

The Invisibles
LEAH GORDON

A *Riflemaker* EXHIBITION

*Our Lady of Penmarc'h.
Based on a painting of a Breton
Madonna by French symbolist
painter Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer.
1998*





Endyen Yo (The Indians)
*A group of children
masquerading as the original
Taino Indians that inhabited
Haiti before colonisation, at
Jacmel carnival, Haiti.
1995*



**Our Lady of Caridad del
Cobre - Lasiren**

*A Catholic saint that is identified
with the Vodou spirit Lasiren.
As a Catholic saint she is the
patron of Cuba and as a Vodou
spirit she presides over the oceans
with her husband Admiral Agwe.
2010*

*Costume design by Oceana
Granata*

*Overleaf: Black Madonna of
Częstochowa – Ezili Dantò
As a Catholic saint she is the
holiest relic of Poland and as the
Vodou spirit she represents a
single parent who fought in the
Slaves revolt. It is believed that
the icon was brought to Haiti by
the Polish legionnaires who came
to Haiti to fight for Napoleon
during the slaves revolt. They
defected from the French army
to fight on the side of the slaves
in 1802.*

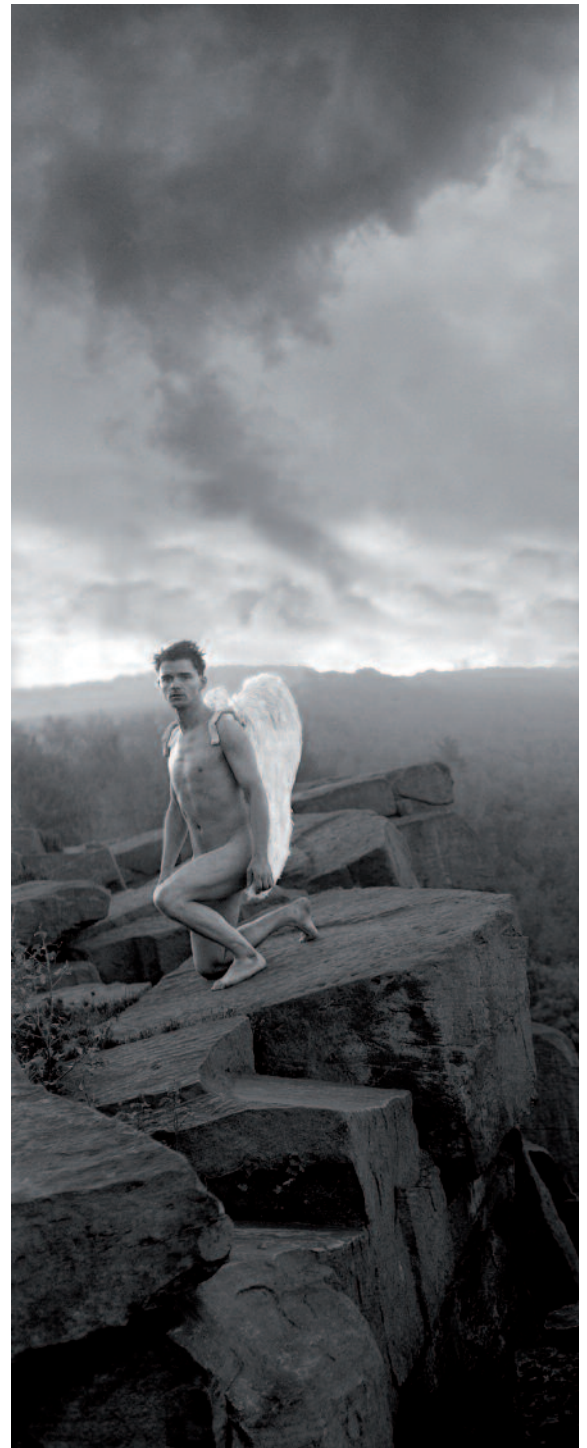
2009

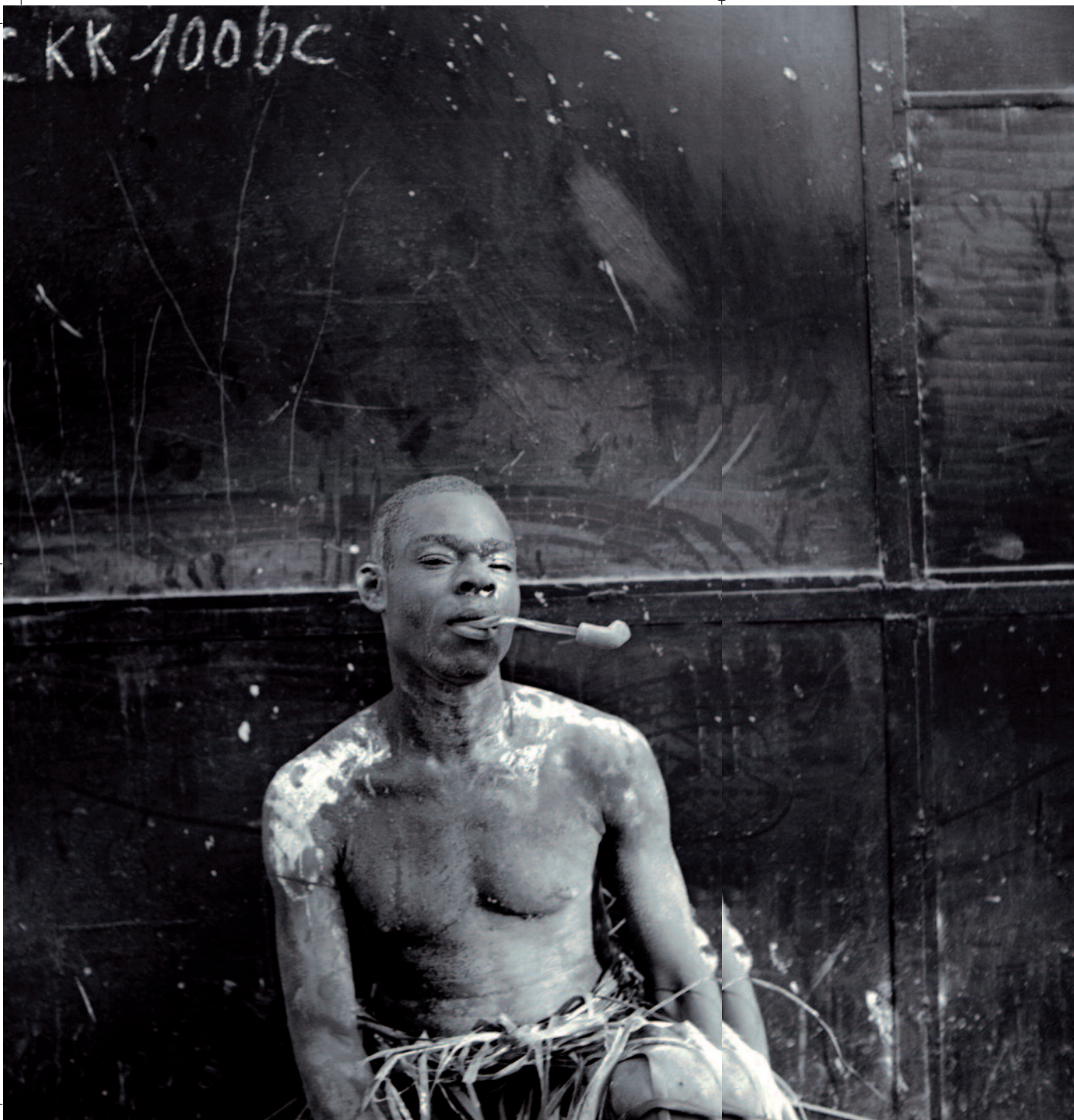
*Costume design by Oceana
Granata*





Paradise Lost
1990





Pa Roro

*A character from the Jacmel
carnival that celebrates the life
and lore of the Haitian peasant
2004*

