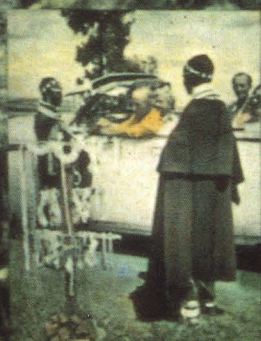


# APERTURE

CULTURES  
IN TRANSITION





## Other Viewpoints, Other Dimensions

By Susan Morgan

*My curiosity about alien cultures was avid and obsessive. I had a placid belief that it was good for me to live in the midst of people whose motives I did not understand.*  
—Paul Bowles

A traveler's curiosity courts a variety of uncertainties: unanticipated pleasures, tragic realizations, happy accidents. Elaine Reichek's work takes possession of that curiosity, orchestrating cultural questions through images. In the reclusive atmosphere of picture collections, second-hand bookstores, and anthropology museums, Reichek collects photographs taken at the ends of the earth. By carefully editing and altering (cropping, enlarging, hand-coloring, collaging) this borrowed material, Reichek coaxes new readings from old images. In representing early-twentieth-century ethnographic photographs, Reichek turns the tables to reveal the cracks in anthropology's rigid, authoritarian method. "Preserving the antique is a colonialist mentality. All cultures are in flux. We are looking at them, they are looking at us." Free of nostalgia (a term invented in 1688 by Johannes Hofer, an Alsatian medical student; nostalgia, from the Greek roots meaning "return home" and "pain," was regarded as a medical problem until the late nineteenth century), Reichek's work does not sentimentally yearn for the past.

Photography has been described by Stanley Cavell as "a medium for making sense" and Reichek's work is about making sense, taking delight in cultural incongruities while avoiding a traditionally linear view of history. Reichek's photocollages and room-sized installations pointedly break down the notion of a correct and singular viewpoint. Her work is never didactic; her arrangements of photographs set up dialogues, introducing a range of considerations and contradictions. The inset images in her photocollages appear like rips in an otherwise carefully composed surface; like peepholes, the insets offer a surprising glimpse, reminding us that there is never one version to any story. In *I Drank The*



Elaine Reichek, right: *Red Man*, 1987; page 28: *I Drank the Zambesi*, 1986; page 29: *Desert Song*, 1987; pages 30–31: *Burden of Dreams*, 1987.



