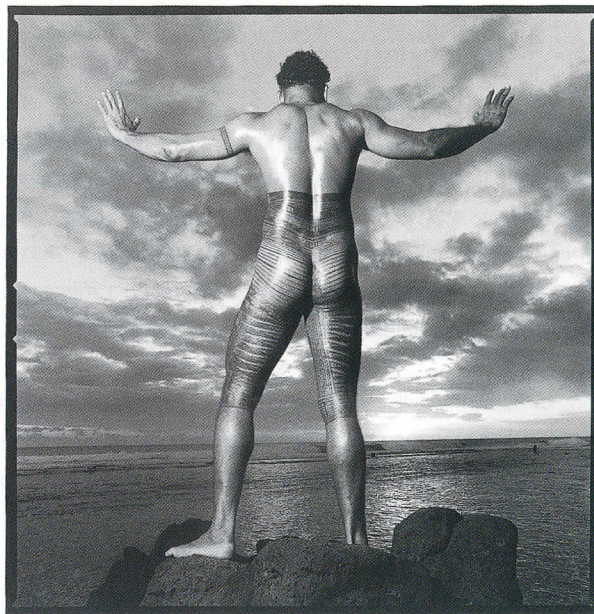




◀ **Diana toy camera:** Always seeking a sense of mystery, Rainier uses a toy camera for the soft-and-sharp distortion of its cheap plastic lens, seen in this portrait of a member of South Africa's Ndebele tribe. "The Diana loosens you up," he says. "It's actually very challenging to work with, because you're never quite sure what the results will be. I prefer to use a few different Dianas, because each camera has its own personality."



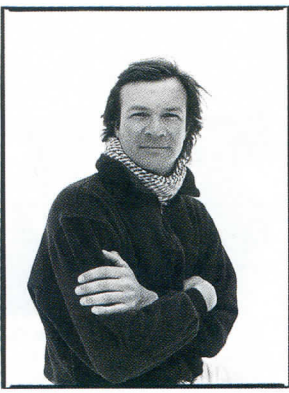
◀ **Hasselblad 501CM:** The Hasselblad with a Zeiss Distagon 50mm f/4 wide-angle lens is Rainier's usual choice for more formal images, such as this dramatic study of a strobe-lit, tattoo-swathed Samoan islander. "I add light most of the time," says the photographer. His rig: a battery-powered Norman 400B strobe softened with a Chimera lightbox, mounted on a Gitzo monopod steadied by an assistant. A Quantum radio slave syncs the flash to camera.

how Chris Rainier shapes his vision

FORMAT MATTERS

▶ **Canon EOS-1N:** When he needs to work quickly and/or discreetly, Rainier uses his 35mm equipment, the EOS-1N and (usually) the EF 17-35mm f/2.8L USM zoom set somewhere in the middle of its range. Discretion was the priority when he photographed this richly decorated mistress of a Japanese Yakuza don. Rainier made contact with the tattoo-loving crime syndicate through their favored tattoo artist, considered the medium's foremost practitioner in Japan.





