



Cristina Rodriguez
The Desert is not Deserted

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New paintings inspired by a trek through the Namibian Desert
in support of the Mines Advisory Group (MAG)

The Orangery Gallery
8 - 17 October 2004

11am - 7pm daily
admission free

The Orangery Gallery
Holland Park
Kensington High Street
London W8

Car park entrance:
Abbotsbury Road, W14
 Holland Park

For information please contact:
Gillian Adam
3 Wilmington House
17 Highbury Crescent
London N5 1RU
tel: 0207 609 3117
mobile: 07969 127169
email: gillianadam@tiscali.co.uk

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Cover image: *The Scene that Never Happened* 2003, oil on linen, 34 x 46 in

Preface

Cristina Rodriguez's paintings of her journey in the Namibian desert perfectly distil one of the truths about travel in remote places - that what we take from such journeys is, above all, a series of moments. We might be suffering severe discomfort - wilting from heat or laid low by some grumbling ailment; we might be troubled by a mysterious rash; we might be anxious at dusk, about wild animals or the zealous members of some vicious local freedom movement; we might be weak with thirst, heavy-limbed with exertion; in short, it might all be going very badly indeed. But then comes the glimpse of a distant horizon, a tiny botanic miracle, a soaring raptor; a character or figure revealed in all its comedy and grace - and we are suddenly catapulted to joy, to a re-affirmation of the world's wonders.

Only the best activities offer such mercurial rewards, but it is notoriously difficult to capture them - either in print or on canvas. Cristina Rodriguez is ideally suited to the role of travelling painter. Born in Colombia, she spent a childhood on the move - with spells in Peru, Germany and Zimbabwe. She has lived in the UK on and off for fifteen years. She has visited most of Europe's more colourful corners, and many beyond. In her work she sustains that essential artist's attribute - the eye of a stranger:

Yet many of her perceptions are also consistent with her native Colombia - the rich colours, the flamboyant figures, the exuberance of the composition - and the narrative. Colombia is a place where narrative is all. That very human tendency, to make mythologies from the randomness of our lives, is in Colombia an art form in itself. Tales are woven out of the most commonplace events. We have only to look at the titles of these works to realise that each one is a little story - *The Girl with the Fabulous Legs Looking for the Chameleon*, *The Reward After the Hazardous Climb*, *The Quiver Tree in the Cave Surrounded by the Most Beautiful Sunset*, *The Girl with the Feather Crossing the Mountain*, *The Scene that Never Happened*.

I have always had a horror of aimless travel. When in my early twenties I first began to roam beyond western Europe, I became acutely aware of how easy it would be to become lost, to spend years drifting from place to place. Travel is a perilous freedom. The pleasures of footloose wandering are also its greatest pitfall: you can go anywhere, do anything, learn everything - but without some sort of shape, some narrative, it is meaningless. The best journeys to my mind are those that flirt with these dangers, that pitch the traveller into the wilderness but which then magically take on some revelatory shape.

Likewise an unexamined journey is not worth making. Ruskin urged us all to draw - not because we might be any good, but to improve our ability to see. Drawing a scene reveals it. The ease and speed with which we now travel means that we run the risk of seeing so much that we end up noticing nothing. Cristina's pictures urge us to take our time, to notice the details. Hers are scenes that appear reduced to their essential features, rinsed of detail. They give us the sense of space, the simplicity of each moment. But they also celebrate details, the flowers in one corner, the figures playing and exercising, the line of glasses on a table, the glowing half-moons of the cattle horns.

The art of travel is no different from the art of art. To do it well requires the same intensity of awareness, the same abstraction, the same discovery of order in chaotic images and events. It means forgetting about the stone in our shoe, the heat of midday, the fear at dusk. It means banishing our selves in order to become immersed in the wide world. The success of Cristina Rodriguez's *The Desert is not Deserted* is that it encourages us to do precisely that.

Philip Marsden

The Desert is not Deserted: New Paintings by Cristina Rodriguez

'Travel is never just a journey to another physical place - it's always an inner journey, too.'

