In Character

In Character

Anja Niemi

With 176 images

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THE WOMAN WHO NEVER EXISTED, OR ON THE SUBJECT
BY MAX HOUGHTON

The woman who never existed takes many forms. Once, she appears as an image in a mirror carefully positioned on a dressing table. Her face is entirely covered by hair, as though a wig has been misaligned, the face mistaken for the back of the head. Her body so evokes a chair as to invite the possibility of taking a seat. Draped green curtains imbue the scene with an acute performativity. In this seat of contemplation, or judgment, or power, the sitter is neither troubled by the action of standing, nor occupied with the sensual repose of sleeping. Becoming chair, she sits. We are witness only to her reflected image; the subject has gone missing, while the viewer occupies the absence, this place of dissimilitude, as well as taking the place of the image's creator. More than the faceless character, it is the illusory power of the photograph that takes centre stage in the opening image of *Do Not Disturb*, the first series presented in this monograph.

Anja Niemi creates a form of photographic self-portraiture that complicates our subjectivity in a way that recalls the literary genre of autofiction, in which autobiography and fiction fuse, creating uncertainty around the boundary between character and narrator. Even in traditional narrative fiction, the sense of 'being-two-to-speak' is pervasive; the relationship between the author and the narrator, or the narrator and other characters, is always stranger, more telepathic, than we might first imagine. The dichotomy of subject and author is destabilized by such modes, in which the concept of the self is bifurcated. Niemi utilizes this technique in her chosen medium to enable a series of encounters with an always divided self. Silently, her photographs pulse to the refrain '*je est un autre*', as so eloquently conveyed in Rimbaud's grammatical slippage.

Yet within Niemi's oeuvre, there is no real sense that we are looking at any 'self' that defines the author. In many ways, her imagery is better situated in the *tableau-vivant* genre of the nineteenth century, which intended to keep classical painting alive, though transformed. The creation of 'living pictures' was a popular parlour game in Victorian high society, and infused the emerging photographic practice with its emphasis on dressing up and metamorphosis. In 1874, Julia Margaret Cameron created an extraordinary series of tableaux to illustrate Tennyson's narrative poems about Arthurian legend, *Idylls of the King*, and the lyrical richness of her staging, borrowing much from pre-Raphaelite painting, succeeded in taking photography to a realm it had yet to occupy: that of art. Almost a century

and a half later, photographic tableaux are more reminiscent of film stills, moments of highly controlled anticipation, and it is precisely into this space that Niemi enters the picture.

A comparison with Cindy Sherman, particularly her seminal *Untitled Film Stills*, would seem to follow naturally, but her images are not a direct antecedent to Niemi's work. Part of a new generation, Niemi's characters are the kind of women beloved of, and objectified by, the film directors who shaped her own sense of aesthetics—the surrealist eyes of Lynch, Hitchcock and Bergman in particular. Early in Sherman's career, when the majority of her characters referenced the idealized women of the 1950s, her images raised the question of whether these characters—before the (fake) blood and (fake) vomit that would follow—reinforced the male gaze. Niemi's characters may well have been formed by the cinematic male gaze, but in her own hands, the only time the camera lingers longingly over their bodies is when they are shaped like missiles, in the many unexpected poses that punctuate her narratives. By turns rigid and graceful, the female body is reclaimed as a means for experiencing emotion, rather than an object upon which (male) pleasure might be enacted.

In the transient privacy of the hotel room of *Do Not Disturb*, Niemi stages her characters in a series of darkly humorous, or simply dark, gestural poses: swallow-diving onto a bed; presenting her head for packing into a suitcase; lying submerged and unresponsive in a bath, or prone in a hotel corridor. The final image in this series emanates from another mirror, the trifold kind that my mother kept on her dressing table, and that as a child I would angle on the left and right sides so I could see myself—my selves, my imaginary selves—repeating to infinity. Niemi uses the triptych to stage a disappearance. One fragmented body part. Another. An empty bed. All that remains is her absence. Photography is a useful medium for an exploration of absence and presence, in that the represented form is assumed to refer to something or someone 'real'. Niemi artfully plays with this idea, positioning the photograph as a kind of absented presence throughout her work.

These collisions of subject and object, of absence and presence, lead us into the territory of what Freud called 'the uncanny', which is as much an aesthetic strategy for Niemi as is her use of beauty. Freud's sense of the *unheimlich* had multiple definitions, originating in a sense of the unfamiliar (or 'un-homely'), but also referring to something that ought to be kept secret, even from—in fact especially from—the self, but has been inadvertently revealed. In *Starlets*, we are once again confronted with a reflection; from out of a vanity mirror, a woman in a blue dress stares straight ahead, directly into the camera. To the left of this apparition is a

disembodied arm, its white-gloved hand reaching for the telephone. From the position of the arm, it seems clear that the rest of the body—assuming there is one—is on the floor, unable to stand. The arm is clothed in the same blue fabric as the women in the mirror, but impossible to align with her reflected image. She is doubled.

Throughout *Starlets* and in her next series, *Darlene & Me*, Niemi creates ever more purposeful acts of doubling that animate the self's internal strife. Over and over, identical characters are pictured in conflict, as though one self is wounded and the other is the aggressor. Freud theorizes that the double plays two roles in relation to our sense of self: first, as part of the child's desire to be multiple, before the ego is established during primary development; and then as the super-ego, the critical voice that inhabits each of us, as a function of self-observation. When the double returns in its second incarnation, it enforces a return to a primitive state, rendering the double a represention of every thought that is unacceptable to the ego. Reminiscent of the self-destructive tendencies of Madeleine/Judy—both played by Kim Novak—in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, and Elisabet/Alma, whose boundaries blur bewitchingly in Bergman's *Persona*, the level of violent thought at work between the conflicted selves in *Starlets* and *Darlene & Me* spells double trouble.

