

**MEN**

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**AT**

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**WORK**

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**Thijs Heslenfeld**

'Did you ask for permission to take this picture?' For years now this has been a recurring question when I show one or more photographs from this series. At first I would just sort of laugh, and answer: 'Well of course!'. I didn't quite understand what they were getting at and wouldn't pay much attention to it.

But then one day I started thinking about it. Why did so many people ask me that question? So I started throwing questions back at them: why do you ask? What do *you* think? How would you take a picture like that? How do you feel about me taking them? How would you react if someone asked you that?

The answers to those questions were a real eye-opener. The fact that so many people ask me the same thing really reveals something about *them*. For some reason, many people find it hard to believe that you can photograph others so candidly. That it's allowed. That they don't get angry or insulted, or feel ashamed.

To me the inevitable conclusion is that the people asking this question are themselves not quite sure about who they are or what they're doing. If you have no reason to doubt your existence, or who you are, what you do and why you matter, you don't find it odd that others should take an interest in you. It's OK to be noticed – you're an interesting person!

As all the pieces began to fall into place, the answer to another important question came naturally: why do I even take these photos? For a long time, I thought the answer was simple: because I *enjoy* it. Because I like the result. And because I like looking at pictures that show people as they really are.

But – as I now realise – that's not all of it. I take these pictures because I, too, have doubts. I get uncomfortable whenever I'm confronted with a camera myself; I get all self-conscious and worry about whether I'll look good in the picture. Is my shirt properly tucked, and does my hair look OK? Do I have the 'right' expression on my face? What will people think of me when they see the photograph?

So, actually, *I* am even surprised that this is so easy. That all these people have no problem at all posing for me with such candidness and vulnerability.

The men featured in this book hardly seem to suffer from this type of insecurity. They believe in themselves and they are not at all surprised that someone would be interested in them. Looking at these pictures you can feel that most of them have no problem with who they are and what they do. These men don't pretend – they really *are* somebody.

However, there are a few exceptions. Some purposefully do something to alter their own self, their own reality. Uniforms, a 'cool' look, flashy sunglasses or a gold necklace – sometimes you can just feel how these are designed to enhance the picture. I clearly see it in the portrait of the US State Trooper: he is armed, both literally and figuratively. And yet I feel there wouldn't be a whole lot left of this man if he were stripped of his shades, automatic weapon, and slick car. And that actually completes the story, for it intensifies the strength of the other men. Almost disarming and, because of that, so powerful.

This book shows men from all over the world in their workplace. The question raised by each of these images: is a man's identity based on his work, or is his work based on his identity? It is up to the viewer to answer that question. For myself, I see a clear connection between the (socio-)geographic location where I take a picture and the role that work plays in the lives of men. In the wealthy, capitalist Western world, men seem to identify strongly with their work: they are what they do. So their existence seems to be based on their job. In less advanced countries, the situation tends to be very different. It works the other way around: people tend to do work that suits them.

