

**“I believe the history of photography
for Black women is still being written”**

Tamary Kudita, IPE 163 exhibitor

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Opening shot

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SCALING THE CREATIVE HEIGHTS



When Jimmy Chin was little he found it hard to sit still at a school desk. Every impulse was to be outside seeking adventure.

He grew up to become a professional climber and skier, later adding photographer and filmmaker to his CV, almost by accident.

While Chin craved adventure and the adrenaline rush, his parents before him had risked everything to pursue a dream of stability and security. They had fled their native China for Taiwan during the turmoil of the Communist Revolution, later settling the family in Minnesota, America, and building a working life as librarians.

Turn to page 50 to find out more about Chin, who went on to co-direct the Oscar-winning film *Free Solo*.

To welcome in the new year, this issue we bring you a preview of 2022 (page 9), focusing on some of the photographic highlights of the months ahead. Among these is the International Photography Exhibition 163 (IPE 163). We are delighted to be featuring two IPE 163 exhibitors in this issue, Tamary Kudita and Rick Findler.

Our cover image, by Zimbabwe-based art photographer Kudita, forms part of her series *African Victorian*, exploring contrasting threads from Africa's colonial history. Documentary photographer Findler, meanwhile, has looked at life in Afghanistan in a fresh and unexpected way. His starkly beautiful images show electricity pylons which stand unconnected. Findler notes that only 35% of Afghanistan's citizens had access to electricity by the time the allies ended their 20-year war effort in August 2021. Learn more about Findler and Kudita's images on page 40, with a chance to see their work, along with that of the winners and fellow shortlisted exhibitors, at RPS Gallery, Bristol, from April.

For more groundbreaking image-making, turn to page 76 for an extract from the book *Photography – A Feminist History*, wherein writer and curator Emma Lewis explores the work of six highly distinctive female photographers, including Julia Margaret Cameron and RPS Hood Medallist Poulomi Basu.

Finally, we were honoured to be awarded Best Member Magazine at the PPA Scotland Awards 2021, with Best Writer going to Tom Seymour. We'd like to thank you for your role in that success – as one of our valued community of readers.

KATHLEEN MORGAN
Editor

'Climber Sam Elias scales a wall in Geyikbayiri, Turkey' by Jimmy Chin



‘I SAW THIS AS A MOMENT TO REFRAME HISTORY’

To celebrate the International Photography Exhibition 163, over two consecutive editions of the *RPS Journal* we feature four photographers whose work is inspirational in contrasting ways

