

The

P H O T O

REVIEW

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Edward Burtynsky

Homesteads # 32, View from Highway 8, British Columbia, from the series Breaking Ground, Homesteads, 1985 (printed ca. 1988), chromogenic print

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Chester Higgins: The Sacred Nile Project
by Diana McClure



Starry Night in the Sacred Cave of Abuna Yemata Church, in Hawzien

In 1973 Chester Higgins traveled to Egypt for the first time. Embarking on what would become nearly a half century of visual, intellectual, experiential, and spiritual revelations, he is now poised to share his findings with the world. Working with his wife, Betsy Kissam, a writer, editor and linguist, as well as countless anthropologists, archaeologists, spiritual practitioners, and everyday people, Higgins has sculpted and framed a treasure trove of historical insight relevant to humans of the 21st century. Embedded across millennia in the landscapes, skylscapes, and people of three ancient civilizations, Egypt (Kemet), Ethiopia (Kush), and Sudan (Nubia), the project in some senses resembles a rite of passage, a poetic glimpse into the mystery schools of antiquity and their presence in the daily life of modern-day Christians, Muslims, Ethiopian Hebrews, and the Oromo people, practitioners of the nature-centric spiritual system Wakafana.

For Higgins the project was expansive and demanding in countless ways. In a Zoom interview in early December as dusk descended over Fort Greene, Brooklyn, where we both reside, Higgins paused in a moment of reflection, commenting, “Doing this work caused me to stretch a lot: intellectually, historically, spiritually, technically. It was one thing after another. How do I make people who are not in the culture have an appreciation? How do I help someone to

whom this is completely alien, to have an emotional understanding and feel for it? That was the ultimate challenge.”

The relevance of the project is twofold. As much as it is an evidence-based correction to the historical record in regard to the origins of the Black diaspora, namely one that begins long before the transatlantic slave trade, it offers nuanced insights into gender equity, environmental and climatic awareness, and the interconnectedness and shared origins of spiritual thought systems around the world. Higgins



Procession of the Meskel Celebration, Aksum, Ethiopia



Moonrise at the Moon Temple of Yeha

starting point is “Lucy,” when found in Ethiopia in 1974, the then-oldest fossilized human ancestor at 3.5 million years.

Consisting of landscape, portrait, astro, art, and artifact photographs — created over 20 years in Egypt, 16 years in Ethiopia, and over three years in Sudan — Higgins describes the project as both a record of his journey as a photographer and a record of the development of the Sacred Mind. Beginning with a series of six-week vacations taken while Higgins was a photographer for *The New York Times*, an appreciation for the vastness of African nights and spaces developed alongside a significant conceptual implication: Abrahamic faiths do not see nature as divine, prebiblical ones do. Contextualizing this point in the present, this framework illuminates the Western European and American cultural assumption that human beings are in control of nature. In Higgins words, “We try to bend nature to our wants and needs.” Hence, our current climate crisis.

Inspired by the discovery that Ancient Egyptians regarded the landscape and the skyscape as equally important, perhaps the most stunning visual work in the project is Higgins’ astrophotography. An encounter with a particular Egyptian belief initiated Higgins’ foray into astrophotography. It posits that the Milky Way is the mirror image of the Nile River, a river in the night sky. Several years spent off the coast of Maine with a telescope prepared him for future journeys. “When I worked in Sudan, all the antiquity sites were far away from settlements. There were no villages, or



Church of Gabriel & Raphael, in Lalibela

hotels, at that time there wasn’t any infrastructure. I had to camp out. That was good, because I wanted to document the night sky. I wanted to photograph sunrise and sunset. Light is most important to me,” he says. “In addition to camping out across the region at times, technical challenges unfolded over time, including the necessity of shooting five exact negatives that are sandwiched together to create depth of field in a starry sky, paired with subtle movements in the earth’s rotation, among other conundrums. To light ancient ruins as part of an evolving night photography practice, Higgins devised a setup involving four to five battery-powered

lights. The majesty of architectural jewels such as 13th-century churches carved out of mountains in Lalibela, Ethiopia, shot under a starry night at 25–30 second exposures, leave an unforgettable visual imprint on the psyche.

