

DESIREE DOLRON



**Cuban feet: portrait of Alicia Alonso, founder of the National Ballet of Cuba — "as rich as any landscape"**

**PHOTOGRAPHY A YOUNG DUTCH PHOTOGRAPHER HAS CAPTURED THE ELUSIVE GHOSTS OF CUBA IN EVERYDAY SCENES. GIVE THE WOMAN A CIGAR, SAYS JOANNA PITMAN**

**DESIREE DOLRON**

★★★★☆

PHOTOGRAPHERS love monuments of the past. Nothing takes the light more gratefully than a slab of weathered marble or a worn limewashed wall. And for the romantically inclined, places such as Havana have provided inexhaustible subject-matter for beautiful photographs that touch at least the shadow of the past.

Desiree Dolron, a young Dutch photographer, is one of hundreds of snappers who have made their way to Havana looking for period decay and relics of the past. But unlike most, who have searched only for prettiness, Dolron brings a sophisticated eye, open to every drama of the senses, ready to find and capture secrets in scenes of such ordinariness that few of us would have looked twice.

In the four months she spent in Havana last year, she captured images of a magical place, populated by spirits that cast their shifting liquid shadows on the eye and tap out their secret messages on the brain. She photographed kitchens, sitting rooms, a classroom, a library, schoolchildren, back streets — everyday Havana scenes — but the powers of simple perception let her achieve a sensory experience that to most of us is as shy and evasive as the hermit thrush.

A shot of a humble kitchen corner is composed with the sensibilities and coloured with the palette of a Vermeer. But it is much more than a superficial imitation. A round table stands at the centre, its rough mesh cloth reflecting the soft, silvery light from its folds and creases. Above it some plates sit in an

old wooden drainer, the light etched along their edges, and the spherical base of a pan glows with a gentle luminescence like a distant full moon on a cloud-scudded night. Everything is rough hewn, but Dolron reveals a world of intense beauty, washed in silvery yellows, greens and the deep glow of pewter.

Dolron's sense of colour is acute. Her shot of the classroom is a rich balance of dusty blues, subdued greens and mellow yellows, tamed and balanced on the computer, and produced as a dye-bond print, sandwiched between layers of perspex, which seems to give it further layers of light from within. It draws you into an enveloping scene of magic and mystery, quickened by the image of Fidel Castro propped up beside a blackboard scrawled with messages about socialism, nationalism and death.

Havana, as we see it in Dolron's photographs, seems to be a place at peace with its turbulent political past, but intimated within the frame is a dark anticipation of how close Cuba is to changing for ever.

On the surface, Dolron's pictures of Cuba do not seem to be either innovative nor especially profound. But they are more moving and mysterious than any I have seen. It is as though her pictures concern themselves not with social history or old bones or even with abstract form, but with the presence of particular spirits.

Her photograph of the library is a beautifully sensuous, almost thrilling, evocation of an echoing world of words and ideas. The books, shabby, well-thumbed, their spines picked out in oranges, yellows and ochres, stand in muddled rows on simple shelves against a softly peeling ancient wall. The arrangement is observed from above by a solemn

Cuban gent staring down from his portrait, a writer or a politician, calmly acknowledging the wealth of words.

And Dolron does not concentrate solely on interiors. Her portrait of Alicia Alonso, founder of the National Ballet of Cuba, is as rich as any landscape. The lady is in her eighties, and she sits elegantly on a formal chair, her painted floury face and slash of red lipstick lifted to the light, her hair hidden in a headscarf, her manicured hands raised in a gesture of creative energy. It might equally be the start of a novel. "She just sat straight down and struck that pose."

Dolron is a perfectionist, as you can see from her prints. They are luminously clean, the tones and colourings adjusted with a degree of hypersensitivity that would make most of us cry. And they are mesmerising.

● *I Give You All My Dreams: Photographs of Cuba* by Desiree Dolron is at 3 Jubilee Place, SW3 (020-7352 4499)

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