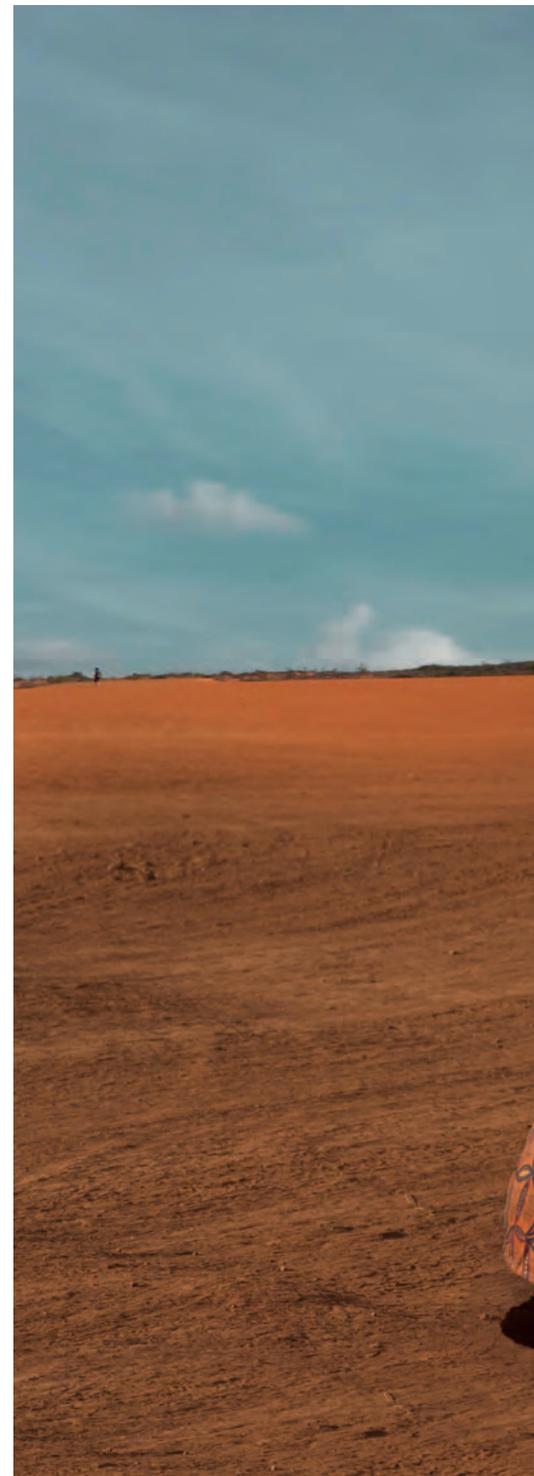
WORDS: TOM SEYMOUR

It was always going to be as challenging as it was exciting to select just 100 photographs for the International Photography Exhibition 163 (IPE 163). The open-call attracted more than 8,000 submissions from photographers across the globe. The results will be exhibited at RPS Gallery, Bristol, from April.

A panel of five selectors including creative producer Sebah Chaudhry and Joy Gregory HonFRPS pored over prints of the shortlisted entries. The final line-up features genres from art to landscape, with exhibitors based in locations including Iran, Chile and Nigeria.

The overall winner is French-Polish photographer Tim Franco, who received the IPE Award for his series *Unperson – Portraits of North Korean Defectors*. KyeongJun Yang, a US-based South Korean, achieved the Under-30s Award for the project *Men Don't Cry*, exploring masculinity and emotion.

Following on from our coverage of the IPE 163 winners in the November/December 2021 *RPS Journal*, four more exhibitors have been selected to have their work featured in this and the following print edition. This time, we meet Zimbabwean photographer Tamary Kudita and UK-based photojournalist Rick Findler.





'Roots II' from the series *African Victorian* by Tamary Kudita



'The gathering' from the series *African Victorian* by Tamary Kudita



Tamary Kudita (Zimbabwe)

“Our self-perception has mainly been shaped by our representation,” says the Zimbabwean photographer Tamary Kudita. “But the Black identity is undergoing significant changes.”

In April 2021, Kudita was chosen as the creative award winner in the open competition at the Sony World Photography Awards. Then she was given the overall open competition honour, the award’s biggest prize, for an image from her series *African Victorian*. Kudita is the first African photographer to win the coveted title – a remarkable achievement for a 27-year-old with little formal training in photography.

In her award speech, Kudita spoke of her pride in “putting Zimbabwean art on the map”. But she didn’t mince her words either, instead providing a rallying cry for what she describes as “the importance of African representation”.

Now, two images from *African Victorian* have been selected for the International Photography Exhibition 163 (IPE 163), the latest edition of the world’s longest continuously running photography exhibition. Her work will be exhibited alongside that of 56 other photographers, having been selected from more than 8,000 images submitted to the IPE 163.

Kudita has not always focused purely on photography; nor does she necessarily define herself as a photographer. She studied fine arts at Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, where she learned to embrace the identity of “a visual activist who uses a camera as a tool,” she says in an interview from her home in Zimbabwe.

African Victorian is an expression of her dual heritage. She was born in Zimbabwe but has ancestral roots in Orange Free State, the historical Boer state of South Africa. These photographs, then, are a way of better understanding the colonial histories that have literally created her body and

defined much of her life, as well as her work as an artist. She describes her images as “a blend of the heritage of the Shona culture I was born into and the Western culture into which I have assimilated”.

“By foregrounding the personal and the self,” she says, “I look at the ways in which forced migration and our unchosen histories have shaped our contemporary state.

“As a Black female photographer, I believe that the history of photography for Black women is still being written. I needed to ask myself: ‘What am I adding to the history? What am I doing to tell the stories of Black women?’ With this in mind, I went beyond the aesthetic norms of photography.”

The series has been long in the making, and involved an immersion in the history of Western and African art.

Kudita began work on it in 2019, when she decided to create what she calls “a direct response” to the Rembrandt painting *Saskia as Flora*, a 1634 oil-on-canvas portrait of the Dutch painter’s wife, Saskia van Uylenburgh, depicted as the goddess Flora. The portrait is held in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, but was taught on Kudita’s fine arts course in Cape Town.

“I decided to use Rembrandt as a point of reference because he is a masterful storyteller,” she says. “His themes of portraiture, landscape and narrative painting epitomise mainstream art history. So I thought about the image of the Black female in Western art, and then I asked myself: ‘What would it mean to place an African woman in the realm of mainstream art history?’ I essentially saw this as a moment to reframe history.”

