

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

WITH

# Piper Mackay

BY ARIEL SU

**P**iper Mackay is a highly acclaimed photographer who has made a name for herself in the world of photography. Piper's awe-inspiring work has been recognized and appreciated by many and gained success worldwide, and has been published in prestigious publications such as Nature's Best, National Geographic, National Geographic Explorer, Travel Africa, WWF calendars, birders, and numerous travel publications, including in past Lens Magazine issues dedicated to the Travel and Portrait themes. Her work is also represented in four out of five Remembering Wildlife books, a testament to her skill and talent. Her beautiful and meaningful photographs capture the essence of nature and wildlife.

Piper's photographs have been exhibited at several prestigious venues, including the Smithsonian Natural History Museum in

Washington, D.C., The Museum of History and Industry in Seattle, Washington, The Art Wolfe Gallery, and The G2 Gallery. Her work is also displayed in public spaces and private collections worldwide.

Apart from being a prolific photographer, Piper is also an inspirational speaker for Canon, Nikon, and extensive photography venues. She is known for leading safaris and tribal expeditions across the African Continent, which has allowed her to capture some of the most extraordinary and breathtaking images. Her passion for photography and love for nature are evident in every photo she captures, making her an inspiration to many.

It is a pleasure to present an intriguing interview with a brilliant photographer and showcase her project, which is focused on the Suri tribe in the Omo Valley, Ethiopia.

MY LOVE FOR  
AFRICA



## MY LOVE FOR AFRICA

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The Suri tribe in Omo Valley, Ethiopia.  
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Piper Mackay fell in love with the African continent when she first set foot on its rich red soil. This led her to embark on an intrepid journey as an African wildlife and cultural photographer, spanning across the continent. She created an exit plan to leave behind a successful career in the fashion industry, driven by her passion for creating compelling imagery and stories that make a difference. To achieve this, she moves away from the beaten path and immerses herself in the cultures and wild environments

she is photographing. Piper's passion for the natural world has grown into a lifelong commitment to inspire others to explore, respect, and preserve the beauty of our fragile planet. After facing a decade of challenging obstacles, she was able to overcome them and finally realize her dream of living and thriving in Kenya. She believes that compelling work comes when one invests time and lives the stories they are trying to tell. It is vital to interact and gain the trust of those whose stories are being told, especially when the stories are sensitive and complicated.

Piper believes that there are enough images of poverty, pain, and disaster in the world. Instead, much more needful is imagery that reveals the beauty that is worth protecting. Powerful images help shape the world's view and play an essential role in disseminating how wildlife and cultures are coping with the rapid changes happening in the developing world.



The Suri tribe in Omo Valley, Ethiopia.  
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**LENS MAGAZINE:** Thank you for this interview, Piper. We were highly impressed by your unique style and achievements. This interview will focus on your fabulous series of portraits of the Suri tribe in Omo Valley, Ethiopia. This ongoing project is an excellent expression of love for Africa, the people, and colorful nature. But first, let's start with your background and passion for photography. **What drew you to the photography field in the first place? Were you influenced by a surrounding artistic atmosphere since childhood? Where did you gain and develop your technique?**

**PIPER MACKAY:** Thank you for your interest and the good words; it's a pleasure having this interview. My love for Africa started in childhood. I dreamed of visiting Africa since my earliest memories. From the moment my feet hit the rich red soil of Africa, I was changed. The sights, the smells, the sounds, the raw and wild spaces; it was a magic that filled my soul in a way nothing ever had. Days later, in the heart of the Serengeti, at our private mobile tent camp surrounded by the greatest migration in the world, I sat in awe and

said to myself, *"I am going to be a wildlife photographer and live one year of my life in Africa."* This statement was quite bold or rather naive, as I had never even used a professional camera before the one I purchased for that vacation. Nonetheless, I began to dream of a life in Africa.

For almost twenty years, I pursued a fashion and textile designer career. While I collaborated with photographers, I had no interest in photography. However, the transformative experience of my first safari ignited my passion to explore the continent extensively and document my journey through photography. Being entirely self-taught, it took years of trial and error and capturing thousands of snapshots before I grasped the fundamentals of exposure and what constituted a powerful image.

