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[About](#)   [Blog](#)

## Flurina Rothenberger: Just as Dandy As You Are

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*Photograph by  
Flurina Rothenberger*



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I have as yet to meet Flurina Rothenberger in person, but from her photographs I feel as though I know something of her. Through her eye, I have see the way she looks at the world, the way she raises her camera to capture a fraction of a moment in time for us to consider at our leisure. From her photographs, I have a sense of style, grace, and poise alongside a wit that gently enjoys the beauty of life, a sensibility that gives



one a feeling of being at home in the world, wherever she may go. When I first received her book, project *I love to dress like I am coming from somewhere and I have a place to go* (Edition Patrick Frey), I was absolutely beside myself. What better than a pocket paperback of Africa to gaze at all day? The people, the landscape, the streets, the style, the feeling of art, culture, and life. Flurina's photographs are about a sense of being as just as dandy as you are.

**Miss Rosen: Can you please speak about your early experience in art, and some of the early influences that inspired you to create art? How did growing up in Africa influence your aesthetic sensibilities?**

Flurina Rothenberger: I grew up in Côte d'Ivoire, in an hybridized environment driven by the genuine remix of tradition and contemporary. The skills, crafts and creative inventions I was exposed to weren't of self-fulfilling beauty, they beared witness to a specific art of life. Nothing was meaningless and in spite of the high aesthetic value served a practical benefit. Be it the toys my friends fabricated from scratch or the enigmatic result of a specific weaving technique, the beauty always emerged from a thought materialized in a unique practical shape of expression. It may be a coincidence but my sisters and I all ended up in similar fields of activity and each one of us has remained strongly influenced in her design by references from West Africa. Most likely our visual perception was sensitized by growing up in a surrounding infiltrated by the genuine presence of someone always inventing and crafting something. I don't consider myself an artist. I'm simply a photographer attracted to places where people don't operate within a single, but a quadruple consciousness.

**Was there a point where you realized that making art would be your life's calling? We love to know the moment when artists realized there was no turning back, and they were committed to pursuing art.**

I never had a sudden strike of insight but there was a sort of turning point. After moving back to Switzerland I had trouble settling in. I felt lost and disconnected. A short introduction to the photo lab triggered something. The particular atmosphere shook my senses wide awake. It became a place of comfort, wild experiments and most importantly of crucial awareness that a certain image is one choice among endless other options. I guess in a sense the darkroom sparked both: my first real commitment to visual expression and the belief that images can challenge thoughts.

**Can you speak about your work in Africa: how does working as a photographer give you access to people, places, and perspectives you might not otherwise reach as a "civilian" (so to speak)? What do you find to be the most rewarding aspect of traveling with a camera?**

As a photographer I have my individual way of looking into things. This naturally also determines the nature of access I reach out for. I tend to seek and find a welcoming door if people understand my motif and commitment to sharing life. In my experience every photograph and every project begins with trust, insight and integrity. As for what I love about traveling with a camera in Africa, is that my ideas aren't triggered by life in theory. They wash up almost physically in the bus, on the street, in a conversation, handed out like a palpable invitation. In most places people have a strong opinion about images and it's far from uncommon to communicate issues visually. Considering this background both is true: approaching people and situations as a photographer often results in opportunities of close proximity, the camera though also exposes my incentive to critical questioning. I appreciate both of these aspects in Africa very much. If the former is the palpable invitation, the latter is the reality check of my intention and approach.

## Can you speak about the challenges of photographing in various nations?

I see two main challenges when I photograph in other nations than my own: One, the fear that my pictures could create a simplistic distorted reflection of the place, the situation or the individual. Second, finding the appropriate balance between familiar and exotic, a visual language which stirs something inside the viewer all the while remaining unpretentious. I keep those two aspects in mind as a guideline while I choose work, photograph and edit. It's a high set bar and in some terms idealistic. Another thing I've learned from portraying the fates of very different people : no matter how committed I remain to the task of showing lives and subjects in their legitimate complexity, it'll always result in a perspective tainted by my own cultural mentality and story, be this conscious or not.



