

KANYE WEST

# SURFACE

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(OPPOSITE) Jackie Nickerson  
in Los Angeles.

# In and Out of Africa

A British photographer in search of humanity finds it on the continent where life began.

BY SARAH KHAN

PORTRAIT BY BRAD TORCHIA



Can a portrait provoke conversation about identity, politics, and the human condition?

That's what photographer Jackie Nickerson achieves in her work, such as her acclaimed 2013 exhibition "Terrain," which was a collection of understated yet searing images depicting workers on farms across eastern and southern Africa. There, laborers and their labor are inextricably intertwined, with faces concealed by plastic crates, figures swathed in tarp, and a man seemingly becoming one with the mound of tobacco leaves piled high atop his head. "I see this guy Oscar walking along the road in front of me," Nickerson recalls. "He's carrying a huge bunch of tobacco leaves. It obscures his head and shoulders, and he becomes a hybrid of himself and the work he does every day." She's trying to show that labor comes with a price, and that the price is human.

Nickerson's eclectic body of work is a study in nuanced approaches. From

her first foray into documentary-style photography, with a powerful book of photographs called *Farm*, taken over three years across southern Africa in the late '90s, to her high-concept fashion spreads for Marni, Louis Vuitton, and Hermès, she brings a singular sensibility to her art. Magazine editors have taken note. In 2014, Nickerson became the first woman to shoot the cover of *Time*'s Person of the Year issue in its 87-year history, with her moving portraits of Ebola workers in Liberia.

"What initially struck me about Jackie's work is her distinctive use of color and light; there's something almost painterly about her photographs," says New York City gallerist Jack Shainman, who represents her work stateside. "The staying power is that the content is always socially invested, and the tremendous care and respect she shares with her subjects comes through in the images."

That unmistakable visual voice is evident in Nickerson's fashion photography, too, and makes her a sought-after talent with brands seeking a fine-arts aesthetic for their campaigns. "I think when people come to me, they're not just interested in fashion," she says. "I've done some really interesting collaborations with people because they get my work. I don't look at fashion photography—I look at art. That's where my inspiration lies."

In terms of collaborations, none was more unexpected than the time Kanye West came knocking. While she's reticent to speak much about the two lookbooks that she shot for his Yeezy line with Adidas, she thinks highly of her fellow artist. "I love working with him," she says. "He's also asking so many questions, about all kinds of things in life and society and art and politics and what's going on." According to Nickerson, they're asking the same questions. >





(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)  
 "Oscar" (2012) from Nickerson's  
 "Terrain" series. "Damiano  
 Masamba" (1999) from a series  
 titled "Farm." "Catherine" (2013) from  
 "Terrain." "Chipo" (1997) from "Farm."  
 (OPPOSITE) Photos from Nickerson's  
 "Faith" series, including (from top)  
 "Brother Michael" (2005) and "Sister  
 Patrice" (2005).

It's hard to pin the peripatetic photographer down. She was born in Boston, spent much of her life in London, and has a house in Ireland—though she spends most of her time in Los Angeles, New York, or somewhere in Africa, where she first arrived on a whim in 1997 and has kept returning, often for years at a time. Indeed, when I reach her by phone she pulls over to the side of a road in Zambia, where she'd come to visit friends but stayed to work on a new project.

Africa is, after all, where Nickerson rediscovered herself as a photographer, and her connection to the continent remains strong. At first, she settled in Zimbabwe and had given up photography, having decided to change course and do something completely different. "But as an artist, you can't escape it," she says. "It always pulls you back."

When she did get pulled back, she was determined to showcase different faces of the diverse continent in images that go far beyond what's typically disseminated in the West. "From the 1970s there was a vision of Africa as a sort of failed continent, it was really made by the NGOs who were trying to raise money. A lot of the photography they produced was incredibly negative," she says. "When I was in Zimbabwe I didn't see any of that. So I tried to take the Western perspective, the pan-African thing, and create something else, images that for me were like a new reality."

The result of this photographic journey has been a commitment to artwork that inspires a conversation. "If you put a photograph in a gallery, all the power stays with the audience, and they think what they want to," she says. "Once you put your work out there, you can't control what people think about it, what questions they bring to it. And when you're dealing with the real world and real people, you have to find a way to address some of those questions."

If projects like *Terrain*, *Farm*, and *Faith*—the latter of which delves into the traditionally private realm of the Catholic church in Ireland—are any testament, Nickerson is constantly seeking out new ways to do just that. And now that her work is regularly exhibited everywhere from France to Qatar to Poland to New York, that conversation is decidedly global.

ALL PHOTOS, THIS SPREAD: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