Having photographed across Africa for almost two decades and revisited many locations numerous times, my passion for capturing exotic wildlife and indigenous tribes never waned. Overwhelmed by the reckless beauty of Africa, my early years were captured in vivid color.

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Piper Mackay  
MY LOVE FOR AFRICA





The Suri tribe in Omo Valley, Ethiopia.  
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As Africa changed rapidly with technology, I developed a sophisticated IR monochromatic style, retracing my footsteps to create images with a powerful glimpse into the raw, wild, and remote lands I first explored. My style continues to evolve as I grow in my craft, and new ideas are inspired by the ever-changing landscapes of Africa's wildlife and the diverse cultures I encounter.

**LENS MAGAZINE:** We've been planning this interview for a while, and we were waiting for your return from your travels. **Would you like to share some information about your latest journey?**

**PIPER MACKAY:** Most recently, I was in the field for a month, leading two private safaris. However, I will hop in my Landrover and drive to remote

northern Kenya in a few weeks to continue working on my newest fine art collections—a perk of living in Kenya.

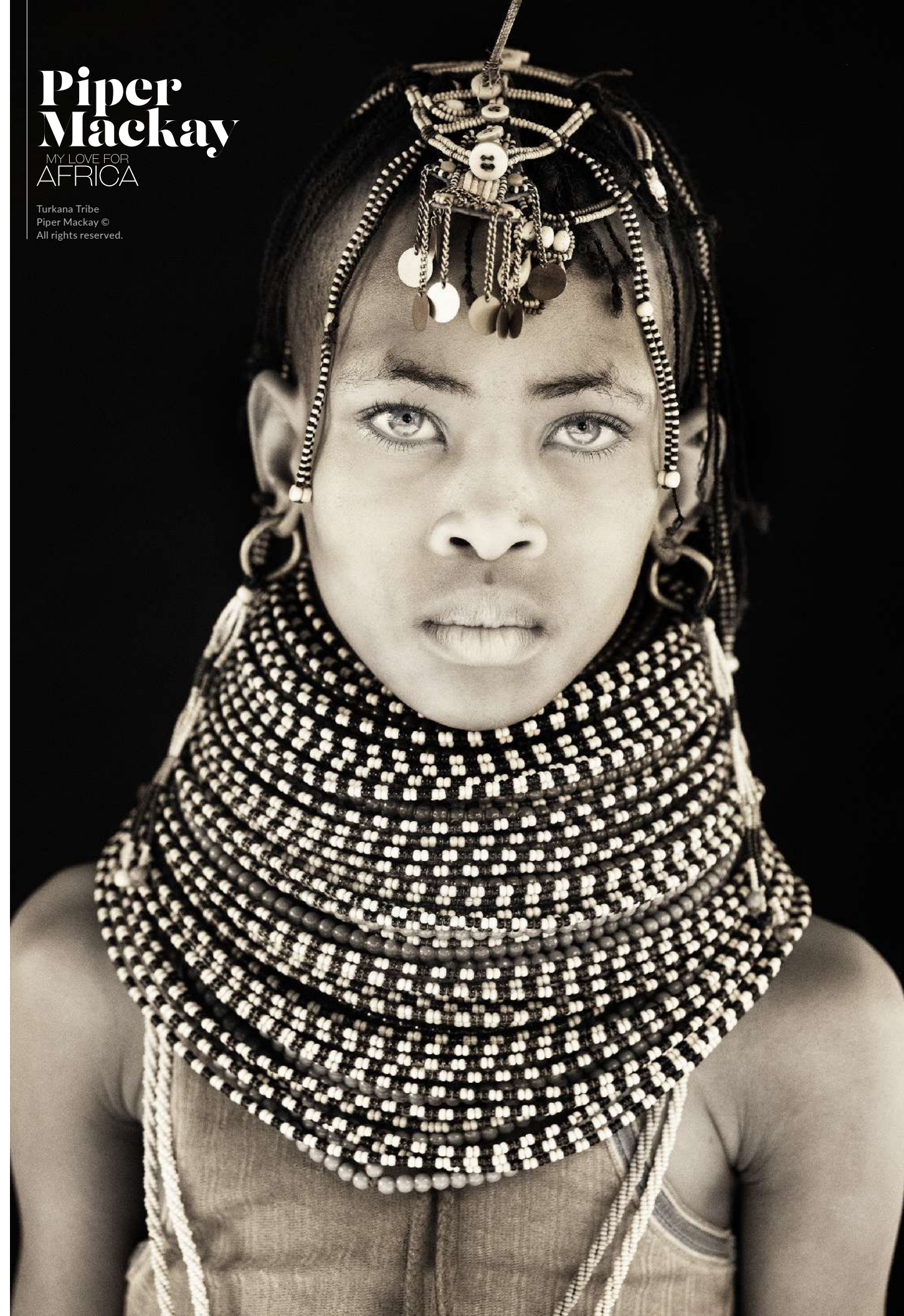
**LENS MAGAZINE:** Digging into your background, I was surprised to discover your previous profession in the fashion industry. **How would you describe the connection between the two fields? Would you say that Fashion was the basis and most substantial influence in developing your artistic photography style?**

