Pasatiempo

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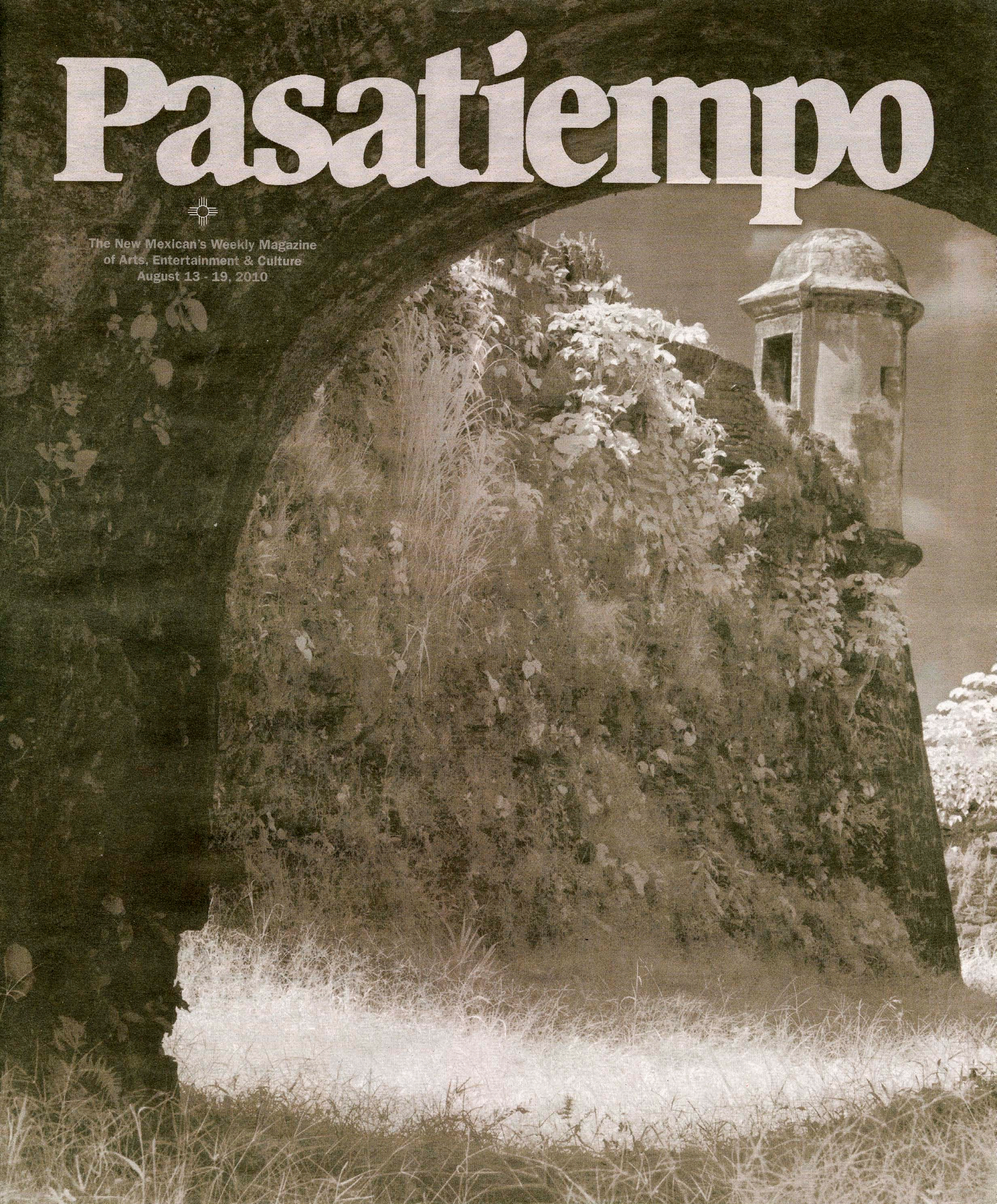

Among the Ruins

Arthur Drooker: *Sans Souci, Milot, Haiti,* digital pigment print

Below, *San Nicolás de Bari, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic*, 2009, digital pigment print

Casey Sanchez ❙ The New Mexican

Machu Picchu and the Maya pyramids at Chichen Itza are well-known ruins of the Americas, but what about Sans Souci in the north of Haiti? A colossal palace completed in 1813 by Henri Christophe — Henri I, king of Haiti — shortly after the successful slave revolt against the French rulers, the Sans Souci palace is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site prized as a symbol of the young country overcoming slavery. "It was very important to show the rest of the world that Haiti could thrive in its independence," said photographer Arthur Drooker in an interview with *Pasatiempo*. "He wanted to build a palace that could rival Versailles."

