

LIFESTYLE
COUNTRY
LIFE

TEXT KERI
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PICTURES OBIE
OBERHOLZER

A life of adventure criss-crossing Africa and beyond is what has inspired iconic South African photographer Obie Oberholzer – and provided the title of his latest book

Diesel & Dust



□ Lynn and Obie Oberholzer, married for 40 years and still travelling together.

□ Nature's Valley, the town the travellers call home.

□ A self portrait of an artist whose career spans decades.

“ BELONG TO A CLUB CALLED THE BLUE Horizon Liners,” says Obie Oberholzer of his passion for travel in Africa. “I have a portrait with a blue line across my face – because the blue horizon is where I go to. It mirrors freedom, adventure, distance. There’s no freedom in the specific; freedom is going in the general direction, and it’s like that with my journeys. I like not quite knowing where I’m going. My only plan is to pack my bags and go. After that, it depends on who you meet, the weather, chance – it depends on you and how you feel.”

Internationally published and acclaimed as both a photographer and writer, Obie studied photography abroad and for many years headed the photography department at Rhodes University. Yet he was always travelling too, always reaching

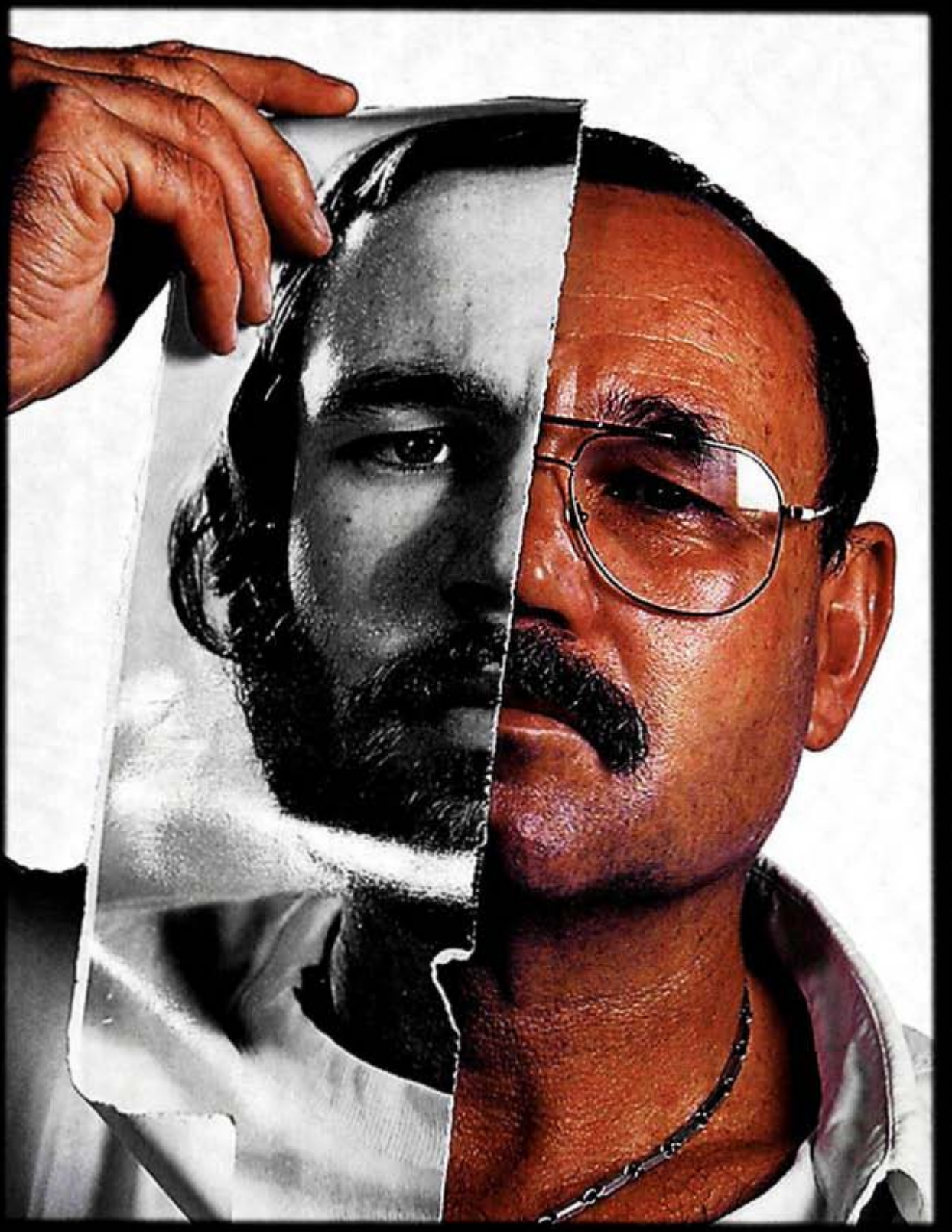
for new horizons. His career spans decades and thousands of evocative images of Africa’s people and spaces, yet home for him remains in the haphazard forest of Nature’s Valley near Plettenberg Bay.

