

Telegraph magazine

MEN



ONLY

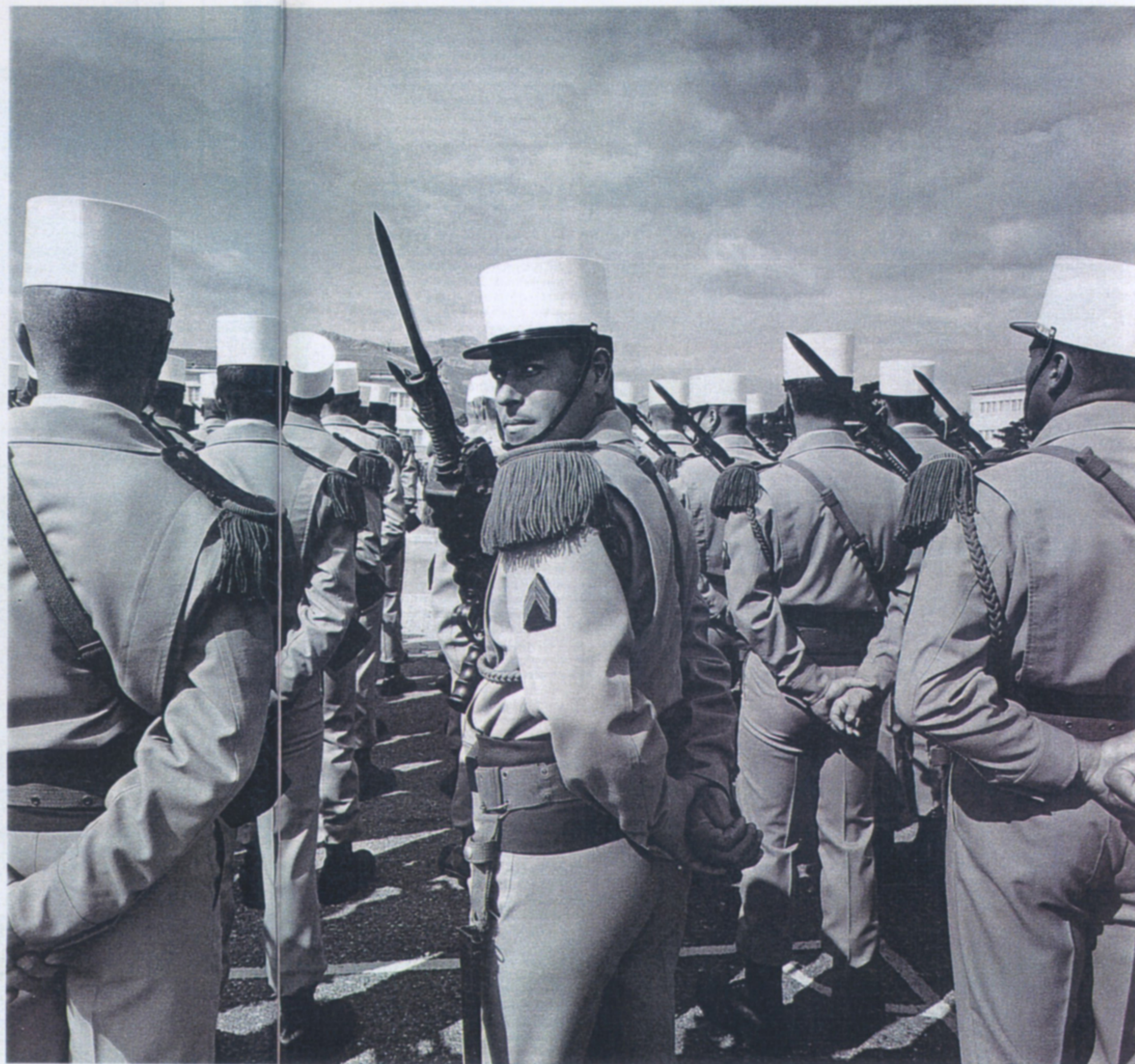
Giorgia Fiorio gave up a successful career as a pop singer to study photography. Now her pictures are acclaimed worldwide. She talks to Sara Wheeler about her work with men in extreme situations

Giorgia Fiorio's portfolio focuses almost exclusively on men. Her subject might be a Ukrainian coal-miner, a Spanish bullfighter, a Russian ballet dancer or a saturnine American boxer, but it will invariably be male. While hundreds of male photographers shoot only women, Fiorio's situation seems curiously odd. And her astonishing good looks make it odder.

So why does a wildly talented young woman from Turin spend 10 years photographing isolated groups of blokes? I put this question to her in her Paris studio, a set of maids' rooms on the fifth floor of an 18th-century

mansion in the chic seventh *arrondissement*. Like most of the best ideas, it turns out that Fiorio's magisterial study of men came about by accident.

