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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

WITH ART DIRECTOR: GIANNI MASCOLO - PHOTOGRAPHERS: EUGENIO RECUENCO
FRANCESCO BOSSO - HENGKI KOENTJORO - JEFF BARK - JOÃO CARLOS
LE TURK - TOMOHIDE IKEYA - POSTPRODUCER: WIEGER POUTSMA,
RISK IMAGING AND WITH: CAT JIMENEZ, LUCIE FOUNDATION
DENIS REDIC, ROVINJ PHOTO DAYS - ENRICO STEFANELLI, PHOTOLUX FESTIVAL
IVA NESVADBOVA, PHOTO PRAGUE FESTIVAL - LISA BERNARDINI, NETTUNOPHOTO FESTIVAL
LORENZA CASTELLI, MIA FAIR - MARCO GOVONI, LOVEYOURPIX.COM
MARIE-LAURE DESJARDINS, ARTSHEBDOIMEDIAS - RITA SCAGLIA AND
PASCAL DOLÉMIEUX, FOTOGRAFICASA - TELEMACO RENDINE, PHOTISSIMA

EXCLUSIVE TEXTS BY

PHOTOGRAPHERS: CARNISCH - CÉCILE DECORNIQUET - DENNIS CHURCH
FRANCESCO RIDOLFI - GIULIO LIMONGELLI - GIUSEPPE DESIDERI - JULIA JAVEL
LIONEL ARNAUDIE - PETRA ROLINEC - PIETRO BANDINI - PYGMALION KARATZAS
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Chess Portraits

Chess. The roots of this photographic series, Chess Portraits, twine back deep into my childhood and the birth of my passion for the game, a passion kindled by my father. The figures of the chessboard readily take up residence in a child's imagination, with their epic battles, knights in armour, suspense and frequent strategic reversals at the front line. And I have always been attracted, personally, by the fashions and dress styles of the past, especially those of the Elizabethan and Victorian periods. Maybe it's because they are so unfailingly majestic and rich in detail, or maybe because they belong to a now distant world. In addition to this more personal bond to the game, what grabbed me when the idea arose of a photo series on the theme

of chess pieces was the inherent possibility of studying each individual figure both in black and in white. Being a portrait photographer by trade, the opportunity to produce studies of the same person in such contrasting lights provided a real impetus. With its six different characters (King, Queen, Bishop, Rook, Knight and Pawn), the game of chess supplied me with a set of archetypes to work on, from whom I could bring out different aspects of the human soul. I am convinced that opposing drives and impulses coexist inside each one of us. Our positives and negatives, bright spots and shadows, may come to the fore according to the situation we find ourselves in, depending on which 'voice' we choose to attend to.



The Challenge. The main challenge was to endow each chess piece with a human face, finding the right physiognomies and combining these with most suitable garments and apparel. And I already had very specific faces and features in mind for each chess piece: faces and expressions that would contribute to suggesting an emotion or a concept bound up with the personage. The King and the Queen, for example, should have a majestic and haughty air, conveying a certain sense of serenity, but also an awareness of their role and their standing.

I had always seen the Bishop, on the other hand, as having hard-edged lineaments and an inquisitorial, dour expression, embodying the kind of religion that is more judgemental than welcoming. As for the Knight, I opted to

represent this figure as an Amazon - partly so that I could include a second female figure and partly because of the appeal and the aura of mystery that has always surrounded these women warriors. The Rook, an undoubtedly stalwart and weighty piece with an important role in the game, I imagined as a strong, brawny fighter: a Viking. I wanted to see him in a more dynamic and active pose than those adopted by the other figures. A finally the Pawn - the most 'sacrificable' element in a match - for whom I sought out a face and expressive range that might suggest a certain unsuitability for the battlefield. For all these reasons, the casting period lasted three months. It took place mainly online, thanks to some dedicated websites and to a specialist agency that helped me out with a couple of the characters.



