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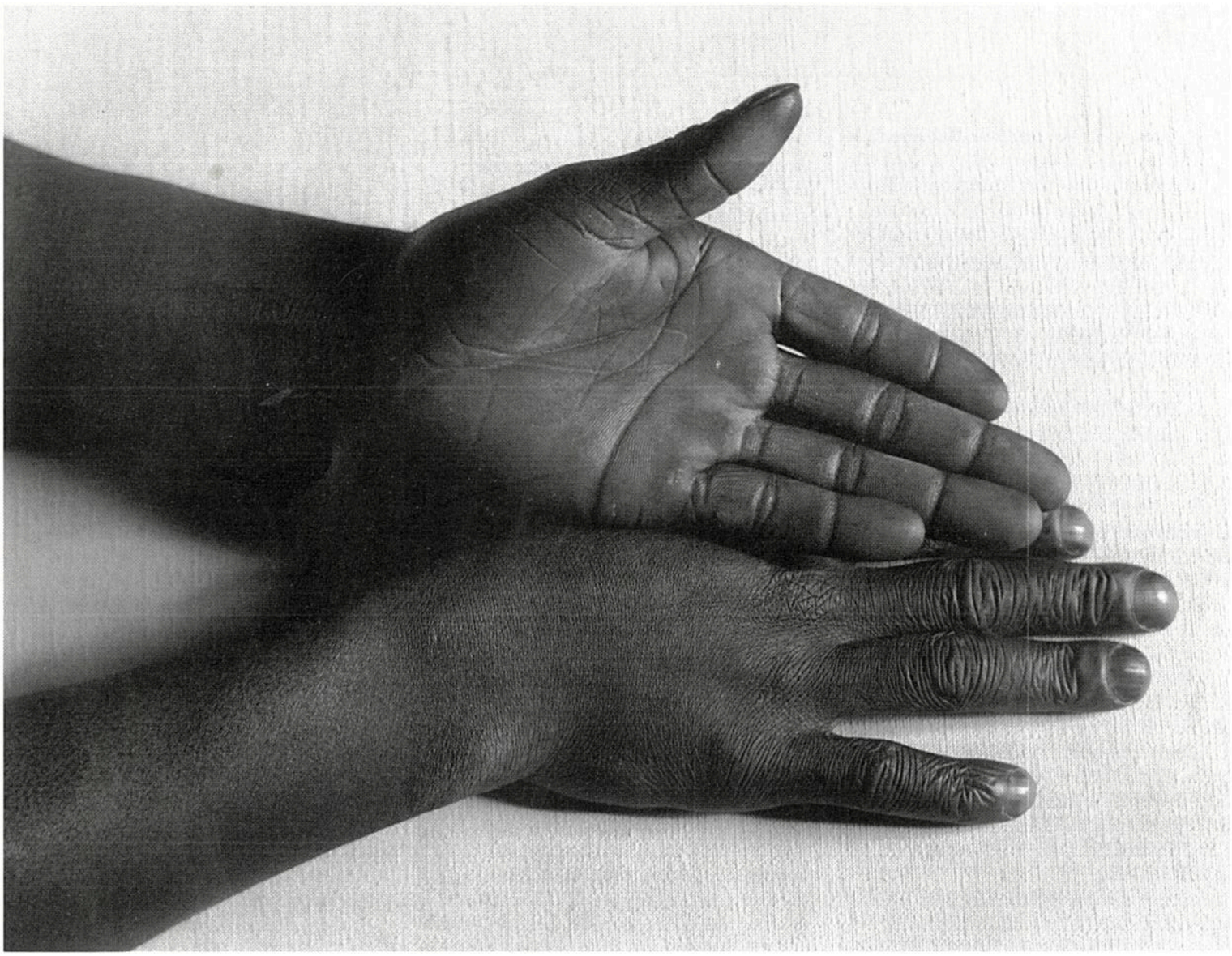
CAN THE WORLD KICK ITS OIL HABIT?

