

# Photographer's FORUM

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PROFILE: PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHER DANA GLUCKSTEIN

IN THE GARDEN WITH RON VAN DONGEN

A CONVERSATION WITH EMILY HANAKO MOMOHARA

PORTFOLIOS: KEVIN BUTLER, NINA MARIE RAMBO

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## CLASSIC PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHER

# Dana Gluckstein

BY NELL CAMPBELL

In 1983, Dana Gluckstein was in Puerto Rico on a commercial assignment to photograph factory workers for Quantum, a computer chip company based in the Bay Area. After finishing her work, she decided to go to Haiti for a week and photograph for herself. Little did she know that the Haiti trip was the beginning of a 30-year project making portraits of indigenous peoples in remote areas around the globe.

The first portraits for Gluckstein's book *DIGNITY: In Honor of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (powerHouse, 2010) were made in Haiti, including the cover photograph of a woman smoking a pipe. The book features over 90 beautifully printed black-and-white portraits selected from her *Tribes in Transition* photographic project, which has grown to include an international travelling exhibition.

Gluckstein spent her childhood in Beverly Hills, where her extended Jewish family included her grandparents from Poland and both sets of great-grandparents. During high school, she was a para-counselor at the first Crisis Counseling Center in Los Angeles. This experience influenced her to major in psychology at Stanford University with a minor in art.



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At the time, her primary art interest was painting, not photography. During her junior year in Florence, she fell in love with the light. Not yet owning a serious camera, she took photographs with an Instamatic. She went on to study photography at Stanford with Leo Holub. A friend of Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham, Holub had built a dark-room in the basement of the university art gallery and founded the photography program in 1969. Gluckstein says that studying with Holub, Robert Parker and the other California artists teaching at Stanford in the 1970s shaped her vision and gave her a great foundation, which included learning how to look at light and how to interpret color into black-and-white.

Feeling that she was too impatient as a painter, after graduation in 1979, Gluckstein went home to Los Angeles to decide whether to become a photographer or attend graduate school in psychology. She wrote to the photographer Eve Arnold, seeking advice on her career dilemma. Arnold sent a typewritten reply before going into seclusion to edit her book on China, saying, "From an older photographer to a young one. Here is my recommendation: Learn your craft, find out what you want to say and then, say it." Thirty-three years later, at the Santa Barbara

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*Chanter, Hawaii, 1996*



*Young Boy, Religious Festival, Bhutan, 2010*

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*Dancers, Bhutan, 2010*

Museum of Art exhibition *Portrayal/Betrayal*, Gluckstein's photograph "Tribal Man in Transition" hung next to an Eve Arnold photograph taken in China.

Gluckstein decided to pursue a career in commercial photography in San Francisco. She describes the 1980s as a great time to be living there. There weren't many women working in the photographic industry yet, and she learned strobe lighting on the job while assisting Bay Area photographers. A friend from Stanford, the associate art director at *San Francisco* magazine, hired her to photograph celebrities like Grace Slick for the

monthly feature, "Persona."

In 1981 Gluckstein bought a Hasselblad, which she still uses today. Silicon Valley was in its heyday, and she began shooting for annual reports even though she wasn't familiar with that photographic style. She went in with her own eye and made intimate portraits. Her work won awards, which led to jobs in advertising.

In 1985, Gluckstein was sent to England to photograph British Army generals for a WICAT computer ad campaign. She knew that plane flights from London to Kenya were cheap, so she went to Kenya and stayed for three weeks. At night in camp, when



*Aboriginal Artist, Gathering of Elders, Onondaga Nation, New York, 1989*

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other travelers would ask which animals she had seen that day, she would say, “None.” She didn’t go on safaris but instead chose to spend her days in tribal villages making portraits.

The portrait “Tribal Man in Transition,” made on this trip, is one of her favorites. She described the making of it to Sarah Coleman in an online interview for *Planet*: “I was at a roadside market in the middle of nowhere, and this man came forward to ask for his portrait to be taken. The light was beautiful, and he was extraordinary: he’s wearing a ragged T-shirt but he has a timeless, iconic face and the essence of a hero.”

In the mid-1980s, Gluckstein sought a bigger pool for her advertising work and considered moving to New York or Los Angeles. Los Angeles won because her own tribe (her family) still lived there. She shot for magazines like *L.A. Style*, an oversize fashion magazine that was a great venue for her — they liked black-and-white photos and ran the images large. Ironically, *L.A. Style* sent Gluckstein back to the Bay Area to make portraits of Herb Caen, Alice Waters and Dianne Feinstein when she was mayor of San Francisco.

In addition to pursuing her commercial work, Gluckstein thought more deeply about her photography of indigenous peoples and why she was doing it. Feeling the need to connect with her spiritual roots, she attended an artists’ retreat at The Ojai Foundation in Ojai, California. She studied with Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, whose philosophy is that artists are the seeds of change in society and that their artistic gift comes with a responsibility.

Gluckstein realized intellectually and spiritually that she didn’t have to remain stuck in advertising photography. Her calling to photograph tribal people was validated. She saw herself “as a

bridge person, non-Native, who walked in both worlds, an L.A. girl but working in other places and bringing the voices of the Ancient ones to the world.”

