

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHO YOU GET

Obie Oberholzer, renegade photographer, seasoned berserker and lifelong moustache-wearer, has a new book out. He meets *Oliver Roberts* to discuss freedom, sadness and being an asshole



MOVEMBER — the month when men the world over grow moustaches as an act of male unity — has just ended. Obie Oberholzer, though, doesn't need a silly observation like Movember to grow a moustache. He was born with one, grew it in the womb. No photograph exists of him without it.

A magnificent specimen, Obie Oberholzer's moustache is. It's perched atop his upper lip like an industrial-strength wire scanner, the kind you buy specially from Builder's Warehouse to scrub away at mucky fluids such as grease and oil and diesel.

Initially, women must want to run screaming from the thing — this heavily foliaged mass of testosterone that sninks and squirms and collects wayward debris that blows in from storms.

But, after a few minutes in the moustache's presence, listening to its stories of desolate places and graveyards and driving blindfolded across parts at 60km/h, the once-terrified ladies will want to linger, open to risking a little blood loss just to get closer to the dangerous mystique of The Moustache. And The Moustache, in turn, will be unexpectedly gentle. Just ask Lynn, his wife of 40 years.

But I'm a man. So, within a few minutes of meeting The Moustache, it's smoking and screaming and calling me a dick and a prick. Because that's what men born with moustaches do. And lesser men, those who've only managed to sprout facial hair post-pubescently — like me — are pleased that the great wire scanner is calling you these names, because you know it probably means that it likes you.

I'm warned before I go to meet Oberholzer: Well, not so much warned, just told stories about the man. That he's obnoxious and arrogant. That he's a binge-drinker with an aggressive disdain for ignorance. That during his days as a lecturer at Rhodes University he shot a hole in the locker of a lay student who never came to class.

This is all probably true. But none of it matters. What matters is that the man — whose very surname sounds like a ratty sh-wheeler-chunking past in the night — has for decades been taking consistently beautiful photographs of South Africa's most isolated places, and the people who inhabit them.

His new book, *Diesel & Dust*, is his sixth since 1995. This time, Oberholzer, 64, has included images from his travels in North Africa and the Middle East. It's a bright, beautiful compilation of roamings among sand and wind, camels and cows and mountains and all the faces that passed by, each laden with their own tacit history.

"Diesel and dust has always been a concept, a philosophy," Oberholzer says. "Because if I

can smell it out there, a bit of diesel, just a sniff, and the dust, then I'm far away. That, to me, is freedom.

When Oberholzer speaks of his freedom, he does not throw the idea around like many others do: nor does he exclaim how this is someone who has, on too many occasions to list, thrown a few clothes into the back of a 4x4, slipped on a pair of leather sandals, slung a camera around his neck and simply passed off in the direction of what he calls fokklootstien. No maps. No schedule. The only plan being to meet people along the way, listen to their story, take a picture and possess them forever.

"It's in the search that it's the beauty. A to B via Z," he says. "We all seek our Utopia, we all seek our Nirvana, and hopefully I never find mine because, when I do, it's over."

One of the things that sets Oberholzer's work apart from that of many of his contemporaries are the little stories he writes to accompany certain pictures. Too often with other photographers, the viewer is left with little more than an image. Oberholzer, though, feels compelled to give more emotional detail. Whether this adds or detracts from the perceived purpose of a photograph — to let the image speak for itself — is debatable, but Oberholzer is far too much of a raconteur, a showman, to let some photographs pass the viewer by without a story.

"I am an entertainer," says Oberholzer. He leans back on his chair, sucks on his Camel, and lets his mind meander, sun burns his arms and face. "I want a person to read the copy and feel some about my journey. That's all. Plain and simple. I want the reader to understand what it's like."

The "it" that Oberholzer wants viewers to understand is, I think, the deeply emotional process that he goes through in taking many of his photographs, especially those with people in them. Pops are one of a kind, though, are of a kind, despite the bright, happy colours and the playful tones you always end up feeling a bit sad for one or two of the characters photographed. Whether it's Sitatunga, from the book *Barometer Road*, who makes life-size models of plants from scrap metal, actually sleeps in the things, but has never flown in a real plane in his life. Or Moduma, the shepherd from Jourd's herd, who doesn't ask for sweets or money, but for his first ride in a car.

That, right there, is the intimacy of Oberholzer's work. While many other photographers' images either make you feel optimistic or profoundly moved, Oberholzer's can make you feel both simultaneously.

