

LIVE DANGEROUSLY

September 19, 2019–January 20, 2020

Rania Matar,
*Rayven, Miami
Beach, Florida*,
from the series
"SHE," 2019;
Archival pigment
print, 37 x 44 in.;
Courtesy of the
artist and Robert
Klein Gallery

Orin Zahra

How can our planet's physical terrain enable women's self-exploration, expression, and empowerment? In *Live Dangerously*, twelve photographers interrogate this question by positioning female figures in natural surroundings to suggest provocative narratives. As a pendant exhibition to *Judy Chicago—The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction*, this presentation similarly delves into themes surrounding women's bodies and the natural world. It is drawn from the museum's extensive collection of modern and contemporary photography and enhanced by key loans. Collectively, the fierce, dreamy, and witty images in *Live Dangerously* illuminate landscapes and their role in constructing personal histories and identities.

© RANIA MATAR, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ROBERT KLEIN GALLERY



Janaina Tschäpe, *Frick Park*, from *100 Little Deaths*, 2000; Chromogenic color print, 31 x 47 in.; NMWA, Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection



© JANAINA TSCHÄPE; IMAGE COURTESY OF JANAINA TSCHÄPE STUDIO

100 Little Deaths

Live Dangerously prominently features the performative and fantastical works of Janaina Tschäpe (b. 1973). Upon entering the exhibition, viewers encounter a multi-gallery, floor-to-ceiling installation of the one hundred large-scale photographs that comprise Tschäpe's *100 Little Deaths* (1996–2002), presented in its entirety at NMWA for the first time.

Each image in the series depicts the artist lying prostrate in a different location around the world—passageways and staircases in India, at the base of the monumental Moais statues on Easter Island, on the shores of Fiji, and more. With various vantage points and camera angles—from bird's eye views to extreme close-ups—the results of this repeated encounter are both startling and intentionally theatrical. Tschäpe inserts herself into these sites as a way to contemplate her own passing from the earthly realm. Her images also reflect a four-year global trek replete with adventurous travel and exploration.

Artists' interventions present women as intrepid in the extreme conditions of nature.

In Her Element

Artists in *Live Dangerously* depict the female body immersed in various landforms, exploring rocky terrains, green valleys, deserts, and bodies of water. Rather than seeming daunted

by these landscapes, figures climb, run, and swim through the sites, freely embracing the sublime elements of nature.

Several of the photographers capture women near crashing waves or underwater as though the aquatic landscape is their natural habitat. For example, the model in *Rayven, Miami Beach, Florida* (2019), from the ongoing "SHE" series by Rania Matar (b. 1964), turns her face in profile under a stormy gray sky as green waves collapse into foamy ripples at her feet. With her eyes closed and lush golden locks flowing in the breeze, she appears completely serene amid the turbulent background.

Dry, arid terrain became a frequent backdrop for pioneering fashion photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe (1895–1989). Working for *Harper's Bazaar* magazine in the 1940s and '50s, Dahl-Wolfe preferred to photograph models outdoors in natural light, and often took them on location to exotic settings. She shot *California Desert* (1948) in the Mojave Desert and positioned her model so that the curves of her body subtly echo the dips of the white sand dunes.

For more than thirty years, Kirsten Justesen (b. 1943) has used ice as a pivotal element in her art. In her "Ice Pedestal" series (2000; printed 2015), a new addition to NMWA's collection, Justesen positions herself atop blocks of ice wearing only rubber boots and gloves, letting the ice blocks melt, and then refreezing the puddles. Her photographs record this repetitive process of transition from solid to liquid to solid, capturing the idea of mutability and impermanence. Dahl-Wolfe's images of bare skin on forbiddingly hot surfaces and Justesen's interventions with frozen materials present women as intrepid in the extreme conditions of nature.

Xaviera Simmons, *One Day and Back Then (Standing)*, 2007; Chromira C-print, 30 x 40 in.; Collection of Darryl Atwell

Pointing to the pre-Civil War history of the American South, when black bodies were constitutionally considered the property of white plantation owners, Xaviera Simmons (b. 1974) raises an incisive question: Who, historically and traditionally, gets to exist in the sublime with regard to landscape photography and landscape painting? In *One Day and Back Then (Standing)* (2007), the artist depicts herself as a character gazing directly out at the viewer, tucked into a thicket of reeds, dressed in a dark trench coat, and covered in blackface. The viewer must confront intentionally ambiguous aspects of the image, such as the identity and intentions of the subject, and the meaning of blackface in this context. Simmons reflects on the current social status of both black and white Americans: "How might our entire history have been different had America fulfilled its emancipatory promises to its freed slaves and their descendants instead of commemorating its defeated Confederate planters?"¹

Mischief Makers

Female bodies dominate and activate the land in *Live Dangerously*. At times, they appear to be in precarious circumstances, as in *Untitled #104 (A Short Story of Happenstance)* (2003) by Anna Gaskell (b. 1969). A figure dressed in black with a white, Victorian-style petticoat is upturned against a forested background. Gaskell crops the figure so the viewer only sees two legs sticking up in the air, humorously implying that something has gone awry for this character.

In other instances, individuals rebel and disrupt societal expectations of women. Justine Kurland (b. 1969) scours locations with links to the nineteenth-century Western frontier to frame her narratives about adolescent women in the landscape. In *Smoke Bombs* (2000), from Kurland's series "Girl Pictures," three teenagers set off fireworks outdoors under a concrete overpass, their crouching bodies

Kirsten Justesen, *Ice Pedestal #2*, 2000 (printed 2015); Chromogenic color print, 36 x 36 in.; NMWA, Gift of Peter J. Lassen



© KIRSTEN JUSTESEN, DENMARK



© XAVIERA SIMMONS; COURTESY OF DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY

enveloped by wisps of smoke. Kurland says, "I staged the girls as a standing army of teenaged runaways in resistance to patriarchal ideals. The girls in these photographs have gathered together in solidarity, claiming territory outside the margins of family and institutions."²

Decades earlier, Ana Mendieta (1948–1985) explored the act of physically altering or unsettling the environment through smoke and flames. In her famed *Siluetas*, Mendieta marked outlines of her body with gunpowder or sulfur, then ignited the silhouettes, leaving traces of her corporeal form in the ground. In *Volcán* (1979), she transformed the silhouette into a volcano-like crater filled with live coals that emitted smoke. For the artist, burning this shape into the ground was a sign of returning the body to earth, a primordial source of female sexuality and power.

Conventional art historical representations of female figures show them passively linked to the landscape through gendered associations of nature, eroticism, and fertility. In contrast, *Live Dangerously* is seen through the lens of the female gaze, with images of women reclaiming the landscape. Contemporary women photographers relate women's bodies to cycles of life and spur profound questions about how—and where—we live our lives.

// Orin Zahra is the assistant curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

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Notes:

1. Xaviera Simmons, email to the author, July 1, 2019.
2. Kurland quoted in Tish Wrigley, "Documenting Girlhood: Justine Kurland's Captivating Pictures, 20 Years On," in *AnOther Magazine* (June 5, 2018), <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/10908/documenting-girlhood-justine-kurlands-captivating-pictures-20-years-on>.