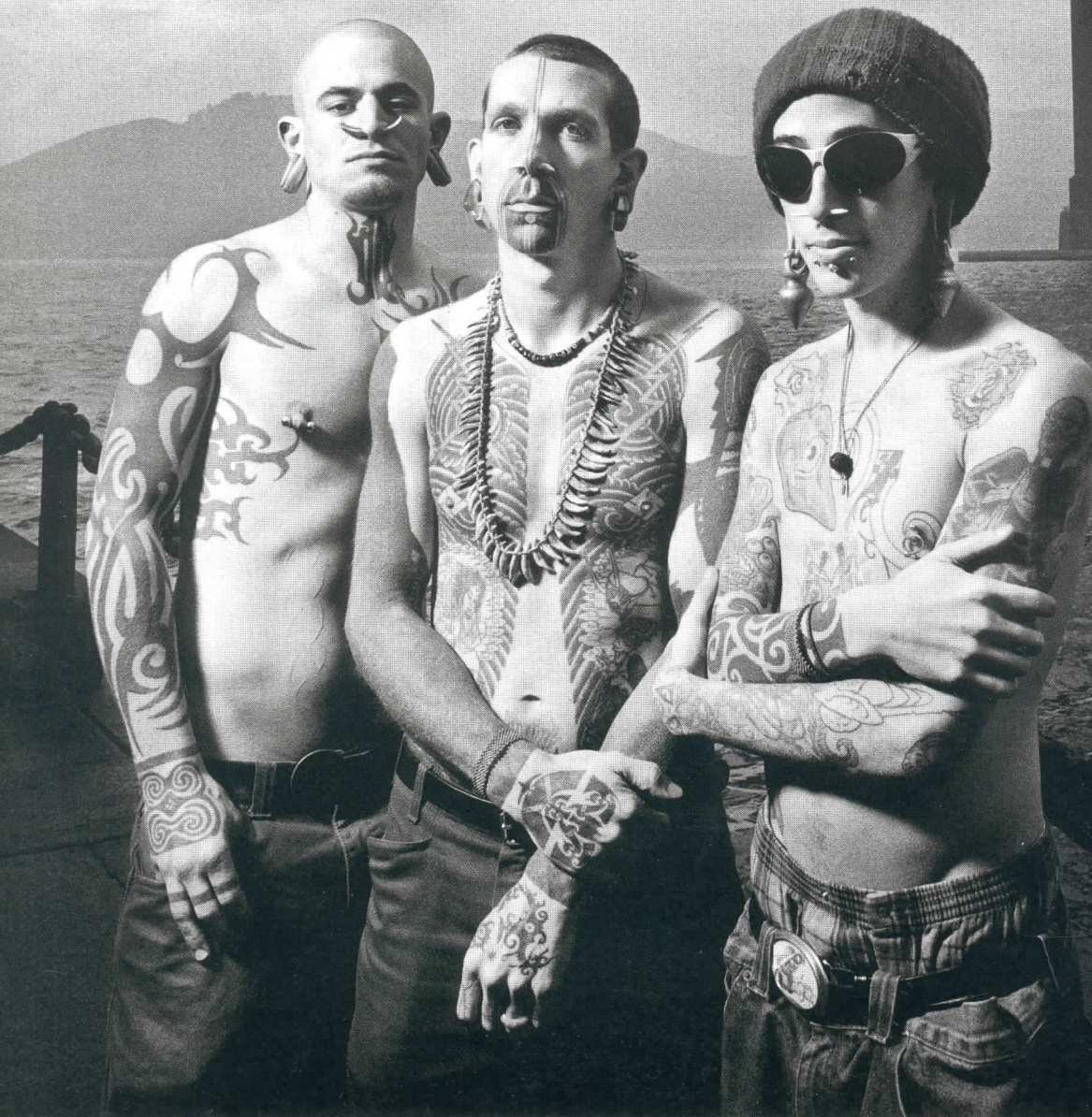


NOVEMBER
2004

AMERICAN PHOTO ONCAMPUS

Master
Chris Rainier
on Body Art



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EDITOR'S NOTE

ART BY DESIGN

If you have a tattoo, chances are it's a small one tucked away in a discreet spot, maybe where only your closest friends would know about it. The subjects of Chris Rainier's photographs, by contrast, want all the world to see their tattoos, so they wear them in more obvious places—often covering the better part of their bodies. Whether aboriginal peoples rediscovering their own traditions or natives of developed countries seeking a way to connect with a primitive past, these self-decorators are part of a global renaissance of body art that also includes scarification and piercing on a scale unknown to shopping-mall jewelry stores.

