

# BYREDO

## Viviane Sassen x Ben Gorham - Bal d'Afrique

B: Still, until this day, I haven't been to Africa.

V: You haven't been to Africa?

B: I've never been to Africa...

V: Really, we should change that.

B: Although my father lived there.

V: Where?

B: He travelled a lot. He studied in Mozambique and he was in Tanzania and Kenya, he actually did his thesis on nomadic people, on the Maasai. When I was very young, I remember him publishing a book. I remember the pictures of the Maasai and I was fascinated by them. That was my first taste of Africa, primarily through my father's relationship to Africa. I didn't grow up with him and many, many years later, when I was 18 years old, my mother gave me my father's diaries to read. I was able to read about the period that my father lived and travelled in Africa, through his diary.

V: That's amazing.

B: It was; it was an amazing way to get to know my father. But it also sparked a very vivid picture in my mind of what Africa was and I was really fascinated by it. Bal d'Afrique was really an extension of that, of those initial memories. It's a little bit of a bizarre project, considering I've never been there. But Bal d'Afrique became this love letter to Africa, about this amazing place, where I've never been.

V: And yet it somehow made an impression on your mind. Maybe you don't even want to go now, so as to not spoil your fantasies about Africa...

B: Oh no, I very much do want to go. You see, the first part of my life I grew up in the suburbs of west Stockholm. I had many friends of African descent, first generation immigrants from Nigeria, from Ghana and Senegal.

V. Mostly West Africa?

B. ...and Ethiopia. For a very long time I wanted to visit, but always at the last minute I had to cancel. Tell me about your experience, when did you first go?

V. I was two years old when my father and mother first decided to go to Africa, to Kenya. I lived there for a while, for about 3 years; my two brothers were born there. We lived in a tiny little village near Lake Victoria. My father worked as a doctor; there was one hospital in the whole area and he was working there. Sometimes, maybe once a month or so, he would head further into the countryside to treat patients. I remember those visits so very vividly because we would drive for hours and then come to a place, a school or a small village, in the middle of nowhere. There would be a big tree and all of the patients, mothers with children etc, would gather under its shadow, waiting for my dad, waiting to be treated. Those were my very early memories. I was five or six when I went back to Holland, but my very first childhood memories are all from that time. It's like they are my hard drive or my blueprint.

B. And when did you go back after that?

V. Well, I visited again 10 years later, when I was 16. I went together with my family, it was a holiday that was very intense. I had always had the feeling that returning to Europe from Africa was a shock when I was young. I felt that my real life would go on without me in Africa, like I was stuck in some kind of parallel universe. So it was very emotional when I went back when I was 16 and I couldn't connect to it anymore. Then I didn't go back to Africa for a long time. When I met Hugo in 2000 – he is now my husband – I started travelling there again. He was born in Zambia when his father worked there – his father was also a doctor. Hugo was born in Zambia and partly grew up in Tanzania.

B. Do you find your early memories and connections are similar?

V. Yes, very much so. For both of us, it made a very important impression; we don't need to explain to each other what it was like. I don't know if it's kind of a mutual background, but Africa connected us right away. We have been together for 20 years now and we travel there a lot. We have friends there, and we try to spend time there as much as possible. Last year, we spent 3 months there with my son, and he went to the same international school that my husband went to when he was young. We travelled all over. My son wants to go back; actually, we might go back for a longer period.

B. A lot of the work I've done, especially the initial work, was exploring the link between scent and memory. I really felt that scent has the ability to evoke emotions and instantly transport you...

V. Into the past and into a memory...

B With your trips being more frequent, do you still feel this more visceral pull? Do you still feel this connection to childhood?

V. Oh yes, definitely. There are certain scents that transport me back immediately. The smell of a wood fire for instance. Or a certain smell of engine fumes and being on a bus with a lot of people in the heat...