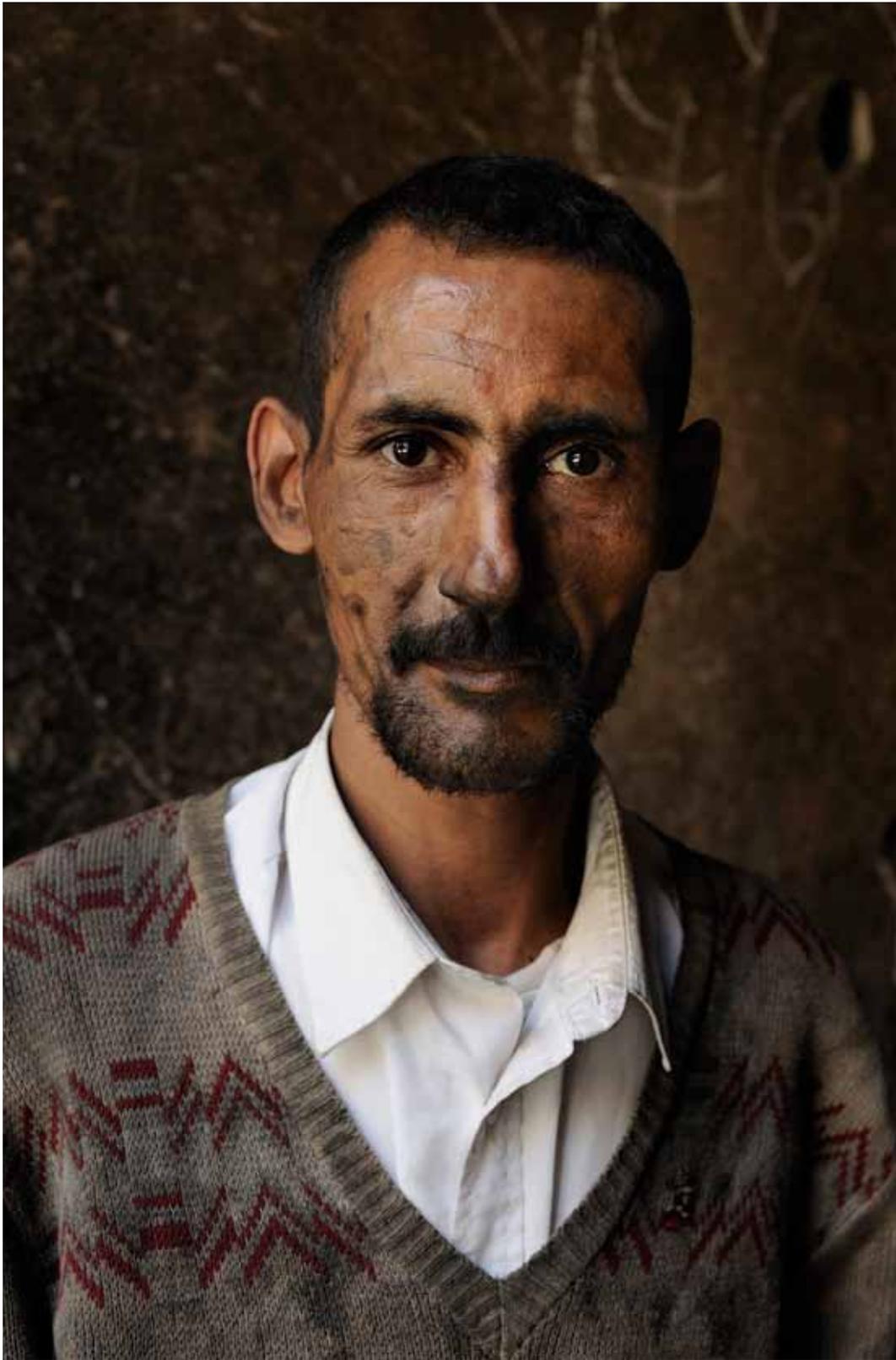
'Men at Work' shows the viewer the importance of work in our lives and challenges them to question their own choices. Is my identity based on my work, or is it the other way around?

That leaves us with one – also frequently posed – question: why do I only show pictures of men? For during my travels I also photographed numerous women. At work, doing chores, with their children. Beautiful, proud women with fascinating stories to tell. But in my opinion they just don't belong in this series.

For me, taking a portrait of a woman is very different from taking a portrait of a man. The dynamic is different, because I'm male and they're female. There might be an attraction between us (or not at all). Women will smile in front of a camera, or strike an elegant pose. Others might proudly thrust their chest forward or grimace because they're self-conscious about their teeth. Women live their lives differently from men, and they also look different in pictures – at least they do in *my* pictures. That's why the portraits in this series are of men only: not as a rigid decision – but more as a logical and self-evident story that wrote itself.

**Samuel Butler (1835 - 1902)**

**Every man's work,  
whether it be  
literature,  
or music  
or pictures  
or architecture  
or anything else,  
is always a portrait  
of himself**



# MARRAKECH, MAROKKO

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↑ Marrakech is world-famous for the many souks in the old city centre. However, these markets have been affected by the growth of mass tourism. This effect is not nearly as strong in peripheral areas, such as the Bab El-Khemis Market, featuring mostly metal workers.

