

Convento
art emerging from ruins

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In late 2008, photographer John Labovitz spent a month exploring the unique environment of the Convento São Francisco de Mértola in Portugal's rural Alentejo region. The once-ruined and abandoned buildings of the convent have been restored by its artists/residents, and the ancient Moorish gardens are again lush and prosperous. Sculptures and mechanical creatures roam among cypresses, wild asparagus, peacocks, and the native kestrels and storks. John's black and white photographs tell intertwining stories of the land, its history, the people, and their art.

I first discovered the Convento São Francisco in 2003, on a trip I took to Lisbon and the countryside of Portugal just west of Spain. For a week I drove somewhat randomly around the Alentejo, a sparse landscape populated mostly by cork and olive trees. Here and there, nested into valleys along slow rivers, appeared small towns of stone houses. Although the February was warm, few tourists ventured to these parts, and I mostly had the roads and villages to myself.

In Mértola, my travel guide listed the Convento as part nature preserve, part restored historical site, and part sculpture park. One day, I walked down the hill from my pensão, over the Rio Ribiera ('Little River'), and up the road to the Convento. As I entered the front gate, I found a man wearing a poncho, with blonde hair, about my age, tending to the horses in the stable near the entrance. He smiled and said hello, introduced himself as Louie. I asked about the place, and Louie explained that he lived here along with his mother, and that they'd come here from Holland.

As Louie showed me around the grounds, I was astounded by the explosion of nature – stands of cypresses, groves of orange trees, fields of fragrant herbs – so different than the desert-like lands I'd been driving through. Scattered around the verdant landscape of the Convento were sculptures made of stone, carefully placed rock piles

marking paths, structures of glass and iron and wood that seemed to live here as beings themselves. The art was not a separate thing, but nearly a force of the land itself.

Although I did not stay at the Convento then, its mystery stayed with me.

I returned to the Convento in 2008 not as a traveler but as a working artist. The Zwanikken family, who owned and lived at the Convento, had started an artist residency program. I made a proposal for a somewhat vague project to photographically explore the Guadiana River valley, including the Convento, the nearby town of Mértola, the river itself that flows from Spain across the Alentejo and by the foot of the Convento, and the enclosing Parque Natural Vale do Guadiana.

I arrived in Mértola on the night bus from Lisbon. In the morning I shook my cold, jet-lagged self from my studio apartment, a thick-walled stone building that was formerly the horse stables, and found myself yet again in the restored paradise of the Convento. Here still grew the tall cypresses, the oranges still held their fruit, the herbs still spread themselves across fields and between stepping stones. Peacocks chirred and strutted, the Zwanikken's dogs wandered, observing and exploring, and the horses grazed in the fields near the road. Storks sat atop their huge nests, built of sticks on the ruined walls of the old grain mill near the river, and pigeons cooed from the red-tiled roof.

The Convento seemed less of a human-dominated place, and more of a place that was simply caretaken by the people who lived there alongside the flora and fauna of the land. By the people living simply, the land is allowed to breath on its own.

The Zwanikkens – Geraldine, Louie, and Christiaan – are three legs of a sturdy tripod. They each support the Convento, and each other. And their individual support is complementary to their own philosophy and way of being in the world.

Louie is the caretaker of the land. He carries the calm pragmatism of the stoic farmer, seeing the land as it is, carefully tending its trees and animals. He understands the world outside the Convento, but chooses to stay within this land which both supports him and allows him to support it.

Geraldine connects the spirit to the land. She thrives in the thinner air of the metaphysical, transcending the earth's hardness for its more delicate meaning. When she was a dancer, she danced the São Domingos mine, up the Guadiana from the Convento, transforming the rough slag into delicate gestures of movement.

Christiaan is the observer, the architect, the maker of creatures whose appearance and movements come out of the natural animals around the Convento, but who are powered by electronics and mechanics. Like Richard Brautigan's poem 'All watched

over by machines of loving grace,’ these ‘mammals and computers / live together in mutually / programming harmony’: mechanical storks that bob and nod and clack as storks do, a pair of playful robotic dogs endlessly rushing up to one another, then turning away, the frightening attack of an eagle (all bones) against a small rabbit – but Christiaan’s rabbit is a pink toy manically beating its tiny drum while the eagle embraces with bony wings. A few of these creatures live quiet lives on the Convento grounds, like his mechanical burro that pumps the magic water from the wellhouse.

