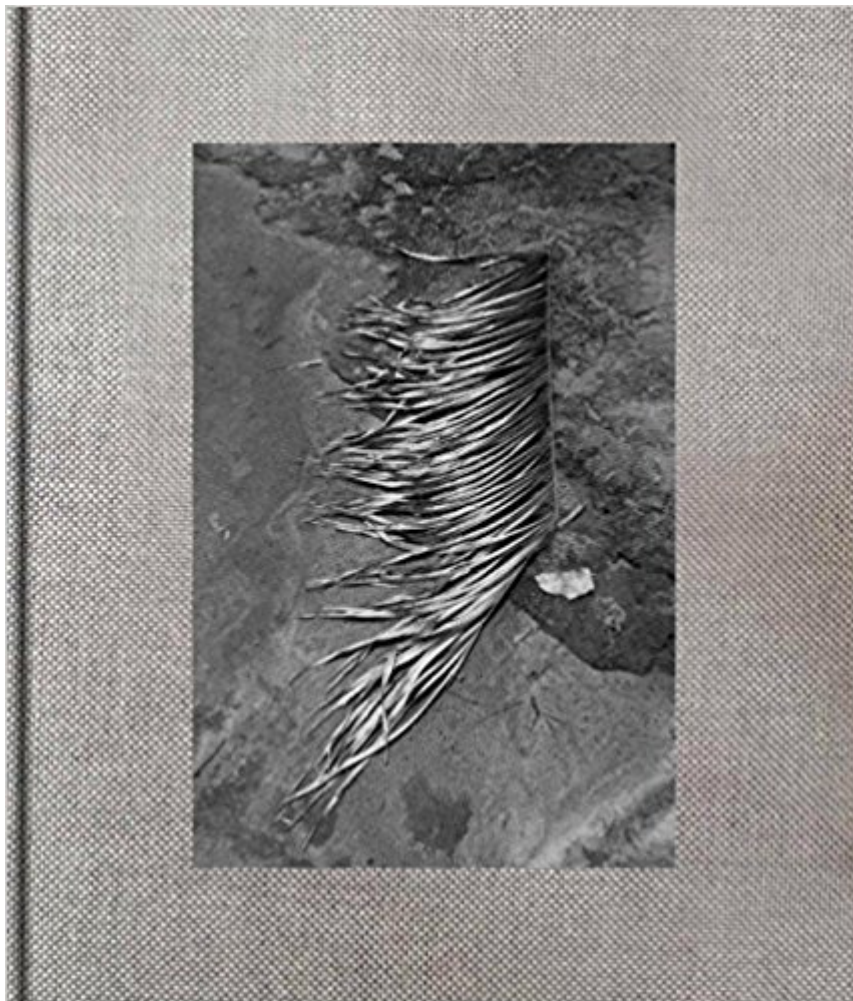


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Viviane Sassen: Pikin Slee



Synopsis

Renowned photographic artist Viviane Sassen's latest body of work was realized in a remote village on the Upper Suriname River. Known for her imaginative approach to fashion photography, Sassen's lens here captures mundane objects, making them appear extraordinary against the background of nature's overwhelming presence. Largely shot in black and white, the informal photos also capture a sense of Sassen's personal connection to the village, which is inhabited by the ancestors of former slaves who escaped Dutch rule. "This project is an exploration of the beauty of the everyday," writes Sassen in her introduction, "an investigation of the sculptural qualities of the ordinary." Her many followers will find much to contemplate and savour in this new book by an artist who constantly challenges herself and her audience.

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Customer Reviews

"Boils photography down to its essence: inspiring us to take a second look at the world around us by showing us how it is transformed within the borders of a photo."—Photo District News
"Simply beautiful with a very distinguished use of color. Only very few photographers know how to do that."—Photo-eye
"[Pikin Slee is] a real place in Suriname. . . and if the place has anything like the character Sassen captures in what is one of the most elegant, seamless meldings of duotone and color I've encountered, I want to go."—Re: Photographica

Viviane Sassen's work has been published in New York Times Magazine, I-D, Purple, Dazed &

Confused, Fantastic Man, VOGUE, Another Magazine, V Magazine, Selfservice, Numero, 10, and POP. She is the author of *Parasomnia* and *In and Out of Fashion* (both by Prestel). She lives in Amsterdam.

