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Worldly views of Glen Ellen photographer

Photographer Lisa Kristine has traveled the globe capturing stunning images of the world's native people

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On a bedroom wall of photographer Lisa Kristine's two-story home near Glen Ellen hangs a photograph so vivid it looks like a window into another world.

In the picture, titled "High Plateau, Tibet," a smiling woman dressed in plain farm clothes crosses a mountain meadow. The elevation there is 13,000 feet and the Himalayas loom in the background.

"I love that image," Kristine said. "The landscape is so enormous, and the woman is utterly comfortable in it. Every day, she takes that walk to her fields where she harvests barley. I love her joy in just being who she is."

The peasant woman in the photo doesn't seem concerned about living far from the comforts and conveniences of big cities. Neither is Kristine, who took that picture and has taken thousands of others all over the world.

In the past 25 years, Kristine has traveled to 60 countries on six continents, creating forceful and intimate portraits of native people in remote regions. Her career sounds like one long adventure, but she has faced some hardships, too.



CHARLIE GESELL / PD

Photographer Lisa Kristine stands in her Glen Ellen home in front of her photograph "High Plateau," from her book "This Moment."

"I've run out of food. I've run out of water. I've had practically every known disease there is — hepatitis and malaria and dysentery," she said. "That part's not fun. Being stuck in a village, turning yellow from hepatitis, is not fun."

Ask her to name her favorite place in the world to take pictures, and she might find it difficult to pick Thailand over Japan, or rate Kenya above Ethiopia, but she does have a special feeling for India.

"India had probably the largest impact on me, because nothing is hidden, so whether there's absolute abundance or extreme poverty, it tends to be right in front of you all the time," Kristine said.

Paul Oppenheimer, a scholar and philosopher in Scottsdale, Ariz., who wrote an essay for one of Kristine's two books of photography, finds it easiest to describe her work with a simple list of her images:

"The young Thai monks. The beggar on the streets. The boys in the madrassa, a Muslim seminary. The old Chinese man in a train station. The Tibetans farming in a place that's almost impossible to farm," Oppenheimer recited.

"And the Papua New Guinea men in their initiation ceremonies," he continued. "It's almost inconceivable that any outsider, let alone a woman, would be permitted to photograph that ceremony."

Kristine gains access to people and places not often open to travelers by simply taking her time, often spending months in one locale and meeting people hours or even days before she starts taking their pictures.

"I never work without permission, and once I have permission, I may not start work for some time, just so I can be candid with people. First, we can be in each other's presence," Kristine said.

Some of the photographer's subjects have never had their photographs taken before, and a few have never seen a camera, let alone a strobe light.

"Years ago when I was in northern Kenya, I was making an image of a small child," she said. "This child sprung eight feet in the air, because the light so frightened her. She didn't know what it was. That was the last time I used a flash."

The artist's patience is evident not only in her approach to her subjects but also in the technology she uses. She develops her own prints from transparencies taken with an old-fashioned 4-by-5-inch field-view camera.

"When we think of photographers making images of people, you think of a whole roll of film being rattled off in about 60 seconds," she said. "I've never worked that way."

Kristine, 43, grew up in San Francisco and started taking photographs at age 11.

"My mother, Kristine Huff, really raised me," the artist said. "Huff was my father's name, but my father has never really been part of my life. My mother was a unit manager for UC Med Center in San Francisco. Then she did some financial planning. She passed away in 1997."

The young photographer, originally Lisa Kristine Huff, ultimately chose Lisa Kristine as her professional name.

She got some secondary parenting — and her first camera — from her aunt and uncle in Orinda, where she attended both junior high and high school.

"When I was 16, and finished high school, I went to the Design Institute of San Francisco," Kristine said. "And the day after the graduation ceremony, when I was 18, I headed for the airport, and I didn't return for five years."

Wanderlust didn't strike Kristine suddenly. Even as a child she had what she now calls her "joie de vivre for elsewhere."

"When I was quite small, I pulled out all my mom's books of anthropology," she recalled. "I was fascinated by people everywhere."

During Kristine's first five-year international sojourn, she traveled the way young students do, getting by on a minimal amount of money and changing plans abruptly.

"I had some relatives in Denmark, so I went and visited them. As I continued to go south and arrived in Italy, somebody said, 'Hey, would you like to catch a boat? I'm headed to Israel.' And I said, 'Sure!' and off we went. Next, I'd meet somebody else who'd say, 'Would you like to go to Cairo,'" Kristine remembered.

"So we went down through the Sinai Desert and I stayed with Bedouins. During this whole time, of course, I'd been making images.

"I remember being in Cairo in a hotel, and picking up a brochure of Thailand. I saw all of these beautiful temples, and thought, 'I will not be home for a very long time.'"

When Kristine finally returned to California, she went to work at a stock photo

agency in San Francisco.

"That was a very intense form of mentorship. It's one thing photographing for oneself, or even taking classes," she said. "It's quite another working for an agency where there's no room for error. You quickly get your technique down. It was there that I realized I could make a living."

Now Kristine supports herself selling her own photos, which can bring a couple of thousand dollars apiece, either at arts fairs around the country or through the three galleries she owns, in Sonoma, Sausalito and Santa Fe, N.M. She hopes to open a new gallery in New York within the next year.

"She has gained her own following of people who love and buy her work," said Darlene Markovich, founder of the Missing Peace Project in Palo Alto, which sponsors art shows in museums around the world to promote humanitarian causes.

"Lisa sees dignity in all people, and she respects them all," Markovich said.

Kristine has auctioned her own work to help support the Missing Peace Project, and also has donated photographs to other humanitarian organizations. Occasionally, she accepts commissions from agencies dedicated to promoting international understanding.

"I've just been invited by the Intersections Foundation in New York to photograph Iraqi refugees in Syria," she said.

Because Kristine takes some time to get to know her subjects, she captures some remarkably candid images, but she also finds parting painful.

"When I was last in China, I had researchers go out and find some of the women who had had their feet bound," Kristine recalled. Beginning in the 10th century and ending in the early 20th century, Chinese girls' feet were bound to keep them dainty and small, sometimes causing severe deformities. The practice was outlawed by Mao in 1949.

"I made some portraits of them, and one of them I really connected with. Through my translator, she said, 'Lisa, when you come back I probably won't be here.' She's in her late 90s. We both just started crying."

Kristine's internationalism even extends to her personal life. She and her partner of eight years, an Iranian film and television producer, have adopted two children, a 2-year-old boy from Guatemala and an Ethiopian girl less than a year

old.

"I have traveled so much in the world, and I've met so many glorious children without homes that for me and my partner, it was our first preference to adopt internationally," Kristine said. "So that's how we decided to start our family."

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