In *Diesel & Dust*, you're Jimmy, one gardener, up cam to be at work in Bryanston, looking directly at you in his torn hat and shirt. There's Rubulus, who worked as a kind of bodyguard

for Oberholzer while he photographed inner-city Johannesburg. He died of Aids a few months after Oberholzer photographed him.

There's Chenzira, who makes his living taking photographs of weddings and funerals somewhere between Pontdrift and Musina. There he is on his bike, red T-shirt, red gloves, camera on his shoulder, on his way to another event.

Oh, and there's Bulelani, sitting outside his shack in the Klein Karoo, amid all that emptiness and heat and cold. Next to the photograph, Oberholzer writes: "Sometimes I am happy, sometimes I am sad, but a humanist all the same. I find photography easy, but sometimes, like here in the Klein Karoo, when I stopped to take a picture of Bulelani's hovel near Kuduskloof, it's difficult. The cracks beneath the outer veneer of cool professionalism open up and the trickle of old memories turns into an underground stream."

It's an old subject — the moral responsibility of the photographer. The question of whether taking a picture of someone's hardship is exploitative, or an act that contributes in some way to a greater consciousness.

Oberholzer is characteristically forthright about this. About his innate ability to charm his way into these sad existences, if only for a few minutes, so that he can capture them, using the magical coincidence of light and entity and heartbeat, and then present them as a form of art.

"I know it's false; I know I'm a bullsh*ter," he says. "Actually, I bullsh*t to get an image. I do not think about the art; it is the Obie that speaks. One power. It's about the alignment of shapes and objects



in a scene. And because we live in Happy Sad Land [this is what Oberholzer calls his world] there's a lot to do. And I can honestly say that at 64 years old, I do it for the love. I don't care, I really don't care what people think. So I'm not in the national gallery, and that's fine. If you think I'm a wanker, that's fine."

It's remarkable and somewhat troubling that Oberholzer has never been signed to a gallery in South Africa, nor has he won a single award for his work. But he isn't interested in being with a gallery. He couldn't. He's too much of an asshole, and says so during the interview.

There's no way a man with this much individualism would let some gallery decide how his work should be presented. When we discuss and laugh at the idea, Oberholzer throws up his right hand and flips a thick, hairy middle finger at some phantom gallery owner in the air.

"The art curators in this country have taken European and American photography and have said 'This is the standard.' I'm not moaning, but I find it sad. It hurts me sometimes. But the overhurling me



ONE POWER: Obie Oberholzer's images: Previous page 'Camel caravan near Gobeled Quarry', Axum. Above, 'Fishmarket in Hadibo', Socotra, Yemen. Left, self portrait, with moustache

enthusiasm for what I still do ... that is the beauty of Obie Oberholzer. He's got this unbelievable passion for the image, just for the alignment. But let's not go down the avenue of art, because I was an outcast from the beginning. When I first started writing about photographs, I was shoved apart. I have got a true talent for seeing objects together."

There are plenty of people who don't like Oberholzer, and it's easy to see why. Just there, he spoke about himself in the third person. He calls people wanker and prick and does to their face. When he's had enough of you, he'll tell you to f**k off.

But (and I know he will tell me I'm a wanker for writing something so corny) take the man in the wrong light and, just like a photograph, it's not going to come out right. When you look at his images and read the beautiful, poignant little stories he writes to go with them, it is impossible to maintain that he is a simply a brash, arrogant, gun-wielding alcoholic.

By the end of the interview I get the impression that, although all that machismo and name-calling is genuine

Obie, genuine Moustache, it's his way of holding back his cavernous sensibilities. Without those sensibilities, the quiet splendour and profundity of the man's work would all be a lie. And Oberholzer is too honest to be a liar.

He tells me one last story. About the Blue Horizon Liners, a club of which he is the only member. To become a member, he says, you must drive to the vast Halksken Pan in the Northern Cape, tie a blindfold over your eyes, and see how long you can drive for at maximum speed. Oberholzer says his record is 160km/h for six minutes, 35 seconds. Says it separates body and mind. A couple of others have tried it. They only managed one or two minutes.

"Wusses," I say. Oberholzer nods his head, smiles, strokes The Moustache. Then he says: "Can you now f**k off please, I've got to go." We shake hands and say goodbye.

"If you're ever in Nature's Valley, please come visit," he says.

And I know that he means it.

● Diesel & Dust, Jacana, R450.