

# Culture

ART BOOKS

## Pictures with volumes to tell

FLORENCE

Photography show challenges perceptions of power and the powerful

BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

The rich and powerful recruit artists, photographers and filmmakers to burnish their images, while going to great lengths to repel the unwanted attentions of less partisan professionals who might subvert them.

"Portraits and Power: People, Politics and Structures" offers a stimulat-

ART REVIEW

ing survey of how 18 international artists have recently represented — in photographs and film — individuals and institutions of political, economic or social power. The exhibition, curated by Franziska Nori, is timed to coincide with a major show on the floor above at Palazzo Strozzi devoted to Bronzino, the artist who defined the image of the Medici court in the mid-16th century.

"Portraits and Power" opens with a series of black-and-white photographs by Hiroshi Sugimoto of world leaders. The life-size images of Fidel Castro and Pope John Paul II are actually of wax-work dummies, lighted and photographed to look like living people, challenging us to question our perceptions once we realize that we have been tricked.

It took many years for Helmut Newton, by then one of the world's most famous fashion photographers, to persuade Margaret Thatcher to sit for him. And she did not much like the results. Yet his photograph of her here, taken after her fall from power, is in many ways flattering — and has the almost sculptural quality of a monumental bust.

The photographer Nick Danziger and the journalist Peter Stothard were given unprecedented access to Tony Blair in 2003 for a magazine feature to mark the prime minister's 50th birthday. The assignment just happened to coincide with the run-up to the second Gulf War and Britain's entry into the conflict in support of the United States.

The idea that he was basically "a

pretty straight kind of guy" was at the heart of Tony Blair's self-presentation, and he no doubt believed that these behind-the-scenes photographs would enhance this image.

But Mr. Danziger was lucky that "in all this excitement," to borrow a phrase from "Dirty Harry," Mr. Blair and his team seemed almost to have forgotten that the photographer was there. His original assignment of a day or two over several weeks fortuitously stretched to 30 consecutive days. Even on the second day Mr. Danziger, photographing Mr. Blair at 10 Downing Street on the phone to Yasser Arafat, artfully managed to catch in a mirror the reflection of Mr. Blair's notorious spin doctor Alistair Campbell, "off stage," but listening in.

Seven years on, Mr. Danziger's penetrating pictures seem to have caught in a remarkable way the story, as it has increasingly emerged in print, of a prime minister who was a far more complex political operator than the ordinary, regular guy of the public persona he was so keen to project.

The face of a person preparing to go to war, as opposed to one sending others, is the subject of Rineke Dijkstra's series "The French Foreign Legion: Olivier Silva." This memorable sequence of seven almost identically posed photos, taken at intervals, begins in Marseilles and ends three years later in Djibouti. We witness the progressive transformation of a mild, slightly built adolescent into a physically hardened, determined-looking soldier. Even the two images of Olivier on the first day, in civilian clothes and then in uniform with shaven head, reveal a subtle change in his demeanor and posture.

The entity depicted in Trevor Paglen's work is immensely powerful, with a worldwide reach but virtually invisible. An artist and geographer, Mr. Paglen has spent a decade compiling a global map, on display here, of the routes and stopping points of secret rendition flights run by the C.I.A. and the U.S. military.

These locations are off-limits, but he has taken long-distance shots of some, even using equipment designed for space exploration that can capture an image from a distance of 100 kilometers, or some 62 miles. The photos here of aircraft and a Reaper Drone on a tarmac and of a chemical and biological weapons proving ground, have a blurred, grainy quality.

The photos instantly bring to mind the images of Iraq's putative storage sites for weapons of mass destruction, employed by politicians to justify the country's invasion.

Francesco Jodice is represented here with a video, nearly an hour long, that was shot in 2009 in Dubai, a city that projects its image as a modern international powerhouse through its spectacular contemporary architecture, which includes the tallest building in the world.

The Neapolitan-born Mr. Jodice is a trained architect, but in this case he is not primarily interested in architecture. His subject: who actually builds these buildings, the tens of thousands of workers who come mainly from the Indian subcontinent.