Photographer Rainier, who shoots for *National Geographic* and other leading magazines (and who was the great Ansel Adams's final assistant), has captured this phenomenon in *Ancient Marks* (Media 27). This stunning book of his austere but dramatic black-and-white portraits is culled from seven years of travel that took him from New Zealand's Maori peoples to Japan's Yakuza crime underworld to the youthful streets of San Francisco.

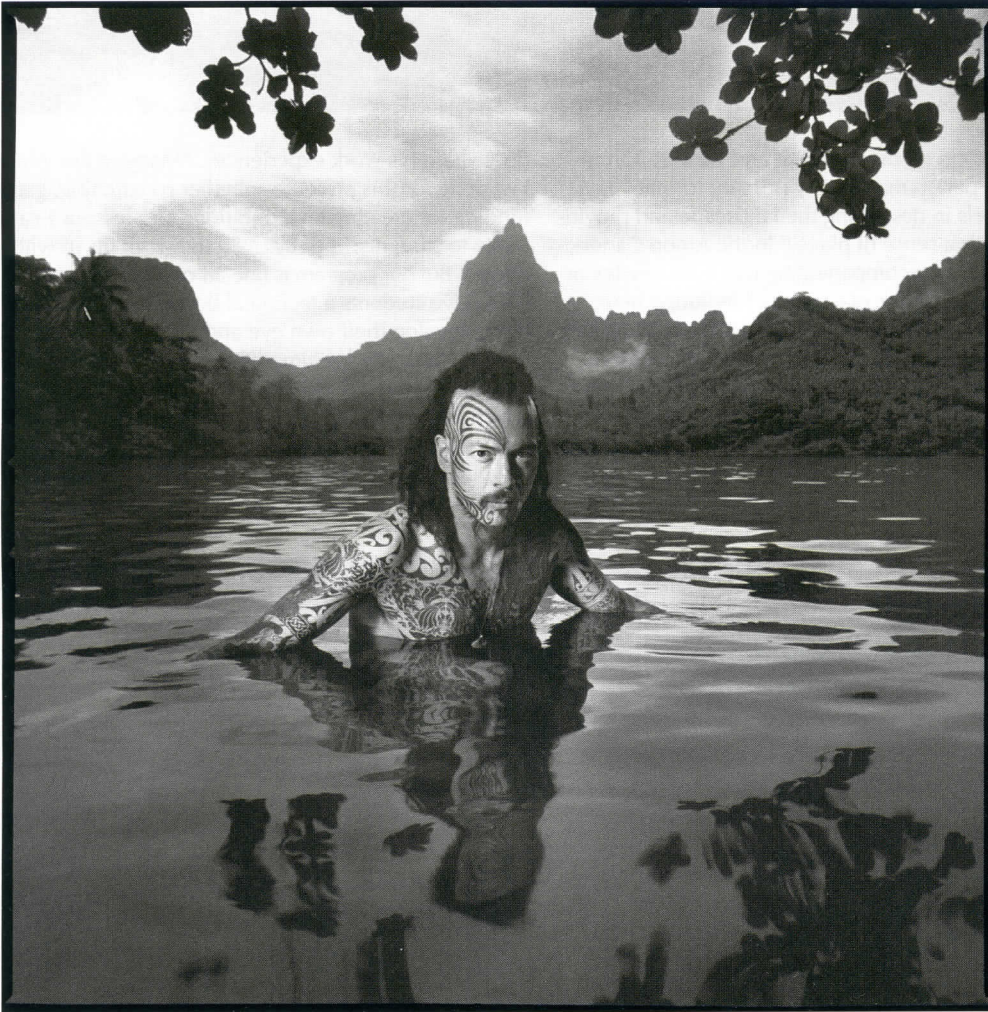
To add some instruction to your inspiration, this issue of *American Photo On Campus* also includes advice about getting your work out and putting a portfolio on the Web, as well as write-ups of portable flash solutions and a hot new digital SLR that may offer the best combination of affordability and image quality ever. What do you want for Christmas?

