

PEOPLE WATCHING

Mūthoni Ngatia is a Kenyan woman moving between the world of data and policy and the world of documentary photography – and finding that both are ultimately about the same thing: honest observation →

FIND OUT MORE: MŪTHONI NGATIA'S STREET AND DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY AT [NGATIA.PHOTO](https://ngatia.photo)

Fish market
SASSOON DOCKS, MUMBAI
I was struck by the blue backdrop and then noticed the lady in the red sari. She looks like she's dancing, but is really just tired in the middle of her daily work getting seafood for sale.



My first serious training as a street photographer was long before I owned a camera. It happened in Nairobi in the 1980s, sitting in a matatu, waiting for it to fill. I'm wedged into a seat, the engine is coughing, the tout is shouting a destination, and everyone is silently doing arithmetic. How many people are left? Will that woman with the shopping bag get in? How will we all fit? In the pre-mobile phone era, there was nothing to do but look. Nairobi gave me plenty to look at. Bus stops were theatres. A woman balancing vegetables on her head. A man in a suit stepping carefully around a puddle. Schoolchildren negotiating space with hawkers, commuters, goats, dust, noise, impatience, elegance. People continuously entered and exited the frame.

PATTERNS IN HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

Years later, I became an economist and data scientist. It sounds like the opposite of street photography, but the two have more in common than you might think. In my work, I spend a lot of time looking for patterns in human behaviour: finding signals using messy big data. I look for structure where, at first, there only seems to be noise. But it also teaches humility. However good the model, human beings still refuse to be fully explained.

Photography is also about problem-solving, only out in the world, in real time. On the street, I'm also looking for hidden order: some choreography, a visual rhyme, a moment when light, gesture, colour and expression briefly come together. The world is chaotic, but every now and then it arranges itself into something readable. My role as a photographer is to notice before it disappears.

I am drawn to moments that do not announce themselves as important. A glance between strangers. A woman waiting in beautiful light. I'm humbled by the fact that we all carry an inner life – a history, a seriousness, a capacity for reason, humour, endurance, tenderness and joy. Even in the most ordinary public moments, there is something deeply worthy of attention, a trace of the divine.

This matters to me as an African photographer. So much of the world's visual imagination of Africa has been

shaped by extremes: wildlife, landscapes, poverty, crisis, spectacle. We do have astonishing wildlife and landscapes, and I love them too. But I am more interested in the daily theatre of people living their lives.

LIGHT AND COLOUR

I am, by nature, an introvert – which makes photography both funny and useful. Without a camera, I would happily disappear into a corner and observe quietly. With one, I have a reason to engage with the world. The camera gives me permission to step closer, to linger, sometimes even to talk. It becomes a bridge – not a shield exactly, but a way of saying: I see something here. Sometimes that something is light. Sometimes it is colour. Sometimes it is a fleeting gesture.

Light and colour are central to how I see, and I think growing up in Kenya shaped that. Our light is not shy. It sharpens edges, deepens shadows, turns ordinary walls into backdrops, and gives colour a kind of confidence. Even when I photograph elsewhere – Washington, Istanbul, Mumbai, Rio – I think I am still chasing the visual intensity of home.

The photographs I love most are not necessarily the most technically perfect ones. They are the ones where life seems to have arranged itself briefly into a small miracle. Street photography asks for patience, luck, humility and a high tolerance for failure. Most of the time, nothing happens. Or something happens half a second too early. Or the person you were waiting for turns in the wrong direction. Or someone walks into the frame and ruins the picture – or even saves it. That uncertainty is the joy of it.

In the end, I may still be that kid in the matatu, waiting, watching, wondering who will enter the scene next. The only real difference is that now I have a camera in my hands.