Born in Turin in 1967, in her early 20s Fiorio studied at the International Center of Photography in New York. While she was there, she began to photograph boxers. She ended up spending nine months hanging around the gyms, and loved it. 'New York for me was the Bronx, Brooklyn and fighting,' she says wistfully. The pictures are indoor, close-up portraits, gorgeous with



French Foreign Legionnaires on parade at their base at Calvi, Corsica, 1996. 'My kind of photography is an interpretation, it's not reality. I believe that when you are a documentary photographer, you are extremely subjective'



texture and twitching with the passion of the ring.

Through the boxing project she learnt that she wanted to do all her work by total immersion, living with her subjects for extended periods. Back at home in Italy, she decided to concentrate on a new topic each year, beginning with 10 months inside the Italian army. 'I wanted a subject that represented all Italy,' she says, 'and one which hadn't changed much.'

Fiorio has a firm handshake and a sexy, faintly gravelly voice. Her looks are altogether gamine: hyper slim, boyish, vaguely pointy face and shiny, shoulder-length chestnut hair. It is difficult not to look at her when she is in the room. She plucks a regular supply of cigarettes from a battered yellow 555 tin and lights them from the dangerously virulent flame of an engraved silver lighter. She could not possibly be Anglo-Saxon.

After the boxers and the army, she moved to Paris 'for love', settled in a flat with her Italian boyfriend, and became increasingly fascinated by things that remain static as the world changes around them. Italy, she found, had transformed itself at an alarming rate during the Eighties. The continuity represented by relatively unchanging communities appealed hugely.

'Normally I don't read the papers, but in a taxi going to the airport one day I saw a story about a miners' strike in Russia. I knew straightaway that it was going to be like the boxers.' In her mind boxers and miners were the same - she describes them as archetypes, a word she returns to again and again. Four months later left for the Ukraine to work on the coal-mining project. The pictures that emerged after two months with the miners are simultaneously gritty and glossy, raw and sumptuous in their emphasis on texture and unctuous sweaty flesh. Glistening pectorals feature prominently: she clearly spent a lot of time in the men's showers. Fiorio then stayed in Russia to photograph ballet dancers, street kids and convicts in prison camps. A book emerged, called *The Russians*, in which the three groups are woven together. She says, 'I wanted to show the Russia that belonged to the Russians before the Iron Curtain. The Russia frozen by 70 years of Iron Curtain.'

At about that time a series swam into focus. 'I was preparing to do

Glockwise from top left, a boxer, New York, 1998 - Fiorio thinks that boxing is a metaphor for all human interaction; miners at the Butovka Donetskaya mine, Russia, 1998; a legionnaire in training in French Guiana, 1996; Don King, Mike Tyson and Alex Stewart, at Trump Plaza, 1998; a New York fireman, 1998. Right, legionnaires in French Guiana





Above, a worker at the Donetsk steel works, Russia, 1998; below, legionnaires at the funeral of a comrade, Chad, 1996

the Foreign Legion as my next monograph. Someone looked at my work and said, "You know what you're doing? You're photographing the same thing over and over." I realised that he was right. I started to see what my subjects had in common. They were archetypes – I mean things that exist in our culture, imagination and memory. Our notion of a soldier, for example, or a bullfighter, or a miner. Of course, these things change, but the accent of my work is not on change. I try to suspend the action, so the subjects are without boundaries in time. The Legion photographs, bursting with naked flesh and men locked in a wrestling hold or up to their noses in murky water, emphasise the legionnaires' physical involvement with their job. Behind such intense physical activity Fiorio perceives human vulnerability. "Whether it's vulnerability in front of a bull, the sea, the earth or another person, each man is standing in front of death. I need to see and show this humanity."

Why men? Can't women represent vulnerability? She immediately gets slightly prickly. "Men are a universe I don't know. I'm not saying that women aren't interesting, but I'm less attracted to them. I'm more interested in studying something that I don't know. It's

of absolutely no consequence that I choose to photograph men and not women. I might have chosen landscapes, or pets – you photograph the thing you're attracted to. The trigger of creativity is that you want to know about something." I suspect that something is being left unsaid. But before I can press her, she strikes the killer blow. "Anyway, nobody would ever ask a man why he photographs women."