**PIPER MACKAY:** My passion for design greatly fueled my fascination with the tribes, leading to unexpected and delightful discoveries. I was privileged to visit a Maasai Village during my initial safari adventure. This journey took place in an era long before the advent of smartphones, let alone widespread cell phone usage in Africa. The village remained untainted by the influences of modern commercialism, with life unfolding much as it had for centuries. The sense of unity within the community, the traditional boma structures, and the vibrant, distinctive attire of the Maasai people were utterly captivating, igniting a keen curiosity to explore other exotic tribes across the continent.

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MY LOVE FOR AFRICA

Turkana Tribe  
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In Kenya, many wildlife reserves are situated on tribal lands, forging a profound connection between wildlife and indigenous communities that began to take on a more profound significance in my photography endeavors. My experience in the fashion industry has profoundly impacted my artistic approach, particularly in my work with the Suri Tribe, whom I've been photographing for over 15 years. These women possess breathtaking beauty and remarkable talent. Over the years, I've developed a deep and intimate connection with them, witnessing their growth from young girls into graceful young women. As a result, last year, we orchestrated a uniquely special fashion shoot that was enthusiastically embraced by the entire tribe!



**LENS MAGAZINE:** Being a travel and extreme photographer is not a common profession for women, especially when traveling to isolated locations in Africa. **Where did the passion for travel come from? Do you usually travel in a group?**

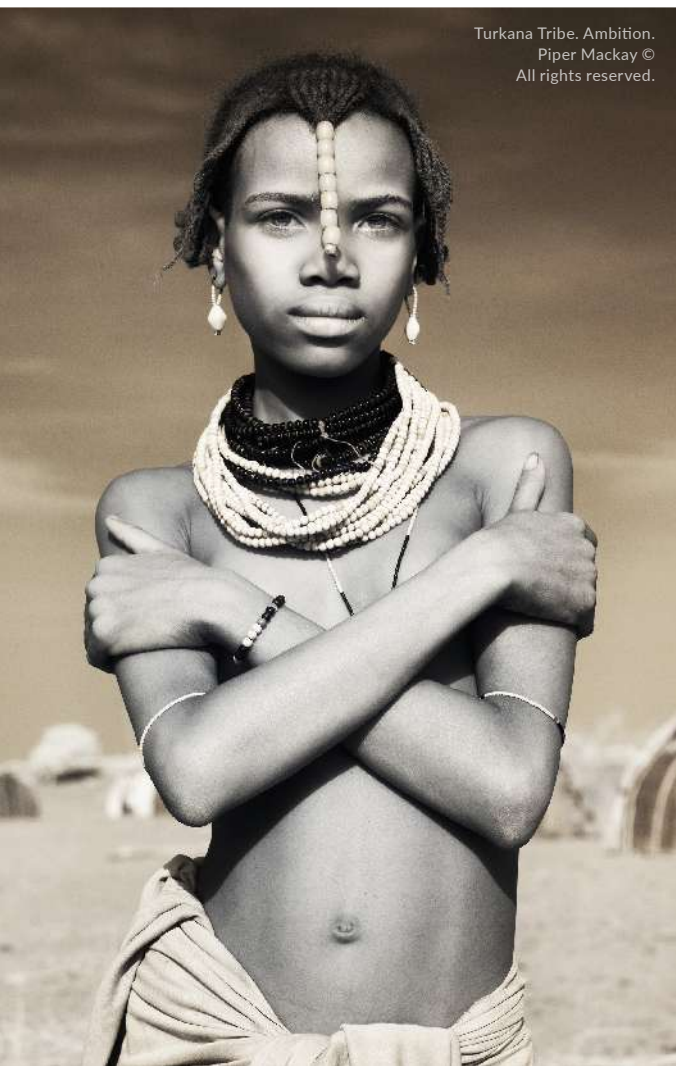
**PIPER MACKAY:** It's impossible to articulate the overwhelming passion and determination that took hold of me during my first safari experience. Africa captivated me so deeply that I returned two more times within the next six months and continued to visit multiple times yearly until my first trip to Kenya nearly a decade ago. With each subsequent journey, my thirst for new adventures grew stronger.