Freud articulated his ideas about the uncanny and the double following a close reading of the literary works of E. T. A. Hoffmann, who repeatedly returned to the concept of the automaton in his writing. Hoffmann's most memorable female automata, who we meet in the terrifying story of *The Sandman*, was Olympia, the 'beautiful statue' with whom Nathanael fell in love, thus spurning his tender but intellectually challenging fiancée Klara. Yet it is at Klara that Nathanael aims the accusation 'You damned, lifeless automaton!', in protest at her attempt to disabuse him of his belief in the Sandman's nocturnal desire to steal his eyes (for Freud, a symbol of castration). Troubled Nathanael, descending into some kind of madness, believes in Olympia's love because of her 'yearning looks' and professes his adoration thus: 'You profound spirit, reflecting my whole existence.' It is never clear which, if any, of the female characters is real, and this is how the story unleashes its uncanny logic, forcing us to question the simple binary of the certainty of the flesh and lifelessness of the machine. The faces of Niemi's characters—Darlene, the Starlet, the Cowboy—are doll-like and expressionless in a way that masks any notion of self. Is their purpose to reflect *our* existence, to allow us to enter into the lives of others to better understand our own?

It is tempting to read Niemi's images as part of a solely gender-related discourse, though this would be a reductive interpretation of her work.

The characters in her photographs are indeed female, exclusively so, and—even more significantly—they are hyper-feminine, exaggerated versions of female icons. She is creating a performance of gender identity that would be familiar to a drag artist and in so doing, she is able to pose her central question: of conformity. While Niemi is not performing drag per se, she is commanding a similar aesthetic, more usually appropriated by gay men. Her characters remind us that women perform femininity every day, to greater or lesser degrees. One is not born a woman; one becomes one. One is not born with rhinestone eyelashes, but one can acquire them. Or as RuPaul has it: 'You're born naked and the rest is drag.'

The act of transformation—also in common with drag—is vital to Niemi, who uses the photographic image specifically for that purpose, and not only to transform the self. She has an acute eye for the pattern and fabric of elaborate interiors, and how her characters will interact with them. There are parallels with how wallpaper was used as a symbol of a suffocating domesticity and encroaching madness in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Gilman's female narrator, convalescing from a 'nervous depression', is advised by her husband, who is also her doctor, to rest, and is forbidden from writing so the rest-cure can work. Her only stimulation, therefore, is to analyse the yellow wallpaper in the bedroom to which she is confined. Over time, she becomes transfixed by it, and convinced that there is a woman trapped within. In an emotional frenzy, she tears and bites at the wallpaper, desperate to free the spirit—and herself. The story mirrors the author's real-life experience (though Gilman divorced her husband and continued to write), and its themes of isolation and control remain pertinent. Similarly, in at least two images by Francesca Woodman, an early influence for Niemi, the artist's soft, fragile body is engulfed by torn wallpaper and subsumed into the hard walls of the room. There is a sense that Niemi's tactics are similar, but that her motivation is to stage another disappearance, worlds away from dreary domesticity, and using her default setting: immaculate beauty. So ethereal is the woman who never existed that she becomes indistinguishable from the floral wallpaper in her exquisitely painted prison, for so it seems to become.

Niemi is at heart a storyteller, a creator of fictions. She crafts exquisite tableaux in which she can hide in plain sight. She draws on the familiar imagery of childhood games—the cowboy, the toy soldier—following a tradition in photography of constructing tightly controlled worlds in which fantasies can be carried out. Despite the doubles that permeate her work, despite the seven selves that constitute the Polaroid series *Short Stories*—or maybe precisely because of these phantom selves—there is a sense that Niemi's work operates as a poetics of isolation. Like butterflies pinned for display by the very wings that gave them flight, the better to see their lifeless beauty, the existence of each character seems transient, though they are trapped in the photographic frame for posterity.

In her 1905 novel, *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton wrote of tableaux vivants: 'To unfinished minds they remain, in spite of every enhancement of art, only a superior kind of wax-works; but to the responsive fancy they may give magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination.' There dwells the woman who never existed, maintaining her poker face at every attempt to define who or what or even whether she is...or is not.

ANJA NIEMI IN CONVERSATION WITH MAX HOUGHTON

MH Self-portraiture as a genre encompasses many visual approaches. Because you are always 'in character', where do you see your work fitting into this mode?

AN I've thought about this a lot, and the more I think about it, the more perplexing I find it. I have been putting myself into my work for almost twenty years, but I'm still not sure if the images I create are strictly self-portraits; it certainly isn't how I think about them. As a young artist, I found myself adrift, with lots of ideas but no coherent way to express them. Being dyslexic with social anxiety seemed like a huge stumbling block at first. When I discovered photography, I started to realize that I could tell stories without words, and I could translate the ideas in my head into something tangible. The camera was a tool to turn my ideas into reality. I knew immediately that I had to control every element of the process myself in order to feel comfortable. So that's the original reason why I am present in my photographs. Of course, the practice has developed into something much more than I could ever have imagined.

Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* was groundbreaking for me in how it visualized matters that I wanted to express in my work. I found the way in which Elisabet and Alma blur and become inseparable captivating. I definitely see the character as one person, with an imaginary other self to whom she addresses her thoughts, and I love the silence within the film (Elisabet does not speak). It's as though she cannot keep on living up to the expectations placed upon her as an actress, as a mother, as a woman, and retreats into her own private world. She finds freedom in silence, but it finally becomes as terrifying as her captive life. The film really made me question what or who I could definitely say is my 'self'. If my work were a series of self-portraits, I would have to understand myself better than I do. I suppose you could say my images are an exploration of where my self begins—and therefore self-portraiture of a kind—but please do not ask me where it ends!

MH Can you describe further how *Persona* made such a strong impression on you, and how the ideas awakened in you by the film have manifested in your work, especially in the series *Darlene & Me*?

AN It was the combination of striking visuals—the slow movements of the camera over the faces, the way the screen splits into two—and the strong portrayal of the character's inner turmoil that initially got to me. The subject of inner conflict runs repeatedly through my work, and is particularly vivid in *Darlene & Me*, which is a story about one woman's troubled relationship with herself. This series references the process of movie-making, in that I essentially constructed a short film from still images.

I have always liked to buy things that belonged to other people, and then to imagine how their lives might have been. In this instance, I found a case online that had been owned by an American beauty counsellor (a cosmetics salesperson) called Darlene. Inside were traces of the woman—receipts for her paperwork, including her signature, and even her fingerprints in make-up samples. What devastated me was that the receipts recorded sales made to herself. In August 1960, Darlene sold herself a jar of 'Liquid Beauty' and one 'Temptress Hairspray'. Of course, I can't know what happened, but my strong feeling was that she did not succeed in her role. She was both saleswoman and client, having this conversation and making transactions with herself. This led me to think about the relationships we have with ourselves, and their complexity, as Bergman understood too. We are our best friend and our worst enemy; at times, I can't think of anyone I hate more than myself. Because of Bergman, I wanted to set Darlene in Sweden, but then I found that extraordinary location in California. It was perfect: the loneliness of that house in the desert. light but bleak and solitary.

MH The contemporary trend of the 'selfie' is changing our understanding of the term self-portraiture. Do you think this might affect the perception of your work?

AN When I started using myself in my images the word self-portraiture had different connotations, associated with artists such as Lorna Simpson, Cindy Sherman, Francesca Woodman, Frida Kahlo, Claude Cahun, even Rembrandt. Following that lineage, I could have been proud to call myself a self-portraitist, if I were sure that is what I was. Today it's very different, and my confidence in the word is gone. A selfie is a photograph one person takes of oneself, and is part of a culture that I do not covet. A self-portrait is, or can be, something else entirely, and has so many more possibilities for interpretation, but as the two concepts are merging, I feel I am shying away from both terms. I am often tempted not to state that it's me in my work, for fear of being misunderstood. I feel very conflicted about it. I want to ask questions about identity, and about what is to be a woman, to be human, but not about what it is to be me.

MH Cindy Sherman certainly dominates this genre. Partly because of the time her work was being made, it was overtly political in relation

to reclaiming the male gaze. Your aesthetic strategy is very different, but there is some sense in which you are continuing this critique. Why do you think using beauty is an effective strategy now?

AN I grew up watching *Twin Peaks*. My friends and I were absolutely obsessed with it. I love how David Lynch blends surrealism and beauty to create such unforgettable characters and storylines. It formed me creatively. I try to use a combination of humor, honesty, and a beautiful aesthetic. I want the image to be alluring, to draw people into it. The aesthetic doesn't mean it's less complex, or even less political, though that's not a word I tend to use about my images. Pain doesn't have to look ugly or disturbing. I very consciously try to make my work as beautiful as possible, but sometimes I start questioning it, and wonder if I would feel as self-conscious about my choices—especially about using myself in my work—if I were a man?

MH What we are seeing increasingly in TV, film and art is the foregrounding of female narratives and use of wit to subvert the dominant (and predominantly male) cultural narratives. Do you find it frustrating that such work may not be taken seriously precisely because it is offered on entirely female terms?

AN I think that such narratives are being valued, and there are many talented female directors with strong voices, but it is still a very male-dominated industry. I hope that by playing both active and passive roles in my work, inside and outside the photograph—by being both voyeur and subject—I can be a little subversive. It's crucial that the humor and irony in my work come through; it makes it so much more relatable. It's easier to admit you want to throw your head in a suitcase than to acknowledge what the image really means. Often when I am creating the images, I find that the actual production can be humorous in itself. When I was shooting 'The Garden Hose' I was alone, acting out a fictional water fight in the middle of the desert. It was well over 40 degrees that day, and that is intense when you're working in a big wig and an old synthetic nightgown, but I remember laughing at myself as I played it out one character at a time, trying to look poised yet ambushed by a garden hose.

MH Do you feel that a woman, as the 'seen other', the subject—still—of the male gaze, is always to an extent 'in character'?

AN I think women's roles have been defined very often by men, but I am just as interested in a man who feels he doesn't fit into his expected place in society. I have toyed with the idea of creating a male character, or someone more gender-ambiguous—I am just waiting for the right role. I am lucky

that I have been able to maintain total control of my imagery, though whether I have total control of my role in general I am not certain. But if we are always to an extent 'in character', I imagine there are men who can relate to that too.

MH The way in which you work seems strikingly similar to that of a novelist. A character seems to appear in your imagination, almost fully formed. How do you develop your characters, and create interior narratives for them?

