

WIN

THE

HEAT

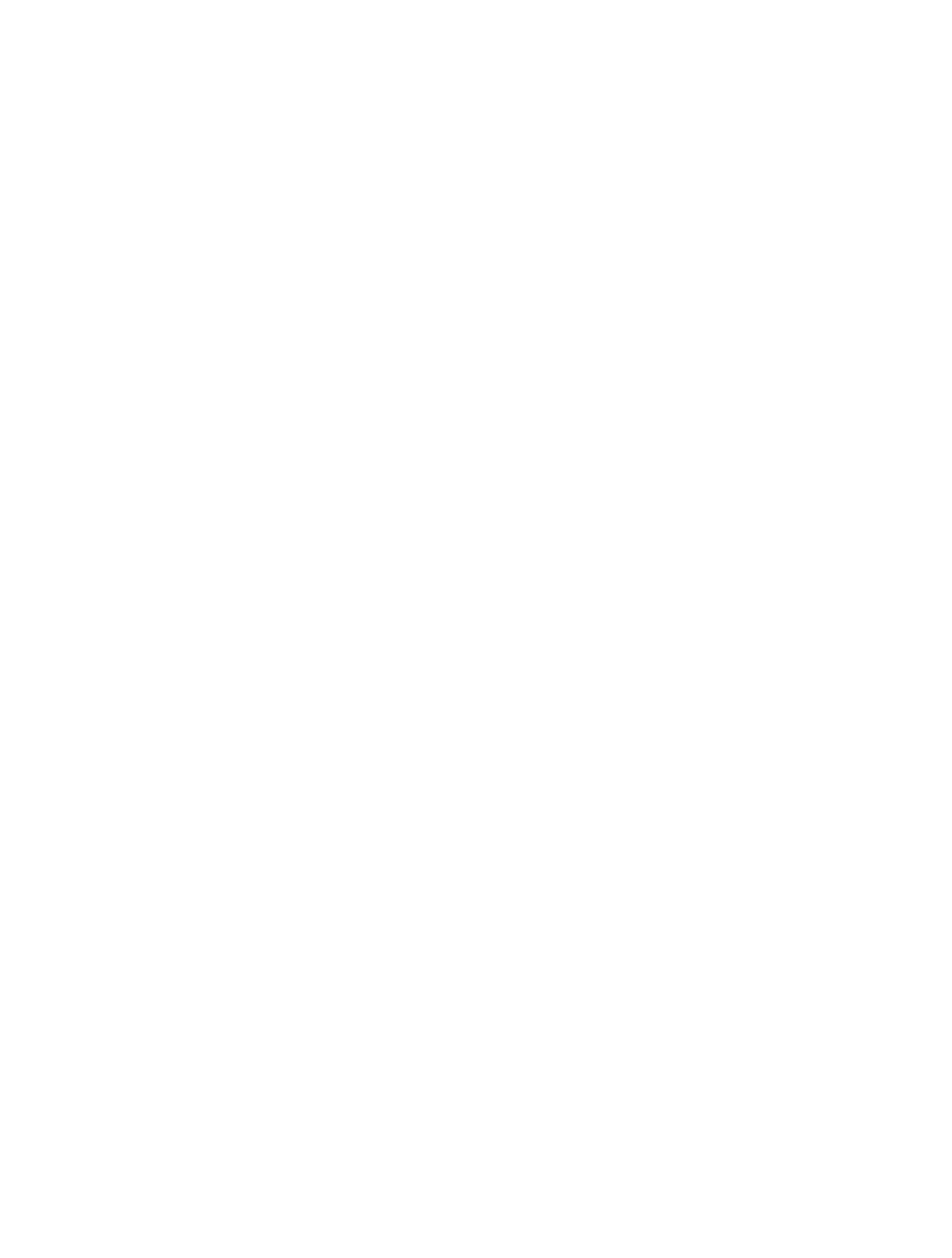


IN THE HEAT

ARTURO SOTO



The Eriskay Connection























_____ Glimmering glass towers rise up from the water's edge. Cars, buses, taxis, cyclists, and joggers move at different speeds along strips of asphalt braided through grassy coastal expanses. One kilometer inland, the new metropolitan railroad carries more than 200,000 passengers daily on a north-south axis that traverses the city, with trains arriving every three minutes during rush hour. By the time the metro is completed, it is expected to carry one million passengers a day. The new biodiversity museum designed by Canadian architect Frank Gehry flashes brilliant red, blue, yellow, and orange at jagged angles into the skyline on manmade islands, providing an entrance from the Pacific Ocean to the Panama Canal. The museum symbolically stages the emergence from the deep sea of the landmass that would become Central America, creating the ecological conditions for an extraordinary diversity of flora and fauna that brings tens of thousands of tourists to the isthmus in search of tropical adventures. With an expanding food scene, a distinctive new Panamanian cuisine is being invented. One can wander the colonial era warren of Casco Viejo, sampling a variation of baklava on a bed of tartar sauce served next to the deep purple of a beetroot salad. Throughout the year, thousands travel from Mexico, Costa Rica, and Colombia to go shopping in Panama's megamalls, air-conditioned temples to commodity fetishism. Shoppers stroll through the arcades of conspicuous consumption, passing bold window displays of leading US and European chains—Cartier, Calvin Klein, Gap, Swarovski, and Tommy Hilfiger Kids. After a day of shopping, visitors can retire to their hotels, often directly attached to the malls. But this is not the Panama City that you will get from Arturo Soto's photographs. His eye for the metropolis is critical and unpretentious, finding a deadpan visual humor in its backstreets. As if an archaeologist of his surroundings, he walks past the throngs of people of diverse hues and shapes to carefully frame an image of their material culture. How to read these pictures devoid of people but with human traces explicitly recorded? Who are the historical agents of these images of decay? And what to make of his photographs of the representational acts of others?

In photographic torsions delivered with a straight face, Soto is adding important links in an ongoing citational chain. He photographed an icon of General Manuel Noriega on the fuel door of a car. Noriega—a CIA conduit for getting arms to the Contras, laundering money, and, as the U.S. government turned a blind eye, ferrying drugs up to the United States—was the pretext for the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989. Even at the time, that brutal assault on an urban population was regarded as a portent for what the United States wanted to do on a grander scale in