Think of the word 'desert' - what does it bring to mind? For many of us, the desert seems an unsettling, disturbing place - too hot, too cold, at once hard to grasp and yet all-engulfing. We are fascinated by its alien quality, its other-worldliness - yet also frightened. We imagine that this sun-swept landscape must be an empty place, bleak and barren. We might end up alone with ourselves there. Perhaps, indeed, that is what both terrifies and intrigues us most.

In June 2002, Cristina Rodriguez left her West London studio to take part in a ten-day trek through the Namibian Desert. The expedition was organised to raise funds for the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), a Nobel Prize-winning charity that works to clear mines and unexploded ordnance all around the world. The trek began at the entrance to the Namib-Naukluft Park near Karib in central Namibia. It concluded, many miles later, within sight of the western coast of Southern Africa.

In between these two points stretch some of the harshest yet most extraordinary environments on earth. The journey was an experience that tested not only the physical and spiritual strength of the participants, but also pushed at the limits of their imaginations. Apparently endless flat plains of gravel terminate in sudden rocky outcrops or jagged mountains, punctuated along the way with valleys and hidden oases, all washed over by ever-changing effects of sunlight and shadow. Life has evolved there, over hundreds of thousands of years, so that it dances in time with such extreme conditions. The Namibian Desert is an absolutely vast place, where the scenery may change from minute to minute yet where everything looks like something out of a dream, and where the minuscule can surprise as intensely as the monumental. As the artist herself puts it,

'I spent hours looking at those changing, impossibly beautiful skies, the colours of the sand, those unreal flowers growing up in the middle of nowhere. We never saw lions, giraffes, elephants; we saw humble animals - a tiny chameleon, a few ostriches, a zebra, scary baboons and a beautiful gazelle.'

Rodriguez's new exhibition, *The Desert is not Deserted*, comes directly out of her Namibian experience. Comprising eleven major new paintings and a limited-edition screenprint, it is Rodriguez's way of leading the viewer along with her on this desert journey - the inner journey, as well as the literal physical one. Brilliant surprising colour, lyrical compositions and a lively sense of curiosity lead the way. As ever, in Rodriguez's work, part of the excitement lies in watching the artist's symbolic vocabulary expand and evolve in order to expose the reality that lies beneath the surface of things - to distil the fantastic from the apparently mundane and wrap it all up in the poetry of pure magic.

Enchantment overlaps sympathy, curiosity and more than a little humour. The journey begins with *The Arrival and Joe* - a beginners' guide to the desert, where the handsome guide and welcoming cold drink can't quite distract us from the hallucinogenic strangeness of the ostriches, the pathos of the departing bus cutting off our last links with civilisation, or - most powerfully - the radiant, distant, infinitely vast horizon stretching out before us. In *The Scene that Never Happened*, Joe joins a zebra in a sunset *pas-de-deux* played out against a backdrop of ardent rose-red and tangerine. It's as if these two graceful creatures of the desert share a magical life that the visitor, for now at least, can only watch with wonder.

But then it is time to leave the safety of the campsite and to set off into terra incognita. Here, Rodriguez's brushwork encodes whole new levels of texture and incident in order to convey the variety of sensations produced by the ever-changing landscape. The colour contrasts, never less than intense, become objects of wonder in their own right. Compositions veer between the literally real and geometrically intoxicating, as if teasing us to draw the line between reality

and dream. Yet this is a landscape so unfamiliar to us that such certainties have to be discarded from the baggage we carry with us. A work like *The Quiver Tree in the Cave Surrounded by the Most Beautiful Sunset*, with its vertiginous hills and emblematic figures, has a mythic quality which seems more evocative of actual memory than any photograph could possibly be. Desert life - the chameleon in *The Girl with the Fabulous Legs Looking for the Chameleon*, the snake in *The Girl With the Feather Crossing the Mountain*, the strange plant in *The Shadows of the Artist and the Journalist Reaching the Gazelle* - takes on a totemic quality. Things are literally seen in a whole new light here - the intense, slightly unearthly light of the desert itself.

