



Anja Niemi inhabits the character of an actress struggling with her real-life identity away from the audience in her latest series, showing across Europe this spring

The Woman Who Never Existed

Words by Melissa Lawford

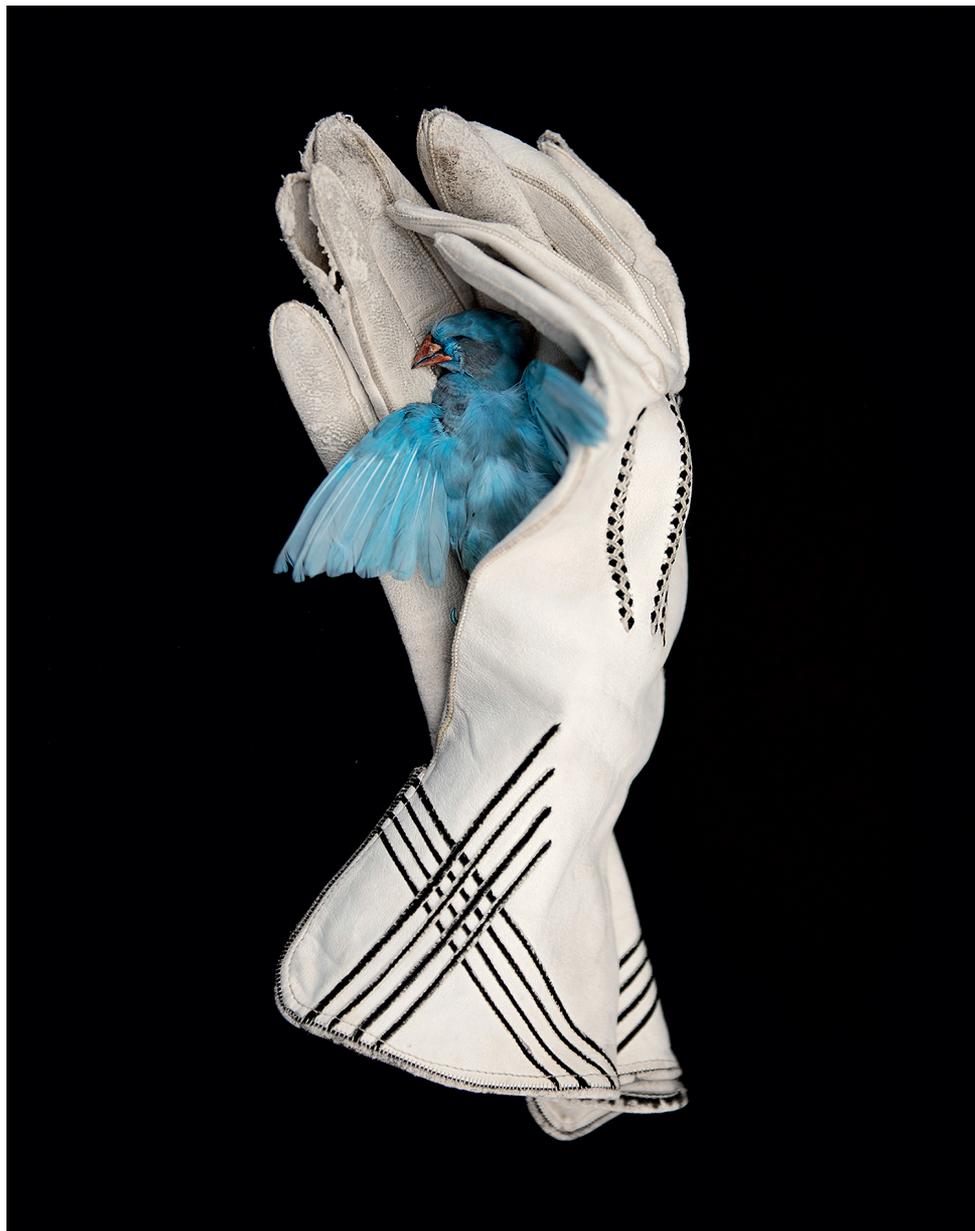
“With a tremor of the lip, which you feel rather than see, and which lasts half an instant,” Eleonora Duse “touches you straight to the very heart,” wrote George Bernard Shaw in 1895. The Italian actress, who was renowned for embodying the inner feelings of the people she played, was described by Charlie Chaplin as “the greatest artiste I have ever seen”. But when she was not immersed within a character, she was extremely shy. Once, pressed by an insistent New York journalist, she announced that, away from the stage, “I do not exist.”

It is this line that has inspired Norwegian photographer Anja Niemi’s latest series, *The Woman Who Never Existed*. Following a showing at the inaugural Photofairs San Francisco in January, it goes on display at Shoot Gallery in Oslo (09 March to 30 April) and Galerie Photo 12 in Paris (16 March to 22 April) before moving to The Little Black Gallery in London (04 to 27 May). In the series, Niemi plays an early 20th-century actress who is sometimes in costume and at other times is beginning to disappear; a character “so used to putting on an act that, when there is no role to play, she no longer knows what to do,” she explains.

Niemi spent over a year collecting props and costumes for her character, picking up “everything I came across that felt like her”. Most of the photographs are taken in Italy, where she rented grand, high-ceilinged houses and apartments as her character’s settings. Determined to inhabit the role completely, Niemi took at least a day, often two, to perfect each shot. “The elaborate costumes and lush interiors are her illusions,” Niemi says. “Without them, she fades away.”

A stylist, make-up artist and photographer, Niemi meticulously builds and acts out her narratives, always working alone. “I am more comfortable by myself,” she says. “I love making pictures and I don’t want my nervousness or insecurities to destroy it.” Though she is the subject of her photographs, Niemi does not consider them self-portraits. “There is a connection – you have to take a little from what you know in order to make it relatable – but the stories are not about me,” she says. Normally she does not like to have her picture taken but when in character she feels transformed. “I like having a balance of reality and fiction in my life. Turning into a toy soldier or a crying clown during the day helps me deal with mundanity.

“My character’s biggest mistake was that she spent so much time performing for her audience that when they were gone she had no purpose,” Niemi adds. “I think we can all benefit from a reminder to have moments that are just for us, without needing validation from anyone.” **BJP**



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