In the early years, I always traveled solo but with a meticulously researched and experienced team. This allowed me to immerse myself in village life, camping for extended periods to absorb their culture and traditional practices. To this day, I revisit many of these villages annually; they've become like an extended family to me. I've watched young boys grow into warriors and start their own families.





Turkana Tribe.  
Visionary.  
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Turkana Tribe. Ambition.  
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While I still embark on solitary journeys for my personal projects, cherishing the last untouched corners of Africa that are rapidly changing, I also lead small groups of photographers to these places. I aim to share the profound connections I've forged over the years, creating opportunities for others to experience the magic and build their own relationships with the people and landscapes that have shaped my life's work.

**LENS MAGAZINE:** Throughout your many years of experience, have you had some stressful or dangerous situations while traveling in Africa? Can you share one of them?

**PIPER MACKAY:** Journeying through remote Africa, particularly a decade ago, posed numerous challenges. Infrastructure like paved roads and reliable cell service was virtually nonexistent. I've faced obstacles such as being stranded by rivers, sleeping in vehicles, bushwhacking through roadless areas, enduring 19-hour drives, and more. Our team sometimes encountered tense situations upon arrival in certain areas, prompting us to trust our instincts and press onward. Despite these challenges, I can't recall ever feeling that my life was in immediate danger. The wealth of incredible stories and memories from those

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South Sudan.  
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experiences is so vast that it would require a book to fully convey them.

**LENS MAGAZINE:** What are the most significant things to remember before traveling, especially to the Omo Valley in Ethiopia?

**PIPER MACKAY:** Plan meticulously well in advance rather than scrambling at the last minute. Do your research, even when going with a group. Inquire about their experience and relationships in the Omo Valley, how often they've visited, and seek personal recommendations. Travel with a highly recommended, experienced, and adequately licensed team, ensuring they possess the necessary permits.

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Verify their license and make sure you're working with a reliable ground agent who is well-connected and capable of swiftly resolving any issues on the ground or providing prompt advice regarding policy changes, arrival procedures, equipment allowances, visas, etc.

Be prepared to go more than once; Omo Valley has a way of captivating the soul. Don't postpone your journey; transitioning from traditional to modern lifestyles is happening rapidly. Simply capturing photographs without profoundly understanding their traditions would feel like an empty achievement.

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**LENS MAGAZINE:** Your portraits are spectacular in their beauty. The figures direct a penetrating gaze, wrapped in flowers and plant motifs, and the result is beautiful and colorful. **Is this the tribe's natural state? Are they specially dressed for the photo shoot or for a tribal event?**

**PIPER MACKAY:** African tribes are renowned for their captivating body painting, attire, and adornments. Legend has it that tribal men imitate the vibrant hues of male birds to allure their mates. This practice seems logical given their close connection to nature, where they observed male birds' striking colors and courtship displays, which they then replicated. Among these tribes, the Suri people stand out as experts in body painting and using natural elements for ornamentation. While they paint their bodies and wear unique decorations/skins for ceremonial occasions, there's speculation that their elaborate headpieces were

inspired by encounters with photographers in the late 1990s. Nevertheless, their ability to swiftly create these stunning headdresses from natural materials remains impressive and provides captivating subjects for photography.

