



In Seven Days...

Nicola Green

In Seven Days...

Introduction

Nicola Green (born 1972) rose to prominence as a portrait artist in the late 1990s. She earned international acclaim for her keen ability to draw out the essence of her subject; whether observing an individual or exploring wider social and cultural issues.

Working in a variety of mediums, Green seeks to understand and reveal human stories by creating her finished work from extensive primary material. Green's work has been acquired by public and private collections, including the Courtauld Institute, London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In making her work, Green distills her subjects in a three-step process. The First stage consists of internalising a vast amount of research; from her own photographs and sketches to newspapers, magazines and collected paraphernalia. She then reduces profile, gesture and context to the minimum information needed to maintain critical form. Using the printed medium as a drawing device, she experiments with pattern and repetition before settling on the final images.

The Walker Art Gallery Exhibition 18th January - 14th April 2013

This is the first European showing of 'In Seven Days...', the acclaimed series of silkscreen prints telling the story of Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. Green originally set out to create a portrait of Obama, thinking about the possible implications his campaign may have upon future generations, including those of her own sons who are of diverse heritage.

After her first trip in August 2008, witnessing Obama's nomination in Denver, Green realised that the story unfolding was bigger than one visit or than one man: it had captured the imagination of the global community as well as the American people. Green went on to make six trips to America during the campaign, ending in Obama's inauguration in January 2009. These seven iconic images are a distillation of all the photographs, sketches and conversations she made during those visits.

For the first time the prints are displayed here with the research materials. Viewed as a whole, the work is a reflection on the meaning of hope as well as what future generations can take from this moment in history.

INTRODUCTION

By Stephen Armstrong

If this were a Hollywood movie, we'd start with a single image – Nicola Green, hunched in a sports stadium, surrounded by thousands of Obama supporters throwing Mexican waves as the would-be Democratic nominee walked on stage at dusk.

Then we could pull focus, zooming out of the stadium and across America, letting a bright light twinkle for every person setting out to record the Illinois senator's campaign. We'd see at least 12,000 foreign correspondents, all in the US specifically to cover the election – a contingent far larger than the entire British military commitment in Iraq. They'd be outnumbered by nearly 30,000 US reporters, all writing and talking and shooting for America's 1,400 daily newspapers, 14,000 radio stations and 1,700 TV stations.

Panning out we'd see the bloggers and the citizen journalists, the editors, activists and lobbyists and then the voters at home and overseas, and the billions across the globe who read and watched and hoped and hated...

Obama's 2008 election campaign was almost certainly the most heavily observed event in human history. So what could the artist, with her sketchbook, no official access and an extremely limited budget hope to add?

That she has is testament to the value – to the necessity – of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, something critics have been struggling to define. Although pranksters like Koons and Hirst offer arch riffs on production line creativity, popular consensus appears to have settled around the idea of an authenticity in the moment of closest contact with an artist's ineffable vision. See the work first hand. Experience the installation. Immerse yourself in the happening. Let your senses embrace something you couldn't quite imagine if left to your own devices.

In *Seven Days* deliberately toys with the techniques of the mass media – screen-printing, magazine cuttings and photography snapped on the move. Nicola's journey mimicked a hack on the campaign trail – she used contacts, charm, persistence and ingenuity to coax her way into the heart of Obama's quasi-military operation, nestling in surprising places and producing surprising things.

We've all seen countless images of Obama – I probably see at least one every day - and yet his portrait, at the heart of the piece, is unlike anything I've seen before. With his sleeves rolled up, striding firmly forward it's a shot that would have been catnip to picture editors on the open market. How did she pull it off – acing paparazzi with years of experience using the digital equivalent of an Instamatic?

Perhaps the answer lies in the actual shots that magazine editors placed on their covers – shots that seem to distort his soft features into those of a heavier, blacker man. Take a look at the way *GQ* and the *Guardian* angle their lenses. It's as if they're reshaping his face to fit the story.

Nicola's sons, like Obama, are mixed race. She wanted to understand how they would be seen, how they would be treated, what their options were and who their role models might be. The spark of inspiration that carried her across the Atlantic to zig zag the

continent leaving bemused press secretaries in her wake began with a mother's love. Twining Obama's name with Hope is a banal cliché today – but when you look at his strength and confidence at the heart of this piece, you're seeing him through the eyes of a hopeful mother willing the world to remake what's conceivable so she can tell her boys they can do anything without feeling the lie in her heart.

