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Capturing Bullfight Festival on Camera

By Olga Kuzmina

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Paco Chaves jumping to plunge a pair of banderillas, or metal-tipped spikes, into the back of a bull during a fight at Madrid's San Isidro Festival last year. **James Hill**

Ernest Hemingway famously observed that bullfighting is "the only art in which the artist is in danger of death." Anyone who doesn't believe him can visit the GMG Gallery's "Days of San Isidro," the latest exhibition from Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist James Hill, who traveled to Madrid and captured the annual festival of the Spanish bullfight in photographs that at times seem too dangerous to be true.

The exhibit opens with a series of quotations about bullfighting and gradually unfolds into a visual chronicle of this traditional ceremony. From the cattle farm to the fatal spearing, Hill trains his lens not only on the confrontation within the arena, but also on the seemingly peripheral aspects of the bullfight. The result is an experience that challenges the visitor's self-brought mental picture with images that are, as Hill says, "recognizable but at the same time unfamiliar."

Using fast shutter speeds, Hill emphasizes the "water-thin line that exists between injury and

art" with striking contrast. In one image, a perfectly poised bullfighter balances just out of reach of a charging bull, whose lumbering hooves barely miss the bow-topped flats of the matador; another focuses so sharply on the bull that we can see thick globs of blood and strings of saliva flying from the animal as he gets speared.

For other photographs, Hill switches to slow shutter speeds and a technique called "panning" to achieve a more emotional representation of bullfighting.

"The specter of death, and not just that of the bull's, hangs over every performance," Hill says. In the images where he employs more blurred techniques, the bullfighter becomes a mere wisp of glittering costume — which Spaniards call the "suit of light" — against a phantom-like black smear.

This dance with death can be seen in a series of three shots that witness the near-fatal goring of matador Julio Aparicio. The final shot, taken at the moment of penetration, shows the bull's horn piercing the underside of Aparicio's jaw and protruding from his mouth.

Serious subject matter is not new for Hill, who has photographed the conflicts in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq for The New York Times. A constant theme in his work, he says, is "the confrontation of two very separate and opposite forces: one of which is beauty, and one which is death."

Hill's current project follows his 2010 photo exhibit "Victory Day" about Russian World War II veterans, which won "Book of the Year" at the 23rd Moscow International Book Fair. His new book, "Days of San Isidro," is at Dom Knigi.

"Days of San Isidro" runs till June 26. GMG Gallery, 2A/1 Leontyevsky Pereulok. Metro Pushkinskaya. Tel. 626-8880, www.gmggallery.com.

See highlights of the Moscow exhibition at www.themoscowtimes.com/multimedia.

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