I meet this blacksmith just as he is taking a tea and cigarette break. Khalid and his colleague make all kinds of steel household objects, such as oil lamps and parts for these lamps.

He explains to me that he deliberately works in a dark room. 'When you heat iron, it changes colour from red to orange to yellow, and finally to white. The ideal working temperature for us is right between orange and yellow. To be able to see the colours properly, we like to work in a dimly lit room.'

# LIMA, PERU

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↓ **MILTON SANCHEZ VAZQUES (28)** works as a clown for the Peruvian Circo Gigante Chin Chin. The eight members of the circus company have pitched their simple tent in a Lima slum. The circus performs only in these poor *pueblos jóvenes* or *young towns*. 'That's all we can afford. Besides, we feel at home here because the people who live here are just like us.'

Milton tells me it's been a bad year for the circus. 'Times are tough in Peru. People used to be willing to pay two or three soles for a little entertainment. But things are so bad right now that many families can't even afford that.'

The circus tours all over Peru. Milton: 'The temperature in the tent must be comfortable. As soon as it gets too cold, people stop coming. That means our entire travel schedule is pretty much based around the seasons. Right now, we need to leave Lima, since it's June and it's starting to get too cold over here. It's time to trek across the Andes, towards the Amazon.'





# ANTWERP, BELGIUM

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**KALMAN FREUDENBERGER (27)** and his colleague are taking a cigarette break in Rijnstraat, in the heart of the diamond district. The diamond business in Antwerp is no longer dominated by the Jewish community – Indians have largely taken over.

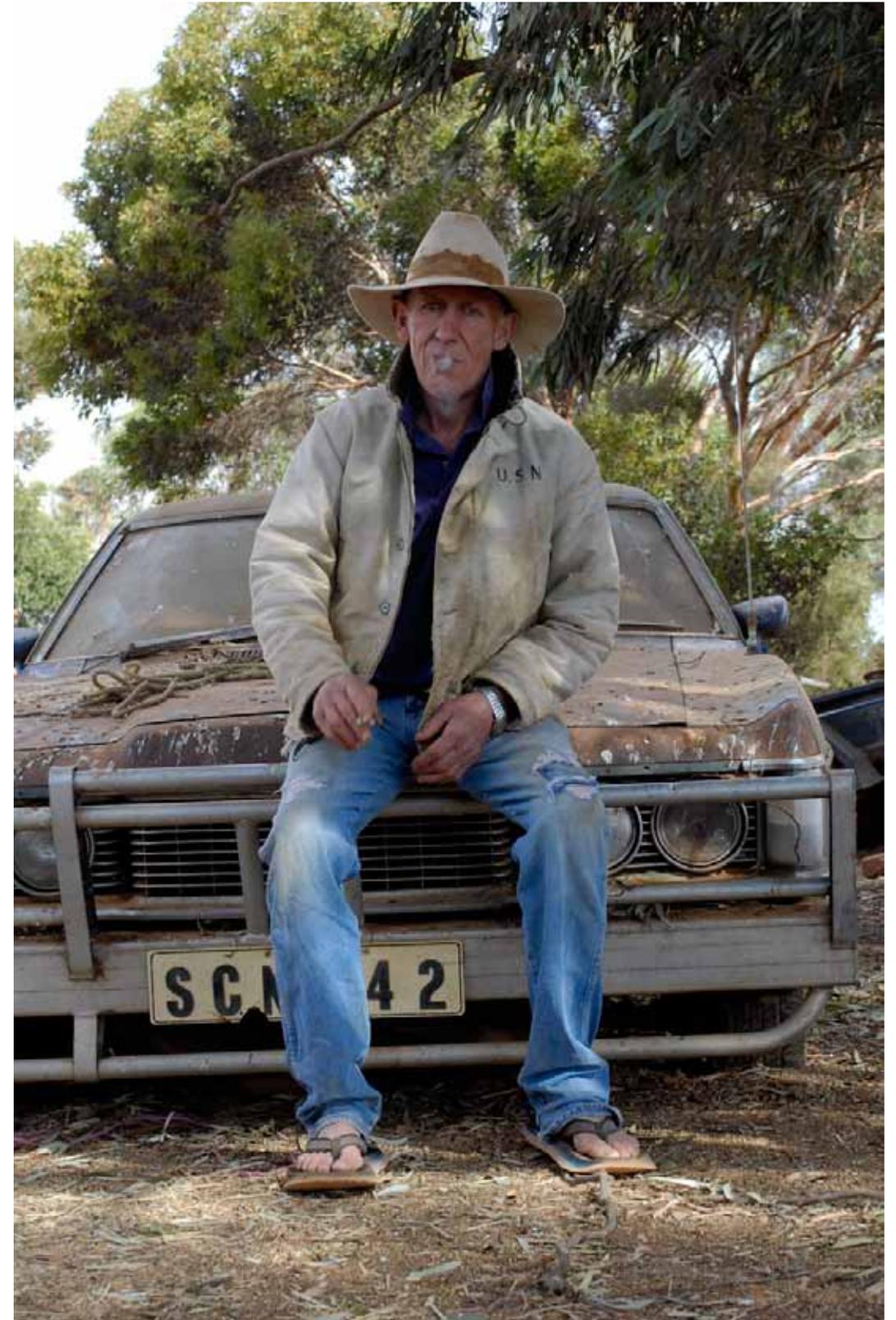
Nevertheless, you still see a lot of Orthodox Jews around the area. Kalman, who has been in the diamond trade for two years, says the business is flourishing despite the economic crisis: 'Things couldn't be better!'