Above: Chris Rainier's "Moroccan Woman with Henna Hands," which appears on the cover of his new book.

Russell Hart, EDITOR

In **Chris Rainier's** lush new book of haunting black-and-white portraits from around the world, the human body is a timeless canvas. **By Russell Hart**

© CHRIS RAINIER/ANCIENT MARKS (2)



ANCIENT MARKS

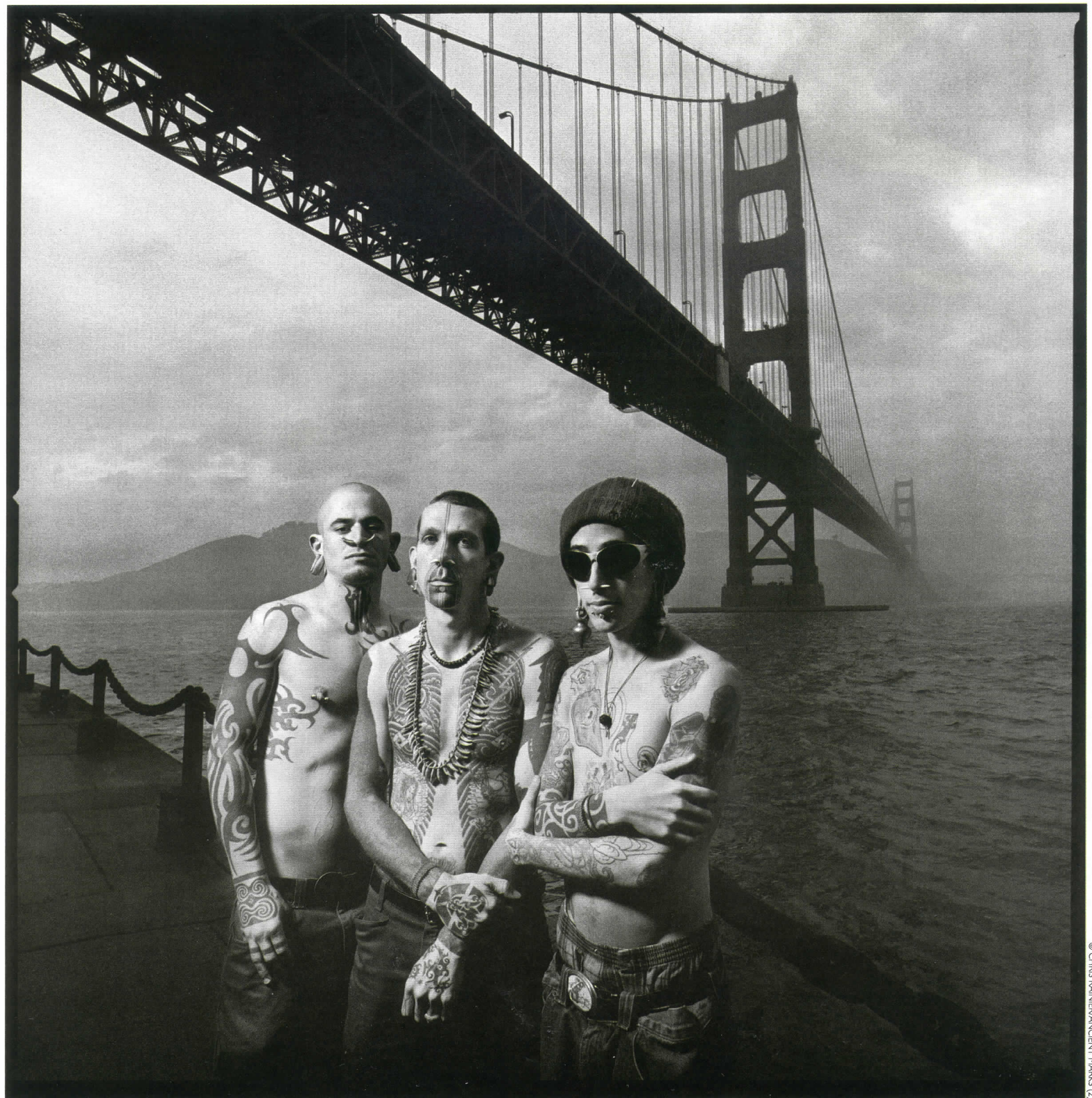
Seven years ago this fall, *American Photo On Campus* visited the work of photographer Chris Rainier as he was finishing one major project and embarking on another. He had just published *Where Masks Still Dance: New Guinea* (Bulfinch Press), an evocative study of that nation's dissipating tribal culture, and was beginning work on an even more ambitious effort to photograph the worldwide renaissance in tattooing, scarification, and other

