

LIFTING THE CURTAIN ON DESIGN

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY

VICENTE WOLF

Christine Pittel

The Monacelli Press

I dedicate this book to good and loyal friends:

Preston Bailey has been there in good times and in bad. His joie de vivre, generosity of spirit, and enormous talent have made him a valuable and precious friend.

Richard and Jane Novick are not only great clients but great friends. They have been by my side since I first started my business.

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Designed by Beverly Joel, pulp, ink.

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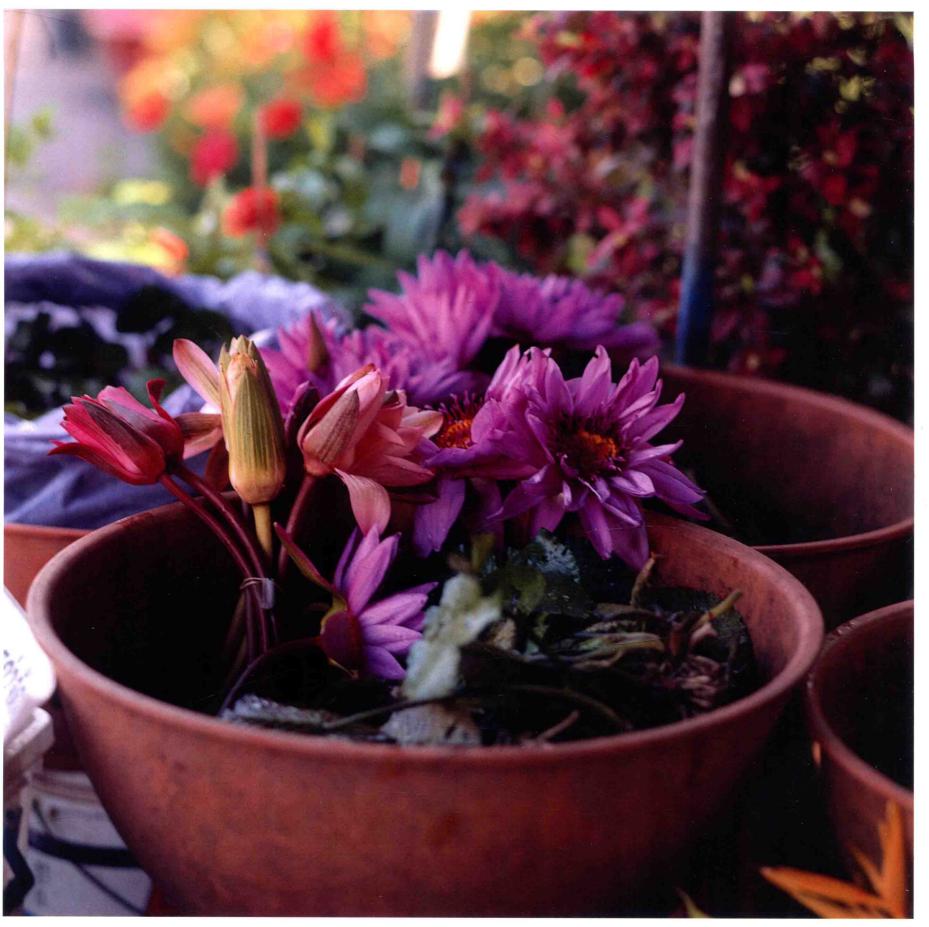
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INTRODUCTION

THERE WAS A PERIOD IN MY LIFE WHEN I DID NOT have a clue about who or what I wanted to be. I was completely disconnected from whatever talents I might have had. I was fortunate enough to meet Bob Patino, an interior designer who became a mentor to me. Very quickly, I found a direction and a career.

I immersed myself in work, and the years flew by. I was continually looking for the next job, the next challenge. The one constant in my schedule was an annual trip. Every December I visited some exotic destination. This was adventure travel, and it usually did not involve luxury hotels or pampering. The point was to get closer to another culture.

One year I was in the Himalayas, hiking through a rhododendron forest along the border between Sikkim and Nepal. The views were incredible, but the mountain path was more suited to goats than to people. It was a perpetual zigzag—climbing up, flattening out, then climbing up again. I was looking at the steep incline coming up and thinking about how I hate going uphill. When was it going to be lunchtime? How much farther did we have to go before it would be over? Why was I here?

All of a sudden a light bulb went off in my head. Wait a minute. I'm walking on the flat part now, and it's actually kind of pleasant. The clouds just parted, the sun came out, and I can feel the warmth on my skin. Why don't I enjoy it, instead of worrying about what's up ahead?

The future will always be just out of reach. You'll get there eventually, and it may not be as bad as you think. But in the meantime, don't miss the here and now. Live in the moment. That's what's important. What am I doing today? How can I use my energies?

I don't pretend to have absorbed this message completely, but I'm trying. There is always a before and an after; but the point is to be present and aware for all the moments in between.