After studying in Ojai, she attended a gathering of spiritual and global leaders in Oxford, England that established the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Attendees included the Dalai Lama, Mikhail Gorbachev, Thomas Banyacya (keeper of the Hopi Prophecies) and Oren R. Lyons (Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, Onondaga Nation of the Iroquois).

Lyons became an important teacher for Gluckstein and wrote the introduction to *DIGNITY*. He invited her to attend the Ancient Voices Forum held in November 2013 at Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico. She was invited to sit in the council and listen to their teachings, as well as make portraits. She photographed Leonard Little Finger, a Lakota elder; Danny Blackgoat, a Navajo elder; and Angaangaq (which translates as “the man who looks like his uncle”), an Inuit elder.

Gluckstein’s travels have taken her to photograph the Quechua in Peru, the Lamu and the Masai in Kenya, the Himba, the Herero and Ovazemba in Namibia, the Goba in Zambia, and peoples in Bali, Chiapas (Mexico), Bhutan and Botswana (not a complete list). Before travelling, she consults with a friend or a liaison who knows the country well to connect her with a guide — someone who knows the dialect of the region and who understands she is not there as a normal tourist. Her itinerary is set in advance, but allows flexibility for random happenings. She is usually in places off the beaten track that haven’t seen many tourists, travelling for two or three weeks at a time because the locations are remote.

When photographing, she says, “I speak a lot to the interpreter if the people don’t speak English. I want them to know that I am



©DANA GLUCKSTEIN

*Navajo Dancer, Arizona, 2012*

**“The light was beautiful, and he was extraordinary: he’s wearing a ragged T-shirt but he has a timeless, iconic face and the essence of a hero.” – Dana Gluckstein**





© DANA GLUCKSTEIN

*Navajo Elder Woman, Arizona, 2012*

there in friendship, in love, to translate the beauty of their culture. That my intentions are good. It has to be a cross-cultural exchange. I have to leave people feeling that they were appreciated and that they enjoyed having their photograph taken.”

Sometimes her family — her husband, Michael and daughter, Marena — travel with her. Marena hangs out with the kids and scouts subjects for portraits; Michael sometimes films Gluckstein at work. Whether she travels alone or with her family, she always brings gifts that the community might need. In Fiji, the family contributed money to help build a one-room cultural center.

Gluckstein shoots with two 1981 Hasselblads loaded with 220 Tri-X film. (She is currently concerned because Tri-X in that size is going to be discontinued.) She likes using 220 film for the extra frames that allow uninterrupted rapport with her subject. She shoots with natural light and usually with natural backgrounds. In Botswana, she travelled with an assistant because it was a difficult and long trip. They brought black silk for a background, as they had a Land Rover and knew they could set up a small tent and shoot inside it. She doesn't always want to have the bush as the background; and, when thinking of a collection, she doesn't

**“I want them to know that I am there in friendship, in love, to translate the beauty  
of their culture.” – Dana Gluckstein**

want all the images to have the same feeling.

In northern Namibia, Gluckstein photographed two teenage girls outside the small frontier town of Opuwo. The attire of the girls is representative of the project’s concept of tribes in transition. One girl is bare-breasted with a cell phone hanging from her neck (probably acquired from a tourist and purely decorative now). The other girl is wearing a bra as a decorative garment. Bras were introduced by missionaries who considered bare breasts to be shameful. The photograph represents the collision of cultures that is happening across the globe.

The publication of *DIGNITY: In Honor of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* coincided with Amnesty International’s 50th anniversary. Gluckstein worked closely with Amnesty International to bring attention to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The text of the declaration is included in the book, as well as an epilogue by Larry Cox, the executive director of Amnesty International.

The United States was one of four countries (along with Australia, Canada and New Zealand) that voted against the declaration in 2007. The book and a policy statement by Amnesty International were used to create support for the declaration and to lobby President Obama to adopt it, which he did on December 16, 2010 with 300 tribal elders in attendance. It was a great human rights victory.

About five years ago, Gluckstein was advised to set up a non-profit, the Tribes in Transition Education Fund, as her project was growing and she could no longer afford to fund the work by herself. It was one thing to take an annual journey, but another to put

together a book and a travelling exhibition. The exhibition *DIGNITY: Tribes in Transition* has travelled to several cities in Germany and to Switzerland at the invitation of the United Nations.

In 2015, the exhibition (with additional photographs made since the book publication) will be shown at the Bowers Museum of Cultural Art in Santa Ana, California. Gluckstein’s photographs are in the permanent collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Holden Luntz Gallery in Palm Beach, Florida represents her photographs.

In the 1990s, Robert Sobieszek, former photography curator at LACMA, helped Gluckstein understand the nature of her work. He said that it was not anthropological or ethnographic, but rather that she was a classic portrait artist trying to connect with the deeper spirit of the person, the soul. The mission of her project with indigenous peoples is reflected in the words written by Desmond Tutu in the foreword of *DIGNITY*: “The Indigenous Peoples of the world have a gift to give that the world needs desperately, this reminder that we are made for harmony, for interdependence. If we are ever truly to prosper, it will only be together.” ▲

*Nell Campbell is a documentary photographer based in Santa Barbara, California. Her project Duck Blinds: Louisiana was exhibited at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans in 2012. Her photographs are included in the permanent collection of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and she is represented by the Jane Deering Gallery.*

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