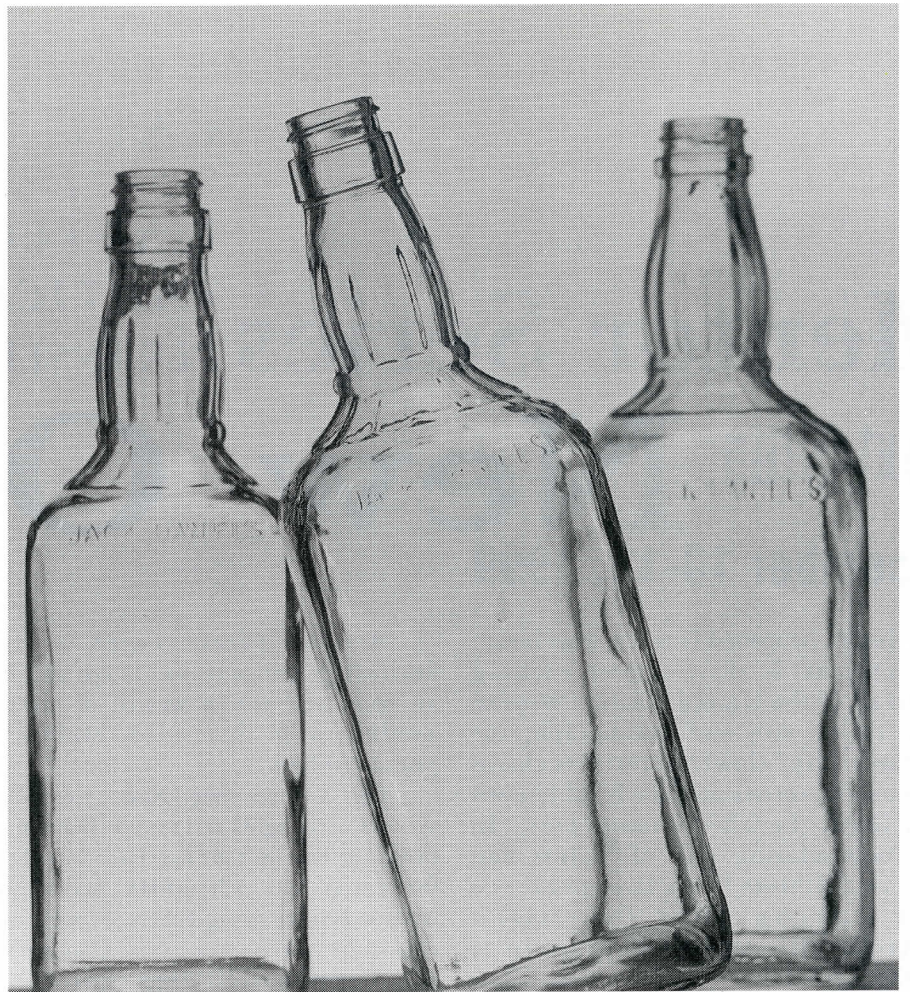
Chris Rainier, full-frame.

As a photographic observer of cultural trends, Chris Rainier has always been ahead of his time. His two books, *Keepers of the Spirit* (Beyond Words Publishing, 1993) and *Where Masks Still Dance: New Guinea* (Bulfinch, 1996), anticipated an end-of-the-millennium interest in indigenous cultures. His current project is just as farsighted: a wide-ranging essay on the global resurgence of tattooing, the ultimate form of body ornamentation. "It's about the way tribal practices have tumbled into modern culture," says Rainier. "My aim has always been to document ancient customs that have survived into the present, so future generations can see them." Rainier's search for extraordinary tattoos has taken him from the gangster culture of Japanese Yakuza to the street gangs of Los Angeles.

It has also taken him into new photographic territory. "Artists can get stuck in a certain methodology, so I'm trying to prevent this by using different-format cameras," says Rainier. "It has been very invigorating." For the tattoo pictures, Rainier gives himself four options: his trusty 2¼-square Hasselblad 501CM; the 35mm Canon EOS-1N; the panoramic Fujifilm GX617III; and (a surprising choice for the control-minded Rainier) a Diana plastic camera. "I try to use the right format for the situation," says Rainier. "I'm usually trying to show the subject in a significant environment, so the framing is very important. The panorama's shape really makes the image a landscape with a person in it, as opposed to a person in a landscape. The Diana usually tends to abstract the surroundings by fuzzing out the edges of the image. By changing format and camera, I'm basically (continued on page 117)

◀ **Fujifilm GX617III:** Rainier uses the 6x17cm panoramic format to evoke a subject's native landscape—here, in southern Ethiopia, where a Mursi tribesman protects his sheep from marauders with a rapid-fire Kalashnikov rifle. Rainier says he prefers to shoot with the Fujifilm GX617III's 90mm f/5.6, one of three interchangeable lenses, because it is able to focus close enough for fairly tight portraiture.