Suriname is an independent country on the northern right shoulder of South America with a population of approximately half a million. It used to be the Dutch colony of Guiana. It is sandwiched between the independent countries that used to be British Guyana and French Guiana. Like the north-south order of the countries of Central America, I have always had trouble remembering their order. Pikin Slee is a small remote village far up the Suriname River, with a population of around 4,000. It was founded by runaway slaves from the Dutch plantations. It is so remote that I could not even find it via Google. It has no running water, and very limited electricity. It is deep in the rain forest. There is no access by road, only by the river. Viviane Sassen is a well-known Dutch fashion photographer who lives in Amsterdam. She ventured out to capture the images from this distant corner of our globe. Most of her photographs are in black and white, and focus on natural and human-made abstract shapes. Some of the photos are of people, but Sassen tends towards abstract images of them, for example, a back or the soles of two feet. She photographs in color infrequently, and with the same sparse style, for example, a black face in portrait against a bright red sheet of paper. Like her photographs themselves, the presentation in the book is also effectively sparse. No words, no titles, not even page numbers. Each page has one full photograph, with wide margins. In some cases, the photograph is spread over two pages, and that is my only specific criticism: I don't like a photograph's middle "disappearing" into the crease between pages. At the end of the book, there is an index, with a small picture of each photograph, with a one word title. There is also a one-page narrative by Sassen on Pikin Slee. I duly noted how the contemporary consumer culture washed up into this remote village. There were plastic sandals and plastic food bowls. One man was wearing a baseball cap with the logo of American professional sports. Another was wearing a sports jersey. And even in a village with limited electricity, there is the TV dish, so the residents can contemplate the joys of life beyond their upriver location. Overall, the book is a quality production, now selling at an excellent price of \$15. Nonetheless, the emotive impact of the photographs do not achieve the level of an Ansel Adams or a W. Eugene Smith. 4-stars.

Pikin Slee is a village deep within the rainforest of Suriname (formerly known as Dutch Guyana). Most of its inhabitants are descendants of Maroons, who escaped slavery on Dutch plantations in

the eighteenth century. Access to Pikin Slee is via a three-hour canoe trip up the Upper Suriname River. Thus, the village and its people are rather isolated from the world at large. Viviane Sassen is a Dutch artist/photographer. This book of photographs represents my first exposure to her work. It is very arresting and captivating. The photographs tend towards minimalistic abstractions, but usually there is enough context to make some sort of sense of them. The subjects fall into three categories: people (almost all of whom have jet-black skin), nature (for example, the river or palm fronds), and everyday objects (such as planks, plastic buckets, or a satellite dish). PIKIN SLEE contains about ninety-five photographs. About two-thirds of them are black-and-white. In some of the color photographs, black nonetheless dominates and one has to look a second time to realize that it is indeed a color photograph; in others there are shockingly bright splashes of color. My four favorite photographs -- four photographs of which I would love to own a print -- are in color, although they probably would not be as outstanding were not the majority of the book's photographs black-and-white. In this regard, it is worth quoting a paragraph from the brief afterword by Viviane Sassen: "This project is an exploration of the beauty of the everyday, an investigation of the sculptural qualities of the ordinary. As I longed for a simpler kind of photography, I decided not to stage as many images as I have in the past, and to work mainly in black and white. As if to re-set the eye: back to the basics." For me, PIKIN SLEE is a model book of photography. The photographs themselves seem to be of exemplary quality and the reproductions are as fine as I could ask for. Equally significant, text is kept to a bare minimum. The photographs are presented without captions on unnumbered pages. Hence, you are left alone with the image. There is a six-page "index" of sorts at the back of the book where postage-stamp sized reproductions of the photographs are accompanied by minimalistic names (such as "Rorschach", "Cassava", "Patina", and "Giallo"). And then there is Sassen's one-page, three-paragraph afterword. How welcome it is to be presented with just the images, without the pretentious or portentous intermediation of a fine-arts expert.

I love Sassen's work, it is original, the colors are amazing and enhance the subjects. The African locales and people are compelling

dang

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