“I don’t like cities,” says Obie. “They are a conglomeration of falseness. I like the ‘outback’. Here you can sit and watch and feel. Some of my favourite places are open spaces, like the Karoo. You find the most interesting things in vastness.”

What Obie likes to do in the vast open spaces of South Africa is drive very fast, blindfolded. “I find a big flat pan, like Vermeukpan in the Northern Cape. Or I ask a farmer if I can drive on his pan. Then I get into my bakkie, blindfold myself and go at full speed. Driving blindfolded at 160km/h is a very interesting experience. Your body separates from your mind. It’s a real high and you think of incredible things. >>



WESTERN CAPE





□ Old pier.
Hondeklipbaai.

>> I don't advise anyone to try it without adult supervision though," he laughs.

Obie's latest coffee table book, *Diesel and Dust* (he says the name is actually a philosophy for him because it conjures up images of freedom), documents both his personal quests and a few international assignments. From South Africa to Egypt, across to the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Oman, not forgetting Ethiopia and Namibia and back to South Africa in the final chapter, the book is a collection of his travels and experiences over the past four years or so. The final chapter – *Memories of Dreamtime* – has Obie reminiscing once home, and the images are unusually abstract.

Recently, Obie says, he's taken a liking to photographing abstract Africa. "Maybe I'm getting older and don't want to have to talk people into letting me take their pictures anymore, but nowadays I'm going beyond the people and looking for abstractions, such as lines in the sand, ridges on a mountain, reflections on water. I am finding great satisfaction in the landscape and still life." He says this is really a new style of photography for him, though he's not particularly fond of the word 'style'. "My photos are just an extension of me, nothing more. I photograph what I love; they are the core of me and I don't worry about the art."

Obie says that from an early age he saw the world in a square format and could communicate through two-dimensional images. So the way his life turned out is no surprise. "I know I represent a vagabond with a camera, but that's an oversimplification. I listen to what my eyes say to my mind via the camera, and I don't fight with my camera – it's my friend. To see pictures, you need to know before seeing, and sometimes see before knowing. It's an interesting balance of seeing the world by conjuring up images. I'm always thinking of what things will look like from different perspectives. My reward is when my pictures make somebody feel something or see a different aspect of a common thing. And when my two sons tell me they are proud of me."

Importantly, Obie doesn't believe in 'if', 'maybe', 'perhaps', 'could have', 'should have'. "When you remove these words from your language, then you have a better image at the end of the day. As I decide on a picture, I can quickly visualise what it will look like in a book, and for me that's the art in what I do. For the rest, I inhabit a haphazard world."

Obie admits that digital photography has greatly enhanced his picture-taking. "When it became too difficult for me to do my own colour printing, I walked out of my darkroom and threw the key away. I adapted very quickly to digital. Everything got smaller;



lighter and quicker. I love it."

Married to Lynn for 40 years, and with two adult sons, Nikki and Jesse, Obie says he can only think that "humour and excitement outweighed all the trouble I caused. That must be why Lynn stayed. And because there is always something new." Now also retired, Lynn travels with Obie. "She told me my enthusiasm for travel and photography is greater than ever before, and that's a real compliment for me. Anyway, I don't believe I'll get old and stop taking photos. I'll just fade away. But before then, I still want to take Lynn to Zanzibar, visit my sons in Doha and Australia, and drive over the Prince Alfred Pass."

And Obie's favourite place in South Africa? Well, it's at home in Nature's Valley, of course. "But in second place would be having a cold beer at the highest pub in Africa at the top of Sani Pass, after having driven up from the bottom. At that altitude, you only need one beer."

In serious tone, Obie says of his career so far: "It has made me extremely wealthy, though I don't have much money. The difference between a fortune in material things and in abstract memories is vast, but I would far rather have my experiences than a suitcase full of gold. I am also proud of myself, not for my pictures or books, but for the enthusiasm that continually percolates through me. I never wonder

what I will do next, I always find something, be it big or small, far or near, behind me or round the corner: What I know for sure is that I will never stop taking photographs, even if I think a really special picture is only worth about 10 words."

On the future of South Africa, Obie says he wouldn't be as enthusiastic as he is if the future was all dark. "I get so angry with corruption," he says, "but there is still hope and we deserve to continue over the horizon. My hope for 2012 is that we all think a little bit more about others and a little bit less about ourselves. Then maybe we'll see the little rainbows we've been told we are." □

□ 'Chenzira' the photographer, between Pontdrift and Musina.

Map reference G4
see inside back cover



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