B. I try to explain to people that it's about the specifics of scent, but it's actually also about place. I used to travel as a child; my mother is from India and we used to travel there a lot. You know India is also a highly impressive environment for a child from Europe. It's so sensory with noise and people and smells. Even the smells of pollution, (yes, even those smells) the humidity and people, lots of people in small spaces, those scents become familiar, even though they aren't always considered...

V: ...attractive smells?

B. Yes, attractive smells. Nevertheless, it becomes a really important part of us.

V. Scent also makes us feel safe or unsafe, it's a really important reaction of the body. One very important smell that I have really vivid memories of is Dettol – and it is connected to my father. I would go and see him in the afternoon; we would walk there when I had nothing to do. I would go to the family unit of the hospital, where all of the mothers and babies were. The hallways always smelt of Dettol – it is so specific to me, bringing back memories from that time.

B. Scent is very strong in that way. Physiologically and psychologically I think scent and memory are the most closely linked. Do you find that? I mean photography has become a medium for you, do you now find that this exploration is more related to your memories?

V: Well, yes. A while ago I was talking to a friend of my mother's; she is actually from Norway and at some point she also worked in the hospital in Kenya when we lived there. She told me that she remembered I was always pointing out things, always saying Kijk eens Kijk eens! [pronounced cay-cans], which means look at that in Dutch. She always thought that I was talking about cakes! But I was actually always pointing out things that somehow felt important to me. That happened from a very early age,

the whole idea of looking at the world and recognising and seeing things that felt important to me. I think the kind of light and colours that are so specific to Africa, and also in other equatorial countries like India, influenced me. The light in Africa is so crisp and the shadows are so strong, I think that this informed my photography very much.

B. Yeah, I can see that

V. For instance, I am remembering those mothers and children seeking shelter from the sun under the tree and the shadows that were cast. The shadows the leaves would cast on their garments and on their skin; that is something that inspired me later on in my photography, that kind of graphic quality, the shapes and the colours.

B. At what age do you remember that it was unique, or rather that your reflections were unique? You have such a large body of work relating to Africa, when did that start to become part of your story?

V. Well, that started back in the 2000's, when I started travelling to Africa again with Hugo. First of all, we were travelling in South Africa. We were quite intrigued by the townships – I just wanted to visit the townships all the time. It reminded me of the village where I had lived, so vibrant. There are so many parts of South Africa that don't feel like the Africa that I knew growing up. I think around 2004 we went to East Africa and showed each other the places of our childhood. We went to visit the village of my childhood and to see the people there that I still knew. We travelled around Lake Victoria and that was when something first struck, whilst making pictures there. On my earlier travels to the townships, I had always shot in a reportage or documentary style. Most images from Africa that appeared in Western media were either National Geographic pictures or documentary photos about hunger and AIDS; that kind of grainy black and white photography. I know it sounds naïve, but in my mind, Africa was ought to be portrayed in a documentary manner. Yet somehow, when I went back to the places of my childhood, I started out making different kinds of pictures; staging them, allowing them to become more personal and subjective. On this trip I had very vivid dreams at night and all of these childhood memories came back. I had this notebook and every morning I would wake up and sketch ideas, ideas that were more informed by Surrealism and my dreams. You know when you are child you still have this magical thinking, where you combine things that aren't real. That is when it all kind of clicked; suddenly my camera became a tool that could reconnect me with my memories of the past.

B. What you are describing is what connects me very much to your work. You see, I only have these childhood memories of something I have never seen. So your work

really speaks to my fiction, to my dream. Somehow, it resonates in that very beautiful way.

V. It's very much about the subconscious, its intuitive.

B. Yes, there is an abstract quality to your photography that is more artistic than what is often thought of as realistic. A dream is a very beautiful way to describe it – it's vivid and emotional and abstract. With this project, with these postcards, beyond the perfect analogy of my father sending these letters and greeting from Africa, I found them very beautiful in their own right. I also found something very authentic in the applications, in the paint, can you tell me how that came about and how it relates to you?

