Mannheim and the Culture and Tourism Department of the City of Windhoek, Namibia. "In a clear, sometimes surreal and often touching visual language, her photographs illuminate the social and political issues associated with the consequences of extreme drought. A moving and shocking portrait of the serious effects of global climate change: Not only accusatory, but also hopeful images show the creativity of the people, a warm, connecting portrait of the country and its people" Jury



Dust on the Wind

Museum Francisco Carolinum, Linz (Austria),
March-July 2024

*"Margaret Courtney-Clarke's art is a quiet yet
profound call to preserve the fragile balance of life".*
Alfred Weidinger, Director of OÖLandes-Kultur GmbH, Austria



Caged (ongoing)

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





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

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 200 pages

Clothbound hardcover with a tipped-in photograph

Forthcoming by Steidl, Germany

ISBN 978-3-95829-253-6



"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".

Virginia MacKenny, Emeritus Associate Professor of Painting,
Michaelis School of Fine Art, University
of Cape Town, South Africa



Cry Sadness into the Coming Rain

200 pages, 120 images
Four-color process
Hardback / Clothbound
34 x 24.3 cm (English)
STEIDL, Germany
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 cuariosity 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".

Margaret Courtney-Clarke



Prix Pictet HOPE finalist

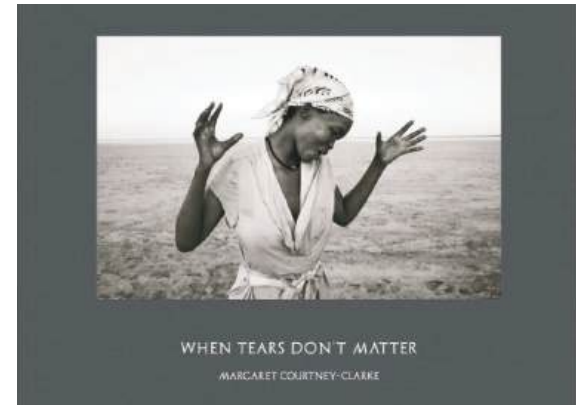


Victoria & Albert Museum
London UK, 2019



Recent Publications

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



Selected Past Work

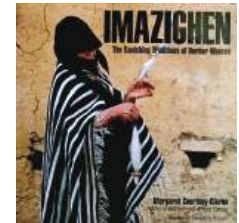
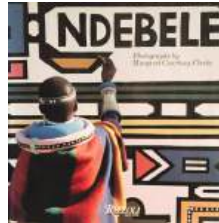
Trilogy

- Ndebele
- African Canvas
- Imazighen

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

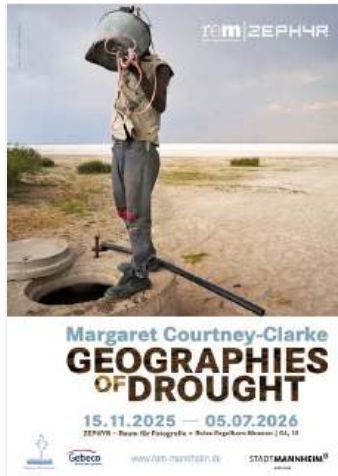
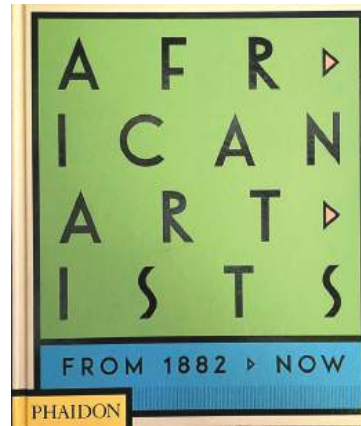
Margaret Courtney-Clarke's trilogy of books, *Ndebele* (1986), *African Canvas* (1990) and *Imazighen* (1996) are an extraordinary document of the artistic traditions passed between generations of agrarian women in three geographically and culturally distinct regions of the African continent. The books 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



Recent Exhibitions

- African Artist, Phaidon 2021
- Geographies of Drought 2025 - 2026
- Dust on the Wind 2025
- Phenomenal Women – Margaret Courtney-Clarke and Maya Angelou 2021
- NESW 2022





Barbara Krueger, "The Artist's Studio" (1985), oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. Krueger's studio is a place of work and a place of life. The artist's studio is a place of work and a place of life. The artist's studio is a place of work and a place of life.