By Anjli Raval



From left: Untitled (Hands);
Untitled (Dan Dixon, Age 5); Untitled

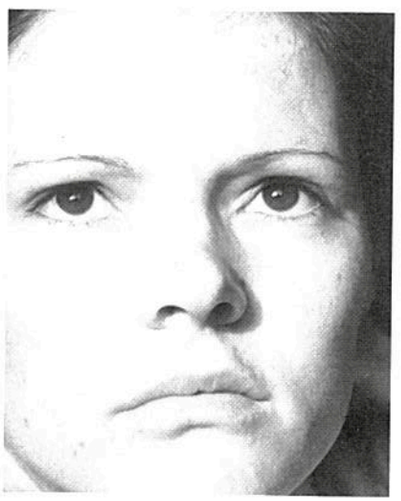
UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Dorothea Lange's most famous photographs, taken in the Depression-era American Dust Bowl, represent only a small part of her life's work. Delving through the artist's archives, Sam Contis discovered another side to the great documentarian.
By *Griselda Murray Brown*

'This desire to get closer, and to show these fragments of the body – I felt a connection in the way we worked'

Sam Contis

Clockwise from top: Helen cutting John's hair, 1952; California desert mountains, San Luis Obispo County, Feb. 1937; Imperial Valley, 1939; A very blue eagle. Along California highway, Nov. 1936; Untitled



DOROTHEA LANGE/SAM CONTIS, FROM 'DAY SLEEPER' BY DOROTHEA LANGE AND SAM CONTIS. COURTESY OF MACK; © THE DOROTHEA LANGE COLLECTION, THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA. GIFT OF PAUL S TAYLOR; LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

"I knew Dorothea Lange in the way that most people do," Sam Contis tells me. "I knew her as the author of 'Migrant Mother', as this - this word she didn't like - 'documentarian' of the Great Depression, of the Dust Bowl era."

I am speaking to Contis on the phone from New York. She never knew Lange - who died in 1965 - but having spent three years rifling through her photographic archives in Oakland, California, she has a new understanding of her vision.

"The work Lange is famous for actually comes from a short span in her lifetime," Contis explains. Iconic images such as "Migrant Mother" come mostly from the late 1930s, when she was working for the Resettlement Administration programme (later renamed the Farm Security Administration programme) as a photographer documenting migration and agriculture. But the photographs in Lange's archives, which span her entire career and have mostly never been seen publicly, reveal a very different artist.

Contis was struck by how contemporary the pictures seemed. Lange photographed family, strangers and landscapes in a strikingly modern way. Her cropped compositions - often fragments of bodies - have a stark, surreal quality.

Contis's new book, *Day Sleeper*, is a selection of Lange's photographs from the archive, but many of them could be Contis's own work. The two photographers have a mutual interest in certain visual motifs - such as hands - and cropped compositions. Contis notes that Lange's picture of her young son sleeping in the sun "felt very close" to one she herself might have made.

Looking at Lange's sequences of photographs, Contis began to understand how she worked. "I saw her getting closer and closer and closer [to the subject]," she says. "I've looked through my own contact sheets and I've watched myself make the same moves, the same steps and adjustments. This desire to get closer, and to show these fragments of the body - I felt a connection in the way we worked, and that surprised me."

When Contis first visited Lange's archive in 2017, her own *Deep Springs* project had just been published. A photographic study of an elite, all-male liberal arts college in a desert valley near Sierra Nevada, it shares Lange's interest in isolated body parts and bodies in the landscape.

Lange is "having a moment", Contis suggests, because her work resonates with our own political and environmental conditions. But she stresses that, for Lange, the personal was political. Even Lange's tender portrait of her other son as an adult, having his hair cut by his wife, is shot through with political currents. It was taken next to a valley whose homes were about to be cleared for the Monticello Dam. Lange the documentarian and Lange the family portraitist are one and the same. FT

"Day Sleeper: Dorothea Lange - Sam Curtis" is published by MACK