After so much incident - mountains climbed, plains crossed, horizons endlessly pursued - the journey draws to a close with *At Last, the First Signs of Civilisation*. Here we are reminded that our fellow human beings, too, make their homes in this strange and forbidding-looking landscape - something underscored by the colour here, so that the Namibians seem to fit in with the land - to rhyme with it chromatically - while the visitors still stand out. Perhaps, then, we - not the desert - are alien? Finally, in *The Last Night in the Campsite Being Visited by the Moon*, Rodriguez and her companions spend their last evening together, celebrating the challenges they have faced and the bonds they have forged. It's a euphorically happy scene, playful and bright, but the dark presence of the mountains, surmounted by the emblematic moon figure, balance this with a note of the eternal - a reminder that the moon's cycles, like the desert itself, will continue long after the footprints of this particular journey have been swept away.

The screenprint which closes the exhibition takes the magic a step further. Inspired by a tale told to Rodriguez by the travel writer, it depicts a moment both exotic and convincing, in the way that a vivid dream sometimes seems more true than waking life - the moonlit moment when lions come down from the plains to fish on the shores of Namibia's infamous Skeleton Coast, watched over by a reflective mermaid. The colours here - not least, the refulgently brilliant blues - are every bit as marvellous and strange as the story they convey. Like the best sort of fairy-tale, this is an image that lodges in the mind and won't let go. Is this, we wonder, what happens all around us when no one is looking? Can we be sure - really sure - that it isn't?

The Desert is not Deserted is full of bright, lively, vibrant paintings. The overriding sensation is one of amazement and delight at the strangeness and beauty of the world around us. But although there is sometimes something childlike about the drawing - the simplified human forms, the strong local colour - Rodriguez is by no means a naive painter. Rather, these works have developed as a way of expressing a profound and personal vision. As Rodriguez puts it,

'I was drawn inwards, in complete silence, in awe of that ancient environment, which is always changing, never still. And there were, of course, my fellow travellers, each intent of raising much needed funds for MAG, from whom I learnt a great amount and to whom this exhibition is dedicated. All of us were transformed by our experience and I want to offer them an extension of that experience - my own interpretation of the trek.'

Rodriguez's interpretation of her time in the desert is richly infused with wonder, awe, humour and enchantment. Yet these paintings are about more than a single place or a single time. Rather, at some more profound level, they have something to say about the nature of journeys themselves. To return to the lines that began this essay, Rodriguez is not just talking about the world around us, but rather about the way in which we see it - the awakening of our capacity to recognize the miraculous that happens all around us, every day. This is a message as relevant, and as inspiring, in London as it is in Southern Africa. Nothing in our world is deserted, nothing without its own capacity for revelation, if we open our eyes to see it.

Bunny Smedley
Critic & Historian

Cristina Rodriguez

The Desert is not Deserted



The Arrival and Joe 2003
oil on linen
34 x 46 in



The Scene that Never Happened 2003
oil on linen
34 x 46 in



The Girl with the Fabulous Legs Looking for the Chameleon 2003

oil on linen

34 x 46 in



The Girl with the Feather Crossing the Mountain 2003
oil on linen
34 x 46 in



The Shadows of the Artist and the Journalist Reaching the Gazelle 2004

oil on linen

34 x 46 in



Timo and the Baboons Waiting for Us 2004
oil on linen
34 x 46 in



The Photograph that Everybody took and the Cameraman 2004

oil on linen

34 x 46 in



The Reward After the Hazardous Climb 2004
oil on linen
34 x 46 in



The Quiver Tree in the Cave Surrounded by the Most Beautiful Sunset 2004

oil on linen

34 x 46 in



At Last, the First Signs of Civilisation 2004
oil on linen
34 x 46 in



The Last Night in the Campsite Being Visited by the Moon 2004

oil on linen

44 x 60 in

The Story that the Travel Writer Told Me is the first picture in the exhibition and was produced at Advanced Graphics in London. The artist comments: 'On the eve of my trip to Namibia, the travel writer told me this beautiful legend: "Every night when the moon is in the dark sky, the lions come out from the desert to fish. With the shadows of ghost boats as companions, the lions play with the fish until dawn." The lion image stayed with me throughout my trip, so I decided to use it as the source for my screenprint.' 10% of proceeds from the sale of the print will benefit the Mines Advisory Group (MAG).