the Middle East. The United States bombed and strafed the neighborhood of El Chorrillo with gunfire from Apache helicopters. Today, El Chorrillo is a patchwork of crumbling buildings and brilliant public art. One graffiti artist prompts passersby to wonder: "What could they have thought trampling on our memory... decapitating history as if it were a dream?" Above this elliptic message is the date of the U.S. invasion: 20-12-89. Attack helicopters are painted in black and white next to paratroopers. The civic poet scrawls: "Ruthless fireflies that miserable Christmas Eve." With this sort of creativity all around, with popular mural projects in the abandoned, trash-strewn lots of the city's ghettos, why take a picture of an understated reclamation of Noriega? Why photograph a workingman's prominent placement of an icon of the Washington-backed thug who brought a measure of safety to the streets only to have it all undone when the United States turned on him, killing more than 500 civilians and leaving swaths of the city in ruins. Unembellished and modest, Soto's photos are wry comments on a people and a city working through contradictory impulses.

As this detour through the Noriega icon suggests, to appreciate the images of this Mexican lensman on his two-year misadventure in Panama City, we need to think about what is happening outside the scenes that he has framed. Soto begins the book with a photograph taken from the observation tower at the Miraflores Locks of the Panama Canal. He's looking out toward the Pacific Ocean and captures the commercial waterway through which a full five percent of global maritime traffic passes. On average, 14,000 ships transit the canal each year. Ships traveling from the East Coast of the United States carry coal and grains through the canal to Asia, while those traveling in the opposite direction are loaded with manufactured goods, carrying everything from cheap plastic toilet brushes to expensive high-end electronics. It used to be that vessels carrying bulk cargoes of corn, soy, wheat, minerals, and petroleum-derived products were the ships most frequently transiting the canal. But container ships carrying mostly packaged goods now make up more than fifty percent of the annual tolls revenue for the Panama Canal Authority. From its opening in 1914 to 2010, more than one million ships loaded with goods and people have been lifted uphill through a series of locks, floated across the mainland through the Culebra Cut and Lake Gatún to head downhill, through a couple more locks, into the ocean on the other side of the isthmus.

_____ From the year 1513, when indigenous peoples guided Vasco Núñez de Balboa across this narrow strip of land, making the Spanish seafarer the first European to reach the Pacific Ocean via

IN THE HEAT

The photographs were made between 2011—12
in and around Panama City.

Concept and Photography: Arturo Soto
Text: Kevin Coleman
Design: Rob van Hoesel
Lithography: Marc Gijzen
Printing: NPN printers
Paper: Munken Lynx 150 gr.
Typeface: Grotisque MT Std
Published by: The Eriskay Connection

Print run: 600 copies
ISBN: 978-94-92051-28-8
TEC055

© Arturo Soto / The Eriskay Connection, 2018
arturosotophotography.com
eriskayconnection.com

This publication has been generously supported
by St. Catherine's College, University of Oxford.
Further acknowledgments are due to Roger Ainsworth,
Mauricio Barra, Tom Griggs, Thomas Locke Hobbs,
Jason Gaiger, Justin Coombes, Rodrigo Ramos,
Mauricio Maillé and the Palis Castellanos family.

Erasmus, this book is for you.