**LENS MAGAZINE:** Many photographers in Fashion and Portraiture describe communication with a model as the most essential part of the photoshoot's success. **What is the importance of communication for you? How do you get the model to stand before you?**

**PIPER MACKAY:** Building a strong connection with your subject, whether a person or an animal, is crucial for capturing an emotionally impactful image. As I mentioned, I dedicated a significant amount of time to building relationships with tribes, not solely to take photographs but because I was genuinely intrigued by their customs and ways of life.

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“ IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO ARTICULATE THE OVERWHELMING PASSION AND DETERMINATION THAT TOOK HOLD OF ME DURING MY FIRST SAFARI EXPERIENCE. AFRICA CAPTIVATED ME SO DEEPLY THAT I RETURNED TWO MORE TIMES WITHIN THE NEXT SIX MONTHS AND CONTINUED TO VISIT MULTIPLE TIMES YEARLY UNTIL MY FIRST TRIP TO KENYA NEARLY A DECADE AGO.

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The Suri tribe  
in Omo Valley,  
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MY LOVE FOR AFRICA

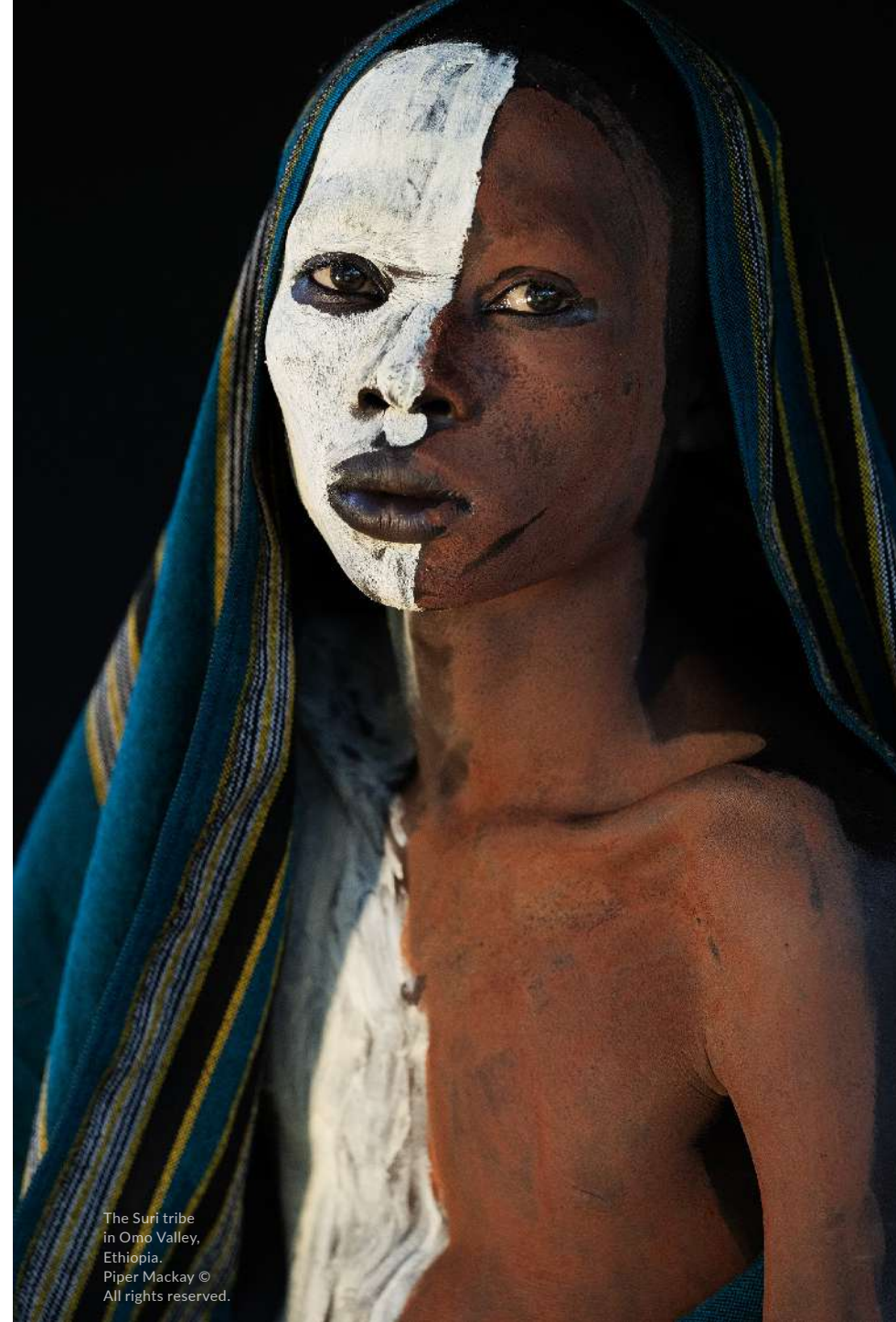


THE SURI PEOPLE STAND OUT AS EXPERTS IN BODY PAINTING AND USING NATURAL ELEMENTS FOR ORNAMENTATION.

- PIPER MACKAY



The Suri tribe in Omo Valley, Ethiopia. Piper Mackay © All rights reserved.



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When entering a village for the first time, I refrained from bringing my camera and instead focused on getting to know the community. Understanding their daily routines and interactions was essential for me to capture their narratives authentically. Without this interaction and insight into their lives, it would be challenging to convey their stories accurately.

Establishing a connection, even if it's just for a few minutes, is vital for creating compelling images that resonate emotionally. Being personally engaged with your subject allows more intimate moments to unfold naturally instead of rigidly directing them like a statue. Additionally, having a skilled and empathetic translator plays a significant role in fostering understanding and trust within the community.



The Suri tribe in Omo Valley, Ethiopia. Piper Mackay © All rights reserved.

**LENS MAGAZINE:** Your fantastic work spans many fields, including wildlife, documentary, travel, extreme photography, and, of course, fine art photography. Which field is the most enjoyable for you?

**PIPER MACKAY:** Throughout my career, I've been repeatedly asked which aspect of my work I love the most, and the honest answer is that I cherish them all equally. At any given moment, the one I'm currently immersed in becomes my favorite. There are times when I'm out on safari, questioning why I endure the challenges and rugged conditions of the hot, remote tribal areas, and I am just going to focus on wildlife and safaris. Yet, a mere two weeks later, I might find myself in the midst of a thrilling tribal ceremony in a scorching, dusty location, my heart pounding with excitement, and I declare that I'm solely devoted to capturing the essence of tribal life. While it might have been simpler to concentrate on one genre over the other,



