

# DRIFT



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# Photographing the Suri

BY: WENDY BEDNARZ

Photographing the Suri has become something of an obsession, not just for me, but for many tourists and photographers, eager for a glimpse at a world beyond the imagination, untouched by modern civilization. There has also been a lot of criticism of those photographing indigenous tribes. There is no simple answer to the question of cultural appropriation or appropriateness. The photographer and the subject – in my opinion – are the best judge of the true value of their exchange.



ROSE, SURI | I brought two dozen roses from Addis Abbas and knowing they were not indigenous to the region left them on the side. The subject plucked a bud from the bouquet and placed it in his mouth.



LEAF, SURI | Look closely and you will see the plastic beads, details in the jewelry and belt; reminders of the encroaching world, a close three day drive away from us.



I made three trips over four years to visit the tribes. Each time, along with my guide, driver, guard and young daughter we endured days of traveling over bumpy roads, sometimes cross-terrain to reach our destinations. I spent long hours, looking out the window, watching the scenery go by and contemplating my motivation for coming to Ethiopia. Each time I returned to the same answer, 'to better understand the world we inhabit.' These people, considered primitive to many, offer a simpler and perhaps more profound view of life, one that we could all take a lesson.

CRISSCROSS, SURI | As if looking into the eyes of a dancer, the subject commanded the frame. I followed his rhythm. Many of these images are dance between the subject and my camera.



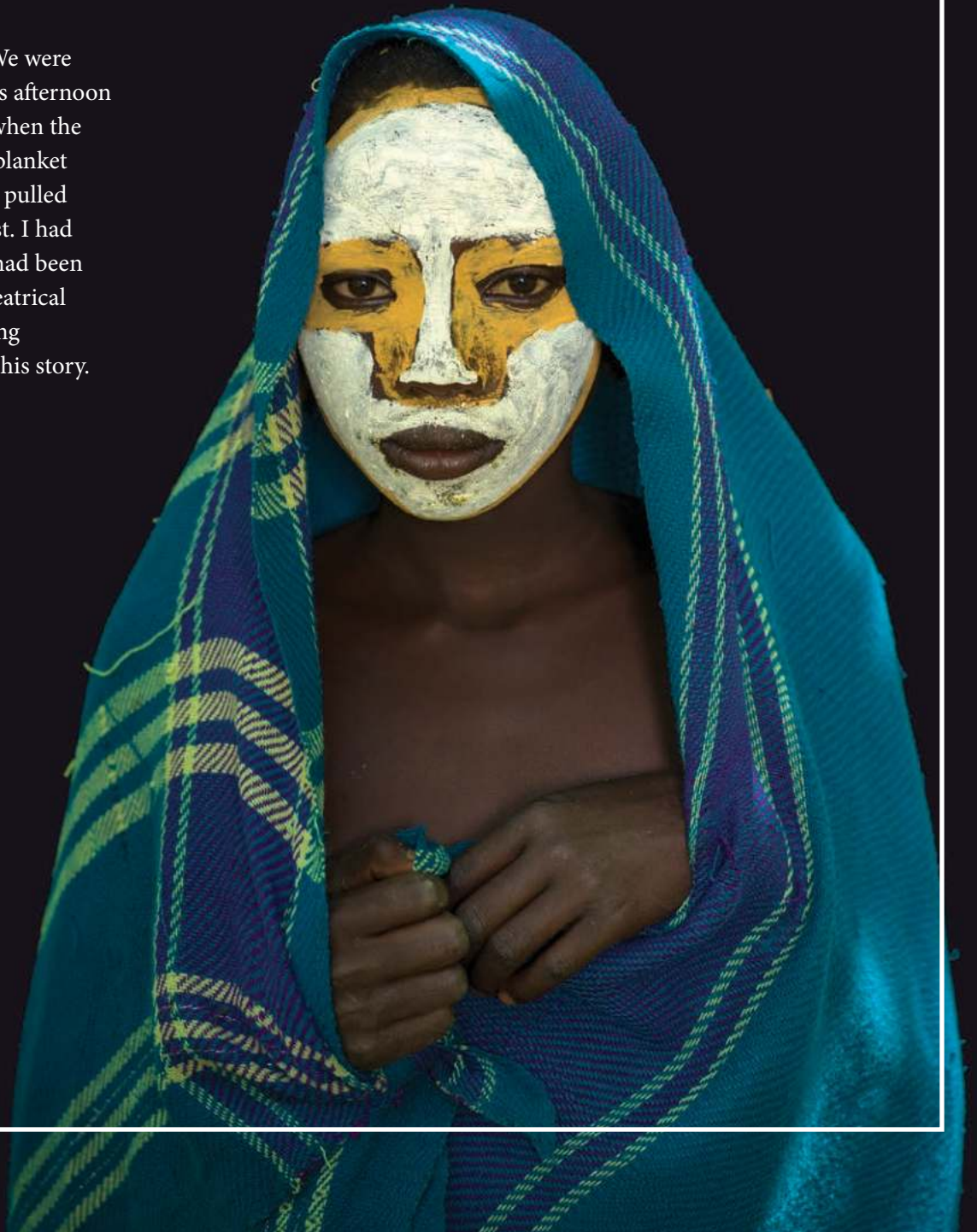


BACK, SURI | This image, the first shot of the day, captures a tentative moment between the subject and me. I had met him earlier at the riverside where he used rocks to ground minerals into paint and stamped his skin with a flower stem paint brush - an expert artist.



The Suri images, *Artifice Traces*, are a departure from classic photo-ethnography. The use of the black backdrop deliberately removes the subject from cliché notions of tribal life. In essence the photographs are performances, choreographed by the Suri, celebrations of their transient masterpieces and proud culture.

GHOST, SURI | We were losing the glorious afternoon sunlight quickly when the subject lifted the blanket over his head and pulled it close to his chest. I had the feeling that I had been transported to theatrical stage and was being beckoned to hear his story.



WATERCOLOR, SURI | The transience of the body painting, its impermanence, the details, one stroke of paint, create a visual language that belies language.



#### ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

A native New Yorker, Wendy Bednarz travels the globe with her two children. They currently reside in the United Arab Emirates where Wendy is a filmmaker and an Associate Arts Professor of Film and New Media at New York University, Abu Dhabi.

*“I am a visual thinker and I find photography a natural way to communicate. My eye is drawn to the human form and my photographic intention is to make highly evocative images that capture the subject’s underlying spirit. Photography is my way of interpreting the world and making a commentary about what I see and feel.”*