ph. - Francesco Ridolfi

The Costumes. In parallel to the casting, I carried out a lengthy research into the clothing, reading and studying some works that follow the evolution of garments over history. While not striving to attain any particular veracity or historical fidelity, this research enabled me - with help from a very able draughtswoman, Elena Rapa, - to get my ideas about the most suitable garments for each figure down on paper. And so starting from these sketches, my assistant Gemma and I embarked on a long task of research and selection of what fabrics to use. We travelled all over Emilia Romagna to find the right ones - and the need to find them both in black and in white didn't make the task any easier! A first class theatrical dressmaker's in Bologna, Scissor Lab, then took care of the sewing, finally giving form to the various costumes. Apart from the garments, many of the

accoutrements that helped fix the characters (crowns, sceptres, medallions etc.) were produced ad hoc. A lot of these articles carry symbolic weight and had to be made to order for the project. In this instance, it was artist and craftsman Andrea Aiudi who enabled me to actualise these important details. The articles produced for the whites have in common their golden colour and the emblem of the sun - ever a positive symbol of life and light in classical iconographies. The objects produced for their black counterparts bear an engraving showing a double face, symbolising ambiguity and double dealing. All of the characters, whether black or white, thus bear the coat of arms of one of these two 'houses'. The exception to this rule is the representative of the spiritual power, as opposed to the temporal power of the Sovereign. The Bishop bears a different symbol: a Papal coat of arms for the whites and a gnarled cross with sword and olive

ph: Francesco Ricolfi



branch - symbol of the Inquisition- for the blacks. In order to obtain a high degree of precision in these details, Andrea worked with purpose-made moulds out of which each object was created. This also eased duplication: the crowns and sceptres, for example, were made in identical pairs which then were painted in the two different colours. This was a painstaking process and required in all a month's work to complete.

The Set. Lover of flashlight that I am, I knew from the outset that I would shoot the various chess pieces in my studio against a neutral background. In my view, this was a 'forced' choice, dictated by the subject matter of the photos, which, as I've said, should represent archetypes disconnected from any kind of context.

What makes me so fond of studio photography is the absolute control you can have over the lighting cast on the subject. In these cases I prefer

to shoot tethered to a computer so that I can observe the finest details on the monitor. I am a firm believer in trying to do things directly 'in camera', not putting them off to post production. This is why the subjects were shot directly against the chosen background: a dark grey for the blacks and a yellowish ochre for the whites. I'm no great equipment geek: I am convinced that ideas and creativity will get you a lot further than using the right brand or the latest technological development. Nonetheless, for this project I wanted to use a medium format Hasselblad combined with an 80mm f2.8 lens in order to obtain the finest possible detail and dynamic gamma.

The light set comprised five different flashes: one beauty dish on a boom arm to provide the main light, one large silver umbrella as a fill light, a pair of softboxes behind the subject as rim lights



ph.: Francesco Riboldi

and a flash with a parabola and grid aimed at the background to create a small 'circle of light' behind the subject.

The sets for black and white were nearly identical. I varied only the colour of the backdrop, the power of the flashes and added a grid to the beauty dish of the main light for the blacks in order to get deeper shadows.

The Make-Up. An important factor for the shooting stage was the make-up used on the models and actors involved. So it was natural to call in, as make-up artist for the project, Marica Bertolin, with whom I often collaborate for my shoots. Although the overall look was kept natural enough, the make-up enabled me to emphasise expressive creases in the skin more than details of the facial features, and so better to characterise each personality in black and in white. In general, the make-up was concentrated on the face and for

a couple of the characters on the hair as well: we made the white King's hair even whiter and the black Amazon's hair a deeper black. A few touches were made to the bodies of the Queen and of the Amazon in order to render the skin colour more uniform and to cover over a blemish or two. For the Queen, I had a wig made to order by a theatrical wig maker, drawing inspiration from fashions typical of the Elizabethan period. In this case, only one wig - a blonde one - was made. The colour was kept as it was for the White Queen, while for the Black Queen it was toned to a more auburn shade in post-processing.