Most places start as mysteries and reveal themselves. The Convento is one of those special places that continues to reveal its mysteries. As I explored its hillsides, wandered its paths, absorbed its views, the mysteries somehow became deeper. Stories emerged from the land, questions arose from behind the stone walls. Does that peculiar circle of paving stones atop the highest hill indicate an ancient building foundation, a platform for threshing grain, or a sacred intersection of ley lines? Is the woman across the ravine harvesting olives, or is she looking deep within the ancient tree for soft clear balls, enveloped in love? Is that sculpture decaying in the meadow near the well an armature built of steel and covered with fiberglass and leather, or is it the body of a huge, dead creature that

breathed its last breath in this calm oasis? Is the well-house a simple place of gears and buckets, or does it shelter a magic aperture to a hidden world where water is everything?

Day by day, I hauled around my bulky camera, walking slowly, asking the land for its best vantage points, the openings to the stories contained within the larger mythology. The view through my lens was less *what is this*, and more *what is this about*.

This place is about water: It is about the first people who drew water from the ground; the later ones who irrigated the verdant gardens; the Rio Guadiana that gives the place life and structure; the rain that pours down in the winter and is only a dream in the hot summer.

This place is about history: It is about the cavalcade of travelers and settlers who others called Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Visigoths, Moors, Portuguese, and now Europeans. It is about the varied identities of the site: palace, convent, farm, art garden.

This place is about nature: It is about the native oak trees that dot the hills, the prickly wild asparagus, the eucalyptus invaders that catch the wind. Strange structures emerge from the land, human-made places that give migrating birds a traveler's bed for a while.

This place is about art: It is about the priority of aesthetics, process, and spirit over the purely functional. Paths are not fully realized without a carefully placed cairn of

rocks; a labyrinth of stones touches the water before the water reaches the garden; a handprint embossed in the stuccoed wall of a shed is human touch made eternal.

The Convento lives in a physical space, but also in two additional dimensions: those of human history and the timelessness of nature. Perhaps the art creations are tiny explosion, nodal points in the plane where human and nature intersect.

As the days moved on, I found myself drawn back to the pathways and buildings and art that dotted the landscape of the Convento. The more I looked, the more I saw. And one

day I realized that *this* was the project I was looking for: to document the land, the animals, the people, and the spirit of the Convento.



John Labovitz



Paths like this form a fine network across the land of the Convento. The trails feel themselves around the other beings, all mutually cooperating.

The old stables housed the bits and bobs of a longtime place of work, along with the little studio where I lived and worked.





The ancient irrigation system has been restored; it now brings water to the extensive garden of herbs and fruit trees.

Painted a bright blue and orange, this little stone hut sits in a meadow. It waits quietly for its monk to arrive on retreat.