forms of body art. This fall, seven years of that work has been published in *Ancient Marks: The Sacred Origins of Tattoos and Body Marking* (Media 27). Sumptuously reproduced in black-and-white quadratone, the book's 100 images have all the mystery and richness that are the hallmark of Rainier's photography.

The *Ancient Marks* project was actually a natural outgrowth of Rainier's New Guinea work. "After spending months on end in New

Opposite: "Free-
wind," Moorea,
Tahiti. This
page: "Pregnant
Karo Woman
with Scars," Omo
Valley, Southern
Ethiopia.





© CHRIS RAINIER/ANCIENT MARKS (2)

Guinea and seeing all the tribal tattooing and scarification that was going on there, I would return to the United States and witness the explosion of tattooing here," says the widely published photographer, who currently co-directs the National Geographic Society Cultures Program with renowned anthropologist Wade Davis, writer of the book's foreword. "There

have been lots of books on tattoos, but I felt that none has made the connection between traditional and contemporary cultures."

Ancient Marks does that by ranging in its subjects from the indigenous peoples of New Zealand to the urban gangs of East Los Angeles. "Even though they're Westernized, New Zealand Maori and native Tahitians are getting full-

body tattoos in the style of their warrior ancestors," Rainier told us in 1997. "And in America, it's not just middle-class white kids who are doing it. Latino, Korean, Vietnamese, and Samoan gangs are taking their countries' old tattoo motifs and modernizing them." What leads today's youth to embrace a practice that has been considered low-rent, if not primitive,



by genteel society? Rainier offers this explanation: "I think the common link between body art in traditional cultures and the appropriated tradition in contemporary cultures is the desire to go through some sort of initiation that makes you a member of a particular group."

Though Rainier thinks the impulse to tattoo is fundamentally healthy, like any good

documentary photographer he reserves judgment on his subjects' lifestyles and belief systems. That detachment was essential given the popularity of tattooing in the criminal underworld, allowing him to photograph subcultures that are famously secretive or exclusive. Getting access to these groups was occasionally a matter of luck but more often the result

of careful research and patient persistence. It took Rainier three years, for example, to gain entry to Japan's tattoo-loving Yakuza crime syndicate. "In my research, I learned about a respected Japanese tattoo artist," Rainier recalls, "and I noticed in pictures of him that there was a little bit of his pinky finger missing." Rainier knew that the shortened digit was a

This page:
"Xingu Women,"
Xingu Tribal
Area, Brazil.
Opposite, top:
"Paduang Long
Neck Woman
and Child,"
Burmese-Thai
Border. Bottom:
"Modern Man,"
Moorea, Tahiti.



sign that the tattoo artist himself was, or had been, a member of the Yakuza.

As luck would have it, Rainier's assistant spoke fluent Japanese. So the photographer dispatched him to Japan for a meeting at which he presented the man with a copy of the *New Guinea* book and a proposal to photograph Yakuza tattoos. The man refused, but Rainier wouldn't take no for an answer—and perhaps

because of his gentle, unaggressive manner, he finally got the permission he needed. "For several weeks we were embedded with the Yakuza," he says. "I could photograph pretty much anyone I wanted." That included the mistress of a Yakuza boss, whom Rainier photographed in the nude on a traditional bamboo-and-rushes mat to show off her ornate shoulders-to-thighs tattooing.