Mēmète initiation ceremony ►

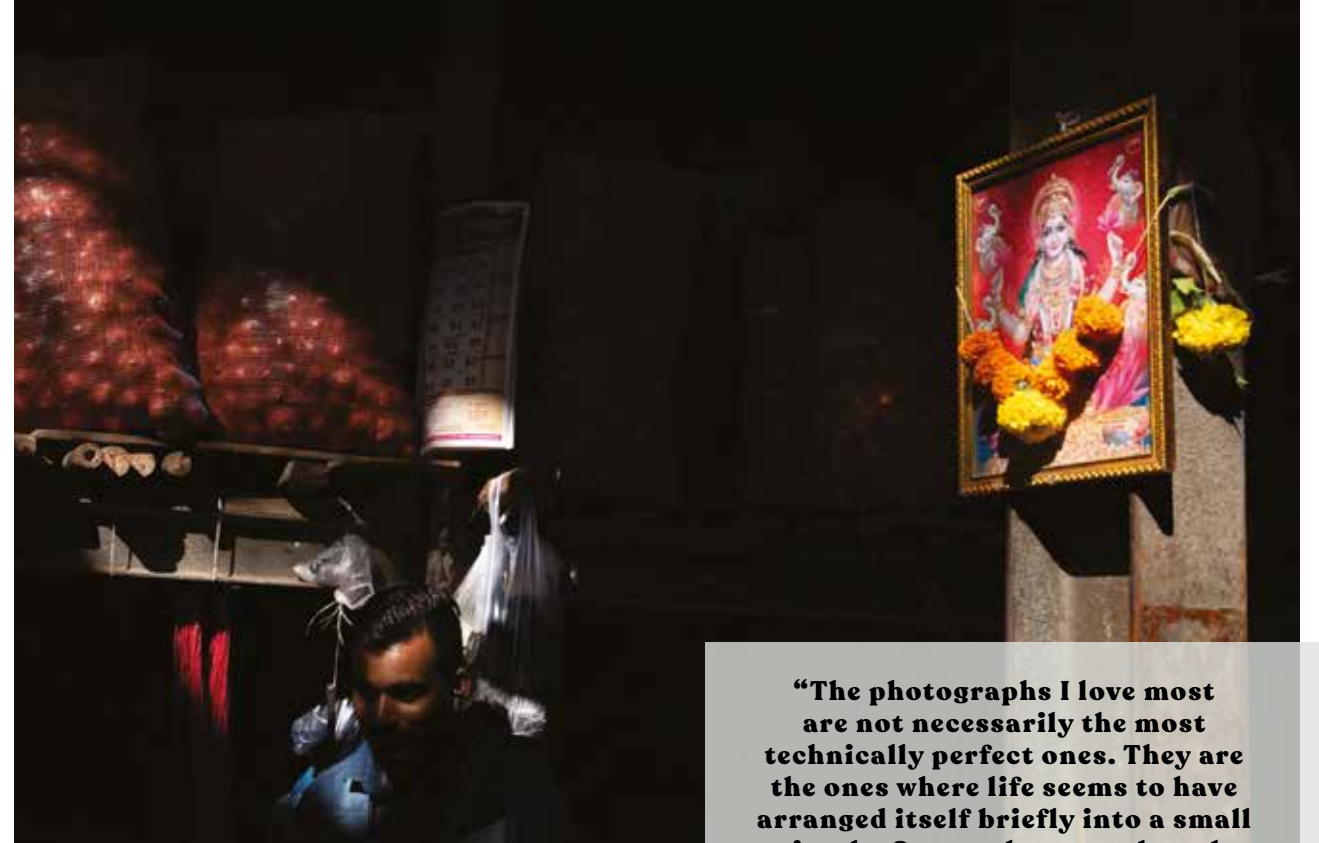
BAFFOUSAM, CAMEROON

The young men are meant to disguise themselves so that they are not easily recognised. The young man in the middle caught my attention.



▲ Light and shade CLUJ-NAPOCA, ROMANIA

I was particularly drawn to the beautiful light and the dynamic energy between the man in the light and the woman in silhouette



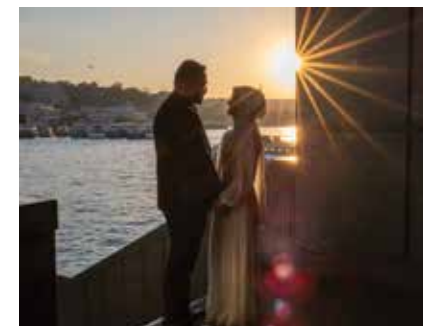
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Market trader ▲ MUMBAI, INDIA

I was struck by the light that grazed the seller and his sacks of onions, while illuminating the religious icon decorated with marigolds.

Galata Bridge ▼ ISTANBUL, TURKEY

Couples go to Galata Bridge in Istanbul for their bridal pictures. It's an especially scenic location at sunset. I was moved by the connection between this new couple and highlighted the magic of the moment by using a small aperture that created the sunburst effect. ➔





Nubian Downy Ceremony ►
NAIROBI, KENYA

Women from the same family wear matching clothes and take gifts to the bride's family. It's a joyful ceremony with loads of singing and dancing. I loved this moment of connection between the women in this family.



◀ *Horse trainers*
BARBADOS

Barbados has one of the oldest horse racing tracks in the Caribbean. Trainers bring their horses to cool off in the ocean at sunrise before it gets too hot, and many tourists come to take pictures with them on the beach. I liked this moment of framing and connection.

Himba ▼
ONCOCUA, ANGOLA

This young man is from the Himba community who live in southern Angola and northern Namibia. I was struck by his sculptural hair and traditional outfit, the blend of old and new, traditional and modern embodied in his effortless cool. In his left hand, he's holding a head covering that fitted exactly to protect his hair from dust while riding the motorbike. He kindly agreed to take it off for the photo. When he marries, he'll have to cut his hair. 🇳🇲



▲ *Mundhari cattle herder*
JUBA, SOUTH SUDAN

The Mundhari love their Ankole Watusi cattle and take great care of them; they will even compose songs for their herds. They burn the cow dung and the smoke keeps insects away. They apply the ash on the hair, face and cow horns for beauty and also as an insect repellent. Here I was drawn to the harmony between men and cattle and the echoes of orange that create unity in the frame.

◀ *Chicken*
ZANZIBAR, TANZANIA

This image comes from a market in Stone Town in Zanzibar. I love the beautiful backlight framing the chicken's wattles and feathers.