V. We spent a few months in Tanzania as we visit there quite often. Close to where my husband grew up, there is a very old shop, an Indian shop called Shah Enterprise that sells souvenirs. There is a very old man who runs the shop; he's in his 80s or his 90s now. I was in this shop – and this shop has already existed for 40 years, including when my husband lived there – when I see these postcards that are really old. I bought a bunch of them. I was off to see some kids and I actually thought it would be a good way to keep them busy! It wasn't staged or planned it was very organic. I often draw or paint on my own photographs so I had these pencils with me. I was with my son and some kids who live there, who are the grandchildren of a family that we know well, and Hugo's parents befriended back in the 70's. We hung out and made these postcards with no intention of making them into anything else.

B. I feel quite fortunate that we can show them to other people in this book. I find them so interesting, even seeing my own children – who are five and eleven now – relate and react to these images. I started to really see their power. I always imagine that a particular creative spirit exists in Africa unlike other places in the world – do you find that? That people in different places possess a unique way to communicate?

V. I am not sure if it is very different to other places in world. If you look at different cultures people always have a tendency to make beautiful things; to alter their thoughts, images and dreams into objects, sculptures or whatever pleases them. What I love about Africa is the animated culture that brings very normal things to life; I love how, for instance, song, dance and theatre are used in a particular way to express ideas and stories.

B. We chose to work with a charity on this project. Can you talk about that?

V. The charity is run by the grandmother of the children who helped paint these postcards. She is born in Tanzania, once an orphan raised by nuns. She's now in her

80s and is a very well-respected woman. I believe she was one of the first female representatives in the houses of parliament in Tanzania and she has done amazing work for young, under privileged girls, in giving them an education. For instance, maybe not so much now but in the past, when young school girls would get pregnant they were not allowed to go to school, and even their families would expel them. One of the reasons she set up schools was to give shelter to these girls. I thought it would be nice to have that connection to her as she has been around for so long and is so well respected within the Tanzanian community. There are many charities in Tanzania, but many of them are run from other countries. She is on the ground and under the radar a little, and already has a connection to this project.

B. I like that connection to the images and what potentially impacted them. I like the connection to projects and people in the area. Although Bal d'Afrique is an immense celebration of African culture and dreams, I think there also needs to be an acknowledgement of the difficulties and the cultural nuances and contrasts that occur. Have you given your son similar experiences to yourself in Africa? Do you want to give him similar memories?

V. Yes, definitely. We planted a little seed in him from a very early age about Africa. He was one year old when we stayed there for a few months; he learned to walk there, actually on African soil. It's something we cherish. For him to see how people in a completely different culture live is very important. He loves it there and he wants to go back – he is always asking, 'When are we going back? When can we go back and live there for a while?'

B. How old is he now?

V. He is eleven.

B. I found with my daughter, who is also eleven, that they are much more mature and aware at that age than I thought they would be.

V. Yes its crazy and it's true.

B. He must have also experienced Africa through your images, as a part of his memory building...

V. Ha, I don't know – he isn't really interested in my photography! He is really into animals! He is much more into nature and wildlife. He knows everything about tigers and the larger animals but also the very tiny insects. When he was younger, and he was allowed to watch TV, we put on wildlife documentaries with David Attenborough.

So we kind of spoiled him with that. He wants to be a biologist when he is older but I am not sure whether that is going to be the case. Lately, he wants to be a vlogger.

B. Yeah, I think that is a viable option for all eleven year olds now.

V. Yes! Maybe he can do vlogging about wildlife, let's see.

B. Do you think you will continue to explore this subject and this part of your history? Do you think it will always be something that you return to and express?

V. Yes, I think so, and I hope so. I am contemplating what to do next, and I will definitely keep going back to Africa.

B. It's such a rich and multifaceted place. And the perfume was built in that way too; Africa is an endless source of inspiration and emotion.