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HYPERALLERGIC

A COMPELLING NEW BOOK FOCUSES ON WORK BY 33 WOMEN
PHOTOGRAPHERS

By Elena Goukassian, February 28, 2018



While on a trip to Australia several years ago, Fiona Rogers happened to meet Lee Grant, founder of Light Journeys, a platform for showcasing work by Australian female photographers. Having spent years working in photography, and noticing many of the inequalities in the industry herself, Rogers decided to create her own organization for promoting women photographers in Europe. The result, Firecracker, launched in 2011, serving as a kind of women's club for photographers with a European connection. In 2012, Rogers introduced the Firecracker Photographic Grant, an annual award supporting documentary projects; and in 2014, the Firecracker Contributors Award began honoring the mentors, commissioners, and educators that continue to support female photographers. Just last fall, the organization published its first book, *Firecrackers: Female Photographers Now*, a compilation of works by 33 contemporary artists.

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In Rogers's introduction to *Firecrackers*, she notes that she and co-author Max Houghton had no specific criteria in selecting artists for the book, instead choosing to emphasize "the contemporary, the best or the surprising. We wanted to show photographers you had no doubt heard of, but whose work you maybe hadn't seen in any major presentations." The resulting collection features artists from many different backgrounds, working in a variety of styles, and covering diverse subjects, from the political to the deeply personal, philosophical, and abstract. A number of photographers focus on the male gaze, while others deal with issues of gender and identity, but the most compelling works are the subtler ones, less easily slotted into a crisp narrative of activist feminism.

Considering *Firecracker's* unofficial focus on documentary photography, it's no surprise that this category contains some of the book's most intriguing projects. Evgenia Arbugaeva captures the residents of the small Siberian town of Tiksi, illuminated by the ever-present whiteness of snow, and Bieke Depoorter travels to unfamiliar cities, asking to sleep a night in houses of complete strangers and taking photos and listening to their secrets into the evening. Sanne De Wilde's intimate portraits of the everyday lives of people who live and work in China's Kingdom of the Little People draw attention to the continuing ostracism of those born with dwarfism, and Corinna Kern documents the ever-changing functions of a 72-year-old hoarder's bathtub, a sanctuary from his clutter, where he does his laundry and dishes and drinks his coffee.

Many of the documentary endeavors presented in *Firecrackers* require intimate knowledge and profound research. Of these, the most impressive is probably Regine Petersen's project and photobook, *Find a Fallen Star*, which traces the histories of terrestrial encounters with meteorites, beginning with the story of Ann Hodges, the first person hit by a meteorite in Alabama in 1954. Petersen's collection of photographs, artifacts, and documents calls to mind the in-depth, almost obsessive investigations of someone like Taryn Simon.

On the other side of the spectrum, *Firecrackers* also features a number of fascinating projects related to the deeply personal life of the artist herself. Diana Matar's "Evidence" series, for example, takes its inspiration from a family tragedy. Matar's father-in-law, a Libyan opposition leader during the Gaddafi regime, disappeared in Egypt, never to be heard from again. Matar's long-exposure, black-and-white images of trees and seemingly empty landscapes at once evoke the feeling of absence and depict the foliage as witness to these kinds of political kidnappings and assassinations. In a new series, Matar uses the same aesthetic to explore locations in the US where people were shot by police.

In another series inspired by personal trauma, Mariela Sancari reimagines what her father may have looked like today, had he not committed suicide when she was only 14 years old. Because Sancari never saw her father's body after he died, she felt herself in a state of permanent denial, hoping to spot him around every corner. As a kind of coping mechanism, she took out an ad in a Buenos Aires paper looking for men who fit a description of what she imagined her father would look like now. In her portraits of the men who answered her ad, Sancari's subjects are dressed in her father's old clothes.

There are the documentarian projects, and then there are the theatrical, staged, and surreal ones. Aida Muluneh, for example, creates bright, painterly photographs using the symbolism and techniques of traditional African body painting, while Anja Niemi shoots film still-like self-portraits (à la Cindy Sherman), in what appears to be a Hitchcockian, Lynchian, surrealist universe. Alma Haser created her "Cosmic Surgery" series by printing multiple copies of the same print of a face, folding the copies into an origami-like shape, and then re-shooting her subjects wearing the folded photographs like partial masks. The result is a kind of science-fiction face clone, a confounding take on identity and how we view each other.

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Firecrackers is populated with dozens of talented photographers, but there's one artist in particular that most seamlessly melds the personal with the political, the documentary with the surreal, and the philosophical with the everyday. In her "For Birds' Sake" series, Cemre Yesil documented a group of middle-aged men in Istanbul, all of whom share the unusual hobby of illegally raising birds for the sole purpose of making them produce "the most beautifully sorrowful song." To do this, the men catch the birds in the wild and keep them in covered cages, coaxing them into singing their hearts out in a desperate plea for an unseen mate. The men gather together periodically at cafés to judge each other's birdsongs.

From the daytime darkness of the Siberian winter to living with a septuagenarian hoarder and coping with death by dressing strangers in a loved one's clothes, Firecrackers is much more than just a compilation of works by female photographers. It's a unique collection of storytelling, both literal and aesthetic.