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## Richard Ross, Guggenheim Winner, Returns from Iran

By Melinda Burns

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*Photographer Richard Ross in a self-portrait.*

Richard Ross, a UCSB art professor and the recent winner of a Guggenheim fellowship, is back from a personal fact-finding trip to Iran as a photographer and concerned citizen.

“I usually don’t like to believe what the media presents or what the government presents,” he said, noting that Iran is part of President Bush’s “axis of evil,” along with Iraq and North Korea.

So in May, Ross set off on a two-week trip with Jeff Clark, a Santa Barbara photographer who’s a former student of his, in hopes of finding out what life was really like in Iran, an Islamic country that is Aryan, not Arab, and ascribes to Shiite, not Sunni beliefs.

Also, Ross said, he wanted to add photographs of Iran to his show, “Architecture of Authority,” which opens June 30 in Los Angeles.



*The Great Seal at the former American Embassy in Teheran has been defaced. Photo by Richard Ross*

In Teheran, the capital city, Ross and Clark visited the former American Embassy, a building that was seized in 1979 by a group of militant students enraged by the United States’ support of the Shah, who had been recently deposed. The students held more than 50 Americans hostage for more than a year.

At the former embassy, still a popular location for anti-American protests, Ross photographed a stone replica of the Great Seal of the United States, now defaced and looking like an archaeological fragment from some ancient regime. It will be part of the new exhibit, Ross said.

Travelling to Esfahan, the second largest city in Iran, Ross said, he was astounded to see 500-year-old bridges, blue palaces decorated so delicately they seemed to be made of lace, and people riding on the river in pedal boats shaped like dragons and porpoises. The crowds, he said, were strolling along the streets as if they were in a European city.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an virulent critic of the Bush administration, was scheduled to speak at the Jameh Mosque, the main mosque in the city, and a reviewing stand had been set up for him, Ross said.

“Instead of a lovely piece, it’s a big steel platform that is bulletproof so that the president can speak without fear of being assassinated,” he said. “It’s really no surprise. Any country protects its leaders. We’ve got the Popemobile and bulletproof limosines.”

Ross took a photograph of the mosque and the reviewing stand, a juxtaposition of the secular and non-secular in which the arched blue- and gold-tiled entrance to the graceful religious building with its dainty spires is largely obscured by the huge makeshift political platform. This photograph, too, will appear in the exhibit.



*Clash of the secular and non-secular: Esfahan, Iran. Photo by Richard Ross*

And how was the president’s speech?

“The basic hyperbole we hear from Bush, except translated into Persian,” said Ross, who got the jist of it from his translator. “The Iranians are the mirror image of who we are. Most of the people don’t like the government and feel like it’s been hijacked by the religious right.”

During his trip to Iran, Ross said, he and Clark ate too much lamb; noticed that not a single woman displayed a bare neck or bare legs in public; and discovered, to their surprise, that the mountains that ringed Teheran were snow-covered in late May. They drove by a nuclear power plant, but wisely did not take photographs, given the current diplomatic crisis on the subject.

The two Americans were amazed to learn that gasoline cost only 40 cents per gallon — one of the perks of life in a top oil-producing nation.

“Everything was surprising,” Ross said. “Everybody’s very glad to see an American. America is still an abstraction that people love. These are people who have every aspiration for their kids and families that we do. They resent being demonized. They are more logically our allies than the Saudis. Yet we have managed to work ourselves into political situations that are untenable.”

Earlier this spring, Ross, who is 60, was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, one of the top awards in the arts. His past work, moving from the romantic to the political, includes series of photographs of the animals frozen in time in museum dioramas; of light streaming through windows to illuminate public and private spaces; and of abandoned

bomb shelters around the world, sitting eerily empty — what Ross calls “the architecture of failure.”



*A girl stands in the midst of women wearing chadors at a rally for the Iranian President in Esfahan. Photo by Richard Ross*

Ross’s new show will open at Acme Art, 6250 Wilshire Blvd., on June 30 and will travel to New York in early 2008. In addition to the photos of Iran, it will include images of isolation cells at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, the interrogation rooms in Guantanamo Bay detention center, the LAPD booking bench at Fifth and Wall streets, and the lethal injection table at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

No person appears in any of these pictures, and that was a deliberate choice, he said.

“Once you have people there, you have defined who the people are,” Ross said. “It doesn’t give you much chance to interact or say to yourself, ‘I could be sitting in that interrogation chair.’ ”

The Guggenheim comes with a monetary award: the average among nearly 200 winners yearly is \$40,000. Beginning July 1, Ross will take a paid yearlong sabbatical from his teaching job at UCSB. He is headed for China next month to continue on his current project and start a new one.



*A woman pauses in light streaming through the arched ceiling of a mosque. Photo by Richard Ross*

"It will be all people and no architecture," he said. "I'm 60 years old and I want to grow a little bit. But I'm a whore. I'll photograph anything, anybody, anytime. If it's about spaces, great, if it's about people, great. It's always about ideas."

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