MAG is an international not-for-profit Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) based in Manchester, UK with a sister organisation, MAG America, based in Washington, USA. The charity assists people affected by landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO - bombs, mortars, grenades), clearing and destroying the left-over weapons that make areas unsafe after war. Lou McGrath, Executive Director of MAG comments: 'We are very grateful to Cristina Rodriguez for her support. MAG has had over 12 years' experience in more than 20 countries. We operate within communities to make land safe so that people can grow food, collect water and their children can go to school safely and without fear. Our aim is to help rebuild peaceful and secure environments. Funds raised from this exhibition will assist our field programmes in the Middle East, Africa and South East Asia.'

Advanced Graphics is the UK's foremost screenprint studio, widely known and respected for the development of screenprinting and woodblocking techniques. It has worked on projects for artists, galleries and publishers worldwide since 1967. Artists work in close collaboration with specialist technicians to produce original screenprints. These are not based on paintings, but are works of art in their own right, and are produced entirely by hand. The screenprinting process involves an artist building a series of backgrounds and marks to be made into stencils. These vary from large washed areas to tiny highlights. Technicians print the stencils, one at a time, by pulling ink through the screens on to the paper beneath using a squeegee. Once the proofing stage is complete and the artist is satisfied with the image, the technicians repeat the process, building up layer upon layer of colour until the final image emerges. Whilst editioning, they refer to notes made during the proofing stage, consulting the artist when necessary. The prints are then signed and numbered by the artist and embossed with the company stamp.



The Story that the Travel Writer Told Me 2004
screenprint, 22 x 30 in
edition of 75 prints

Cristina Rodriguez: Biography

Born Colombia 1964

Education

- 1983 - 87 BA in Fine Arts. University of Los Andes, Bogota, Colombia
1989 - 91 MA in Fine Arts. The Slade School of Fine Arts, London University

Solo Exhibitions

- 1987 *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Fundacion Alzate Avendano, Bogota, Colombia
1991 *My Gift to a Continent*, Cadogan Gallery, London
1997 *The Carnival of the Animals*, The Pump House Gallery, London
1999 *La Fête sous la Pyramide*, Carrousel du Louvre, Paris
1999 Hiscox Art Café, London
2001 *Jump into Reality*, MacLean Fine Art, The Air Gallery, London
2004 *The Desert is not Deserted*, The Orangery, Holland Park, London