Gason Bo Kote Lamè

(Boy by the Sea)

*Boy in carnival mask on the
beach in the Bay of Jacmel,*

Haiti

2000



An Ethnography of the Invisibles by LEAH GORDON

A post-colonial nightmare, I enjoy febrile religious experience and the exotic with an empty bag of excuses. I'm drawn to the boundaries between art, religion and anthropology. These borderlands have a historical, and often uncomfortable, relationship with photography. A suspicion that photography has observed and policed, but never taken part. Photography has rarely been embraced as a form of representation by religions. It is as if photography, with its indelible relationship to the material, could only serve to disprove the divine. (*Although when one reflects on its alchemical past it seems rooted in magical process*).

Mixing Hierophany, the visible manifestation of the divine, with photography one encounters a prickly and complicated terrain. Much of my studio photography is an exploration of this, often surreal, territory. My portraits in the studio are staged examinations of the spirit world; an anthropology of the invisibles. Traditionally, in a theology of imagery, the icon is perceived as a window to the divine whilst the idol is accused of replacing it. This has led me to a obscure and paradoxical landscape. I have always been envious of both Vodou and many Renaissance artists who merely have to decide which spirits (in the case of Vodou) or saints to depict. The limited range of subject matters is very appealing. All Vodou spirits have Catholic saint counterparts, a vestige of the Catholic Church's spiritual investment in the slave trade. I used these synchronistic saints as a starting point for my work, but before and after I have trespassed into other territories including Milton's *'Paradise Lost'*, European mythology, Animism and Protestantism.

'Kanaval' is a body of my work that has a more documentary approach. My portraits taken in the Jacmel carnival in Haiti are about history. A record of people that still own and transmit their own folk history. Their costumes, masks and performance are living transmitters of a history not determined by state curricula, television adaptations or text books. It is a unsanitised, dirty

history of the people played out on the streets. I have collected oral histories of the costumes which are published, alongside the photographs, in the book *'Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti'*.

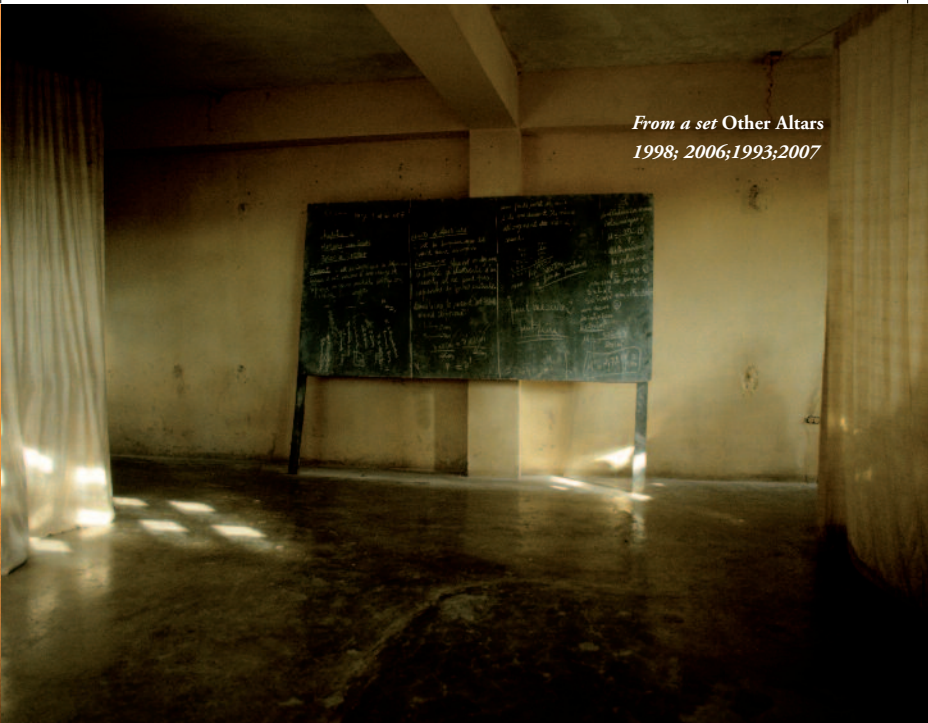
Then finally there's the other images, my random moments when a combination of inarticulate forces command me to photograph. Perhaps it's when the divine finally reveal themselves to me on the streets. There's no explanation for that. It's my religious moment.

