



the
Sublime
feminine

Maryam Eisler

the Sublime feminine

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies*

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For further information on Maryam Eisler's photography, please contact:

Tristan Hoare (UK enquiries)
www.tristanhoaregallery.co.uk

Harper's Books (US enquires)
www.harpersbooks.com

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The Sublime Feminine

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Since time immemorial, the idea of the ‘Divine Feminine’ has been at the core of humanity’s conscious memory and mythology. Recorded history’s emblematic portrayals – from Aphrodite to the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, from Jezebel to Anahita, Mata Hari and many more – must tell us one thing if nothing else: that humankind derives greater purpose thanks to women’s prowess. The power of femininity, though it may have been denied or suppressed, is undeniable in its allure and irrepressible in its formal and artistic expressions.

My personal journey through photography as a means of artistic, cultural and social dialogue has not only been a search for self-identity; it has also been revealing through its practical and intellectual peaks and troughs. It is about an exploration of the Sublime Feminine, adding a heightened dimension to my work, a majestic reach above and beyond the ordinary. I defer here to the poet Audre Lorde: “These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep ... joyous and sublime.”

The Sublime Feminine lives within us all, and it is in no way a feminine convocation. Call it Shiva or Shakti, Yin or Yang – whatever you choose, these sublime energies co-exist in conflict and/or in harmony in each one of us, regardless of gender, tribe, creed, sensibilities or, come to it, capabilities.

Across cultures, the Sublime Feminine is associated with a spiritual force best ennobled through creative expression. Some would argue that honoring our Sublime Feminine is no less than an attempt to reclaim our identity – a beautiful, soulful, sensual and intellectual expression of the feminine divine. We should not forget that the Sublime Feminine carries

within its womb the greatest mystery of all: that of human creation. In its physicality, it is viewed through the ‘Mother’ concept extending through the all-encompassing notion of Mother Earth. The Feminine is the guardian figure of our planet in a manner of speaking. In its sensuality and expressions of sexuality, its power can become bewitching at times, overwhelming at others.

From a personal perspective, the Sublime Feminine has always fascinated me, and I have sought out this interest photographically through the past decade, in different places and environmental spaces. This socio-cultural quest has become a personal journey of sorts, more recently in the arid plains and canyons of New Mexico, in the scented lavender fields of Provence, and in the lush forests and riverbeds of the Catskill Mountains. I have tried to trace and visually revitalise this energy, embodied in the female form and set against the grandeur of nature.

For my first public series back in 2015, I followed the footsteps of the great painter Georgia O’Keeffe, experiencing first-hand a small part of her journey among the truly grand barren landscapes of New Mexico, even visiting Ghost Ranch, her beloved home and studio near Abiquiú. The experience, haunting and vital, set against unimaginably sharp blue skies and rock-strewn valleys in shades of rust, known for their prehistoric fossil remains, made me whisper O’Keeffe’s own words to the wind: “Such a beautiful untouched lonely feeling place, such a new part of what I call “the Faraway””

I’d gone to New Mexico searching for hidden corners of my own soul, and to seek a clearer sense of union with untroubled nature, that silent witness to the vicissitudes of time and their transformative presence. I spent days in the majestic, inhospitable New Mexican landscape, a unique visual and sensory feast. Lost in time, trying to tie purpose to creative endeavour, matching Nature’s true art, which O’Keeffe did through her magical canvasses. I began a visual dialectic with the sources of my budding inspiration and came to understand the outlines

of my own poetic adventure. Thus was born the search for Eve, Mother Earth's first muse. I saw her standing atop rocky inclines, as sensual and powerful as the monumental nature surrounding her. This, my imagination suggested, could have been one of the locations in and out of which Eve would have darted, between the borders of reality and fantasy – an act which the Divine Feminine has performed so well throughout time, between the ephemeral and the sensual, lost in the iconography of art and nature.

As to Provence, what can one say? Another of nature's paradises, where the light and the moods of the seasons mix with scents and aromas conjuring every flavour known to humankind. Why have so many great artists followed each other to this magical region? It was this uniqueness which attracted me to the area in 2016, and inspired me to extend my search for Eve to another plain, one with more colourful tinges than the rocky crags and arroyos of New Mexico. Think of Paul Cézanne's sensual Provençal landscapes. Look again at Vincent van Gogh's *Road with Cypress and Star*. Provence has been a place where nature and humankind have united to bring elements of magic into feminine portrayal, employing varied media through the range of pastel reflections – sunlit pinks, shades of scarlet, yellow sunflower hues – for which the region is renowned.

I happened upon the Carrières de Lumières (Quarries of Lights) as my starting point. A little stark perhaps when compared to lavender fields, yet revealing unique colours magicked out of shapes, shades, textures and light – a perfect setting to seek out mythic antecedents to my searching narratives. This extraordinary site was once a bauxite quarry in the bowels of the Val d'Enfer (Valley of Hell). Jean Cocteau located his epic 1960 film *Le Testament d'Orphée* here, replete with a cameo by Pablo Picasso. I even discovered the ghost of van Gogh almost next door, lurking in the shadows of the Saint-Paul de Mausole psychiatric hospital, where he was confined for a year in 1890.