Selected Group Exhibitions

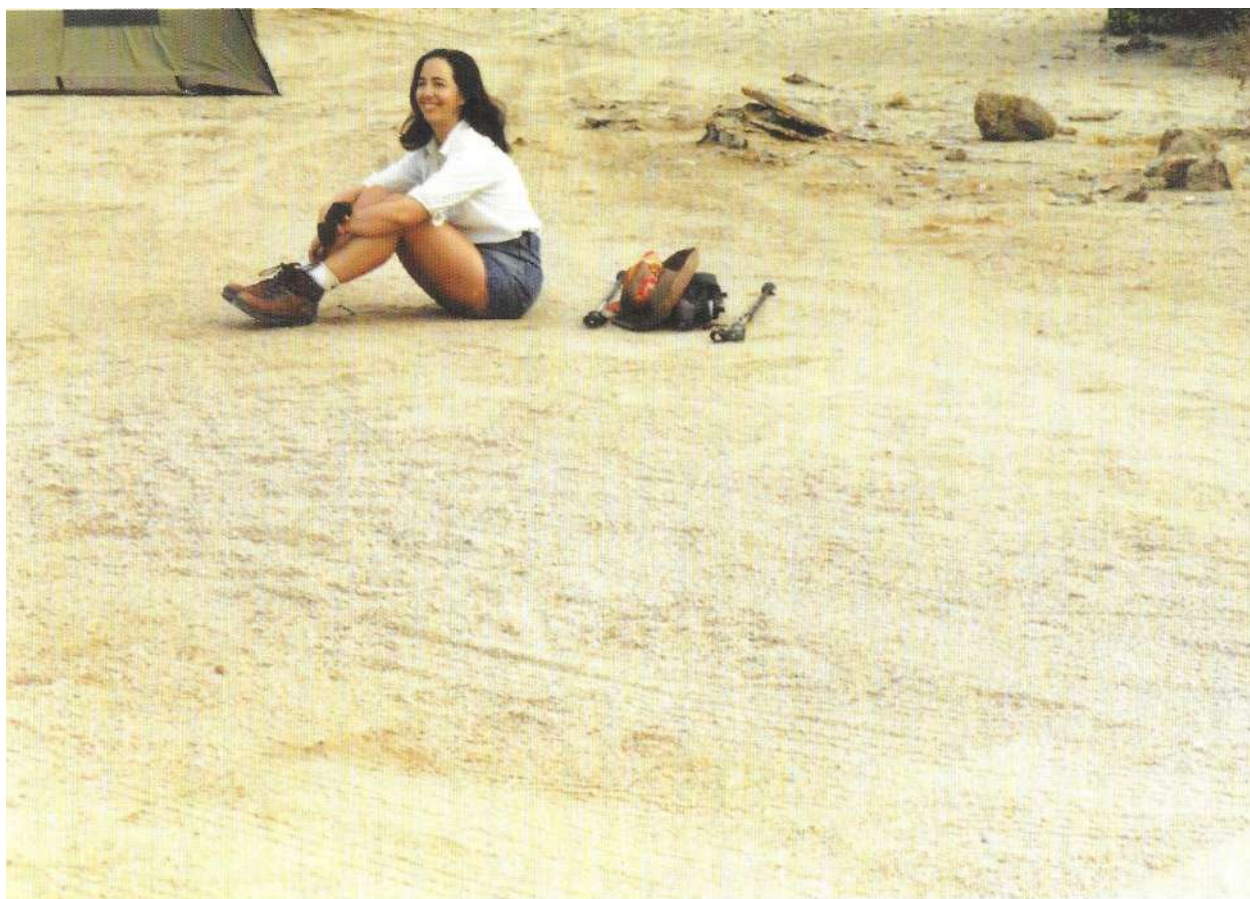
- 1987 *Los Nuevos Pintores de Bogota*, Centro Colombo Americano, Bogota, Colombia
1988 *Nuevas Tendencias*, Galeria Ventana, Cali, Colombia
1989 *30 Años de Arte Biblioteca*, Luis Angel Arango, Bogota, Colombia
1990 *Contemporary View*, The Royal College of Art and Christie's, London
1991 *The Discerning Eye*, The Mall Gallery, London
Under the Eye of Saturn, Oriel Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, Wales
1992 *The Ship of Fools*, Acorn Gallery, Liverpool
1993 Summer Show, Delfina Studios, London
The Affordable Art Company, Connaught Brown, London
Delta Gallery Exhibition, Delta Gallery, Harare, Zimbabwe
1994 *The Affordable Art Company*, Connaught Brown, London
1997 *The Affordable Art Company*, Connaught Brown, London
2002 *Dangerous Corners*, An Exhibition of Football curated by James Huntingdon-Whiteley
Gallery 27, London, Sponsored by The Professional Footballers' Association and Clinton's Solicitors

Awards

- 1989 Scholarship for Outstanding Artists, Icetex: Government of Colombia
1990 The British Council Scholarship
1992 The Delfina Studios Scholarship, Delfina Studios Trust (one year)
1993 Travel Scholarship to Zimbabwe, Delfina Studios Trust
1995 Travel Scholarship to New York, Delfina Studios Trust

Her work is in private collections in: Colombia, Mexico, Peru, USA, Great Britain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Belgium, France, Portugal, Zimbabwe.

Public collections: The Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, The Professional Footballers' Association.



Cristina Rodriguez in the Namibian Desert

For Angelika, Charles and Lucas and all of our friends who through their sponsorship kindly contributed to the worthy cause of the Mines Advisory Group.

For further information and sales, please contact:

Gillian Adam
3 Wilmington House
17 Highbury Crescent
London N5 1RU

tel: 0207 609 3117
mobile: 07969 127169
email: gillianadam@tiscali.co.uk

www.cristina-rodriguez.com

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