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## How do you, as a photographer, work to avoid the more obvious visual tropes and reductive narratives that the Western media often associates with third world nations?

I wish my work was fully free of the kind of images Binyavanga Wainana labeled as “poverty pornography”. It certainly isn't. I've fallen into that trap just like most Western photographers. Mass media operates in terms of which message sells fastest and cheapest to the widest audience possible. Obviously this isn't the best equipped vessel to explain a context from a place with great diversity and complexity. Yet it is mass media which has significantly shaped our collective and increasingly global visual memory. As a photographer I'm aware that the viewer assigns a certain message to a descriptive clue and will prioritize this one from the overall picture. The devastating aspect though is that the audience grows bored and sated by topics due to the way they're pictured, when just these should urgently stir us to take action.

I try to follow a working style and ethics which considers this fait accompli. If I get carried away in the excitement of the moment, I'll censor those images later in the edit. At times it's frustrating since I submit the actual content in which the photograph was created to precisely those very rules I question in their legiti-

macy to condition how we perceive things.

There is a photograph in my recent book showing a four year-old girl in Moçambique. Sent to help her sisters fetch water from the well, she marches down a long empty road. In my consciousness this image elicits a chuckle and reflects the amazing maturity, singular determination, flexibility and courage I've experienced countless times with children deprived of certain opportunities. On the counterpart this image belongs to the risky ones. It embeds several of the earlier mentioned indications, a large audience is conditioned to associate with poverty, struggle and vulnerability. It's not an easy decision which one to give in to: the origin context of the image or the general public's eye.

I solve the struggle by getting advise from someone who understands my motive but doesn't share the specific story of the pictures origin. For my latest project *I love to dress like I am coming from somewhere and I have a place to go*, I chose a tight collaboration with Hammer, a graphic design studio founded by my sister Sereina Rothenberger and David Schatz. I handed them a large chunk of my archive and they curated the final selection along with the edit and illustrations of quotes. Sometimes it's best to let others kill a few darlings in the benefit of a fresh and fair view.

**What do you think that the photograph does that no other medium can do? How do you find people respond to your interest in photographing them?**

Photography is a medium of great generosity. It can easily stretch it's boundaries between dream and reality giving up neither one nor the other. It suggest optional views on a complex, yet unpretentious level. It is both, humble and powerful. A photograph sets our thoughts into motion by taming life to stand still. Most cultures and societies have their own popular imagery which also influences how people respond to the medium. In a way by taking a picture of someone in this context, the portrait is reciprocal, tainted by both backgrounds. Mine and the subjects. I enjoy that for my deep belief that how we want to be seen, points out the reality we're shaped by. I make my presence and intentions obvious and in exchange, with few exceptions, people respond with positive and active complicity. I love the intimate moment of unspoken consent, when the other suggests a pose, changes the setting with small arrangements or simply agrees by addressing the camera with an assertive presence.

**What did you find to be the most inspiring aspects of photographing the people and places of Africa ?**

The diversity of scenarios and the relationship people generally entertain with the medium, exhausts the whole range of photography's pliable and enigmatic nature. It's all there woven into the pattern of every day life: the flickering of value and meaning, the shift of visual boundaries, the remix of traditional and contemporary, the fusion of carefully arranged and incredibly improvised. In Africa, my wrestling thoughts are put at ease, my fears untangled and my senses wide awake. This alone is very inspiring!

I like that in most areas and African countries I've been to, images act in a different and in a way stronger narrative context than I experience in Europe. A response to this is the individual ownership people tend to take on, when being portrayed. Even now in times of social media there is a particular poised nature of self-perception most Africans I meet from very different backgrounds seem to share. I rarely experience fidgeting, restlessness or any other lack of confidence. If someone agrees to be photographed, regardless the scenario, they will meet me and the camera with doubtless presence. Intuitively or consciously adding their intention and vision to mine. It's one of the many stimulating aspects I love, admire and at times envy a bit.

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