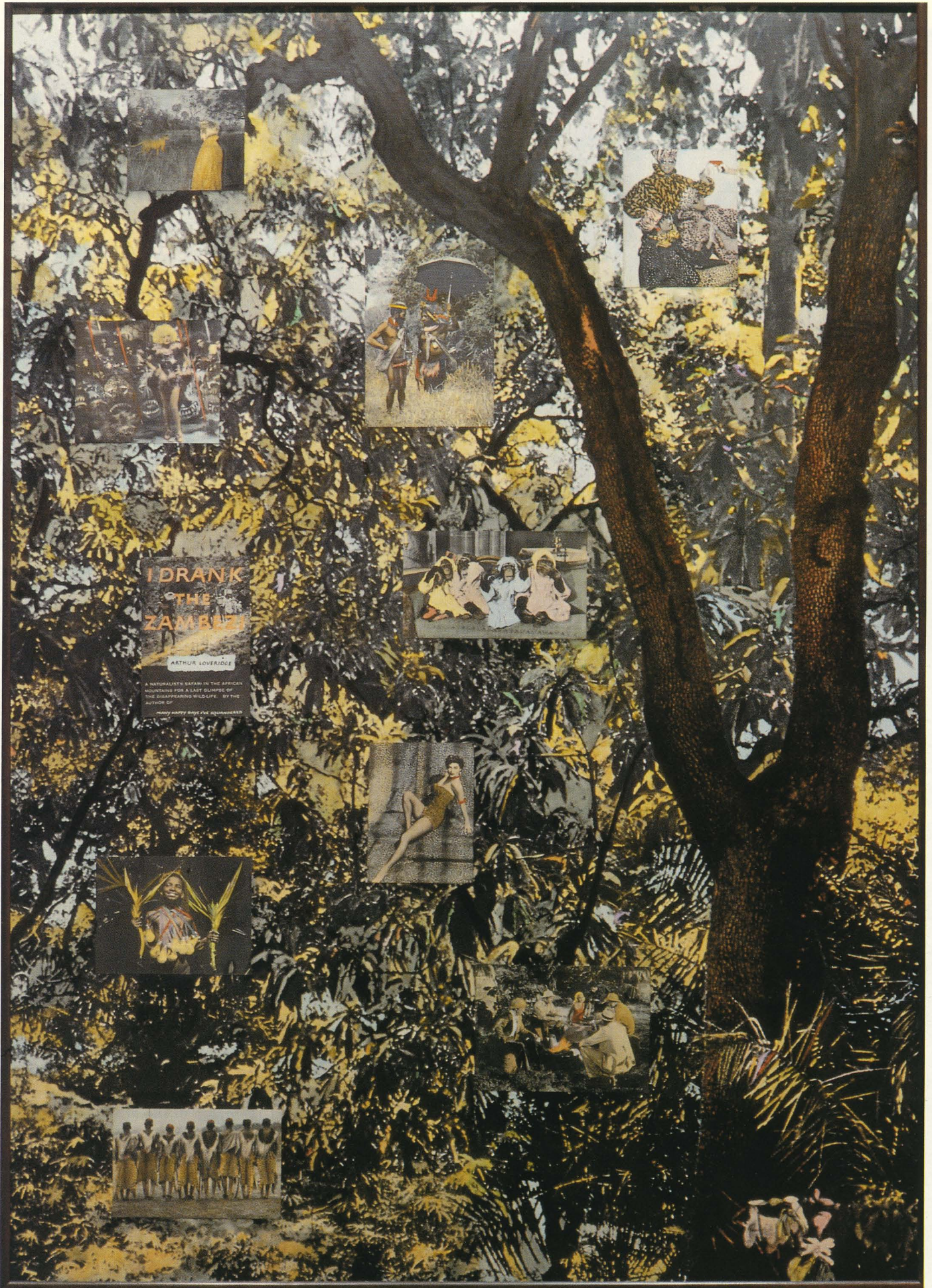


*Zambesi*, 1986—the mysterious title taken from a travel guide—characters imbibe the exotic. It's the heart of darkness peddled as the flavor of the month as everyone tries to get a taste of the Other: monkeys in dresses, women in animal skins, rain umbrellas as parasols, light bulbs as necklaces. As so often in Reichek's work, the notion of exotic here has no fixed meaning.

Reichek has referred to the hand-coloring of the photocollages as "homogenizing the time." It is a democratic gesture, diminishing any sense of priority among the images and establishing them as equal parts of a whole. In *Ticket to Paradise*, 1988, a painting of Jamaica Bay by the nineteenth-century American landscapist Martin Johnson Heade is hand-colored in pale postcard tints. The sublime landscape envisioned by the Hudson River painter dissolves over time into a tourist's souvenir. Once the wilderness has been tamed, nature is reduced to just another photo opportunity. As in the tradition of English landscape painting, the beauty and importance of the countryside rests in its commercial potential—it is beautiful because you can own it.

In Reichek's room-sized installations, the information surrounds us. The past and present appear in the same moment, creating yet another dimension. In the darkened room of *Desert Song* a pile of broken cameras lies discarded in a corner, a depleted oasis of voyeurism. "The desert is a place of great aestheticism and great luxury. The desire ranges from the spiritual to the carnal," Reichek notes. She has referred to her working method as "free associating"; references abound. In *Desert Song*, the Egyptian pyramids are presented simultaneously as architectural wonders of the world, ten-cent picture postcards, and a monumental movie stage for Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra. The central image from *Desert Song* is a classic scene; nomads and camels in the desert, palm trees swaying in the misty distance. The scene is both romantic and fraught with anxiety; all of the figures, men and animals alike, are looking in different directions. "If you look closely, something is happening. A storm is brewing." Reichek has located that ephemeral moment, changes occurring out on the horizon, and framed it. In *Desert Song*, a woman