'Nature gave us vocal chords but neglected to give us a light-producing organ. We had to build it ourselves: The projective luminiferous eye.' 1]

'People originated by magic in all countries of the world. No one lives of the flesh. Everyone lives of the spirit'. 2]

1] Stefan Themerson, *The Urge to Create Visions*, Gabebochus + De Harmonie, Amsterdam, 1983.

2] Andre Pierre, Haitian artist, quoted in *'The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou'* ed. Don Cosentino, UCLA Fowler Museum, 1995.



SIMRYN GILL

Many years ago Leah Gordon asked her friends if she could photograph them with their prize possessions. She took pictures of us in bedrooms, in back gardens, on streets, on the moors, clutching shoes, caressing a clock or a tree or a dog or hiding under a billowing garment or bit of jewellery. The pictures were affectionate and so direct and probing. Leah at twenty already understood about the talismanic virtues of things that we hang on to for dear life, those clocks and dresses and bits of jewellery that keep us afloat in the currents. Now, three decades later she juggles reportage photography which has taken her to Ethiopia, Burma and Rwanda where she records people caught up in terrible events and at their lowest ebb and her practice as a visual artist making beautiful staged photographs - with the continuing collaboration of long suffering friends, clothed in scull caps and antlers and delicate feathered wings - which seem to want to materialise the lurking passions which live in places. But there is another story here, the third ball that Leah juggles, where her day job and her night job meet. This is where her deep skill as a watcher and recorder of real life meets her longing to recreate remembered and imagined images of rapture and mystery. Not as a documentary photographer, nor as a self conscious contemporary artist, but somewhere between the two, Leah makes tender and exquisitely timed pictures recording people with their things; fleeting and private moments of passion and possession: a girl in a street in Cite Soleil, Port-au-Prince, cradling a bird to her chest, two novice monks carrying a cross up a mountain path, a person in Jacmel, seemingly wearing a haystack, a giant head-to-toe hood made of banana leaves. These are the pictures that she has always made for herself, and are, for me, Leah's most luminous pictures. I will perhaps stretch a metaphor here, and say that they glow with that magic light that photographers talk about, which sometimes happens just after night meets day or just before day meets night, except that here the illumination comes from Leah's own magic light, between her two versions of her self. Between her day and her night.

Simryn Gill is an artist who lives in Sydney.

JØRGEN LETH

Leah Gordon wants to see the world as a fantasy. Full of strange, mystic and sweet characters. She jumps from her Jacmel carnival images to another staged fantasy. She likes to put persons into dreams. A beautiful black woman with a Mona Lisa teasing non-smile on her face is dressed as the Haiti Vodou spirit Erzili Dantò. A young man wears wings and smiles. A strange mother with a satanic child. There is some Jeanne d'Arc (Dreyer) over some of these characters. Remember Antonin Artaud as a monk in the inquisition? This series of photographs have religious motives. But they are not about God. They are about imagination, about life as images. Leah Gordon wants to seduce us. And she succeeds. Those faces, those eyes, they look at you. She likes devils and angels, she likes to mix innocence and sin and understated horror. Her pictures are deep but have a crunchy surface.