Rainier's access to the gangs of East L.A. came about very differently, through a friend who was an ophthalmic surgeon in a local hospital. "There are something like 200 gangs in a ten-square-mile area, and most of the eye injuries coming into the hospital were caused by glass shards from windows that had been shot out," says Rainier. "My friend saved one gang member's eye, and the guy said he

“I think the common link between body art in traditional cultures and the appropriated tradition in contemporary cultures is **the desire to go through some sort of initiation** that makes you a member of a particular group,” says Rainier.



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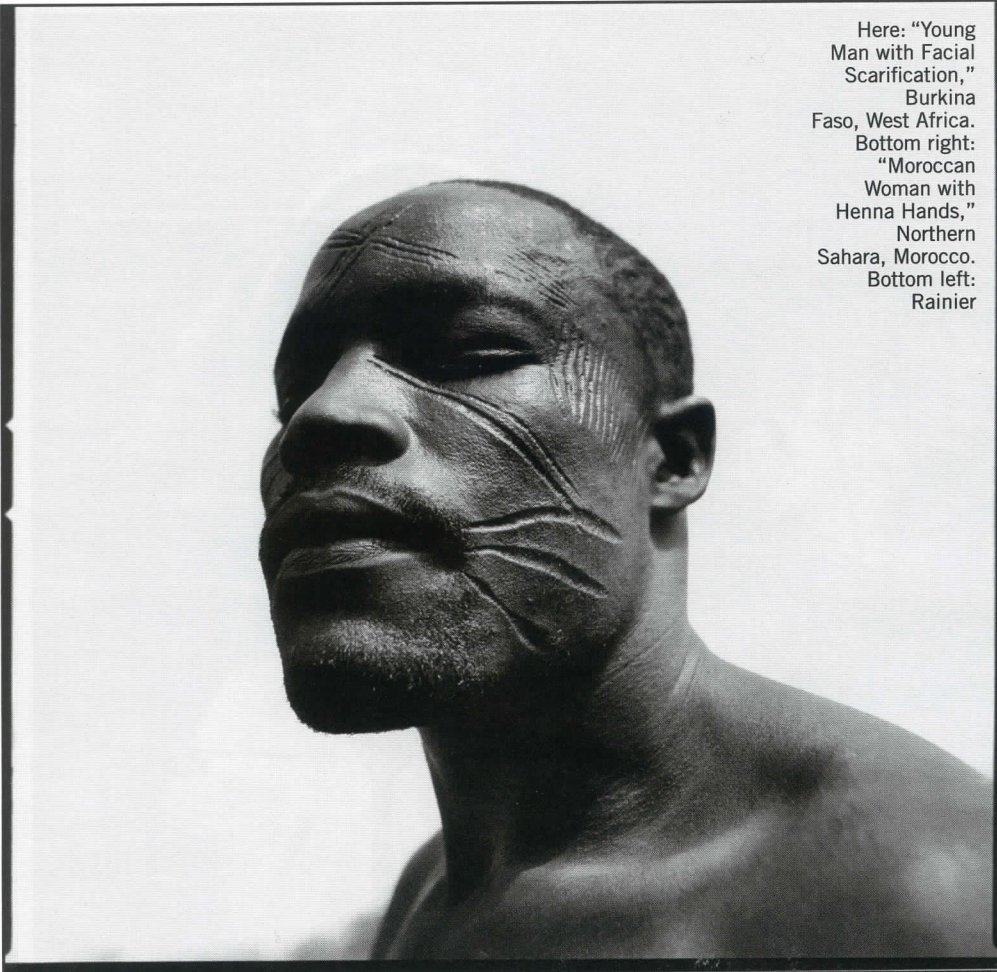
wanted to repay him.” The debt was paid by granting Rainier a weekend shoot with gang members in a graffiti-covered wash, one of the normally dry concrete canals that channel storm runoff through the city. “There were maybe 30 security guys standing watch with guns while we were doing the pictures,” says Rainier.

