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On photography



How Margaret Thatcher's HQ turned into Chateau Despair

Lisa Barnard's photographs of the drab former Tory party headquarters show the fleeting nature of political power – with Thatcher's image left to get damp and discoloured in a cupboard

Sean O'Hagan

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 28 February 2013 17.24 GMT



Empty smiles ... mouldy photographs of Iain Duncan Smith at 32 Smith Square

Eight identikit portraits of Margaret Thatcher, steely-eyed, almost smiling, punctuate

the pages of Chateau Despair. Each one is blemished to a different degree by creeping mould, which has vividly discoloured the lower edges of the paper. The old photographs were uncovered in a damp, disused cupboard in 32 Smith Square, Westminster, which was the head office of the Conservative party from 1958 to 2004. They provide a distinctly Warholian undertow to the main body of work in Lisa Barnard's new book, a psychic investigation of this empty, neglected space where political power used to reside – and where a free-market ideology was created that continues to shape our lives.

Chateau Despair
by Lisa Barnard



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Chateau Despair is one of three books that launch the new independent imprint Gost Books. Its pointed title may or may not reflect Barnard's view of Thatcher's reign and, by extension, the Britain the so-called Iron Lady made in her own image. But it is also the nickname bestowed on the building by the Tory rank and file who worked there just prior to the Conservative's relocation to Victoria Street in 2004. From the photographs, it's not hard to see why.

The interior of 32 Smith Square is as drably functional and lacking in style or decor as any Soviet politburo office, and this is only accentuated by the passing of time and the relics that remain. The fading carpets are greyish blue, the walls a lighter shade of the same. The ceilings are low and the walls often turn out to be makeshift partitions, where bigger rooms were bisected to house the lower ranks of assistants and party workers on a sliding scale of shabbiness. The overall feel flies in the face of the Bauhaus edict that form follows function. Here, function is all; form just another useless indulgence to be banished like free school milk.

Lisa Barnard began photographing inside the disused building in 2009 at the request of the architects, Pringle Brandon, who have since transformed it – irony of ironies – into "Europe House". (In one of Barnard's images from a smaller series called Remnants, also included here, a deflated balloon found in the building bears the slogan "In Europe, not run by Europe".) Barnard describes herself as a photographic artist, but her work seems unapologetically political. She pays homage to, and undercuts, the tropes of documentary realism – apart from the Thatcher portraits, her book is all about a profound sense of place and the ghosts that linger there.



A stained, discoloured

image of Margaret Thatcher, found in a cupboard at her former headquarters. Barnard has photographed these glum rooms from a detached-to-the-point-of-neutral perspective, but their power lies in the details: a red rocket firework standing alone against a wall; an American campaign sticker that reads Bush Is Our President beneath a frenzy of scratches. The overall atmosphere is one of abandonment: a forlorn pair of shoes sit side by side beneath a radiator; two still-locked safes stand alone in otherwise empty rooms. Ancient radio equipment, built into a wall, speaks of another time when Sky first began to do battle with BBC and ITN. Elsewhere, a slightly elevated platform, perhaps six inches high, shows where the Iron Lady once stood to address the nation's media in that absurdly modulated schoolmistress voice. Her presence still haunts these spectacularly mundane rooms, where the light is filtered through fading net curtains.

"As an architect who believes that the way we live is related to what we live in," writes Jeremy Till, head of Central St Martins College of Art and Design, in the book's afterword, "these miserable environments speak to me of miserable people; Chateau Despair indeed. They are not designed, but simply delivered as sheer expediency, with no imagination."



All in the details... a

rocket stands alone against a wall in this glum room at Chateau Despair

It was the late [Michael Foot](#) who originally located Thatcher's lack of compassion in her lack of imagination, and here, that equation is laid bare with a strange poignancy. Barnard's images speak of the fleeting nature of political power and the often makeshift working environments that lurk beyond the gaze of the TV camera or the official portrait. Post-New Labour, that has been banished too for an altogether more sleek, designer-savvy politics. Chateau Despair, then, is a reminder of how all things Tory used to be and how, beneath the surface, they still are. Only the facade has changed.

Now see this

Edith Tudor Hart is having a moment. The politically-engaged photographer, who trained with the Bauhaus and went on to capture images of poverty and social injustice across Europe in the 1930s, has two exhibitions devoted to her work opening this week.

The first, and biggest, is [In the Shadow of Tyranny](#) at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery from 2 March. The second, [Quiet Radicalism](#), is at [Open Eye in Liverpool](#) from 2 March.

The [new issue of Hotshoe](#) (Feb/March £6) is just out, featuring work by David Armstrong from his 1979 series, *Before Everything Fell Apart*, as well as Bryan Schutmaat's evocative landscapes and portraits from the mining communities of the American West.

Also available is [issue 16 of Seesaw](#), the online magazine of [photography](#) and film edited by Aaron Schuman. It's worth checking out the ambitious series, *You Wait ...*, by

Ukrainian artist Roman Pyatkovka, which merges old Soviet imagery and avant garde photography to explore changing ideas of femininity.

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