AN My characters all have a source of inspiration, usually some kind of object or possession, like with Darlene's beauty case. I'm obsessed with all these possessions that once belonged to someone, but have become worthless and been discarded. I want to give them a new life, with a new owner. Other people's things are an instant character trigger. My costume shed is filled with beautiful old things that have all worked, or will work, their way into a story.

Once I can see my character I start collecting her belongings—clothes, objects, accessories, wigs; anything she would have had that can help me form her. For each project, I clear my shed, and then start filling it with my new character. By the time I'm ready to start shooting, I have a pretty good feeling of who she is, and am excited to start acting it all out.

With Darlene, I found so many signs of uneasiness among her possessions that led me to picture her very clearly, trapped in this exchange between the beauty counsellor and the woman who wishes to be made more beautiful. For my series *Short Stories*, I created seven characters, who were also each inspired by a single object: rhinestone lashes, a police booking sheet with fingerprints, a Russian gun holster, six 1940s dolls with loose limbs... Each object led to a character and a chapter in my book.

MH Your series *The Woman Who Never Existed* very successfully explores the tension inherent in the idea of performing the self. The title is especially evocative and could perhaps apply to all your work. Do you sometimes want to disappear?

AN Oh, all the time, but not forever. *The Woman Who Never Existed* was inspired by an interview I was reading about an Italian actress. Her words jumped off the page: 'Away from the stage, I do not exist.' She said she lived for her audience and that she had no desire to talk to interviewers. She was an actress, not a socialite. As I read that, a character came to life, her story inspired by the idea of a woman who only exists when looked at. It's a very textured series; I used feathers, silks, velvet, floral fabrics, gold, and Italian frescoes to create the shell of her world. If you take it away, there's nothing.

Her face is mask-like and expressionless; it's as though her surroundings create her. I found a box with insects carefully pinned to its interior. It filled me with the same feeling as my character. A kind of perfect deadness.

MH In your series *She Could Have Been A Cowboy*, one image is called 'The Girl of Constant Sorrow'—is this a reference to the Joan Baez song of the same name, itself kind of an answer to her lover Bob Dylan's 'Man of Constant Sorrow'? I wonder if a man full of sorrow would be considered 'deep', but a woman might just be considered unstable. What is your motivation for the *Cowboy* character?

AN The title does reference that song, which felt very descriptive of my character's state, and also fitting as an old Country Western song. I imagine that if what you want is to be in pants and leather, but instead you are forced to wear lace and nylon stockings, it would fill you with a sorrow that doesn't go away. My character's cowboy life is all an illusion, made up of images from her favourite Western movies. The series shifts between reality and imagination; a combination of what she is and what she wants to be. Maybe I was playing out my own fantasy a little with my cowboy. I have certainly never enjoyed dressing up as any character more than this one! But to be honest, my character's dream could have been many things; this story is not really about being a cowboy. It's about wanting to be another. I wanted something that could stand for a vast number of things, a symbol for all those dreams not being fulfilled, whether they are to do with sexuality, gender, religion, or lifestyle. Big or small, I think a lot of us have something we wish we could do or be, but something prevents us. Like when a small girl wants to play the king in the school play or a boy wants to have a princess makeover at Disney World, and someone tells them they can't. The whole series is a nod of compassion to everyone who lives a life different from the one they actually want.

MH There is a great sense of transformation with all the characters in your work, who might be described as ultra-feminine. You work incredibly hard at every detail of your costumes and the overall look. What are your influences for this?

AN I have an admiration for drag queens; I really relate to their processes of transformation. The world of drag in an endless source of inspiration, and has influenced my characters, who are often exaggerated; I think it makes them more relatable, so you can project whoever you want on to them. I always say I hate to be photographed, which sounds like such a contradiction, but the 'me' I photograph in costume has been transformed.

This is essential. The performing of my characters is a need for me. Without them, I would be trapped in a world where I have conformed. You could take away my camera, but if you took away my ability to transform myself, and that world I have created, I don't think I'd cope.

I remember the first time I saw *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, and being so grateful, so happy, at seeing such colour, such exuberance, such life. I remember the desert wind blowing a cloud of gossamer sequins into the sky and thinking: I want that.

MH Doubling appears as a device in many of your images and series. It is a way to express this sense of divided or conflicted self—*je est un autre*, as Rimbaud put it—and seems essential to your work. In Freud's writings on the uncanny, the double can assume various forms, such as a shadow, a reflection, or the superego, observing the self. Who is the other self in *Starlets*?

AN I do often multiply myself, sometimes to examine inner conflicts, or to show the contrast between what we choose to show and who we are. With *Starlets* I wanted to look at how the image of the ideal woman has developed —or otherwise—since the 1950s. There are similarities with the perfect images of the 'selfie' culture in my *Starlets* photographs, which makes me uncomfortable. I created these female icons with perfect fronts in flawless environments, but the use of the double allows me to disrupt the idealized narrative, to show some of the darkness. The other self is the relentless internal dialogue that inhabits us all—telling us to do one thing when we want instinctively to do another. There is a violence, or at least a wildness, to this voice or other self.

MH Your references are more filmic than photographic, and your practical process is akin to that of a film-maker. How did that develop?

AN That severed ear, found in the grass in *Blue Velvet*... It's an image that just never left me. As a child, I secretly wanted to be an actress. Looking back now, it's almost funny how it turned out. I was too shy and nervous, and I'm not good with words—so I quickly realized that acting was very far from something I could do. Now I create all my dream roles and cast myself in every one of them; it's like acting for introverts. Wim Wenders' *Pina*, a film about the choreographer Pina Bausch, was also an essential influence for me. It was Pina's way of using the body poetically to talk about everyday things that really helped me create the images of the women in *Do Not Disturb*— some of the costumes channel *Blue Velvet*, but the movement as she falls onto the bed is pure *Pina*. I am no dancer, but I will act out the scene hundreds of times if necessary to capture the right gesture or movement.