It is one of several lesser-known ruins of the Americas that Drooker photographed as part of a new exhibit opening Friday, Aug. 13, at the William Siegal Gallery. His image of the vine-strewn palace, captured in lightly sepia-toned infrared, is a haunting work that looks like a shattered daguerreotype from the 19th century. It's a fitting style for a kingdom that met an untimely end. "Sadly, Sans Souci means 'without care' in French," Drooker said. "The story of what happened there is quite tragic. He built this elaborate palace. There was a mint to make money, an ironworks to construct weaponry; there was a military barracks and an atelier to construct fashions for his wife, the queen. In 1820, Henri Christophe suffers a stroke. Rather than risk being overthrown, he kills himself with a silver bullet, as the story goes. The opposition invades and kills his only heir, his 16-year-old son. His wife and daughters are escorted away to live in exile in Italy." The palace was looted by opposition forces, and a massive 1842 earthquake turned the grounds into a stately ruin, which fortunately survived the island nation's January 2010 earthquake.

Getting to Sans Souci is a trek, but even a novice traveler can accomplish it. "I made a point of shooting sites that were accessible to people," Drooker said. "It was important for me to shoot places that people could get to."

The gallery show features five prints of Drooker's photos of U.S. ruins and 10 prints from his upcoming book, *Lost Worlds*, which includes images from 33 ruins in 15 countries throughout Latin American and the Caribbean. Another five are taken from his 2007 book, *American Ruins*, which documents abandoned historical sites throughout the U.S.

In the introduction to *American Ruins*, Drooker muses that the title is almost an oxymoron, as this country prides itself on being "a synonym for the future, while *ruins* are the remains of a forgotten and obsolete past." His road trip through U.S. ruins, however, yielded many tantalizing depictions of decay and lost history.

Many of the book's most exquisite and decadent scenes of "it once was" come from the South. Bulow Plantation, along the east coast of Florida, looks lush and archaic, overgrown with palmetto fans and cypress trees. It is hard to believe the gothic grounds are only 45 minutes from the mayhem of Daytona Beach. The plantation was built in 1821 by slave labor in a wilderness tract on land claimed by the Seminole Indians. A grand estate, the plantation was burned to the ground by the Seminoles during the Second Seminole War in 1836. Like all of the ruins pictured in Drooker's books, it remains publicly accessible, as it is operated and maintained by the Florida Park Service.

What aids Drooker in capturing the otherworldly atmosphere of the ruins is his adroit use of infrared photography. "For me, infrared gives its subjects a very particular, haunted, ghostly look," the photographer said. "Being at ruins is like being in another world. For the way I see things, infrared feels like the best way to visually convey the look and feel of being at a ruin. Without being too technical, infrared sees a band of light that the human eye cannot see. It makes leaves and grass turn a white, frosty color. Clouds pop from the sky, and tree leaves as well. It helps the architecture stand out more."

As New Mexico does not lack atmospheric ruins, Drooker made many visits to the state and to Arizona. His book documents the Pecos missions along with Abo and Quarai missions in Mountainair, east of the Manzano Mountains; the Ancestral Puebloan ruins in Arizona's Canyon de Chelly; and the great houses of Chaco Canyon — prints of which are featured in the gallery show. Of all the New Mexico ruins that Drooker visited, he considered Fort Union to be the most alive with history. "I just felt a strong presence there — I guess just knowing back in the day it was an active area for the Santa Fe and Cimarron trails," Drooker said. "Reading some of the signage, you learned that a few hundred people easily would pass through there [each] day."

Venturing out from the U.S. to the rest of the Western Hemisphere, Drooker found many stunning examples of ruins created