During the shoot, Kudita made the most of costumes designed by Angeline Dlamini and worked closely with the model Nothando Chiwanga. Kudita describes Chiwanga as “essentially an extension of myself”.

The image, featured on the cover of the *RPS Journal*, won the Sony open award. It was the last photograph from a two-hour shoot, both women in the windswept wilds of Zimbabwe with the sun starting to dip in the sky. It was a moment of serendipity; Kudita saw the dramatic background and located her model in position; Chiwanga instinctively placed the materials on her head and looked into the distance.

“I asked her to turn her head towards the camera and I took the shot,” Kudita says. “And in that frozen moment, the individual and the environment became one within the frame.”



'Vessel', 2020, by Tamary Kudita

Rick Findler (UK)

In March 2021, the British photojournalist Rick Findler found himself standing shivering on a snowy mountainside in Afghanistan's highland province of Bamiyan. The altitude of the rolling mountains around Bamiyan easily tops 3,000m – roughly the same as Mount Etna in Sicily.

The city of Bamiyan itself, with a population of more than 100,000, is traditionally known in Afghanistan for its liberal, multicultural perspectives. It is particularly renowned for two colossal cliffside statues of Buddha, thought to date from the 5th century and destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.

Two decades later, Findler was at the Bamiyan Ski Club, ready to photograph a commission for the *Guardian*. The occasion was a remarkable one. Nazira Khairzad, 18, and her sister Nazima, 19, were about to take part in the national Afghan Ski Challenge – and they were permitted to ski alongside boys.

Speaking today, Findler expresses disbelief at the tragic changes that have rocked Afghanistan in the short few months since he watched Nazira and Nazima course joyously through the snow. In the interim period, the US-led Western forces launched an abrupt, full-scale withdrawal from the country after a 20-year war, and the Taliban swept through the country again, taking back control and forcing the nation's youth, including Nazira and Nazima, to live again under a medieval interpretation of Sharia Law. "A lot of the people in Afghanistan are scared out of their minds," he says.

While in Bamiyan back in March 2021, Findler's eyes were repeatedly drawn to strange, Obelisk-like structures that reached out of the arid land. They were electricity pylons, he learnt, constructed by Bamiyan's mayor a year previously – but never connected to the country's electricity grid. After a 20-year Western occupation, during which infrastructure creation was often used as a selling point for the war in the British media, only 35% of Afghanistan's citizens had access to electricity, Findler notes.





'Pylons 01' from the series *Lost Connection* by Rick Findler



'Pylons 06' from the series *Lost Connection* by Rick Findler



“There were thousands of these pylons,” he says. “The mayor of Bamiyan had promised the town would get electricity, and put the pylons up in the hope of remaining popular with the people. But when he got voted back in, he did nothing with the pylons. They’ve remained there, completely unused, and it’s become a bit of a joke among the people.”

Findler photographed the pylons over the course of 12 days. The result is *Lost Connection*, a series of simple, austere still lifes, carefully orientated in the landscape, each of which represent the tragedy upon layered tragedy that is a reality for many in Afghanistan. Two of these images will feature in the International Photography Exhibition 163 (IPE 163), opening at RPS Gallery, Bristol, in April.

“I started to view the pylons as microcosms of the problems that persist in Afghanistan,” Findler explains. “Before the Taliban was in power, this was a story about the loss of basic amenities for the people of Afghanistan. But now the Taliban have taken control and the Western armies have left, the pylons have taken on another meaning – the abandonment of the Afghan people by the West.”

In comparison to the pictures of Nazira and Nazima skiing, Findler describes the pylon pictures as odd and unsettling. “Especially now,” he says, “after we’ve turned our back on the people of Afghanistan and left them to fend for themselves.”

One of the images from *Lost Connection* has been included in the Royal Academy’s Summer Exhibition 2021, which runs until 2 January 2022.

“I’m pleased with that,” Findler says, “not because I have a picture in the RA, but because people will go and see a simple photo of a standalone, empty pylon in a remote region of Afghanistan. They will see that image alongside a lot of artwork. And they will look at these pictures and ask: ‘What does it mean? And what did we have to do with this?’”

The International Photography Exhibition 163 launches at RPS Gallery, Bristol, in April 2022. Meet two more IPE 163 exhibitors in the March/April issue of the *RPS Journal*. rps.org/ipe163