

THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE

By Hanya Yanagihara

THE WORK OF *FEMALE PHOTOGRAPHERS* IS BEING SOUGHT AND COLLECTED MORE THAN EVER. WE ASKED SEVEN TO MAKE *SELF-PORTRAITS* THAT SHOW WHAT OTHERS SEE IN THEM—AND WHAT THEY SEE IN THEMSELVES.

What does a woman look like? For most of the history of art—that is to say, the history of the world—women didn't get to decide. The fact that it was men who showed us what women looked like (because we see people as we have been taught to see them) isn't surprising. What *is*, however, is how similarly females were depicted, across centuries and across cultures. Whether it was an Edo-era woodblock printer in Japan or a Renaissance painter in Italy, the woman of the artist's imaginings was elusive, her gaze lowered or dreamy and unfocused. Her anatomy—all that the artist didn't have—was rendered lovingly, longingly. But her thoughts

remained hers: Her face was opaque, a testament to woman's fundamental otherness, her unknowability. (Think of Ingres's *Odalisque*, her expression shuttered and her eyes heavy-lidded, or Sargent's *Madame X*, her face turned sharply away.) What, in the end, is the Mona Lisa but a portrait of feminine inscrutability?

Which is why these images—self-portraits by female artists—are so striking. You have the sense that these women aren't being looked at so much as looking back. There is an understood participation here: They know that you'll be looking at them, but before you do, they are looking at you. Instead of mystery there is self-possession, frankness, certainty—even in some cases provocation. Collectively they could be read as an announcement, one more powerful for its plainness: Here I am. Look at me. Consider the forthrightness of Mona Kuhn's half-smile and the lift of her chin, or Sophie Elgort's cool regard, her camera positioned just below her sternum, like a shield. Even when the artist's face isn't present—as in Jessica Craig Martin's self-portrait told through objects, her jacket nearly eclipsed by her camera and the names of the subjects she has been hired to document—the artist herself is. Many of the women in this portfolio are fashion photographers. Their job is, in essence, to sell fantasy women to other women. But in these pictures nothing is being sold—they are declarations of the self.

Being a photographer is often an act of disappearance, and for many years (still, in many places) so too was being a woman. Both demand a certain amount of hiding and a great deal of patience. A photographer's power, like a woman's, comes from her ability to observe and collect information, to not frighten or startle the object of her scrutiny, to make that object believe that he is the one with the power. It would be too pat, too reductive to declare this a golden age of female representation, but what is undeniable is that we are living in an era in which many groups of people who were never allowed to depict themselves are having the long-fought-for, hard-won opportunity to do just that. These photographs remind us that the art of representation is really a conversation. All we have to do is pay attention. «

MONA KUHN

Kuhn is a fine art and fashion photographer celebrated for her serene large-format nudes. Turning the lens on herself "was a meditative process," she says. "I tried a few angles until I felt one or two really captured a sliver of who I am."

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