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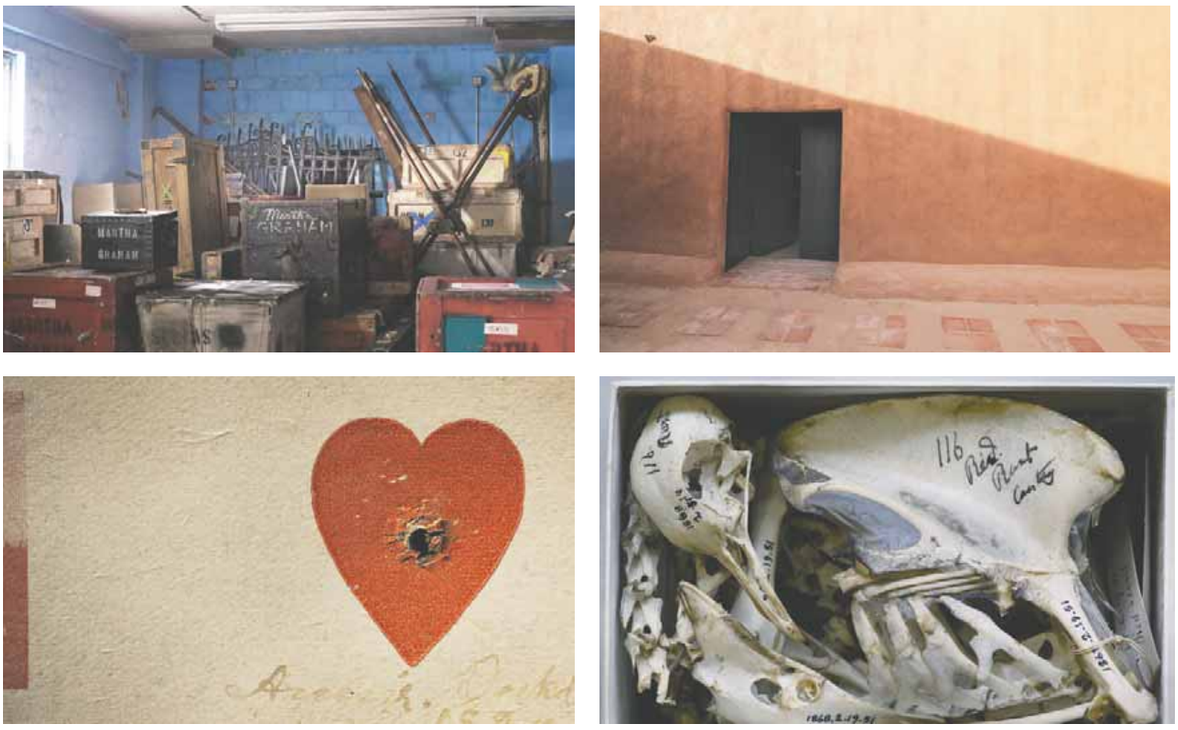
EXHIBIT REVIEW

Objects of her projection



PHOTOS BY ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES: Clockwise from top left: The Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance warehouse in New York; Georgia O'Keeffe's door in Abiquiu, N.M.; Charles Darwin's pigeon skeleton in Hertfordshire, England; Annie Oakley's heart target.

In Leibovitz's 'Pilgrimage,' things get the uncritical gloss of her celebrity portraits

BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

Annie Leibovitz photographs the 1 percent, the rich, beautiful and famous, conspiring with the apparatus of celebrity and capitalism to make the lives of successful people feel even more glamorous and alluring. The Library of Congress has officially declared her a "Living Legend," and despite a few financial problems awhile back — a massive home-renovation project in Greenwich Village contributed to the setback — she has joined the same rarefied ranks of privilege that she has so diligently served throughout her career.

Her photographs are beautiful and scrupulous, and she has won just about every award a photographer can win, but there is something tragic about her oeuvre. Her pictures represent a bankrupt and vacuous

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ/CONTACT PRESS IMAGES

LEIBOVITZ'S PHOTO RECORD:
Clockwise from top left: Annie Leibovitz poses for a self-portrait last year in Plano, Ill.; a bullet-struck television, which once belonged to Elvis Presley, at Graceland in Memphis; Sigmund Freud's couch in London; Ansel Adams's darkroom in Carmel, Calif.

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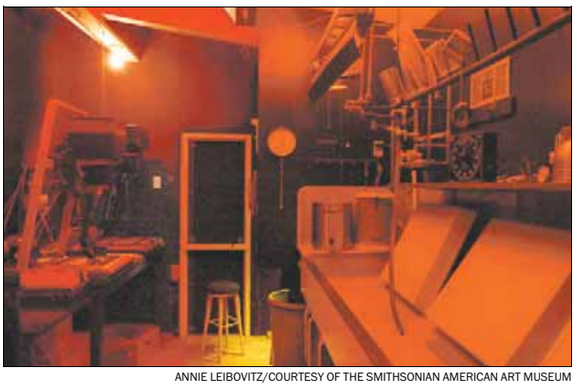
To view more photos from Annie Leibovitz's "Pilgrimage" exhibit, go to washingtonpost.com/style.

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ/COURTESY OF THE SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM



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world not as it really is, but as an ideal that both animates and mocks the 99 percent, the losers in our winner-take-all system.

