

About: Returning, 1992-1995, 1997

When I visited the Asmat Papuas in New Guinea in 1992, I decided to take along a number of T-shirts as presents.

I had modified them by hand by putting skin-coloured make-up around twenty-four punched holes. Anybody who accepted one of the shirts as a present and put it on would complete the work by matching his skin colour with a global range of skin colour tones.

Breaking my own self-imposed rules, I took a picture of the first person to get dressed in one of these presents. On returning home, I lived with this image and started wondering about this man.

Three years later I found my way back to his settlement in the rain forest, eager to meet him again. Once there I was shocked to learn that the man had passed away sometime before. My shock was even greater when I was presented with the remains of the T-shirt I had given him on my previous visit. Confused, I swapped it for one of my own T-shirts and brought it back home with me.

Later I had myself photographed in this same T-shirt as a homage to the man. It took me two more years to feel comfortable enough to combine all of the pictures.

About: Red Calico, 1998-2000

The Asmat Papuas of New Guinea have traditionally gone naked.

During the last century foreign visitors gradually introduced clothing. Even today, however, an article of clothing remains a rare and precious item that can only be acquired by bargaining, as a present, or by buying it from Indonesian settlers with money earned by hard labour.

I began to notice that there's something remarkable and unique about the way the Asmat tend to modify most of their highly valued T-shirts. It is something that also seems to be completely integrated into their culture: are the cuts, tears and slashes related to the traditional practice of scarring their skin – a 'wearable' decorated skin?

Is it a demonstration and protest against the dress codes of the current foreign occupation of their rightful territory?

Or is there something else involved?

To prevent anybody from making items to please me, or catering to my taste, I only collected on the first day that I visited a particular village.

Roy Villevoeye