SIMPLIFY



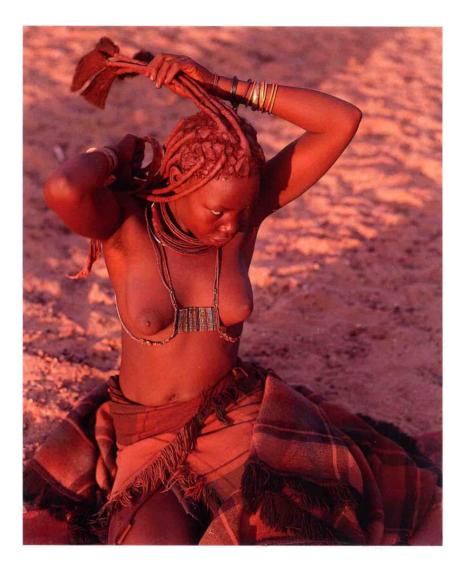


I had heard that Namibia was completely different from any other country in Africa. It has a very small population—fewer than two million people, which seems even smaller when you realize that there are four times as many just in New York City. It's on the west coast of the continent, just northwest of South Africa. Most of the country is desert, very hot, dry, and arid. Not many tourists make the trip. Its one claim to fame is that it has the tallest sand dunes in the world. That was enough for me.

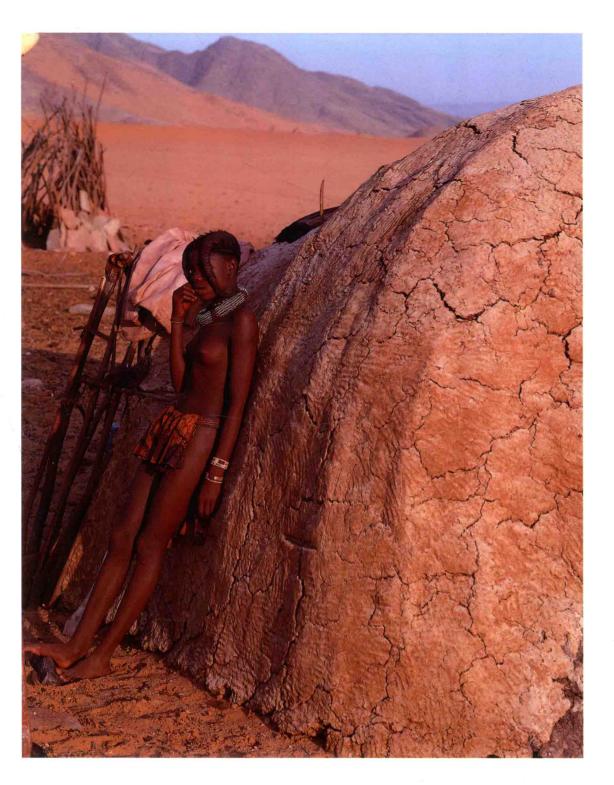
I arrived in the capital, Windhoek, on Christmas Day. Windhoek means "corner of the wind" in Afrikaans, and it's one of the best-kept, cleanest cities I have ever seen. I stayed at the Heinitzburg Hotel, an improbable crenellated castle built by a German count for his fiancée in 1914. I had a lovely Christmas dinner and the next morning boarded a charter flight to fly north to the Kunene region. (The only way you can get to these remote places is by chartering a plane.) After three and a half hours in a small, propeller plane, I was glued to the window, desperately searching the landscape for any signs of life. Where was the airport? But there was no airport. We landed on a stretch of gravel in the middle of nowhere. A Land Rover was waiting, and a couple got out and climbed into the plane as I got out and climbed into the Land Rover. Then we drove for a good forty-five minutes through the desert. All you could see in any direction was sand. Hills and valleys of sand. I was expecting that, yet I was not ready for the desolation and the vastness. There's nothing out there. But then I got over my shock and started to differentiate a shape here and there—a tree, a bit of scrub, a pile of rocks. Gradually, you realize that there is more to the landscape than you initially thought.

The sky was a blazingly bright blue. Not a cloud in sight—which was actually not good, according to my guide. Why? Apparently you need a few clouds in order to get the truly magnificent sunsets. So now I was scanning the sky, hoping for clouds. Finally we arrived at the Serra Cafema camp, which is built on the bank of the Kunene River. Usually when I travel, the accommodations are primitive, but this was utterly luxurious. I had my own thatched-roof bungalow, handsomely constructed of wood and canvas, with a living area and a sleeping area and a bathroom with a wonderful shower. A ceiling fan circled lazily overhead, and the coverlet on the bed was made of soft chenille. Best of all, the rooms were open to the river so you never felt confined. I could hear the rush of the rapids downstream as I fell asleep.

The next morning, we went out in the Land Rover to visit the Himba tribe, a nomadic people who wander with their cattle and goats from one watering hole to another. The women are accustomed to visitors from the camp, and they laid out handwoven baskets and







little carvings of animals to sell. But I couldn't take my eyes off their skin. To protect it from the sun, they rub a mixture of mud and animal fat all over their bodies and even into their hair, which they braid into stiff, surreal shapes. So the hair blends into the skin and the skin blends into the earth. The girls are a vision in rich reddish-brown. The clothing they wear may start out a certain color, but it all ends up looking like mud. Suddenly, I found myself thinking of a living room. How would it look if I did it all in reddish-brown? But the trick is that it can't all be the same reddish-brown. That's the mistake people make—they try to match everything perfectly. It's much more interesting when you have all these different tones of the same color, as you have here, in nature.

The Himba people live in rounded huts made out of a framework of branches spread with mud mixed with cow dung and draped in animal hides. I watched young girls milking cows, preparing food, carrying water. The women seem to do all the work while the men just sit there. They stare at you, you stare at them, and I wonder, whose life—theirs or mine—is actually weirder? I bought a little container