I say the world – in fact, of course, it's America. Perhaps that's why she expanded the planned portrait to include Americans themselves – their hands, their bodies, whether black, white, tired or poor - the huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

In our increasingly aggressive instant and ephemeral culture, every powerful image is reproduced thousands of times, flung around the world at the speed of light to be devoured then, as instantly, disregarded and trashed. Nicola returned from the campaign and spent four years working on what she'd found in almost monastic artistic silence. In that way she's like a war artist – caught up in the mayhem of battle then left alone to digest and review and distill and compose, tasked with bringing new emotion to events we think we understand.

That we send artists to war, of course, is one of the few things about conflict that keeps us human. If all we could produce were the flickering jump cuts of the evening news we'd not deserve to escape the horrors of the machine.

There's a 1953 science fiction short story by Alfred Bestler called *Disappearing Act* that frames this human need. The United States is engaged in a near permanent War For The American Dream. The generals call for money, equipment, experts and machinery to defend civilization, culture, poetry and art.

At the height of the fighting, however, battle shocked soldiers start disappearing from their trauma ward, literally vanishing in front of their doctor's eyes. They visit ancient Rome where they smoke cigarettes and flirt with Ben Hur. They nip back to 1920s America to meet Diamond Jim Brady and vote for Eisenhower. They arrive in London where they meet Disraeli in his Rolls Royce outside the Houses of Parliament. Then they reappear, winking back into existence in their beds.

A historian points out that the soldiers are visiting fantasy worlds stuffed with anachronisms – literally disappearing into their own dreams. America's technicians and experts struggle to understand. The historian says only a poet can really explain. But in a nation of hardened and sharpened tools fighting for beauty and poetry, there are no poets left.

In a sense, that's the role Nicola Green's work fulfills - in reframing the moment when a black man became president of a former slave-owning nation, she's allowing us to visit the tattered dreams of our childhood, the last time we truly believed we could do anything. That she uses the voices and tools of our technicians and experts to do so proves that, despite the sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Let's hope it remains so when her boys are men.

January 2013

Day 1 LIGHT

'Our destiny is inextricably linked, together our dreams can be one'.

Barack Obama
Denver, August 2008

LIGHT was inspired by my trip to the Democratic National Convention in the Mile High Stadium, Denver, in August 2008. There were 70,000 people in the stadium doing a Mexican wave when Obama accepted the nomination. It was an extraordinary movement of energy, timing and coming together, both in America and around the world.



Justin Spivey 2010

Image Opposite: Day 1 LIGHT, Two-colour silkscreen print with water-based enamel ink on cotton paper, 2010, 138.0 cm x 106.5 cm



II



IV



III



V

Day 2 STRUGGLE

'And so it has never been easy, to get where we are today took struggle and sacrifice, discipline and tremendous courage.'

Barack Obama
Detroit, May 2005

This is Barack Obama's hand, sketched during a rainy night in a New Hampshire gym at a rally in 2008. At this time, victory seemed very far away, the effort to get to this point and the struggle ahead felt overwhelming. I kept thinking about how each of us has to find our power through our identity. This image is about the value and strength in that struggle.

Image Opposite: Day 2 STRUGGLE, Three-colour silkscreen print with water-based enamel ink, 24K Gold leaf on cotton paper, 2010, 138.0 cm x 106.5 cm



VI



VII



IX



VIII



X

Day 3 HOPE

'I stand before you tonight because all across America something is stirring... This election has never been about me. It's been about you.'

Barack Obama
Denver, August 2008

HOPE is my tribute to the American people. It is drawn from all the events and rallies I attended in this election, and the quiet, patient hope I saw there. Some people had been waiting generations for this moment; others queued in the rain for hours and hours. Everyone was watching.



Image Opposite: Day 3 HOPE, Five-colour silkscreen print with water-based enamel ink on cotton paper, 2010, 138.0 cm x 106.5 cm

Day 4 CHANGE

'I have been deeply humbled by this journey...you have moved me again and again, you have inspired me. You have filled me with new hope for our future.'

Barack Obama
Philadelphia, October 2008

CHANGE was born from a remarkable photograph I was able to capture in Philadelphia on what the team dubbed 'Barnstorming Day' – an event which involved four rallies over four hours in all four corners of the city. The photograph was taken at about 7am in the cold clear light just after dawn.