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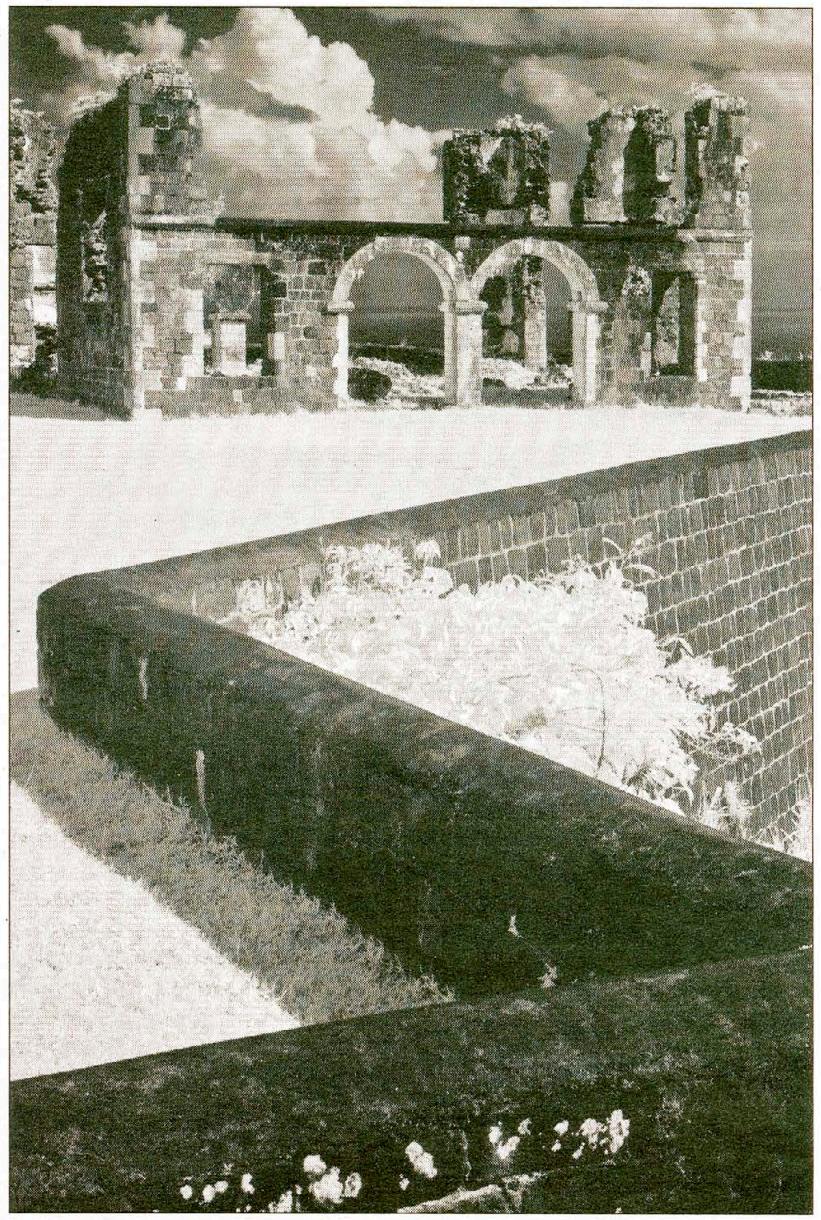

Artillery Officers Quarters, Brimstone Hill Fortress, St. Kitts, 2009, digital pigment print

In Arthur Drooker's photo of San Nicolás de Bari, pigeons take flight over the stone structure, lending the image the feel of an ancient empire left to nature's revenge.

Pecos Mission, Pecos New Mexico, digital pigment print

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by the collision of indigenous civilizations and Spanish and French colonizers. His use of infrared to photograph Machu Picchu, the ancient Incan city of the Andes, renders the much-photographed site in a whole new light. In a similar manner, his take on the Temple of Kukulkan, a famous Maya pyramid in Chichen Itza, makes the place feel antiquarian in a way rarely captured in either standard color or black-and-white depictions.

His most arresting work comes from photographing Caribbean ruins less well known to Americans. In his photo of San Nicolás de Bari, pigeons take flight over the stone structure, lending the image the feel of an ancient empire left to nature's revenge. In reality, San Nicolás de Bari, built between 1503 and 1508, is in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic's capital, and is only a short trip from the city's downtown. The building not only mixes architectural styles from the centuries of its use — the early 16th century to the 19th — but it also served every conceivable civic function in the colonial republic. "It was considered the first hospital in the New World, where Columbus and his brother established the seed of Spanish interest in the Caribbean in the early 1500s," Drooker said. "It was the first European-style university in the New World, the first hospital, the first church, certainly the first monastery."

Drooker's grasp of history — he is a producer for the History Channel and worked on the documentary segments of the 2003 film *Seabiscuit* — keeps the photos from being just beautiful images. Like all ruins, the subjects of his photos paint a distorted image of the past. When in use, these buildings gleamed and shined instead of crumbling and decaying as they do now. Still, these photos, with their imaginative use of infrared and sepia toning, allow us to slip back into antiquity. Drooker writes in his introduction to *American Ruins*, "I was drawn to these sites to forge a spiritual connection with those who came before us, to capture the visual poetry of what they left behind, and restore what they had built to our collective memory." ◀

details

- Arthur Drooker: *Lost Worlds: Ruins of the Americas*
- Opening reception 5-7 p.m. Friday, Aug. 13; exhibit through Sept. 3
- William Siegal Gallery, 540 S. Guadalupe St., 820-3300