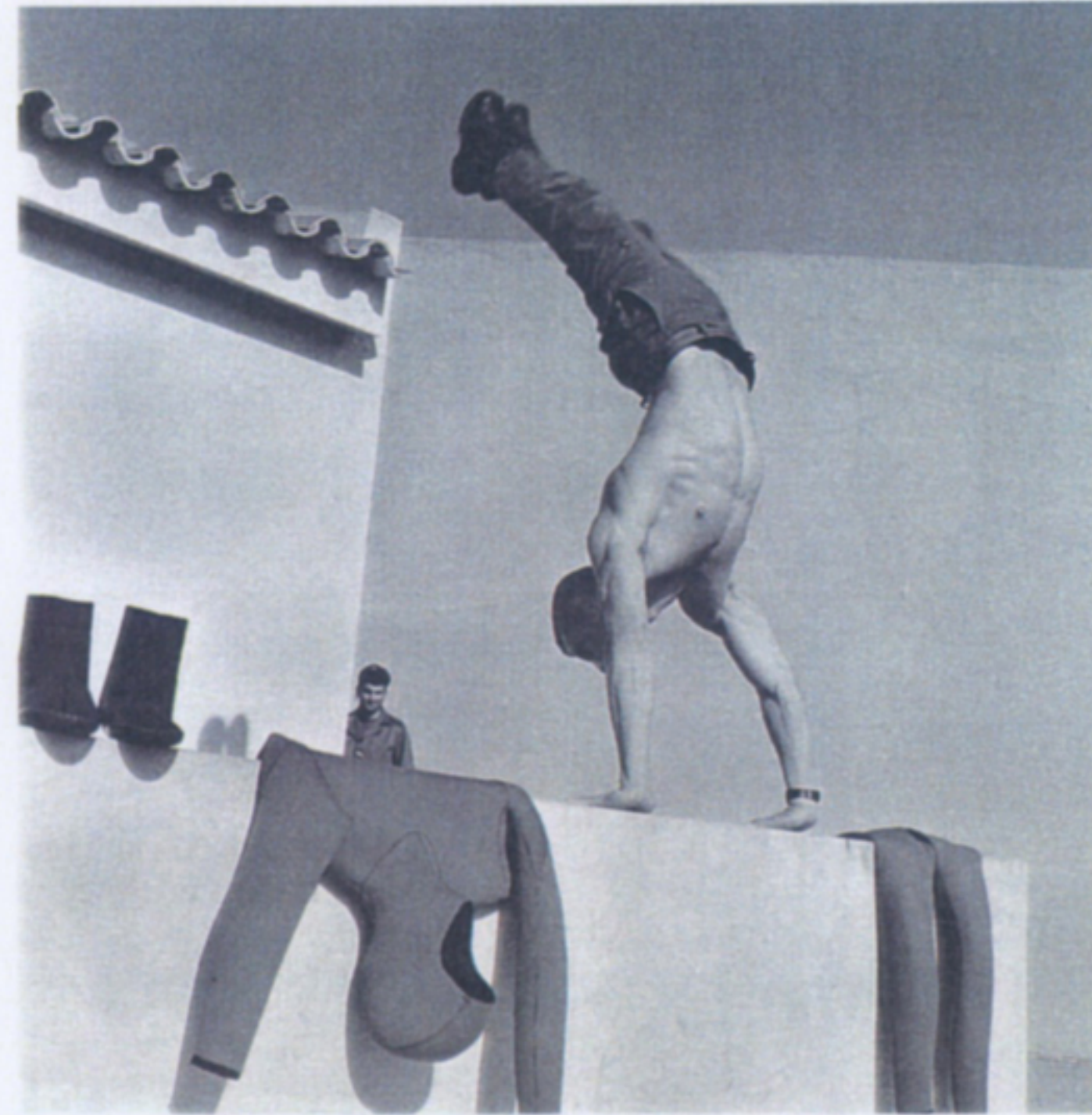
"The Legion isn't an abstract entity," she writes in the introduction to her book, *Legio Patria Nostra*, published in 1996. "It exists because of the legionnaires: 8,500 men, or rather, 8,500 times one man." In the French Foreign Legion she found "the whole of humanity in all its complexity". The introduction is strong, as are the personal, even slightly lyrical captions to the photographs. It makes *Legio Patria Nostra* the most compelling of her books, as her warmth and sense of wonder trickle through the pages. She describes hearing snatches of *Rigoletto* drift around the Yugoslavian mountains when the commandant played it, and the soldiers asking her out for a welcome-back drink. The most moving moment comes at the end when she shares her subjects' grief at a funeral. At this Mass, she writes that she was "sans caméra," honestly acknowledging, perhaps, the limitations of her field.

Not only does it take months to convince the relevant authorities to allow access to these elite groups, but also, once she is in, Fiorio has to gain the confidence of her men. She tells the story of literally quaking outside the dormitory block of a Russian prison. "I persuaded the guard to stay outside. A door locked behind me. The prisoners were sitting on their beds, staring. I was terrified, but I had to show them I wasn't afraid. I put the camera down and asked them in Russian if they minded if I took their photographs."

"One guy came up to me – and this is the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me in all my career – and he pointed to the windows, which were bricked up, and he said, "By doing that you can take us out of here." To earn acceptance, I have to show that I see them as human beings."

