

Joey L

Abyssinia



















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According to ancient archeological findings, Ethiopia is situated on territory that qualifies as the birthplace of mankind, an unproven theory that begs to brand this nation the most sacred of territories – the point where human life first appeared. Also never proven is the notion that the human presence and the brute forces of nature – from the astounding to the devastating – present themselves with more intensity here than they do anywhere else on earth.

While Ethiopia's sky-heavy terrain leaves its residents engulfed by a jungle of impressions, myths and searing truths, their daily existence remains tinged with sociopolitical issues, a sense of spirituality, and an

undeniable nearness to the animal world. Conditions, details and factors such as these have consistently made documenting aspects of Africa an experience as irresistible as mind-altering. In addition, they have intensified not only the writings of Conrad and Hemingway, but also works by renowned African authors such as Achebe and Worku. No less important on the list of human and artistic achievements inspired by the Black Continent are the deeds and journals of explorers and travelers. In this heroic context, another unproven theory comes to mind: the more sensitive and respectable the act of documenting African subject matter, the more beauty and knowledge there is to discover.

For the sake of argument, one could ask whether knowing Ethiopia beforehand is essential to experiencing what it offers. Should the documentarist, writer, traveler, or, in the case of Joey Lawrence, the 19 year-old Canadian-born photographer, be briefed in advance before setting foot on Ethiopia's soil? Furthermore, if not in the loop regarding certain pieces of historical background information – the Ogaden War, the outbreak of famine in the 1980s, confrontations with communism, the Eritrean-Ethiopian War, President Negasso Gidada's allegedly rigged election, and the unstoppable march of modernisation currently devouring tradition and displacing the nation's artifacts in one breath – should not the visiting party at



least be capable of effectively interacting with the region's inhabitants? The aforementioned 19 year-old photographer's answer to this long, hypothetical question would most likely be as short, as heartfelt: "Yes!"

The so-called agreeing photographer, who never studied his craft in a school, literally specialises in interaction. He insists on making the people who appear in his series of photographs as comfortable as possible. He spends time with them before shoots, interviews them individually, and considers this and other acts of bonding, essential to being a good photographer. For him, the study of character, subconscious thought-patterns, culture, and body language carries more

weight than the study of lighting and composition. Welcome to the amazing world of photography according to Joey L.

In recent years, Joey Lawrence, who shortened his professional name to the catchier Joey L, has become a much discussed figure in fine art and commercial photography communities around the world. Working professionally since the age of 17, he is currently a sought-after portrait photographer, a photojournalist of a special ilk, and maybe too, a kind of Mozart of the Canon camera. His vast know-how and technical expertise regularly culminate in talks, film-promotion posters, celebrity portraits, and tutorial materials, all

of which seem dwarfed by his extensive art photography activities.

Joey L is nothing if not hardworking. He commits himself to photographing cultures in remote parts of the world, and he does so with the candor of professionals twice his age. Accompanied by an assistant and a hired guide, his nearly two-month-long journey through Ethiopia and its surroundings became a quintessential Joey L project.

The project is entitled *Abyssinia* (the exotic name Ethiopia was known by in the past – a word that translates to "sunburned faces"). At first glance, the

wide-ranging portraits and group shots taken during this journey, seem to say that a straightforward, down-to-earth 'dude' born in Ontario, Canada, can do a lot more than simply endure changing climates and weather conditions; he can also research, organise, and execute explorations that mix the visions of Peter Beard and Richard Avedon with touches of Robinson Crusoe and video-clip culture.

Judging on the basis of his *Ethiopia Journal*, posted on the "Joey Lawrence Fine Art" website, the photographer's tone of (printed) voice presents his readership with a provocative mix of traits. When talking about himself and his work, Joey L's lively nature seems to change by the minute, and while he runs the gamut of high and low profile remarks, he sounds at once 'awesomely' self-confident, instructive, and direct. Yet he never forgets to share his vulnerable, brutally honest, and self-critical side.

Among the station stops of his Ethiopian odyssey were the sun-beaten plains that cradle the valley of the Omo River. This region's assorted residents have led mostly isolated lives for several hundred years, and the land itself has not appeared on maps much longer than a century. This is where communities have casually engaged in ceremonial cannibalism; where lip plating, scarification and extravagant beadwork abound; where people with warrior spirits have great rank, and where sinewy, long-limbed dark bodies crisscross the landscape. This is where the Mursi, Karo, Bodi and other people have lived for centuries, representing, as it were, a visually and socially complex quilt of cultures in the wilds of Southern Ethiopia. Here too, it seems only a matter of time before the customs kept intact until now, vanish.

The difference between Joey L's Ethiopian imagery and that of other photographers is worth noting. Compared to standard-setting, masterly photographs by the likes of Hans Silvester and Angela Fischer, for example, Joey L's *Abyssinia* images show the viewer an oddly (almost strangely) stylised Mursi people. Instead of the 'models' being, so to speak, found by the camera and photographed in real African time à la Robert Capa, Joey L's often centralised figures are carefully posed and arranged in the frame, and, by trial and error, secured in a perfectly-lit composition. In the end, a number of these commanding figures appear somewhat foreign to the background, especially where the finer details of the surrounding wilderness look cautiously enhanced.

