

M+B

"Main Event": A retrospective of Howard Bingham's photography recalls the Ali-Foreman "Rumble in the Jungle."

By Stephen Lemons

Feb. 28, 2000 | There's a corner in photojournalist Howard Bingham's current show at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History where evil goes toe-to-toe with good. This may sound hyperbolic, but it's not, at least not by much. In this segment of "Main Event: The Ali/Foreman Extravaganza Through the Lens of Howard L. Bingham," evil is personified by the late dictator of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko, a man infamous for the plunder of his own people.

Images of the dour, sinister autocrat in black horn-rimmed glasses and leopard-skin chapeau fill an entire wall. Even without knowing the history of the man's barbarity and greed (the term "kleptocracy" was reportedly coined to describe his rule), his cold, sadistic stare alone can give you the willies.

"He is scary," remarks Bingham, 60, during a recent walk-through of his spectacular 130-photograph exhibition.

Color and black-and-white photos are mixed throughout the show. Culled from thousands of contact sheets and slides in Bingham's possession, the enlarged prints pay tribute to Bingham's eye -- his seemingly effortless ability to capture intimate moments in even large public events. It's a talent that's garnered him the American Society of Photographers International Award and the Kodak Vision Award as well as nabbing him the unusual honor (for a photojournalist) of being featured on a 1998 cover of Sports Illustrated, alongside Muhammad Ali, above a caption that reads: "Who's that guy with Howard Bingham?"

Renowned for his contributions to publications such as Ebony, Life and People, Bingham has shot numerous celebrities and public figures, among them Bill Cosby, Malcolm X, Sidney Poitier and O.J. Simpson (with whom he shared, coincidentally, a fateful plane ride to Chicago that got him called as a witness in Simpson's subsequent murder trial).

But it was Bingham's relationship with Ali that most profoundly influenced his career.

To the left of this wall, there are photos of a series of green-and-yellow signs with slogans from Mobutu's regime. They caught Bingham's eye while he was in Zaire in 1974 as Ali's personal photographer for the fighter's momentous bout with then-heavyweight-champion George Foreman, a match known thereafter as the "Rumble in the Jungle."

"I like this one," Bingham says, pointing and reading with just a hint of his famous stutter. "Black power is sought everywhere ... It is already realized in Zaire.' But you know, Mobutu was just talkin' smack and doin' something else."

In Leon Gast's 1996 Oscar-winning documentary about the fight, "When We Were Kings," Norman Mailer tells a story about Mobutu operating a prison underneath the very stadium in Kinshasa where the fight was held. Supposedly, Mobutu had rounded up all of the city's criminal element and executed a handful to show them who was boss.

"There probably was a prison underneath," says Bingham. "I never went down there to see. We didn't get into conversations like that there. I was in Ali's entourage, and people were always happy around Ali."

Bingham, a handsome black man with a warm smile and a salt-and-pepper beard, turns to the wall just to the right of Mobutu's -- one which displays a number of images of Ali. There could be no clearer contrast to the aloof and menacing Mobutu. The pictures depict Ali mugging for the cameras, resting in quiet contemplation on a couch and posed with a group of smiling schoolgirls, among others.

The energy radiating from these photos is the exact opposite of that coming from those of Mobutu. Ali is all warmth, humor and gregariousness. He is light to Mobutu's darkness. Bingham has captured Ali's generosity of spirit on film as effectively as he has captured Mobutu's rapaciousness.

"Mobutu actually died a little bit too late. In 1974, that guy was one of the wealthiest men in the world. In 1997 when he was overthrown, they said he was worth billions of dollars. The way he treated his country was really sad. When I was over there, I remember thinking I'd never seen soil so rich."

Looking at the photos of Ali kissing children and being followed everywhere by adoring crowds, it's easy to get the impression that had they been free to choose, the citizens of Zaire would have readily anointed Ali as their monarch.