# PETERBOROUGH, SA, AUSTRALIA

**TOM BRUCE (60)** is a sheepshearer and cowboy. He has led a wild and dangerous life. A Vietnam vet, he competed in rodeos for many years back in the United States, where he was also featured as a cowboy in Marlboro ads. He has since settled down in the remote town of Peterborough, where he lives on a farm together with his partner, her son, 10 kangaroos and a bunch of cockatoos.

Tom believes the Vietnam War changed the course of his life: 'If it hadn't been for that war, I would probably own a farm on Kangaroo Island right now and have a wife and children.' He still thinks about the war every day: 'It's a part of me – that's something that will never go away. Fortunately, after 35 years I don't have nearly as many nightmares as I used to.'

Tom had a drinking problem for many years, but nowadays he can limit his intake to a couple of beers. He's had a good life: 'I have no regrets. There've been good times and bad times. I did a lot of dangerous things, but things always worked out for the best in the end.'





# VIRGOHAMNA, SPITSBERGEN

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↑ Dutchman **TON PIETERS** is showing a group of tourists around Spitsbergen, a Norwegian archipelago midway between the North Cape and the North Pole. It is known as Europe's last untouched wilderness. Pieters is carrying a gun, to defend himself and the group against the 3,000-odd polar bears that populate the island – as many as the human population.

Their presence means that anyone who ventures off the beaten track of the small capital city of Longyearbyen must be prepared for an attack at all times. When not employed as a tour guide, Pieters works as a forester for the National Forest Service in the Netherlands. He has been in his job for 40 years.

# MAHÉBOURG, MAURITIUS

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↓ **KAPPER YOUNOUS COPAUL (81)** is waiting for the first customer in his hair salon in Mahébourg, Mauritius. Copaul estimates he must have cut the hair of more than 250,000 people since starting his business in 1944. Retirement is not an option, simply because he needs the money. However, he tells me he still enjoys his job.

I took the picture in May 2010, just when huge numbers of people took to the streets of Madrid, Paris and Athens to demonstrate against government plans to raise the retirement age. EU statistics show that the average age of retirement in Greece is 61, while in France it is 59.4.



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