

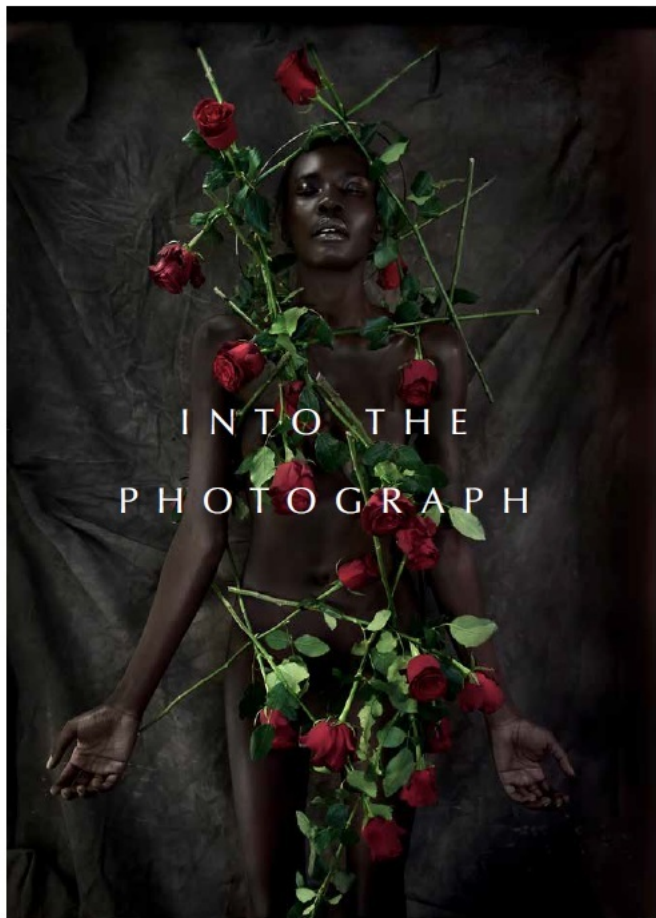
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INTO THE
PHOTOGRAPH

Krisjan Rossouw's intriguing African portraiture art photographs keep popping up on Instagram, restaurant interiors and décor shoots, so we sought him out to hear the inspiration behind his sculptural images.

Words Carrie Hampton Photos Kris Rossouw



Kris spoke to us in his Zen-white De Waterkant cottage, dotted with African artefacts, powerful statement pieces and a vast artist proof of his own favourite photograph from his *Dark Paradise* series that launched his career.

Dark Paradise was his debut solo exhibition in Cape Town's Castle of Good Hope in 2013. "I didn't see myself as an artist then. I just knew I had to create," grins Kris. Being a heritage building, it was dimly lit by antique chandeliers, and he wasn't allowed to hang anything on the walls. "My photographs had to be suspended from rafters, and they swung in the breeze. It was surreal," Kris recalls.

Kris reveals that Patricia Laloyo from Uganda was his muse for *Dark Paradise*, photographed in the damp basement of his Sea Point cottage where water seepage from

a natural stream created patterns on the walls, lit by one fluorescent tube. "It was the first time I realised how beautifully light reflects on dark skin." Non-traditional photographic lighting has become a key signature of Kris' stylistic approach, where the background becomes the colour, and the model almost becomes a silhouette.

Draping his subjects with foliage has also become a successful signature look. The poetic play of botanical accents in the *Dark Paradise* series has made it so sought after that only smaller-sized limited-edition prints are still available.

He gained international exposure after being invited to exhibit in Hamburg, followed by a solo exhibition in The Gallery at Grande Provence in Franschhoek, which continue to favour his work.

The show entitled *we never*

dreamt of seas explores identity in the context of slavery. The connection between the sea and people being taken from their countries, referencing the silent triumph of each subject; a wistful study of self-expression amidst the metaphor of broken, lost, and discarded things. Kris honours each model as an active collaborator in the process. Each photograph in this sequence is named after the model. Adam was plucked into his moment of fame from the Grande Provence waiting staff. "We work together to find that brief moment of truth in the image," Kris explains.

Exhibitions come and go, but Marble Restaurant in Rosebank, Johannesburg, collaborated with four South African artists to permanently incorporate art into their interiors. Rossouw's life-sized photographs translate Marble's story



of fire, smoke, organic beauty and sophistication. "They loved the turquoise green effect my lighting produced, matching the tiles by ceramicist Mervyn Gers." Marble's interior decorator commented, "His artworks are a pivotal storyteller. They stand out and offer patrons something to talk about."

Kris uses models from all over Africa, and the Caribbean, and the main model in *Tropika* is Tanya Nzonzimbu from Republic of Congo. "I couldn't take a bad photo of that girl! She walked into the room, grabbed a beer from the fridge and said in her silky French accent, "I'm ready!" The backdrop is a water-damaged concreted wall with limestone discolouration that emulates waves coming into shore. "The nicest pictures I've taken have been in derelict spaces."

Tropika, inspired by the exotic islands off the east coast of Africa,

was a collaboration with French furniture brand Roche Bobois, which partners with renowned designers and global fashion houses. Kris had artworks in the Roche Bobois Cape Town and Johannesburg showrooms, then came the offer to show in their Mauritius gallery. "I love tropical islands," Kris admits and sought out exotic plants, especially for these images. Kris remembers the opening night, "My partner didn't let me have a drink until the opening was over, but everyone wanted a one-on-one walk-through, so I did laps of the gallery until midnight!"

The most recent series Kris worked on, called *Culture Club*, was his interpretation of blurring the lines between black and white. He decided to make a fictional rainbow nation adorning models with initiation clay lit with different colours. "The images are powerful, graphic and potentially

confrontational because some of the models are looking straight at you."

Kris explains that he had no formal art or photographic training; perhaps that's where his genius lies. He's not constrained by how it's supposed to be done. Instead, his creativity knows no boundaries.

Kris is of Huguenot descent with a Dutch twist to the spelling of his surname Rossouw but was born a child of Africa. "Africa is part of who I am. I want to push the themes of Africa into a more positive, proud and beautiful way."

Kris Rossouw's next body of work will launch in the Deepest Darkest Gallery on the ground floor of his home in De Waterkant, Cape Town. But first, Kris and his partner are taking a well-earned holiday; where else but the tropical island of Mauritius?

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Krisjan's *Tropika* collection hangs in Roche Bobois gallery in Mauritius, and at Marble Restaurant, Johannesburg.