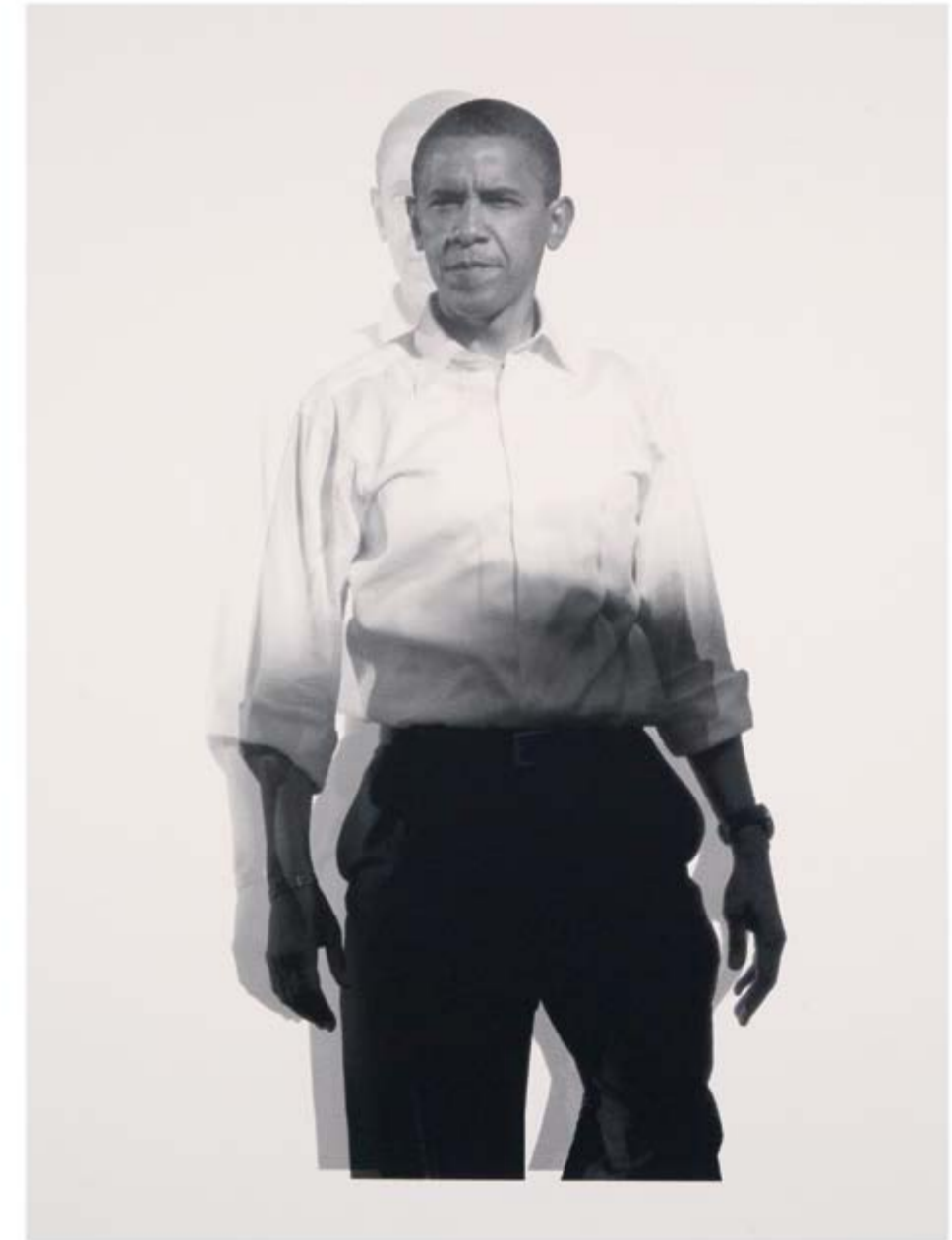


Image Opposite: Day 4 CHANGE, Three-colour silkscreen print with water-based enamel ink on cotton paper, 2010, 138.0 cm x 106.5 cm

XVI



XVII



XVIII



XIX



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Day 5 FEAR

'What has been lost is our sense of common purpose, our sense of higher purpose. And that is what we have to restore.'

Barack Obama
Denver, August 2008

This image was inspired by a press conference I attended in early January 2009. It is Obama's viewpoint – always looking out into a sea of cameras. This is not just about the media pack; it is about all of us, and what we really want from this story.



Image Opposite: Day 5 FEAR, Five-colour silkscreen print with water-based enamel ink, aluminium powder on cotton paper, 2010, 138.0 cm x 106.5 cm



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Day 6 SACRIFICE / EMBRACE

'You made this happen, and I am forever grateful for what you've sacrificed to get it done... You did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead.'

Barack Obama
Chicago, November 2008

This is a distillation of my experiences in Chicago on the night Obama was elected President. He was embracing a new beginning, but it was also a moment of sacrifice as he prepares to become the most powerful man in the world.