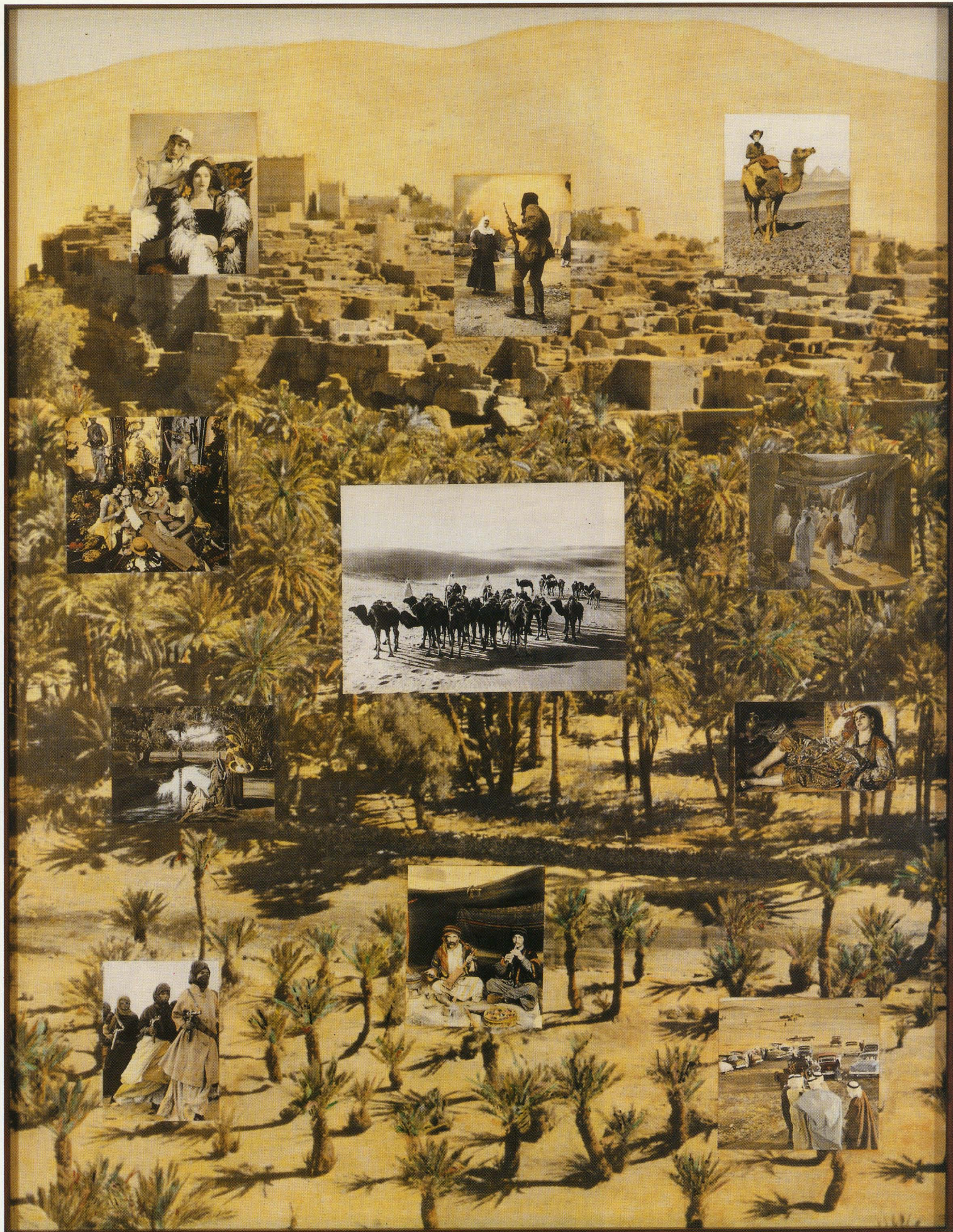
# I DRANK THE ZAMBESI

ARTHUR LOVERIDGE

A NATURALIST'S SAFARI IN THE AFRICAN  
MOUNTAINS FOR A LAST GLIMPSE OF  
THE DISAPPEARING WILD LIFE. BY THE  
AUTHOR OF  
HAPPY MOUNTAINS FOR THE HUNTER









in Victorian safari-wear poses on camel-back; the photograph is from the nineteenth century but the woman's face is Reichek's. "I try to include myself in the work. I am implicated. The work is about my own desire and guilt."

Since the late 1970s, Reichek has worked from "photographs into knitting," translating found images into three-dimensional objects. Working from a series of ethnographic studies of the Tierra del Fuegians, taken between 1908 and 1921 by Martin Gusinde, a German Jesuit anthropologist, Reichek has produced a series of knitted men, decoratively patterned after their now extinct, hand-painted human counterparts. Darwin loathed the Tierra del Fuegians, dismissing them as a people "with no form of art, only a crude form of body painting." Within fifty years of contact with Europeans, the tribes of Tierra del Fuego were decimated. The beauty of that lost culture is found, at least through allusions, in Reichek's work. The knitted men appear like shadows, visual puns on the embodiment of spirit. Displayed alongside Gusinde's photographs, they appear to be stepping outside the last remaining document, regarding their own lost history.

In Truman Capote's story "Music for Chameleons," the narrator visits the Caribbean island of Martinique. His conversation with a local aristocrat, an elegant woman "perhaps seventy, silver-haired, soigné," reveals the island's intricate culture and complex history. Nothing is simple, no natural "paradise" is serene. When the narrator takes notice of a black mirror, his hostess explains that in the late nineteenth century artists used black mirrors to "refresh their vision"; this one "belonged to Gauguin. You know, of course, that he lived and painted here before he settled among the Polynesians." The conversation continues. They talk about Carnival and murder; the narrator considers again the black mirror. "All the while the black mirror has been lying in my lap and once more my eyes seek its depths. Strange where our passions carry us, flogingly pursue us, forcing upon us unwanted dreams, unwelcome destinies." Reichek's work has captured the essence of the black mirror, refreshing our vision and unearthing our dreams.