But perhaps the most important lesson I took from *Pina* is a moment in the film where Pina is talking to her dancer: 'You have to be crazier', she says. All my life I feel I have had to be less crazy; more put together. But I took that advice exactly as she said. When it comes to my work, I know it's good if I'm as crazy as I want to be.

The other major influence in my work—and it's obvious, of course—is Hitchcock. I paid homage to one of his heroines in 'The Taxidermist', in which my character feels inseparable from the stuffed raven. I have always loved horror movies, and with Hitchcock, it's about how he combines so many beautiful details with unsettling tension. Maybe the most unsettling thing of all is the thought of Tippi Hedren shooting that final attack scene in *The Birds* with the ravens, gulls and crows, which indeed were not stuffed at all. Overall, much of what I have taken from film relates to surrealism. I didn't learn it as an academic discourse; I understood its meanings through the visual medium of film, and more than anyone else from David Lynch, the way he explores the impulses of the unconscious. It suits me better to retain control through creating single images, while using the skills of narrative and sequencing that I drew from the moving image. I find it interesting that Bergman actually used still images in the montage sequence at the beginning of *Persona*. Even in film, certain emotions are better expressed as a still image, or in strange, static juxtapositions. In a photographic series, each image has to work very hard, without the aid of script or soundtrack, like a very slow, silent movie.

MH Your series *Short Stories* marks something of a departure from your typical way of working. What inspired this change of direction?

AN One of my proudest achievements is learning the set of skills needed to become a photographer. Until I studied photography, I had never really felt I was good at anything. Back then it was all analogue, I was shooting medium format with a Polaroid and it felt really special. I was in love with it—the sound of the shutter, the smell of the Polaroid, the excitement of waiting to see the result. With the advance of digital photography, which meant anyone could make good pictures, I started to feel a little lost. I wanted to go back to where I started; to measure light, and peel back film—to recall the time when photography was precious. So I decided to spend a year working solely with Polaroids. I love the fact that only one can exist. It was such a departure for me to submit to the informality of the smaller format, and I found it really satisfying to travel so far, to work so hard, and to end up with 140 tiny objects.

MH Although your locations range from Venice to the California desert, most of your work takes place in your shed. Your two young daughters must find it the most magical place, where ordinary things can be transformed. How far does your work become part of your family life?

AN For me it's not work or life as a binary—everything is both. My daughters love going into my shed; they bring their friends, too. I love it when they are interested, and they really are—in the cowboy costumes, the wigs, the silicon finger, in all of it. The shed became a necessity, because my costumes and collections were taking over the house. My brother built it for me. It's quite simple, but it's nice to have a space separate from our house where my characters can exist. As the shed starts to transform, gradually filling with all the possessions I have acquired, I start to transform too. It's where the characters are formed and where they come to life. My process is not so extreme that I inhabit my character at all times; she can stay in the shed! The girls definitely affect the way I work; I really like when I can give them examples of reaching for what you want, and making it happen. For example, for the trip to Utah, I was so nervous about driving alone, and I told my daughters how scared I was and we made maps together so they could follow my route each day when I was away. They can sense when I am anxious, but they are equally so proud of me when I have achieved the thing I found most terrifying.

MH Famously, you always work alone. Why is this important for you?

AN The best way to answer this question is to tell you about my friend, a former ballet dancer. He loved to dance, but suffered from terrible stage fright. He said he always dreamed he could dance on stage with no audience. There is a joy in sharing my work, but the purest joy is in making it.

When I began making photographs, the idea of the images reaching such a wide audience, in fact any audience, was not on my mind. I was just doing what came naturally to me. I have often puzzled over how I ended up doing what I do, but looking back to the beginning it makes sense. I was using my body to tell stories in a setting that made me comfortable, alone. I admit I am very controlling in my work; I am a perfectionist. But at least in my case, when I am directing my characters the only person I'm controlling is myself.

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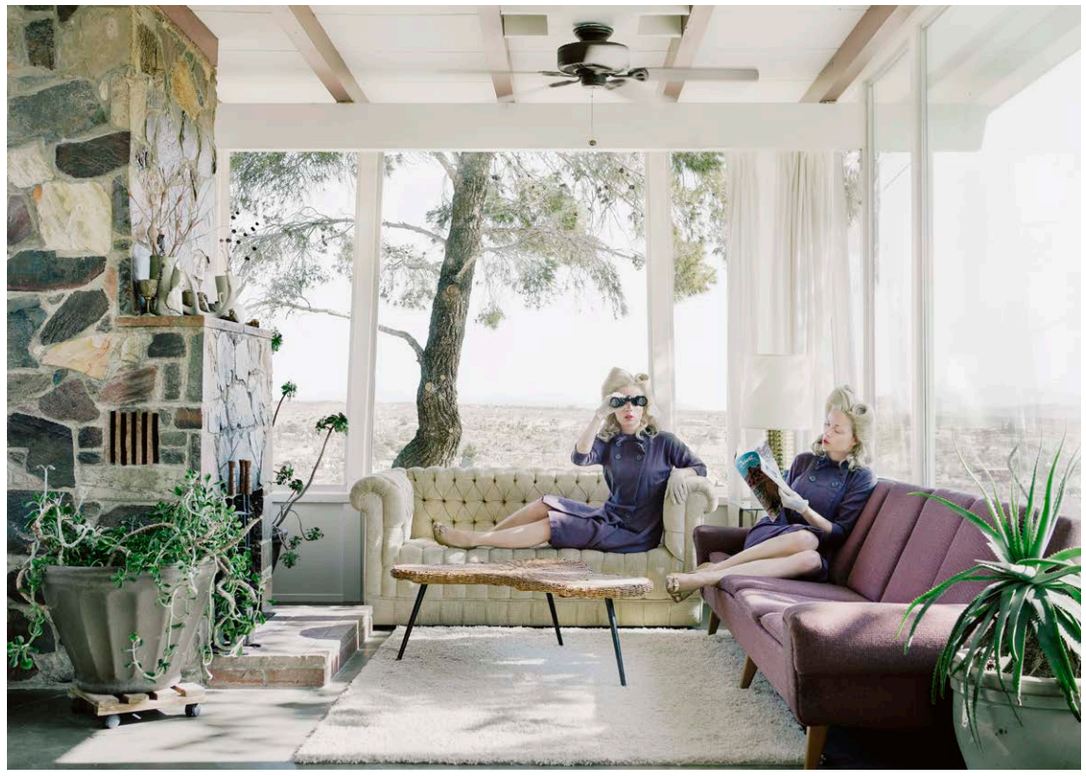