It was important to me that this part of the cycle was not an image of triumph or a happy ending. It does not signal completion of anything – this was the beginning of a long road.

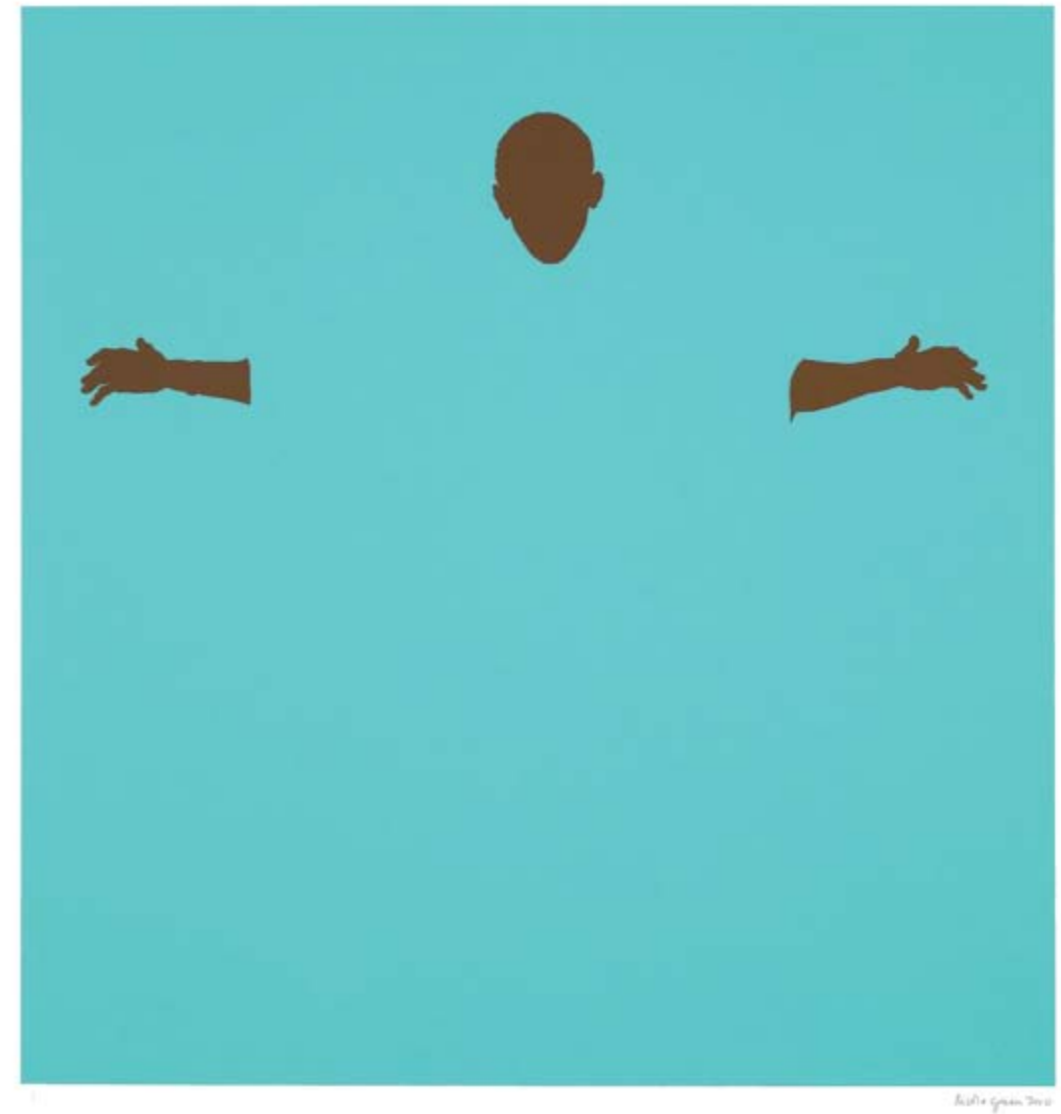


Image Opposite: Day 6 SACRIFICE/EMBRACE, Two-colour silkscreen print with water-based enamel ink on cotton paper, 2010, 138.0 cm x 106.5 cm

Day 7 PEACE

'Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested...'

Barack Obama
Washington DC, 2009

At Inauguration the President represents everyone in America. Used by 43 presidents before him, this gesture is a sign of acceptance and an image of inclusion that refers back to Day 1.

Image Opposite: Day 7 PEACE, Three-colour silkscreen print with water-based enamel ink on cotton paper, 2010, 138.0 cm x 106.5 cm



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