Jørgen Leth is a poet and filmmaker.

EMMA RICE

Leah Gordon's images seem to speak not only to the eye and mind, but somewhere deeper. They almost speak to the soul itself, to the long buried core of our human experience. As we peek into this powerful world, we see mankind turned inside out; the monster within worn proudly on the flesh, exposed, named and challenged. Perhaps it is this that strikes at the heart? This raw and intimate portrait of fear, rage and hope laid bare. I think I will return over and over again to these images - they are a startling reminder of what lies beneath. Truly startling. Truly brilliant.

Emma Rice is the Artistic Director of the award winning Kneehigh Theatre. She has directed shows including Cymbeline, Tristan & Yseult and The Red Shoes. Kneehigh are currently preparing a landmark project - The Asylum.



St Hubertus

St Hubertus is the patron saint of hunters who was invoked to cure rabies. He saw a vision of a stag with a blazing cross between his antlers whilst out hunting in Ardennes.

2009

Costume design by Oceana Granata

On the road to Bourgne, Haiti
1997





Two girls on Sunday, Cap
Hâi tien, Haiti
1995



Esklav Yo (The Slaves)
*Young boys masquerading as
slaves in the carnival in Jacmel,
Haiti.*
2001





Juj (The Judge)
1995

The Marriage
1992



Thirty

Thanks to Rachel Boyes, Schilaine Cayo, Marg Duston, Andre Eugene, Cinders Forshaw, Romain Forquy, Simryn Gill, Dorothy & Ron Gordon, Oceana Granata, Shuruq Harb, Maccha Kasparian, Jørgen Leth, Jonas Labaze, Victor Luengo, Davey Malcolm, Josh Murray, Lorraine Proctor, Emma Rice, Johnny Winter.

Dedicated to Destimare Pierre Isnèl aka Louko, now amongst the Invisibles, RIP

Riflemaker exhibitions are curated by Virginia Damtsa and Tot Taylor
Special thanks to Robin Mann at Riflemaker
Book edited by Tot Taylor. Design by Julian Balme at Vegas Design

ISBN 978-0-9563571-4-4
Published in an edition of 1000 copies

OTHER RIFLEMAKER PUBLICATIONS

Stuart Pearson Wright *I Remember You*
text by Adam Foulds, Deborah Warner, David Thewlis and Keira Knightley, 2010
Alice Anderson's *Time Reversal*
text by Marina Warner, Maud Jacquin and Louise Gray, 2010
Artists Anonymous: *Lucifer over London*, text by JJ Charlesworth, 2009
Anya Niemi: *Porcelain*, 2009
José-María Cano: *La Tauromaquia*, text by A L Kennedy, 2009
Voodoo: Hoochie-Coochie and the creative Spirit
edited by Tot Taylor with text by Marina Warner and Zina Saro-Wiwa, 2008
Liliane Lijn: *Stardust*, 2008
Francesca Lowe & Alasdair Gray: *Terminus*
Unpublished short story by Alasdair Gray, text by Sarah Kent, 2007
Chosil Kil: *Living With Andis*
co-published with Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2007
Jamie Shovlin: *Lustfaust*, text by Jamie Shovlin, 2006
Gavin Turk: *Me As Him*, text by Tot Taylor, 2007
Riflemaker becomes Indica: by Tot Taylor, with contributions from
Barry Miles & John Dunbar, 2006
William S. Burroughs: *The Unseen Art of William S. Burroughs*
with text by Stephen Lowe and James Grauerholz, 2006
Jamie Shovlin: *Fontana Modern Masters*, text by Martin Holman, 2005
Christopher Bucklow: *If This Be Not I* by Christopher Bucklow, 2004
Marta Marcé: *Playroom*, reproduction of the artist's sketchbook, 2004
Jamie Shovlin: *Naomi V. Jelish*, 2004

www.riflemaker.org

Thirty Two