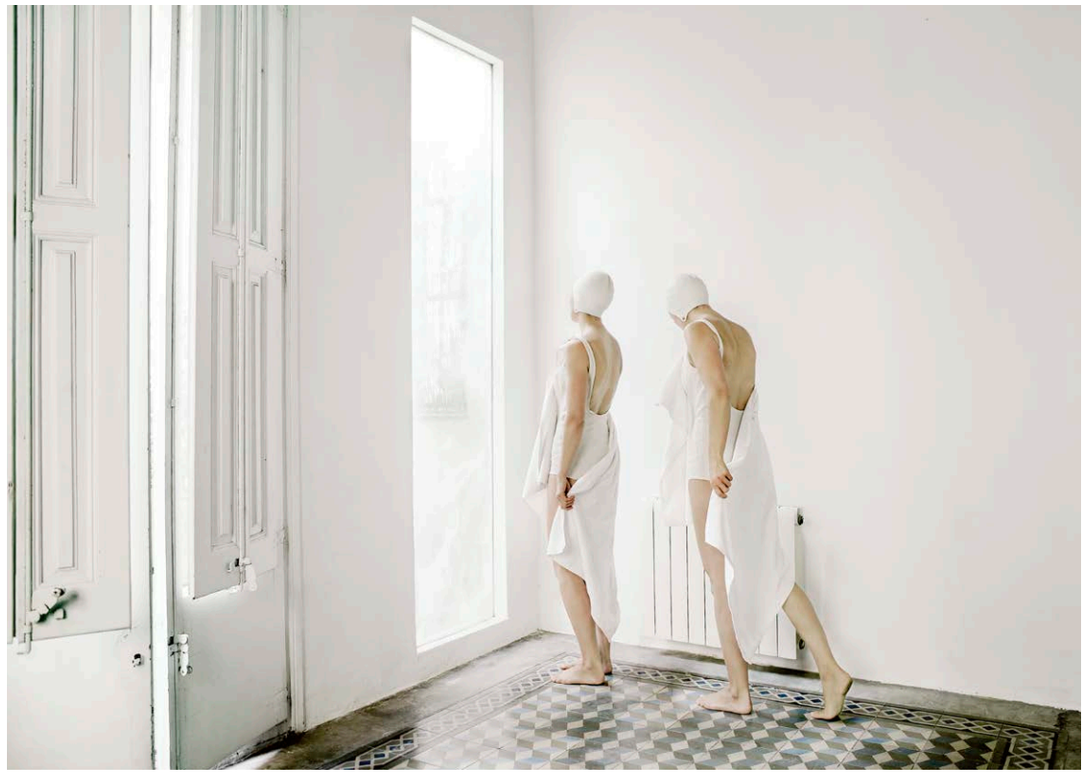

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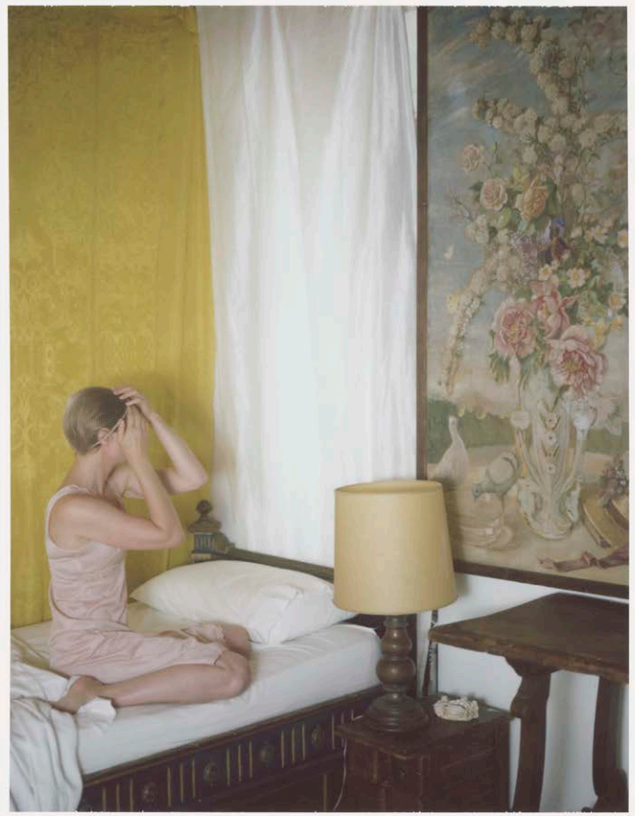
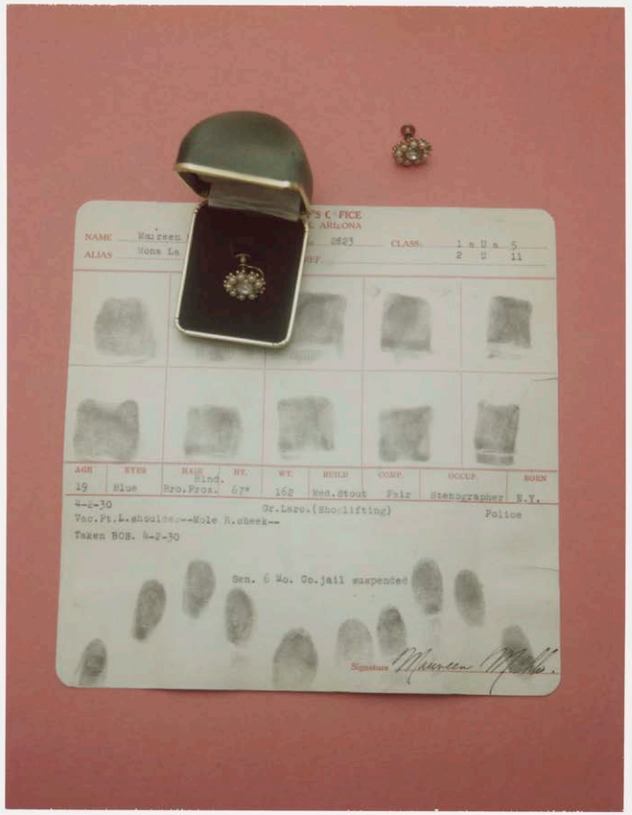



NEW EXTRA LONG NEW
FOR EYE BEAUTY
LASHETTES
COSTUME LASH
Lashettes
COSTUME
LASH
THE NATURAL LASH
MADE WITH ADHESIVE
READY TO PUT ON

VISITOR FOR T
IN YEL
THE TETONS ABOUT 7 A.M.


THIS BAG SHOULD BE
RETURNED TO
UNION BANK
CALIFORNIA
4-78


NAME Maureen