This army of poorly paid laborers constitute the majority of the resident population of the Emirate. They are bused in and out of the city daily, barely noticed either by other residents or visitors to one of the most affluent cities on earth.

There is little commentary of the type one would expect in a more conventional documentary, but by switching between the lives of the upper and lower echelons of Dubai society, the filmmaker builds a grim picture of the chasm between the powerful and the powerless.

The rich and nouveaux riches are the subject of the works of Martin Parr of Britain and Daniela Rossell of Mexico. Mr. Parr has photographed, with a merciless over-lit brilliance and clarity, the wealthy and would-be wealthy

Nick Danziger, working with the journalist Peter Stothard, had unprecedented access to Prime Minister Tony Blair in March 2003, and his photographs show a far more complex political operator than Mr. Blair sought to project. At right, "The den" at 10 Downing Street.

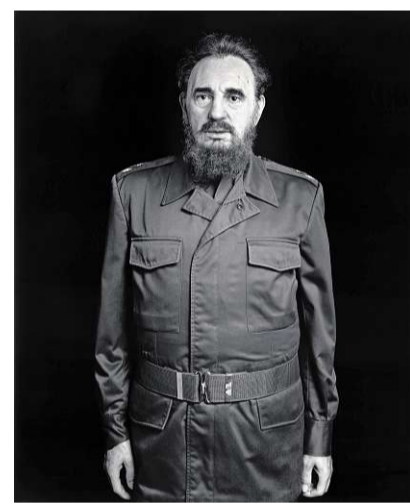


NICK DANZIGER/NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

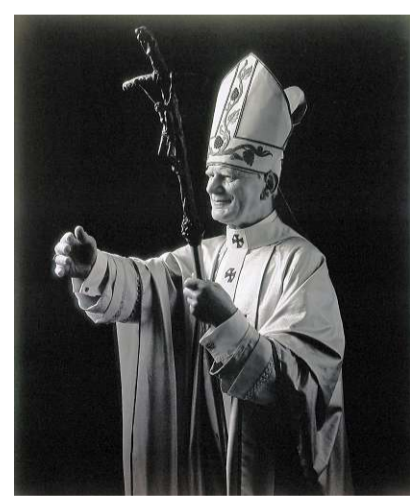


FRANCESCO JODICE/UNICREDIT GROUP COLLECTION

Other images on display include, clockwise from left, Francesco Jodice's 2009 video of workers in Dubai; Rineke Dijkstra's "The French Foreign Legion: Olivier Silva"; "Chantilly Races," one of Martin Parr's merciless looks into the lives of the rich and would-be rich; and Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs of wax-work figures of Pope John Paul II and Fidel Castro.



HIROSHI SUGIMOTO/SONNABEND GALLERY, NEW YORK



HIROSHI SUGIMOTO/ROSA &amp; GILBERTO SANDRETTI

We witness the transformation of a slightly built adolescent into a physically hardened soldier.

at race meetings, fashion events and a polo match in England, France, Russia and Dubai. Ms. Rossell's images of women in their garish and kitschy homes conjure an ambience in which the role of wives and daughters has become purely decorative.

The French millionaire François Pinault had an exclusive party behind an elaborate security cordon to mark the inauguration of his new Dogana (Customs House) museum during the opening of the 2009 Venice Biennale, and a number of large yachts were moored off the quay. The German painter and photographer Christoph Brech used that moment to create a novel work that is on show here.

With no possibility of seeing the goings-on either inside the museum or the yachts, Mr. Brech filmed a small area of the hull of Sea Force One, one of the imposing vessels that had appeared for



MARTIN PARR/MAGNUM PHOTOS, VIA FONDAZIONE PALAZZO STROZZI

the occasion, as it was soaped and washed by two seamen in a little boat moored alongside. What we see in his charming five-minute video, with J.S. Bach's "Prelude in D Minor" as accompaniment, looks like the creation and expunging of an abstract painting, its textured white surface illuminated by

the refracted light of the waves — poor man's art gleaned from the hull of a rich man's yacht.