The intersection of the divinity of women and the natural environment is traced back to prebiblical times in several photographs of artifacts and temples dedicated to women. To name a few: The Temple of Yeha in Ethiopia, also known as the Moon Temple and Temple of the Woman, dating back to circa 700 B.C.E.; The Temple of the Woman still in use by the Oromo people in the practice of Wakafana; female deities Isis, Hathor, and Nuit in Egypt; and, a depiction in stone of a Nubian queen holding three lotus flowers in her left hand and a whip in her right in Sudan. Referencing the Nubians, who had an equal number of queens and kings in their culture, Higgins notes, “You saw pictures of queens on the walls. What we really have from the ancients is ancient snapshots in stone. The snapshots in stone left by the Nubian queens were called *Kandakes*, which is a term for female ruler.” He goes on to say, “We just wouldn’t know about those female rulers if they had not left behind — in stone — snapshots of themselves.”

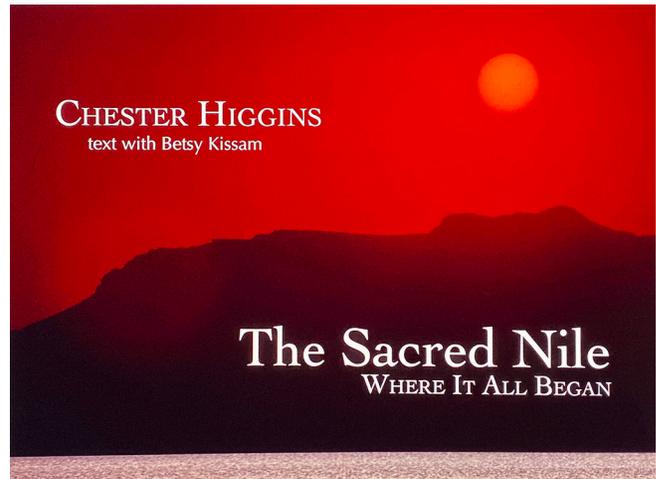


Nubian Kandake (Queen), Meroe, Sudan

The role of women is a significant theme in Higgins’ intentions and hopes for the overall body of work. “I wanted to show when a woman was emasculated of her divinity. Be-

fore the old testament the woman was the top God and Gods and everything else fell under her. The Abrahamic faiths did away with the divinity of the woman. They just took it away from her. They said okay, you can be Mary, but everything else, no.” In parallel to these thoughts, Higgins often returns to the idea of balance in the context of the harmonics of nature found in early civilizations. “People who believe in nature, whether they are the Wakafanas or the West African Vodun religions, have an understanding that if you are a man you are half your mother. If you are a woman you are half your father. That’s how nature works,” he says.

One of the most pleasantly confounding revelations of experiencing this particular body of work, is its complication of notions of time through visual means. What it adds to the work of scholars of ancient African civilizations such as Cheikh Anta Diop or Josef Ben-Jochannan is a visual record that simultaneously shows the infinity of the cosmos, the antiquity of art and artifacts and the everyday lives of 21st-century citizens of the globe. In a sense, time collapses. It is rendered incomprehensible or perhaps simply shifts out of a linear form into a vast multisphere. With a working title for the project originally known as *Before Genesis* and now known as *Sacred Nile*, perhaps the most pertinent question that comes to mind after an afternoon of conversation with Higgins is: when and how can I hold this information in my hands, in a book, to sit with it in wonder.



The Sacred Nile: Where It All Began

For anyone who has had an ongoing inkling about the untold depths of human history, Higgins says, “You may have your inklings? Now let me see if I can give you some ammunition for your inklings. Let me see if I can give you some evidence.” To that end he has an extensive bibliography for anyone who is interested in further excavation beyond his oeuvre, however it requires an open mind. His parting words in our time together were, “Fundamentally, what it looks like to you has a lot to do with what you’re comfortable with. If you want to get comfortable, here are some other things you can explore. And, thank God, you can go there yourself. This stuff exists. It wasn’t invented in Photoshop.”

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