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4b

4a. Rania Matar, *Alae (with the mirror)*, Beirut Lebanon, 2020, 19 x 24 inches. Archival pigment ink print, edition of 8. 4b. Rania Matar, *Alae (with the mirror)*, Beirut Lebanon, 2020, 19 x 24 inches. Archival pigment ink print, edition of 8. 5. Keisha Scarville, *Untitled (Surrogate Skin)*, 2016, (c) Keisha Scarville, image courtesy of Huxley-Parlour. 6. Anette (25 Futures Series), 2017 © Sarah Waiswa.

4 She RANIA MATAR

Rania Matar's (b. 1964) series *She* (2017-2021) features young women in the contrasting cultural settings of Lebanon and the United States. Despite these varied geographies, the subjects adhere to a shared sense of femininity, expressed through composed self-presentation. It is fair to say that because of the overwhelming representation of "femme" women, the series examines gender identity across cultures.

Alae (with the mirror), Beirut Lebanon (2020), is the first in a selection of 11 images on display at Obscura Gallery, Santa Fe. It depicts a young woman with a hand-held mirror, located on the upper floor of a high-rise building. The figure faces the Beirut skyline whilst pointedly returning the photographer's gaze through the mirror. She watches herself being watched. *Alae* could be a metaphor for coming-of-age in a contemporary world – hypervisible through the lens.

Throughout the series, the subjects participate in the photo-

graphic process, exhibiting agency in the way they are seen. They arrange themselves in flattering poses along rocks and deteriorating architecture, letting their hair drape and catch the light, echoing a mainstream editorial take on beauty. *She* can be differentiated from fashion portraiture, however, by its celebration of the individual, not just their aesthetic.

Matar illustrates the strength and power of her collaborators through their connection to sensuality. They engage with the material of their surrounding worlds: resting in water and standing barefoot on the rocky earth. Walking through the exhibition brings to mind those working in environmental portraiture, such as Deana Lawson and Jess T. Dugan, who create images that honour individuality whilst informing the viewer about the struggles and joys related to specific communities. In *She*, the focus, perhaps, is on forging connections between subjects, rooted in the physicality of the body.

Words
Angie Rizzo

Obscura Gallery, Santa Fe
25 August - 31 October

obscuragallery.net

5 I Belong to This 17 WOMEN AND NON-BINARY ARTISTS

I Belong to This, curated by American photographer Justine Kurland, brings together 17 women and non-binary artists to explore a sense of self and belonging. The title is derived from Ariana Reines' poem *Save the World*, and in Kurland's words, "can be read as a declaration of identification, a promise of solidarity, or a blurring of self into multitudes."

The artists explore unique lived experiences, be it immigration, religion, family history or motherhood, to create a body of work that considers both personal narratives and the artists' identities as photographers. This can be seen clearly in Jennifer Calivas' series of *Self-Portraits/I While Buried*, taken remotely from under a pile of sand. The artist's hand pokes up from under the earth, grasping a remote cable, reminiscent of Ana Mendieta's *Earth Body* (1972-1985).

Moving through the exhibition, Naima Green, Cheryl Mukherji and Annie Hsiao-Ching Wang are highlights. Green's *Pur.suit* (2019) is a series of nine vibrant prints

of the queer community presented as playing cards. The work is an expansion of Cathy Opie's *Dyke Deck* (1995), in which "couples were hearts, jocks were clubs, femmes were diamonds; and butches were spades." Mukherji's *I Held My Mother* (2020) reworks an old photograph with threadwork.

Meanwhile, Wang's *The Mother as a Creator* comprises a series of collective self-portraits taken over many years with her son. The images act as a mise en abyme, evoking a time-tunnel through layered photographs. They appear at increments over the years, with the photographs filling the shot and accumulating. The work arose a question Wang posed to herself 20 years ago: "I love children, but why am I so afraid of becoming a mother?" The compositions play on this sense of altered identity, as the pictures denote someone new.

This seminal show offers something for everyone, irrespective of their identities, experiences or beliefs – reflecting, with nuance, what it means to belong, to ourselves, or otherwise.

Words
Shyama Laxman

Huxley-Parlour, London
14 September - 16 October

huxleyparlour.com

6 Lips Touched with Blood SARAH WAISWA

For *Lips Touched with Blood*, currently on display as part of the 2021 Bristol Photo Festival, Kenya-based documentary and portrait photographer Sarah Waiswa (b. 1980) has responded to the British Empire and Commonwealth Collection at the Bristol archives. The goal was to re-create the photos taken by British travellers of African people between 1860 and the 1970s and, in doing so, disrupt the colonial narrative. The show title comes from the caption of a portrait taken in 1953, after an alleged Mau Mau cleansing ceremony shortly after the Lari massacre. There is much ambiguity in both the photograph and its caption, whilst the portrait demonstrates a sense of simultaneous power and defiance.

Waiswa digitally manipulates the archival images, leaving only a silhouette of individuals in the composition. In the age of social media – when we are constantly putting images out into the ether, and each more filtered than the last – blacking out subjects is a statement. Waiswa wants the viewer

to consider who these people are, or were. What expressions did they have on their faces? Why have they been removed here? Metaphorically, it also speaks to the erasure of the culture and identity of Africans under British rule.

Next to these doctored archival images are stunning contemporary portraits of young African men and women, who are embracing the aesthetics of culture in the form of cornrows and cowry shells, with a tinge of western influence as evidenced in their clothes, makeup and other accessories.

These young people – with their confident smiles and a sense of calm – provide a kind of filler to the silhouettes. The message seems to be that if you want to "look" at African people, see these faces filled with pride and defiance, and none that have been forced. Ultimately, Waiswa normalises the act of looking, if only we could view each other without the lens of colour. It's interesting, moreover, that some sitters wear sunglasses, stopping the viewer from locking eyes.

Words
Shyama Laxman

Bristol Museum
and Art Gallery
18 May - 31 October

bristolmuseums.org.uk