From time's perspectives, I could only glimpse the reality of solid rocks and boulders, broken shards of basalt and dust particles sprinkled through the air – but also through the hair of Eurydice by the hands of her unattainable love. Was her enterprise a labour of love, or was she a slave to the sentiments of time and humanity? Not too dissimilar to servitude in Hell, written of in the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. She was locked away in the Underworld, with Hades as her guardian and unloved companion.

It's easy to get lost in one's own fantasies in such settings. Was I in a quarry located next to an asylum? Or was this some kind of mythic location with its dark forebodings? Elysian Fields surrounded by the deep still woods of the Thracian mountains where Orpheus once played his lyre? Could I hear the sound of a nearby stream, or was it the roaring flood of the River Styx?

Time to marry reality to myth, and photographically explore universal themes common to all cultures and literature: love and lust, temptation and unconquered passions, set against humankind's insignificance, amid the grandeur of nature.

Hello again, the Sublime Feminine.

In 2017, the yellow brick road led me to the Catskills, a place of some mystery, alive with its own spiritual and folkloric tales hewn out of the land. The region is the New Yorker's true getaway paradise, delighting the eye with its thickly forested mountains, its lush green valleys and its stone-bedded rivers and streams. Lost again in my unconscious wanderings, I heard the crunching of every twig beneath my feet, as I looked out for the elusive woodland nymph. There, by the copse? No, hidden behind the yellowing Birch tree, glimpsing out of the abandoned woodshed over and beyond. Last imagined singing on a swing? I was desperately enchanted by her fantasy.

Along the way, I discovered a beautiful and vibrant land, with its own raw spiritual rhythms, a special place where art meets life. For centuries, the Catskills' virgin landscapes have attracted artists from all over the world. During the mid-nineteenth century, the Hudson River School's women artists ventured fearlessly into the wild woods, exploring and painting the landscape around them despite all the challenges, both societal and climate-driven – female trailblazers in the wilderness, with their courage driven by the springs of creativity. They, too, inspired me.

It's easy to dream in such surroundings, transported by childhood memories and magical fairytales of enchanted water sirens and forest nymphs. But also of Ophelia, effortlessly floating on the ponds and lakes, and of the elusive Nymph perched on a swing hanging from a tree branch! All were mesmerising creatures, reunited in an unlikely and imaginary melting pot.

It's fair to say that I have been driven by fantasy in such settings as New Mexico, Provence and the Catskills. But it is the skill of the eye that trains the lens when it comes to capturing a magical creature in its fleeting, prancing moment; and the stardust thrown up by Orpheus on Eurydice, or the rock of the Feminine Sublime rearing out of the mountain face.

That is when dreams have the ability to turn into reality.

It is with this purpose that I present these works as a paean to femininity and to the female form. And perhaps a salute is due to Homer, to Shakespeare and to Fragonard, as well as to all the poets who inspired me along the journey across time and space. Finally, reverence should be paid to all human imagination, born out of earth, water and light, nature's touchstones from which my works have drawn both their energy and their purpose.

Maryam Eisler
London May 2018

Together in This Room

Hannah
Barry

*Some men say cavalry, some men say infantry,
some men say the navy's the loveliest thing
on this black earth, but I say it's whatever you love*

Sappho

The advantage of being a weekends-only sort of scholar is that one can skip carefree across the bounds of historical context, strict chronology and other such lines of enquiry and just choose what one loves. There are great and sincere pleasures to be found in these sorts of wide rather than long pursuits.

To this effect, the aim here is simply to hold up a guiding lamp and present to you – readers, and those who wish to look harder, longer, more intensely – a few souvenirs of the life and enterprises of three great women in time, hailing from antiquity, the medieval world and the modern moment. These are by no means the only examples, but each burned bright and clear in her own time. Their individual legacies of work and words serve today as a powerful reminder that these were – and still are – standard-bearers for independent, radical thought, ideas and action.

Sappho was a Greek poet from the island of Lesbos. She is Antiquity's greatest female artist, a seventh-century-BCE lyric genius.

Little is known with certainty about her life. She was born into an aristocratic family during a period of great cultural flowering. It is said that her birthplace was one of two main cities on the island where she lived for some time. The names of her family members are inconsistently reported, but she seems to have had several brothers and to have married and had a daughter.

Sappho's poetry was lyric poetry, and she is best known for her poems about love. Most of Sappho's poetry is now lost and survives only in fragmentary form.

In Antiquity, Sappho was regularly counted among the greatest of poets and was often referred to as 'the Poetess' just as Homer was called 'the Poet'. Plato hailed her as 'the tenth Muse', and she was honoured on coins and with civic statues. Her sometimes playful, sometimes anguished songs about her susceptibility to the graces of younger women gave us the adjectives *sapphic* and *lesbian*.

For the better part of three millennia, she has been the subject of controversies about her work,

her family life and her sexuality. In Antiquity, literary critics praised her 'sublime' style, even as comic playwrights ridiculed her allegedly loose morals. Legend has it that the early Church burned her works. ('A sex-crazed whore who sings of her own wantonness,' wrote one theologian ...) Even today, experts can't agree on whether the poems were performed in private or in public, by soloists or by choruses, or, indeed, whether they were meant to celebrate or to subvert the conventions of love and marriage. The latter is a particularly loaded issue given that for many readers and scholars, Sappho has been a feminist heroine or a gay role model, or both.