An exhibit from Virginia MacKenzie's "Forward in Margaret Courtney-Clarke's book when Joan Don't Mother"

[Born and raised in Namibia] Margaret Courtney-Clarke's enthusiasm, energy and love for Namibia and those the photographer's possible in the narrative she shows. [One of the few documents] of indigenous women's artistic practice in Africa, via Namibia. The Art of an African Woman (1986), African Women, Art of West African Women (1995) and Imagines – the Vanishing Footprints of Barbara Women (1996), she is well versed in writing out that which was beyond the public sphere. 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 direct attachment to the domestic sphere. Courtney-Clarke's travelling into its female homelands 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 Joan Don't Mother... engages the lives of the remaining Bushmen in the Kalahari in western Namibia... She is interested in the people themselves, scattered Bushmen who are out of living facing the daunting demands of the natural elements – including a seven-year drought – as well as the opposing bureaucratic neglect by a government which talk to honour a constitutional mandate to look after its people's equality...

I was pulled into this journey, albeit vicariously, as, sharing interests in art and environmental resilience, I became the recipient of many photographs produced on a mode that have now found their way into this world. I would receive text messages, news indicators of the raw experience of the journey. A constant reminder of 'no water, no roads, no nothing...' and the endlessness of the road ahead – "journey south will take 3 days in this sand..." "100 km in 48-hour period. Now nothing tough and". The impact of the never-ending drought came through: "our campsite of Ghanie, Arava. Now we're consistently, distressed for days ago by waterholes, it doesn't get bleaker than this..."

Her anger and sense of helplessness were palpable. "My heart cries out for these people" and later "inexplicable heartbreak" – when the found "pockets of Bushmen here and there... all in search of water (many bowls down and tents spread open by elephants). It's hard to stay positive." She notes with typical dishevel that it's "hard to 'frame' distance and space in this landscape", "the time, the time".

How does Courtney-Clarke manage to keep on returning? Because of the job, she says: "The spirit of the people keeps me going... It is key to her work which, while recording a deprived people living on the border of modern, also reveals a new culture and spirit for the Courtney-Clarke, a veteran of the desert... sweat out the small incidents of violence in the larger crisis of survival."

She was not with a detached, dispassionate eye, but a profoundly personal one. She is a writer/painter of the legacy she embodies, the "baggage of childhood, adulthood... and that grandfather's inability to change things". Given photography's dual role as a mechanism of imperial rule one could default to a place of easy critique of [her] foray into Africa. However, Courtney-Clarke, unlike many predecessors does not 'look' at her subjects from a distance, but 'wishes with' them. She feels society, she gets heartbroken and outraged at the inequalities of race and in response she gets angry...

... 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 their life, hold knowledge deeply as mothers; no less regard under their shrouded complex than quarters of old, in an extraordinary series of black and white photographs, women's deep satisfaction in the ancient pleasures of making is palpably evident, as is their independence of spirit.



Barbara Krueger, "The Artist's Studio" (1985), oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. Krueger's studio is a place of work and a place of life. The artist's studio is a place of work and a place of life. The artist's studio is a place of work and a place of life.

This is a people caught between worlds. Both who still hunt porcupine, mimic the moves of city life learnt not from art experience, but from brief phone. Young girls learning angular stunts, of old present portmanteau the language of the culture, and the enticements of shiny competition shop items combine traditional values. At silver shoes cross olive sands for wedding held in churches cloaked in honor of a foreign god, and dances occur not under the night sky, but in plastic periboscated 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 come 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 MacKenzie, August 2020

Academy of Painting, Michaels School of the Art, University of Cape Town



Barbara Krueger, "The Artist's Studio" (1985), oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. Krueger's studio is a place of work and a place of life. The artist's studio is a place of work and a place of life. The artist's studio is a place of work and a place of life.

An exhibit from Robert J. Gordon essay: "Report of a journey into the land of the Bushmen in Margaret Courtney-Clarke's book When Joan Don't Mother"

On Homing Margaret

I seek to home Margaret's work by providing a socio-cultural context in which her work can be approached. Indeed, I directly wish to emphasise why it is important, reading, at a time, the ambiguous divide between documentation and art...

Margaret's work is not some brief opportunistic foray into the arid areas of Namibia to see its spectacle offered by the misery of its people, but a subtler 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 shape and maintain human dignity. We see people in the midst of life and well-rounded. They are not timeless or anonymous but contribute to the storybook of history with names, dates and places.

Being at her home hut, as it were, gives Margaret's actions a deeper emotional and ethical imperative. She is able to compose, 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 Joan Berger, an outsider perspective is a necessary component 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, controversially, the classics in the documentary photography canon are largely the work of outsiders. But, Berger says, outsiders come in two basic types: Reporter and Recorder, the former, commonly photojournalists, wish to place the subjects on the market, while recorder 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 low much in the work of the aesthetic collector Berger famously outlined: "Does this work help or encourage (people) to know and claim their social agency?" The image one expressive in that they evoke the imagination – not only in terms of empathy, but also in terms of going one to act. Very much on immediate hands-on activist, on hearing 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. Documenting a school teacher's motherhood she has already mobilised her network to do something about it. 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 distorting or prevaricating. She responds rather than interferes. While photographs might not always change the situation, in this case they have changed the photographer. Margaret's kind of saying here: Carter-Brewer: "It is an illusion that photos are made with the camera... they are made with the eye, heart and head".

