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 eye 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.
VANINA SORRENTI
The middle sibling of the Sorrenti photography family (her brothers are Mario and the late Davide; their mother is Francesca), Vanina shoots fashion features and ad campaigns and is known for her frank portrayals of the female body.

PHOTOGRAPHER’S OWN CLOTHING

BIBI CORNEJO BORTHWICK
The daughter of fashion designer Maria Cornejo and photographer Mark Borthwick, Bibi, who is based in New York and L.A., “was learning to load up rolls of film when other kids were building Lego towers,” she said in a recent Vogue profile. Familiarity has given the young artist a compelling sense of comfort behind the lens and, as she shows here, in front of it, too.

MICHAEL KORS COLLECTION
JACKET ($4,995); AG SHIRT ($64) AND JEANS ($178)
Craig-Martin’s fashion and reporting assignments often take her to society events, where she collects place cards, including the ones shown here. “I don’t know most of these people personally, but their presence is a part of my life as a photographer—the ghosts of parties past.”

ALL CLOTHING: DOLCE & GABANNA

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.”

AKRIS SHIRT ($995) AND PANTS ($895)

JESSICA CRAIG-MARTIN

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ALL CLOTHING: DOLCE & GABANNA
THE CURATED LIFE

ELFIE SEMOTAN

"With a self-portrait you can’t see yourself," says Semotan, whose work has appeared in Esquire, Harper’s Bazaar, and many other publications. "Hoping for something amazing is a limit, but also a kind of freedom."

GIORGIO ARMANI COAT ($1,395), JACKET ($3,495), AND PANTS ($1,595); CALVIN KLEIN T-SHIRT ($40 FOR 3)

SOPHIE ELGORT

Elgort, who shoots for magazines and clothing brands and whose father is the fashion photographer Arthur Elgort, treated this assignment like any other portrait session. "I created a mood board and sourced a location. What I found challenging was that I couldn’t see myself through the lens in real time to direct myself to make changes."

GIORGIO ARMANI JACKET ($1,895) AND PANTS ($1,595). FOR DETAILS SEE PAGE 216.