In other portraits, particularly in those shot close to the river, Joey L abandons any purely compositional concerns and also demonstrates a deep fascination with lighting – this being one of his technical strengths (patched through from his commissioned work for the film and music industries) and perhaps too, one of his primary tools during the shooting of *Abyssinia*. Both exacting and suggestive, the employed lighting underscores Joey L's ability to create high levels of cinematic tension in still shots.

Deliberately missing in *Abyssinia* are the maddening, 'too beautiful' visual touches that can surface in com-

mercial as well as exceptional stock photography. Also missing is the so-called human-zoo effect (obligatory shots of lip-plated faces, for example) that can sometimes haunt the Africa-related work of many travel photographers. All in all, apart from carefully responding to his subjects' physical presence, emotions, and immediate surroundings, Joey L's images make an inspired effort to move beyond the realm of travel photography. They seem intent on showing the viewer the lifestyle, customs, and candid gazes of the Ethiopian residents from a perspective that would never satisfy a *National Geographic* assignment.

In the process, the overall aesthetic defends what Joey L puts great stock in: producing what he deems a "dignified portrait." In this respect, the power of these often hypnotic portraits of people from the other Ethiopia, the Ethiopia of the past, namely Abyssinia – dark yet colorful images of people who could easily be considered heroically displaced, or better, strangely suspended between a real world and a real *other* world at the same time – lies in the fact that Joey L shows the viewer exactly what he means by producing dignified portraits.

His African subject can have a godlike physical presence, as in the photographs *Rufo* and *Saragolea*, where the beauty and the stature of two women from different generations surpass the visual effects, depicted nudity, and spookily-lit branches of a blurred outside world that functions more like an interior, because of the quality of the lighting. Or his subject can be depicted as an everyday man, as in the portrait of *Damo Dori*, who stands in the open wearing a trendy T-shirt, inspiring no element of surprise in the viewer, except for the partially-hidden rifle draped over his left shoulder. In either case, the subject's self-confidence and sense of purpose are clearly brought to the surface. And Joey L insists on this happening with equal portions of respect and simplicity.

Insisting on dignity and interaction succeeds on at least two levels in *Abyssinia*. While Joey L's photography recognises the presence of a nation rich in turmoil and natural wonders on the one hand, it succinctly locates a newer humanitarian stance in Africa-related image-making on the other. Apart from suggesting a strong awareness of underlying injustices, wars past and present, and the need to acquaint the indigenous communities with newer values, not to mention the government's keen interest in taking control of their land, Joey L's photographic stance reflects what his various subjects seem to aspire to in their hearts and minds: an understated display of great belief and integrity under unique circumstances.

Though he admits to being inspired by photographers whose work in Africa preceded his own, and fully acknowledges the sense of culture that they made visible (a good example of this being Gianni Giansant's remarkable 2004 publication, *Vanishing Africa*), Joey L's handling of the same subject matter remains nevertheless his own.

In *Abyssinia*, a defining layer of darkness seems to saturate and sharpen the photographs. Real or imag-

ined, this 'inner darkness' gives each image the quality of a carefully coloured daguerreotype, and, under its effect, the colours and forms commonly associated with African jewelry and bodily embellishments become to an extent less dazzling but also interestingly controlled. In turn, the black-and-whiteness of the photographs without colour intensifies. (The viewer's eye is mildly surprised by this because the black-and-white photographs somehow resemble stills from famous 'never shot' movies.) This manipulative darkness functions like a clarifying device when applied here. It neither admonishes nor symbolises the "heart of darkness" cliché often mentioned in conjunction with Africa-related projects. Instead, it adds a precise edge to the photographed subjects, and to the world surrounding them; it endows each image with a two-fold (conceptual) brilliance: the 'neither indoors nor outdoors' effect on the one hand, and, combined with slight enhancements and lighting techniques, a visually rich connection to a different kind of 'here and now' on the other.

The suggested time travel from the 'before' of a culture, to the same culture in a 'here and now', culminates in provocative history-conscious photographs, which obviously possess a dignified modernity all their own. Ultimately, this quality can be read in more than one way. It can stand for Joey L's real or abstract sense of hope, largely founded on an empathy kindled while interacting with his selected subjects, but also for the kind of effective and compositionally sly, artistic slight of hand that only a few photographers are capable of.

In any event, whether encountered in the riveting headshot of the village chief named Bona; in the dance-like, downward gazing profile of an older villager wearing a two-feathered headpiece; in the utter calm of a pretty, young girl meditating beside a rock near the riverbank; or in the inquiring stare of a man holding a long staff in an open field, each subject's presence, quietly mingled with hints of curiosity, confirms a willingness to share personal information with the photographer and interact with him.

For Joey L, interaction of this kind is supreme. In a positive way, it blurs the border between bonding with people who have gripping stories to tell, and examining cultural subjects for study purposes alone. Moreover, this form of interaction can create images powerful enough to blur the perceptual border between seeing photographs and seeing what photographs document. And as this occurs, subject by subject, image by image, each documented moment in *Abyssinia* becomes as real as wherever the viewer happens to be admiring it.

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