**Portraits and Power: People, Politics and Structures.** Strozzi Center of Contemporary Culture. Palazzo Strozzi, Florence. Through Jan. 23.



RINEKE DIJKSTRA/BANK OF AMERICA MERRILL LYNCH COLLECTION

## Zora Neale Hurston fictionally reinvented as a girl detective

NEW YORK

Children's mystery aims to fill literary void with a strong black heroine

BY FELICIA R. LEE

Where is the black version of Caddie Woodlawn (a 19th-century Wisconsin tomboy) or Harriet the Spy (a 20th-century New Yorker), smart, spunky, fictional heroines for the tween crowd?

Tanya Simon, a literary agent, asked herself that question while pregnant with her daughter, now 4. She answered by reaching back in time to Zora Neale Hurston, a canonical Harlem Renaissance writer, and imagining her as a girl detective. Ms. Simon and her close friend Victoria Bond put flesh on that idea with "Zora and Me," an evocative mystery published last month by Candlewick Press.

The novel depicts Hurston as a bright, imaginative fourth grader, living with her family and friends in an all-black

Florida town, around 1900. Zora, Carrie (the first-person narrator) and their friend Teddy try to figure out what happened when a man's headless body is discovered by the railroad tracks.

"Fictionalizing Zora gave us creative freedom," said Ms. Bond, a 31-year-old lecturer in composition and classics at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, who has a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing. Added Ms. Simon, 44, who writes under the name T.R. Simon: "We wanted to write a book that would help people fall in love with Zora. I wanted them to be able to see that bridge from childhood intellectual curiosity to adult production."

"Zora and Me" is the first book not written by Hurston that has been endorsed by the Zora Neale Hurston Trust, created in 2002 to manage the business of bringing Hurston's work to a widening audience. (Some 500,000 copies of her books are sold each year, according to the trust.) The buzz so far has been good: Kirkus Reviews called the 192-page mystery "absolutely outstanding."

Victoria Sanders, the agent for the book and the literary representative for



ERIN BAIANO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The authors of the children's novel "Zora and Me," Victoria Bond, left, and Tanya Simon, flank Lucy Anne Hurston, a niece of Zora Neale Hurston and one of her biographers.

the trust, said the endorsement helped the authors obtain a six-figure advance and a deal to produce two sequels.

In Hurston the writers have a heroine whose life story had enough adventure to fill many more novels.

Born in 1891, Hurston wrote four novels and more than 50 published short stories, plays and essays, the most famous being her 1937 novel, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," about a woman's lifelong struggle to be true to herself amid family and social pressures. Beyond the novels, Hurston studied anthropology at Barnard College, received a Guggenheim Fellowship to observe West Indian spiritual practices, and collected black folk tales in the South.

While she died in poverty and obscurity in 1960, she entered the literary canon in the 1980s after a reissue of "Their Eyes Were Watching God." The rerelease was due largely to Alice Walker, the author of "The Color Purple," who credited Hurston as a huge influence on her own writing, and to Robert E. Hemenway's revelatory Hurston biography in 1977.

Oprah Winfrey brought Hurston to an even bigger stage in 2005 with the ABC

television movie of "Their Eyes Were Watching God," starring Halle Berry.

Lucy Anne Hurston, a niece of Hurston's and another of her biographers, grew teary-eyed as she talked with Ms. Bond and Ms. Simon about the new project recently. "This was the most reverent representation of Zora I'd ever seen," said Ms. Hurston, an associate professor of sociology at Manchester Community College in Connecticut, and one of the trustees of the estate.

While the trust has created a Hurston Web site with HarperCollins (which publishes Hurston's books), ZoraNeale-Hurston.com, and supports efforts like literary awards programs, most of the projects that have come its way have fallen short, Ms. Hurston said. Here, she added, was a project that deeply appealed to her.

"Zora and Me" is set in Hurston's real hometown, Eatonville, Florida, which bills itself as the country's oldest incorporated black township. Its main characters — Zora, who tells outrageous stories; Carrie, an observant tomboy; and Teddy, a sweet farm boy — are best

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