ALIAS Nona La
CLASS 1 a U a 5
2 U 11
AGE 19
EYES Blue
HAIR Brn.Frzs.
HT. 67"
WT. 162
BUILD Med.Stout
COMP. Fair
OCCUP. Stenographer
BORN N.Y.
4-2-30
Vac.Pt.L.shoulder--Mole R.cheek--
Taken BCS. 4-2-30
Dr.Larc.(Shoplifting)
Police
Sen. 6 Mo. Co.jail suspended
Signature Maureen Mathis

– v –

THE WOMAN WHO NEVER EXISTED

2017

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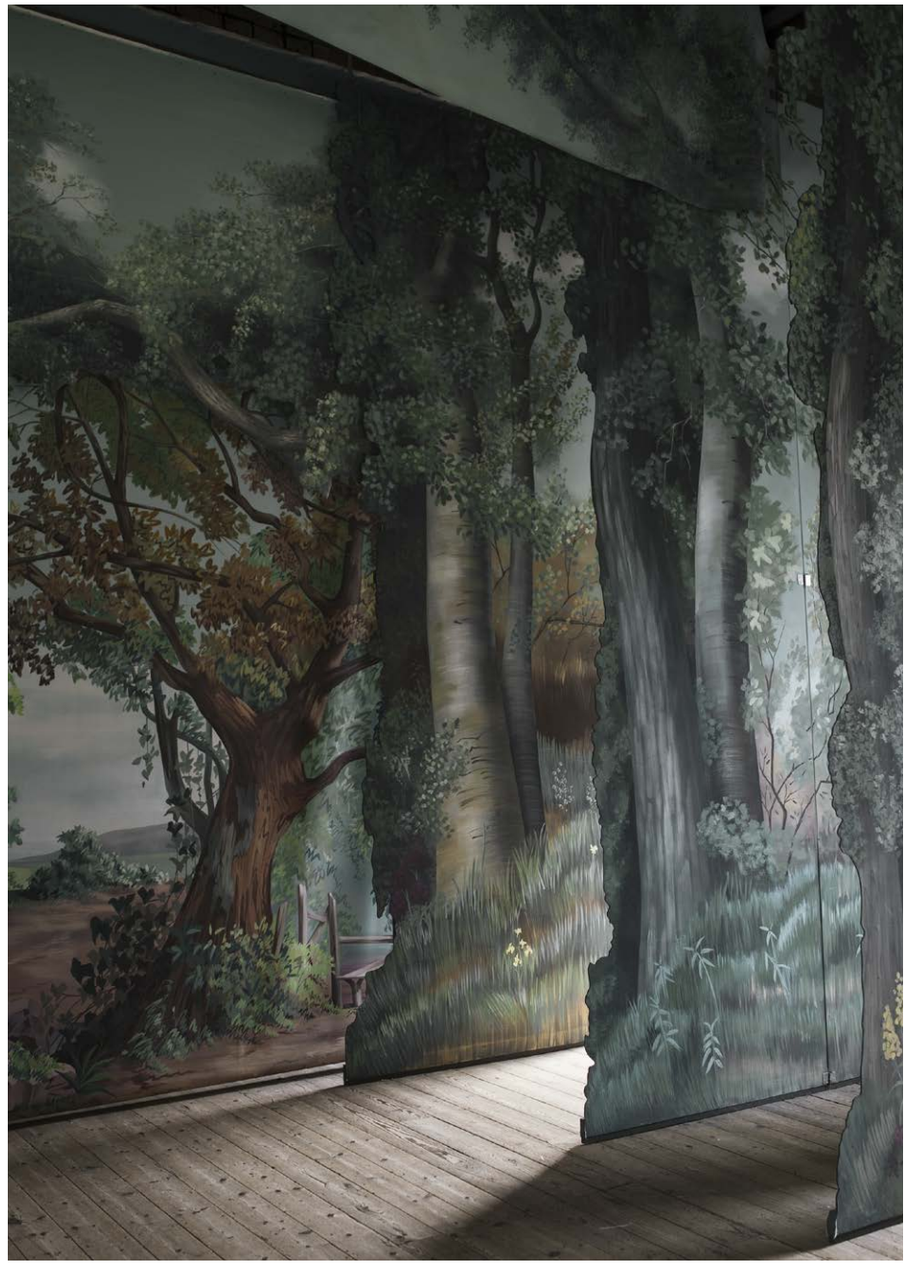

