

Namibia is a magical country. If you google it, you will end up with seductive views of endless shining dunes under a steel-blue sky, as if caressed by God's hand, and bizarre mountain formations, whose naked rocks seem to stretch out of a ghostly wasteland into the clouds according to all the rules of romanticism. In front of them are sometimes decoratively lost leafless trees, which spread aimlessly with their dead branches. And behind it: the sheer nothingness to infinity. Under one of the photographs, a tour operator advertises its "luxurious desert adventures" with reference to a well-developed infrastructure and first-class tourist facilities. But there is another Namibia, not far from the routes of holidaymakers. Sometimes even directly at the edge of their path.

Namibia is one of the driest regions in the world, and climate change is not making things any better. Rain only falls every few years. There are hardly any rivers, certainly not clean ones, and many of the underground springs are gradually drying up. To describe such a nature as hostile to life is still beautifully coloured. The lack of water is not the only problem with which the



Welcome? An attempt is worth it. With bizarre figures, the inhabitants of Namibia's dust-dry landscapes want to encourage tourists to stop. There is more money to be made with them than with the barren country.

Photos Margaret Courtney-Clarke



Dust in the wind

Photographer Margaret Courtney-Clarke's earlier work was about the beauty of brightly painted huts in African settlements.

That's how she became famous. Her most recent recordings, on the other hand, are a matter of life and death.

They are shocking.

By Freddy Langer

people there are struggling. This is what the Namibian photographer Margaret Courtney-Clarke reports from her homeland. She speaks of a "complex country" and lists: corruption and mismanagement as well as a conflict caused by internal and external socio-economic and political forces, which culminate in neo-colonial exploitation and human rights violations. Namibia is rich in mineral resources, from copper and uranium to diamonds and rare earths. Thanks to mining, evenly distributed prosperity does not have to remain a utopia. Instead, greed rules, as a result of which land expropriation and resettlement, economic deprivation and ecological catastrophes are on the agenda. Hardly anywhere else is the gap between rich and poor as great as in Namibia.

Under the title "Namibia - A Photographic View", the twin cities of Mannheim and Windhoek, the Namibian capital, have announced a photo competition in 2024 among photographers from the country who are interested in "deal with historical, political and social issues in relation to their home country". The jury decided in favor of Margert Courtney-Clarke's long-term reportage "Geography of Drought", not least because it shows "not only accusatory, but also hopeful images". This refers to the creativity of the desert dwellers, especially the San, who, despite all the hardships, have lived - and survived - in one of the most life-repellent regions on earth since time immemorial.

"When I leave home," says Margaret Courtney-Clarke, who was born in Swakopmund in 1949, "I follow the wind, the moon and the clouds, which may or may not bring rain." That sounds unnecessarily esoteric. And it's not quite right either. For she, the white photographer, has been seeking out the same people in the same places for years, the original, black population, in order to document how they are doing, what is happening to them and how things will continue. One of her paintings, created in 2019, shows the inner wall of a tin hut on which nine of her color prints hang in a long row: souvenirs from each of her visits. They show

always the same couple, always in front of their house. She is standing, he is sitting. Only in the last picture the man is missing. He died. And now the woman is sitting on the chair. The situation is not getting any better as a result.

The photos of Margaret Courtney-Clarke seem brittle at first. She forces the brutal light of a merciless sun with slight overexposure in such a way that the heat creeps out of the pictures. The sky is pale, the ground ochre. What people have always built there immediately acquires the beige flavor of surrealism: shady roofs that balance in the most brutal solitude on wobbly constructions. The chairs for the service, each of which is more of an artistic sculpture made of scrap metal than a seat. Or the strangely forbidden

cages made of rabbit wire, here put over puny bushes to protect them from goats, there over poultry so that no predators help themselves, but once just over a stone, which at least makes you think. The track in the sand, known as the main road C 35, could have been created by the artist Richard Long. And even where scientists have staked out small fields for their investigations or where stone circles lie around the metre-long, dried-up leaves of thousand-year-old world wichi-as, one thinks it is Land Art. And when polished toilet bowls finally stand in the middle of nowhere, you have to force yourself not to think about Marcel Duchamp.

But of course, such associations are above all self-protection of the viewer.

who does not want to admit that all the scenes are real life. And the women do not hang themselves on strings between the bare bushes as an ornament of Mobile with handcrafted animals of the African savannah, rather they hope to sell such things as souvenirs to tourists. Just like the semi-precious stones that her men and sons dig out of narrow corridors deep in the ground at the risk of their lives and which they now spread out on small tables. And of course, the huge, bizarre animal and human figures on the roadside serve solely to persuade holidaymakers to take a short break - and to photograph themselves in front of or next to them for little money. But Margaret Courtney-Clarke does not show such contacts in any of her pictures. With her, people are alone with themselves or under their control

himself. Alone, not lonely. And the viewer wonders what he doesn't get to see yet. Some of it remains at least hidden behind dust, one might say, just like the graves of two poachers on the side of the road, over which a sand devil dances. What is hunting here, you think, and what is poaching? And what is there left to hunt at all? The only antelope in the exhibition hangs dead in a barbed wire fence. She got stuck trying to leave the national park and jump onto private land where there are still water holes. The animals, one reads, die in this way by the hundreds.

Margaret Courtney-Clarke documents. The quiet beauty of her shots stands in stark contrast to the brutality of life in the desert. Of course, she accuses with her pictures.

But at the same time, it celebrates the perseverance of the people with their meagre belongings and asks what home is, what makes a home. Her exhibition is a balancing act between art and reportage, which in the end leaves more questions unanswered than answered. But what else is photography supposed to do? At least you can say from the pictures that they won't get out of your head so quickly. And it wouldn't be the worst thing if they resurfaced from memory the next time there is talk of "luxurious desert adventures" somewhere.

"Margaret Courtney-Clarke: Geographies of Drought", Reiss-Engelhorn-Museum/Zephyr, Mannheim; until 5 July. The book "Dust on the Wind" serves as a catalogue. It costs 34 euros at the museum ticket office.