So it is a bit of a surprise to see this subaltern handmaiden of the fame industry create a new body of work, on display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, that is almost entirely free of portraits. "Annie Leibovitz: Pilgrimage," which opened Jan. 20, is billed as an intimate look at a personal journey she made during a period of emotional and spiritual crisis. Punctuated by the occasional image of the American sublime — the enormous torrent of Niagara Falls captured from above, the iconic plume of a geyser at Yellowstone National Park — Leibovitz's pilgrimage is a photo record of her visits to the homes, gardens and stamping grounds of some of her favorite dead people.

She had planned a project called the "Beauty Book," a collaboration with her longtime friend and companion Susan Sontag, the critic and polymath who died of cancer in 2004.

"After Susan died, I knew that I couldn't do the Beauty Book," writes Leibovitz in an essay that accompanies the exhibition. "As time passed, I realized that I might do a different book, with a different list of places. The list would, inevitably, be colored by my memory of Susan and what she was interested in, but it would be my list."

That list took form slowly, and as it did, Leibovitz performed the stations of her pil-

grimage with camera equipment in tow. The results are eclectic but mostly reflect the heroic pantheon of the bookish liberal establishment: Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, Georgia O'Keeffe, Eleanor Roosevelt. Among the 64 photographs culled for the Smithsonian exhibition are images of Freud's sofa; a rattlesnake skeleton displayed in the Abiquiu, N.M., home of O'Keeffe; a television set disfigured by a bullet hole, once owned by Elvis Presley; and the woven-cane bed that Thoreau slept on while at Walden Pond.

There isn't much internal logic to this cabinet of curiosities, although in several cases photo curator Andy Grundberg has created dreamlike juxtapositions. Putting Freud's couch and the darkroom of Ansel Adams in proximity suggests the unconscious of the photographic process, the hidden manipulations that lead to the polished surface of the printed image. The primal power of water at Niagara Falls, Yellowstone's Old Faithful and the Spiral Jetty (an earthwork sculpture by Robert Smithson that is often submerged by the Great Salt Lake in Utah) suggests, respectively: deep emotional undercurrents, irruptive psychic forces and the play of surface and depth that governs so much of how we think about ourselves and the world.

The photographs make everything feel more real, closer, more textured and sensuous than anything found in real life. They have the inherent sexiness of glossy magazine imagery, and as you look at the interiors photographed at the home of Ralph Waldo Emerson or Val-Kill, the cottage where Roosevelt lived and worked, the idea of a visit begins to seem futile. Why bother? The interiors could never look this good, this intimate, this inviting. In many cases, the view offered by Leibovitz's lens is far superior to anything a tourist might have access to. The light is better, the detail clearer and you don't have to bend over a display case.

Although she is photographing things, not people, it is not clear that this project, seemingly an homage to her heroes, is all that different from Leibovitz's celebrity photographs. As Sontag wrote in her classic book "On Photography": "One of the perennial successes of photography has been its strategy of turning living beings into things, things into living beings." That's a perfect summation of how "Pilgrimage" relates to Leibovitz's earlier work: Celebrity photographs objectify people, while "Pilgrimage" conjures the aura of celebrity from the objects once owned by historic figures.

Even the introductory essay by Doris Kearns Goodwin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, embraces the phoniness. Goodwin's essay begins: "As a historian, nothing matters more to me than the chance to wander through the rooms where my subjects lived and worked."

But "as a historian," she ought to say that what really matters is archival material, ideas and facts, not PBS-style emotive rambles through the boudoirs and kitchens of dead presidents. And original research, given that Goodwin was accused of plagiarizing substantial amounts of text from multiple authors for her 2002 book "The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys."cq, no amazon link.

But Goodwin has rehabilitated her career, in part, by practicing history as a form of public emotional spectacle, as if parodying in narrative form the famous suggestion by photojournalist Henri-Cartier Bresson that photographers search out "the decisive moment."

This matters because there is a strange mix of insipid sentimentality and self-promotional personalization of history in this project. This supposedly private, restorative pilgrimage is a very public and narcissistic form of old-fashioned hero worship. Notice, for instance, how many times Leibovitz refers to her heroes on a first-name basis: Emily for Emily Dickinson, Virginia for Virginia Woolf, Eleanor for Eleanor Roosevelt. Or how often she photographs beds, and bedrooms, as if her pantheon is also a personal B&B, where the great and famous always leave the light on just for her.

Millions of Americans make some version of the kind of pilgrimage captured in Leibovitz's images. Catering to this tourism has been an industry for a century or more, and there is a widespread belief that these visits help establish an emotional relation-

ship between 21st-century Americans and their history. But warm feelings of personal connection to a historical figure don't necessarily carry with them any particular understanding or knowledge of what that figure did. Not enough suspicion is directed at the inherently mythologizing tendency in this national pastime.

Certainly, none emerges from Leibovitz's "Pilgrimage." This is about celebrating the goodness of people, the beauty of things and stoking an insatiable desire to have and hold the sacred relics of history. Again, Sontag is the best critic: "Despite the illusion of giving understanding, what seeing through photographs really invites is an acquisitive relation to the world."

This is no history lesson. This is an essay in consumption, the same restless appetite to feel close to famous people stoked by glossy images in glossy magazines.

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