BY RUSSELL HART



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FORMAT MATTERS

(continued from page 39) playing with the emphasis on the background."

That said, Rainier's approach is anything but purely formal. His tattoo photographs—which in 2001 will become a Bulfinch book, tentatively titled *Ancient Marks*—often require that he find his way into naturally suspicious subcultures. "I try to slow down and talk with people first, show them some of my photographs, and be honest and open about my intentions," he says. "Especially when I want to photograph a foreign culture—the Maori of New Zealand, for example—the process can take weeks." Or even longer: "In certain situations it's taken me many visits over years to finally get permission. But I find that when you take the time to create a relationship, people rarely say no. And I think the quality of the picture is directly proportional to the relationship you create."

While Rainier is meeting potential subjects he's also scouting locations. "By the time I'm ready to shoot, I've usually found two or three places to do the picture, and figured out two or three compositional variations at each place," he says. For his photographs of Los Angeles gang tattoos he made first con-

MASTER CLASS

tact through an eye-doctor friend who extracts shrapnel from gang members' eyes, and at the same time started cruising the city's infamous concrete flood-control canals for the right setting. "Graffiti, bullet shells, and syringes were everywhere," he remembers, speaking with typical calm. "It was an absolute war zone. When we took pictures, the gang would station armed guards on the embankments."

It's not uncommon for Rainier to use several different cameras during a single shoot. "Even when I'm planning to photograph in a less controllable situation—maybe a festival procession in Thailand that happens only on one day—I might get there a week ahead of time, meet with the participants, and check out all the angles," he says. "Then, when the time comes, I might use the Canon for reportage, the Hasselblad for some formal portraits, and the Diana for something more expressive. I shoot lots of film—good old Kodak Tri-X—and pick the one or two images that best represent the feeling of the event." Yet Chris Rainier isn't the sort of photographer who operates by the law of averages. "I try not to leave too much up to chance," he says. "I treat each photograph as if it were an entire assignment." ■

COLLECTING

E-BUYS

(continued from page 46) set estimates in relation to the market—once we learned what the market really is for this piece, it was a no-brainer."

One of the inexpensive Sherman prints also turned up for sale on eBay. The print being offered—by Boston-based collector Alan Bortman—reportedly sold for \$1,300, although that deal subsequently fell through. Bortman then auctioned it a second time, for \$571.65, almost four times what it could have been had for if the buyer had done some research and gone to Metro Pictures.

Unlike traditional auction houses, eBay does not stand behind sales made on the site. Pieces are put up for sale by individuals, who pay a small fee to list their items on the site, and bid on directly by other individuals. (Newer online auction sites from the big auction houses, like *sothebys.amazon.com*, will guarantee the provenance of lots.) Bortman was scrupulous about representing the picture properly on eBay. He made it clear that the print was from an open edition, though he did describe the piece as "A Beautiful and Classic Sherman! AUTHENTICITY GUARANTEED!" He invited prospective bidders to ask questions but cautioned, "Seller reserves the

right to refuse anyone with negative feedback."

When it learned that one of the unlimited-edition prints was being offered on eBay, Metro Pictures put up a notice on the site to alert bidders of the image's background. Notes Helene Winer, one of the gallery's owners: "We represent Cindy Sherman's work and feel obligated to make sure collectors are properly informed about the market for her pieces. He (Bortman) didn't do anything wrong; I don't object to what he did. But not everyone is aware that these prints are still readily available here at the gallery for \$150." The poorer result of Bortman's second offering suggests that Metro Pictures' e-mail did effectively caution buyers about the market for these prints.

Online auctions do provide some marvelous opportunities. Not everyone, for instance, can easily travel to New York to visit a gallery like Metro Pictures to buy a cheap Cindy Sherman print. In that regard, the \$571 that the winning bidder paid may have been a bargain. But it's clear that buyers on sites like eBay should beware. Says Metro Pictures' Winer: "I like eBay and the other online auctions. But you have to take the time to do some research into what you're buying." ■

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