

IN SEVEN DAYS

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

zigzag 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.