

A new exhibition showcases the work of 12 female photographers seeking to portray women embracing nature in a powerful and self-exploratory way

Live Dangerously

Words by Laurence Butet-Roch

"Women's bodies have continuously been seen through a male gaze, as they recline passively or seductively amongst lush vegetation, flora, and fauna," observes Orin Zahra, assistant curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington DC. Featuring the works of 12 female photographers, the exhibition *Live Dangerously*, on view at the museum from 19 September to 20 January, confronts this gendered vision. In the show, "women set off fireworks, climb trees, skinny-dip, explore rocky terrains, green valleys, deserts, and turbulent bodies of water, freely and boldly embracing the sublime elements of nature," says Zahra, highlighting the diversity of dynamic relationships women create with their natural surroundings beyond the tired tropes that associate nature and womanhood with sexuality and fertility.

- 1 *California Desert*, 1948 © Louise Dahl-Wolfe/Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents.
- 2 *Jungle Gym*, 2001 © Justine Kurland. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.
- 3 *Weimar*, from the series *100 Little Deaths*, 1998 © Janaina Tschäpe.

At the heart, spanning multiple galleries in a floor-to-ceiling installation, is Janaina Tschäpe's *100 Little Deaths* [3], displayed in its entirety for the first time. During her travels between 1997 and 2002, the German artist produced photographs where she performed her own demise, lying face-down in different sites across countries and continents. Some locations are popular tourist destinations and are easily recognisable, such as the megalith human figures of Easter Island or the temples reclaimed by the roots of Banyan trees in Angkor Wat. Others are more mundane, some even intimate, taken in private spaces. The inherent drama in the captured act lets our imagination run wild, free to craft stories inspired by the cues in the pictured surroundings that would account for the presence of the inert body. Tschäpe's repose is not a welcoming, alluring one, where the female form is to be marvelled at as if just another feature of a stirring landscape. Her apparent fall encourages us to consider questions of ephemerality and permanence, and the ongoing transmutation between those two states.

Seen in relation to works from her predecessors and contemporaries, including Ana Mendieta, Louise Dahl-Wolfe [1], Rania Matar [4] and Xaviera Simmons, amongst others, a conversation emerges. In the 1970s, Mendieta made outlines of her body with gunpowder and sulphur, before igniting them, etching her silhouette violently on the ground, here too evoking mortality and our organic connection to Earth. Earlier, in the 1940s, Dahl-Wolfe, often credited as the pioneer of environmental fashion photography, asked her models to pose in exotic settings, such as the Mojave Desert in California, hoping to fuse the contours of the land with that of the human figure, and thereby highlighting the tensions between the two: the similarity of forms, the antagonism of an environment that can hardly sustain life. More recently, photographers such as Lebanese-born American citizen Rania Matar, and African-American Xaviera Simmons, are infusing the genre with political statements, considering how geographies affect identity and who has access to which type of spaces.

"While traditionally women artists were pejoratively associated with genres that