Margaret's composition is obvious not only in her photography, but also in her body language. She will spontaneously hug and if offered home brew will sip it, thereby engaging one of the many inter-racial taboos still found in the beleaguered country. Picture-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 kneeling), prostrations, offerings and other props reveal cultural values of both root and valor. Margaret seeks to portray the Bushmen's lived experience. Her subjects are portrayed not in their docility or even servility, but as shagging, imagining, dignified human beings in control of their actions.

Robert J. Gordon

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



Barbara Krueger, "The Artist's Studio" (1985), oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. Krueger's studio is a place of work and a place of life. The artist's studio is a place of work and a place of life. The artist's studio is a place of work and a place of life.



Barbara Krueger, "The Artist's Studio" (1985), oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. Krueger's studio is a place of work and a place of life. The artist's studio is a place of work and a place of life. The artist's studio is a place of work and a place of life.

Biography



1949
1954 – 1968
1969 - 1978

1970
1972 - 1990

1974 - 1994

1978 / 1979

1979 - 1996

1988 - 2008

1989/1995

Born in Namibia of Anglo-Irish descent
Formal education in Namibia and South Africa
College education in Art and Photography in South Africa, Italy and USA
Begins career in Photography in South Africa
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
Documented the rural life in La Ciociaria, a remote mountainous region south of Rome. Donated her collection to the Municipal Region in 2009
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
Pursued personal projects in Africa documenting the physical manifestations of shelter, mural painting and personal identity associated with the female 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
Photographs distributed by Hoa-Qui (Paris), Speranza (Italy), Anzenburger (Austria), Mega Press (Tokyo), Photo Researchers (NYC)
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 Places in The Sand

1990 to 2000	Represented by the Witkin Gallery, New York (they closed in 2000)
1990 to 2016	Photographs distributed worldwide by Corbis (USA)
1994 to 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, The Poetry of Living
1999 to 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 Cry Sadness into the Coming Rain that marks a new phase in her photographic work, documenting her engagement with its people and a landscape in crisis
2019-2026	Begins a new series of work Kalahari documenting the human endurance of the Bushmen in Namibia
2020	(Covid Lockdown) Redesigns her Trilogy, The Art of African Women into a 4-book series for reprint (Steidl 2027); Design & layout of new work on the Kalahari When Tears Don't Matter (Steidl 2026/27)
2021-ongoing	Beasts Beyond, 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
2021-ongoing	Documents the life of small miners (semi-precious stones) across Damaraland
2022-2026	Returns to the Namib and Kalahari Deserts – continues documenting land enclosure, corporate mining extraction, consequent environmental degradation and impact on local inhabitants

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:

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

Links:

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

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

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

Commission / Sanitation in Namibia:

Produced by the Center for Collaborative Investigative Journalism (CCIJ), funded by The Pulitzer Center

Journalist of the Year and Best Visual Storytelling, a joint award with Fred Clayton and Sonja Smith for Namibia's Sanitation Crisis, Editors Forum of Namibia

<https://veza.news/article/2023/05/01/how-namibias-sanitation-crisis-is-endangering-its-people-and-its-future/>



Current work (ongoing): Kalahari



Painted works

Courtney-Clarke's practice has 'return' at its core. Travelling regularly through some of Namibia's roughest terrain she makes friends over time. She revisits, re-engages and reconnects, documenting a changing landscape over years. At the heart of her encounters, she explores "the making of home and shelter, creative and adaptive responses to living, conversations with place, communion...". In this series of small, mainly A4 photocollage paintings she revisits her photographic archive and uses it to move beyond the directly documentary to an imaginative amalgamation of experience. Through cutting/pasting/painting she rearticulates the photographs to reveal that which is invisible to the camera thereby engaging the interlacing of human intervention and place/multi-species dialogue within the context of a climate-stressed Namibia.



Tapestries

Margaret Courtney-Clarke's ground-breaking early photographic work across North, West and Southern Africa documents women's creative practices in the domestic sphere. Rendering a rich archive of images her trilogy *Ndebele* (1986), *African Canvas* (1990) and *Imazighen* (1996), now provides material for a new endeavour. Collaborating and co-designing with artist Virginia MacKenny, elements from the original photographs are reinterpreted. Fragments of wall painting, textiles and ceramics evolve across media into unique tapestries that are woven in organic hand-dyed Karakul wool at Moses Helao's artisanal weavers' workshop in Namibia. Distinguished by Courtney-Clarke's signature 'hanging thread', inspired by an ancient Berber proverb "life is a loom, whose threads are the days - God decides when to cut the threads, even though [the work] may be unfinished", the wall hangings intersect pattern, symbol, and historical context manifesting in an imaginative reconfiguration across African geographies acknowledging a variety of African traditions and challenging the divide between art and craft.