Photo-Editing. Compared to the long preparatory phase, the shooting stage went rather quickly and was followed first by a careful editing phase and then by selection of the best and most suitable photographs. In practice this meant an initial large-scale video skim of the images produced,



ph.: Francesco Ricolfi

narrowing them down to 5 or 6 for each subject and colour. These were then printed in small format and arranged on a wall in my studio so that I could get an overall view of them. This was done to allow the images to 'dialogue' both within the colour ranges (the blacks and the whites) and to contrast with the character's 'other' face. This was the only way I could find to make a definitive choice and identify the individual images that were to go on to post-production.

Post-Production. The post-production stage enabled me to optimise the shot without deranging it. I retouched neither form nor light and limited post-production to the ever-present need for colour correction, retouching of the skin and small details of individual photos. I then devoted, on average, one day's work in Adobe Photoshop® for each individual shot. For many years now, I have been used to working on a

Wacom graphic tablet, which offers me a high degree of working precision, but especially it saves me from developing wrist strain during the long hours of working at the computer. With regard to post-processing, I don't have any special tips about software or 'tricks of the trade' to share. As I said, I like to keep it to a bare minimum and for the basic operations that I carry out, Adobe Photoshop® is already a size too big!

The Project. The entire 'Chess Portraits' series was conceived for my work portfolio and it was certainly a challenge for me to tackle such a multi-faceted and complex project, especially at the management and organisational level. The ultimate aim - which was no more than a pipe dream at the outset - was to see it on show in an exhibition one day. Fortunately, right from the very first stages of project promotion, Chess Portraits has been met with considerable interest



ph.: Francesco Ridolfi

and has been featured on a host of blogs and online sites, including: The Daily Mail, LaRepubblica, PetaPixel and VisualNews, to name just a few. It sure was the first time I've experienced at first-hand what it is to go viral on the net. To begin with, it was me pushing the process along by directly contacting the editors of some photography blogs, but in no time at all a kind of snowball effect had been triggered, with the project rebounding on its own momentum from one website to another, grabbing the attention of ever more famous and influential sites as it proceeded. Subsequently the promotional net caught art galleries, whom I contacted personally on the basis of the artists and the kind of aesthetic they were concerned with. This brought me the gratification of being included among the artists featured by London's "Doinel Gallery", (www.doinelgallery.com), who are now actively promoting the project in the UK.

The Prints. A limited print run of the photographic series was made on Ilford Galerie Prestige fine art paper using pigment archival inkjet technology, mounted on Dibond and framed in American Box in two different editions: 60x60 cm (in 7 editions and two artist's proofs) and 120x120 cm (in 5 editions plus one artist's proof). The choice of a square format for the photos is a clear reference to the shape of the chess board. Prices range, according to format, from £1,200 to £2,500 per photograph. I always check in person every photograph printed to ensure that the chromatic and qualitative results are the ones I had set myself. The printing is carried out by Professione Colore, the best fine art printing workshop in Bologna, with whom I have built up a relationship of mutual friendship and trust over time.

Francesco Ridolfi

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"I was born, twenty days earlier than expected, in Bologna, one morning in the summer of 1981. A dozen or so years later, I fell in love with photography, the catalyst being my father's mythical Olympus OM-1. Following a degree in Agriculture from the University of

Bologna, and a year eking out a living as an academic on temporary contracts, I decide that I would like to dictate my own terms of job insecurity. So I open my first 'photographic studio' in the basement of my parents' house.

Since then, I have progressed through a good few of these (I mean studios, not basements), and I have never stopped thanking my stars for the decision I made back then. Today my time is divided mainly between Brussels, Bologna and Milan, carrying out commercial and editorial commissions. A selection of my clients includes: Auchan, Inda, Rolling Stone Magazine, Tetra Pak, Caterpillar and Louis Vuitton. I'm referred to in the trade as a portraitist, and I'm quite happy that this definition has stuck." Francesco Ridolfi is represented in the UK by the Doinel Gallery.

www.doinelgallery.com
www.francescoridolfi.com
www.chessportraits.com
 Backstage video:
www.vimeo.com/75760460