It is her courage that gains the respect of the men she photographs. This was the quality that impressed Don McCullin so much that in 1992 he called Bob Pledge at the Contact agency in New York and told him he had to look at Fiorio's work. Her determination, too, is awesome. She has closed the door on an extraordinary period of her past, for example, in order to prove her dedication to photography. Before she picked up a camera, Fiorio had a career as a pop singer. It began in her teens and lasted only a few years but she won recognition at the prestigious San Remo festival and is still remembered by the Italian media. She gave it all up to study photography but everybody in Italy thought she'd make a comeback. She never did. Not only that, but she turned to the opposite of pop singing. Photography is as anonymous as pop is public. "I guess she chose a more silent means of expression," says Bob Pledge.

The project that started as a number



A French Foreign Legionnaire displays his physical prowess at the camp in Calvi, Corsica, 1996

of monographs but became one single layered subject will appear in a book called *Men*. The next monograph, meanwhile, called *Men of the Sea*, will be set in Britain. The tripartite structure ranges between Scottish trawlermen, the lifeboat service and the Navy. After that, she is going to photograph tin and silver miners in Bolivia.

Each project is extremely physically taxing. If the legionnaires had to march for three days to an operation, Fiorio marched with them. "It won't work if I turn up as fresh as a rose at the moment the operation is about to take place," she says. In the process of composition she makes herself part of the physicality of her pictures. When she went to Mali to photograph the National Guard, she had her own camel, Number 39, called Ora. "We spent six hours a day on camel patrol. The people in the remote camps asked me to explain snow and the sea. They had heard about these things."

At home she trains hard, stepping up her regime as an assignment approaches. After the Legion, she went off to Spain to follow bullfighters. Like them, she drove miles and miles every night, slept for a few hours in a hostel during the mornings and in the afternoons went to the ring. She did this for seven

months. "It was the most difficult thing I've done from the point of view of not losing my bearings," she says, lighting another cigarette. "I felt very lost."

The next monograph, however, was to prove the most emotionally challenging. She went back to New York and lived at a fire station, going out with the firemen on every call. The firemen changed shifts every 24 hours but there was only one photographer.

WE RESPOND in a particular way to black-and-white photographs. They suggest the past. Black and white is the natural medium for a photographer seeking to impale the particular upon the universal. Fiorio always shoots in black and white, perceiving in it "something archival and eternal". To a certain extent, texture replaces colour in her pictures. The eye luxuriates in the fold of a turban or a rivulet of sweat.

She is awash with awards, last year, she was named Documentary Photographer of the Year by *American Photography*. None is on display in the

studio, the white walls of which are adorned with a sparing selection of black-and-white pictures. The place is tidy almost to the point of being sinister: besides developing and printing kit, the only visible items are a corkscrew, a shortwave radio (she loves the radio) and a battered metal toy pistol. Fiorio is proud of the fact that she doesn't own a TV, computer or mobile phone. She says she is "very physical and earthy". Like her pictures.

Before we make our way to her local bar for lunch, we rifle through fat sheaves of transparencies. There are a handful of pictures of women. I ask her if she likes any of these, and she picks out a wildly androgynous Russian miner. When I linger over a dressing-room shot of a couple of ballerinas, Fiorio hesitates for the first time, then says, "I feel a bit embarrassed doing women. A bit of a *royeuse*. Somehow I'm allowed to be curious with men. Looking at women is like looking at myself. I've never taken a self-portrait – I even have a problem photographing my family. I can only do the babies, because I don't know them yet."

I had heard she was trilingual (she speaks French and English fluently) but she told me she also learnt Russian to go to Russia and Spanish to go to Spain. She is highly articulate, and a natural storyteller. Like most artists, she is unusually self-absorbed, and at one point she uses the word 'megalo-maniac' to describe herself to me – only half in jest.

She does the occasional magazine commission, and a couple of collectors buy her prints, but I get the impression that she feels compromised by anything other than book-length monographs. Prestigious as they are, they don't pay many bills. Fiorio says she doesn't know how she keeps going. "It's like walking over the abyss all the time." Then, stating the obvious, "It's not just a job. I live this work."

There is an empathy, or at least complicity, between her and these exotic men. It's an idea she consciously reinforces by asking them to look at her when she takes their pictures. But while aggressive images abound in her work – guns, barbed wire, boxing gloves – her vision is ultimately sympathetic. "All these men," she says, "have taken a pretty tortuous route to get where they are, and somehow there is a form of redemption in what they do." This notion of redemption holds a key, perhaps, to the work in progress of Georgia Fiorio. She once wrote this about a boxing match, but it could describe what's happening in every picture she takes. It is, she wrote, "a means of overcoming, thanks to which it is possible to hope, to dream again, and to believe."

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