Not all of Rainier’s research for *Ancient Marks* panned out. “There were some dead ends,” he says. “I’ve pored through lots of old ethnographic books and gone, ‘Wow, look at those tattoos,’ only to find out when I pursued the lead that the group no longer practices the art.” While this may be true in much of Africa, Rainier has still found body art alive and well in the nations of Benin, Togo, Ethiopia, and Burkina Faso. “Where skin is dark, people tend to scar rather than tattoo,” he says. “In southern Ethiopia, where young boys are initiated into tribes by running naked across the backs of a herd of bulls, their mothers, sisters, and wives-to-be sit and watch and beat their backs bloody with sticks of thorns.” The scars that remain, says the photographer, are a mark of pride. “They show that a son, brother, or husband ran the bulls.”

Tattoos and scarification are highly detailed yet often subtle, requiring careful photographic technique and lighting that bring out their pattern without sacrificing the overall character of the image. Rainier, who was Ansel Adams’s final assistant, brings consummate craft to that



Here: "Young Man with Facial Scarification," Burkina Faso, West Africa.
 Bottom right: "Moroccan Woman with Henna Hands," Northern Sahara, Morocco.
 Bottom left: Rainier



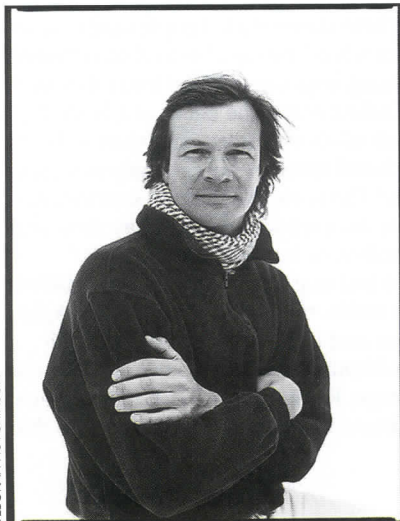
task. "Like Ansel Adams, I want my pictures to have a mood," he says, "but I'm also trying to create an environmental portrait." Working alternately with 35mm Canon EOS SLRs, 6x6cm Hasselblads, a 6x17cm Fujifilm GX617, and even a Diana plastic camera, Rainier shoots classic Kodak Tri-X film—preferring overcast days for their drama and adding light to three-quarters of his photographs. For the latter he uses portable 400-watt-second strobes, diffusing the flash head with a small collapsible softbox. A single head is typically placed high and to the side on a monopod often held by a local volunteer; it is synced to the camera with an infrared triggering system that eliminates the need for cables. Though his gear is relatively simple, Rainier's bush forays can last several weeks, which means he must often rent a gas-powered generator and lug it along to charge his flash and camera batteries.

While Rainier has shot assignment work with digital cameras and is a member of Canon's trendsetting Explorers of Light group, he prefers film for his long-term projects. Any such endeavor culminates in months spent in the darkroom, and Rainier does extensive dodging, burning-in, and other manipulations to achieve his remarkable print quality. But while his

"I want my pictures to have a mood," says the photographer, "but I'm also trying to create an environmental portrait."



© CHRIS RAINIER/ANCIENT MARKS (3)



DEBORAH HUTCHINSON



two previous books have been reproduced directly from prints, *Ancient Marks* was a different story. As usual, Rainier made a set of conventional black-and-white prints on Kodak paper—but then *scanned* the negatives and used Photoshop to make the image files match the prints. "I think scanning from the negatives greatly improved the quality of the reproductions," he says. In fact, Rainier's exhibitions of the *Ancient Marks* work—the first of which will open at Santa Ana, California's Bowers

Museum and L.A.'s Fahey/Klein Gallery early next year—include a mix of silver prints and large-scale inkjet prints made on Epson printers.

It's a really exciting time now with the technology," says the photographer. "I'm definitely a traditionalist coming from the Ansel Adams background and from strict black-and-white photojournalism, but I find digital imaging very, very exciting. I think the technology is opening all sorts of doors. But the only caution I have—

and I'll quote Ansel here—is that there's nothing worse than sharp images of a fuzzy concept. As a photographer, you have to develop your eye, figure out what you really want to say, and stay focused. Be the best you can be at whatever you're most passionate about, and everything else begins to fall into place."

For more information about *Ancient Marks*, or to order a copy, visit ancientmarks.com. For more about Canon's *Explorers of Light*, visit photoworkshop.com/canon/explorers.