– VI –

SHE COULD HAVE BEEN A COWBOY

2018

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CANYONLANDS
MOTEL

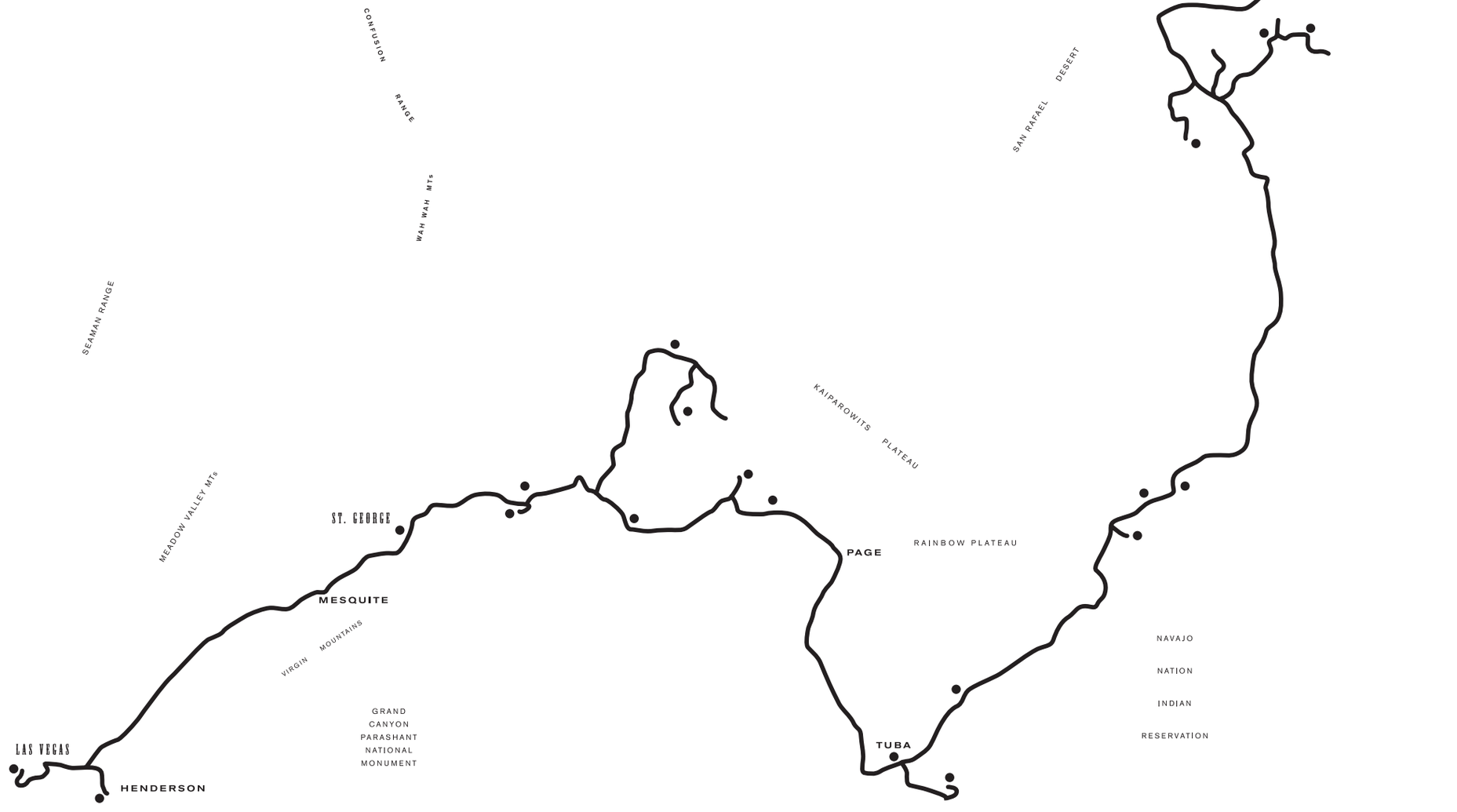
THE MAP

The route for
She Could Have Been A Cowboy

* * *

ARIZONA — COLORADO
NEVADA — UTAH

* * *



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To Thomas, Edith and Lucy for all their love.