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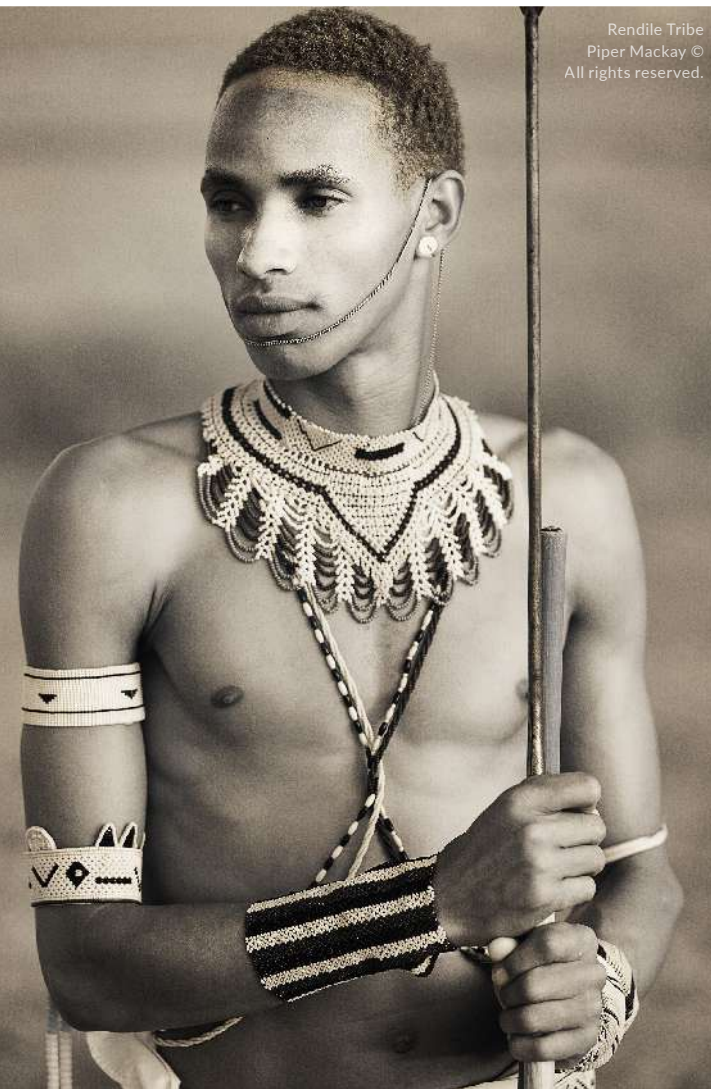
BUILDING A STRONG CONNECTION WITH YOUR SUBJECT, WHETHER A PERSON OR AN ANIMAL, IS CRUCIAL FOR CAPTURING AN EMOTIONALLY IMPACTFUL IMAGE. AS I MENTIONED, I DEDICATED A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF TIME TO BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH TRIBES, NOT SOLELY TO TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS BUT BECAUSE I WAS GENUINELY INTRIGUED BY THEIR CUSTOMS AND WAYS OF LIFE.

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Rendile Tribe  
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it's the entirety of Africa that captivates me. Lately, however, my attention has shifted towards my monochromatic fine art collections in both tribes and wildlife.

**LENS MAGAZINE:** Do you usually work on projects for an agency or as a freelance?

**PIPER MACKAY:** This is a career of passion, and I enjoy the freedom of working freelance.

**LENS MAGAZINE:** From the perspective of many years of experience, what would be your advice to the young photographer who wishes to gain his place in the field?

**Is there any particular advice for women photographers?**

**PIPER MACKAY:** Despite its repetitiveness, always pursue what ignites your passion. This profession is fraught with challenges, regardless of your experience. Without a profound love for your photography niche, you'll unlikely endure the hardships. Let it become a way of life, something you do out of necessity. If fame and wealth are your primary motives, consider a different path; it will offer a smoother journey toward your objectives.

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## *And my advice to women photographers:*

In my two-decade journey photographing across Africa, the challenges of being a female photographer persist. Simply put, the path to success is more arduous for us due to a significantly higher ratio of male photographers, particularly in the professional realm. It's crucial to note that this isn't a negative statement but rather a factual observation meant to provide context. As we've progressed through life, we understand the significance of connections and who knows us when opportunities arise.

Hence, backing us could mean advancing your career more quickly. Opt for workshops, photography classes, or seminars led by professional female photographers. They can serve as valuable mentors and recommend you for future opportunities.

The Suri tribe  
in Omo Valley,  
Ethiopia.  
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The Suri tribe  
in Omo Valley,  
Ethiopia.  
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# MY LOVE FOR AFRICA

APART FROM BEING A PROLIFIC PHOTOGRAPHER, PIPER IS ALSO AN INSPIRATIONAL SPEAKER FOR CANON, NIKON, AND EXTENSIVE PHOTOGRAPHY VENUES. SHE IS KNOWN FOR LEADING SAFARIS AND TRIBAL EXPEDITIONS ACROSS THE AFRICAN CONTINENT, WHICH HAS ALLOWED HER TO CAPTURE SOME OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY AND BREATHTAKING IMAGES.

The Suri tribe  
in Omo Valley,  
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