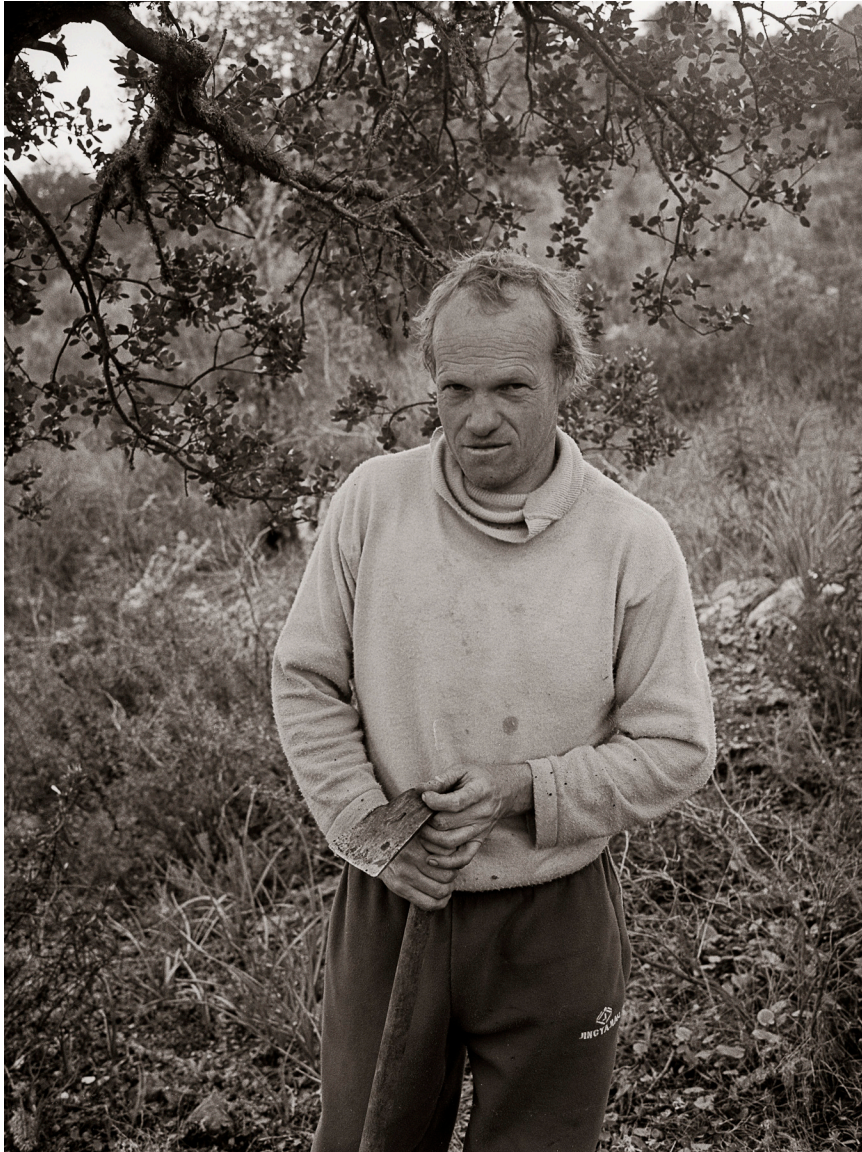




These smiling heads were friendly sentries along the entry to the Convento.

'Goldfinger,' one of Christiaan's earlier sculptures, lay dormant in the meadow.





Louie was constantly at work on the land. Whether pruning trees, building a floor in the stable, or bringing in firewood, he seemed truly at home, and the land felt comfortable with him in it.

*Dunja the stallion was kind
and inquisitive.*





The kestrels, in their migration between Europe and Africa, stay at the Convento to lay and hatch their eggs. The walls of the chapel have special nooks waiting for the birds.

*Over the years, many artists
have come to the Convento.
Some have left their
work here, like this small,
enigmatic stairway.*





Christiaan ponders the construction of his hut, a commission for Sint-Oedenrode, a small city in Holland named after Oda, a Scottish princess. Oda fled her throne and searched desperately for places to worship silently; she was continually interrupted by the songs of magpies. Paradoxically, the same magpies led her to the place in the forest where she finally found peace. Christiaan's hut will be placed in the woods near the town, and will house mechanical, singing magpies.

The mechanical burro that powers the water wheel in the well-house.





One of the pair of Christiaan's mechanical storks. Facing each other, suspended at the ends of long fiberglass rods, they bob and turn their heads, and clack their beaks. Each of their behavior is influenced by the other; they are truly communicating.

Some of the tools of Christiaan's trade.





The randomness of parts and pieces create art itself.

Sometimes an artist's table is a beautiful, accidental still life.



I → lapis lazuli - 2e l...
II vitrioles -
III Carant → gesselsbalsem -
IV crisl. nicht plast. un...
□ consist of ...
Vitrin...
basse ...



*A drama for three players:
mechanical peacocks recite a
soup of lines from Treasure
of the Sierra Madre. Their
voices boomed across the
cavernous space of the
chapel.*

*Christiaan and his nearly-
completed Sint-Oedenrode
hut. We set up this
photograph for his New
Year's card.*





Geraldine works in her studio. I spent days trying to photograph her, and she kept disappearing; finally, in the last hours of my last day at the Convento, she agreed.



The chapel where Geraldine teaches yoga and painting.

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Thanks to Geraldine, Louie, and Christiaan Zwanikken for the opportunity to spend a wonderful, creative month making art at the Convento São Francisco. Thanks especially to Christiaan for helping me set up my nomadic darkroom, and regularly asking me ‘how is the work going?’ And thanks to Bella the dog, who regularly reminded me that it was time to play.

Thanks to Patti Battin for the opportunity to show this work at Dovetail Art & Design Gallery.

TECHNICAL NOTES

The photographs were taken with either a tripod-mounted Mamiya RB67 or a handheld Bronica RF645 medium-format camera. Film was primarily Fuji Neopan 400, with a smattering of Ilford HP5+. The negatives were developed in the kitchen of my studio with Ilford LC29 developer. This book was printed with Lulu.