Like other great poets of the time, she would have been a musician and a performer as well as a lyricist. To read or listen to these fragments is an experience that has been compared to 'reading a note in a bottle':

*You came, I yearned for you,
and you cooled my senses that burned with desire*

or

*love shook my senses
like wind crashing on mountain oaks*

or – the lines in which the notion of desire as 'bittersweet' appears for the first time in Western literature –

*Once again Love, that loosener of limbs, bittersweet
and inescapable, crawling thing, seizes me.*

Hildegard of Bingen, also known as St Hildegard and the Sibyl of the Rhine, was a German Benedictine abbess, writer, composer, philosopher, healer, mystic and visionary. She is considered to be the founder of scientific natural history in Germany.

Called by her admirers 'one of the most important figures in the history of the Middle Ages' and 'the greatest woman of her time', she wrote theological, botanical and medical texts, as well as letters, liturgical songs and poems. Hildegard's works include three great volumes of visionary theology, a variety of musical compositions, one of the earliest musical morality plays, one of

the largest bodies of letters to survive from the Middle Ages – addressed to popes, emperors, abbots and abbesses among many others – two volumes of material on natural medicine and cures, and even an invented language!

In September 1179, when Hildegard died, those present claimed they saw two streams of light appear in the skies and cross the room where she was dying.

Dare to declare who you are. It is not far from the shores of silence to the boundaries of speech. The path is not long, but the way is deep. You must not only walk there, you must be prepared to leap.

Glance at the sun. See the moon and the stars. Gaze at the beauty of earth's greenings. Now, think. What delight God gives to humankind with all these things ... All nature is at the disposal of humankind. We are to work with it. For without we cannot survive.

The earth is at the same time mother; She is mother of all that is natural, mother of all that is human. She is mother of all, for contained in her are the seeds of all. The earth of humankind contains all moistness, all verdancy, all germinating power. It is in so many ways fruitful. All creation comes from it.

When the words come, they are merely empty shells without the music. They live as they are sung, for the words are the body and the music, the spirit.

Like billowing clouds, Like the incessant gurgle of the brook, The longing of the spirit can never be stilled.

Just as a mirror, which reflects all things, is set in its own container, so too the rational soul is placed in the fragile container of the body. In this way, the body is governed in its earthly life by the soul, and the soul contemplates heavenly things through faith.

Vita Sackville-West (also known as Lady Nicolson) is the English poet, novelist and garden designer remembered for the celebrated white garden at Sissinghurst and as the inspiration for the androgynous protagonist of the historical novel *Orlando* by her friend and admirer Virginia Woolf, with whom she had a decade-long affair.

Vita was born in her mother's bedroom at Knole in Kent, once a royal palace and as expansive as a village with its 6 acres of roof, seven courtyards, more than fifty staircases and (reputedly) a room for every day of the year. This great Tudor house marked her for life. Even in middle age, when she itemised her three great loves as her husband, poetry and Knole, she insisted that Knole was the greatest of the three. 'God knows I gave you all my love,' she wrote in her diary in an unpublished poem addressed to the house.

Vita married the writer and politician Harold Nicolson but saw herself as psychologically divided into two. One side of her personality was feminine, soft, submissive and attracted to men, while the other side was masculine, hard, aggressive and attracted to women. In 1930 Harold and Vita acquired and moved to the ruined Elizabethan manor house, Sissinghurst Castle, also in Kent. There, they created the famous gardens that are now run by the National Trust.

Vita had many affairs, but the one for which she is most remembered was in the late 1920s with Virginia Woolf. Woolf's *Orlando* features a protagonist who changes sex over the centuries. This work was described by Vita's son Nigel Nicolson as 'the longest and most charming love-letter in literature'. Woolf herself documented the moment of its conception, writing in her diary on 5 October 1927:

And instantly the usual exciting devices enter my mind: a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to the other

Her appearance was indeed remarkable – strange almost beyond the reach of adjectives ... She resembled a puissant blend of both sexes – Lady Chatterley and her lover rolled into one.

Vita had a great deal to say and always delivered her opinions with a combined sense of melancholy and humour.

On marriage:

I cannot abide the Mr. and Mrs. Noah attitude towards marriage; the animals went in two by two, forever stuck together with glue.

On gardening:

The most noteworthy thing about gardeners is that they are always optimistic, always enterprising, and never satisfied. They always look forward to doing something better than they have ever done before.

Successful gardening is not necessarily a question of wealth, it is a question of love, taste, and knowledge.

The more one gardens, the more one learns; And the more one learns, the more one realizes how little one knows.

On travel:

Travel is the most private of pleasures. There is no greater bore than the travel bore. We do not in the least want to hear what he has seen in Hong Kong.

Most poignant perhaps are her comments on love: *I loved you when love was Spring, and May, loved you when summer deepened into June, and now when autumn yellows all the leaves ...*

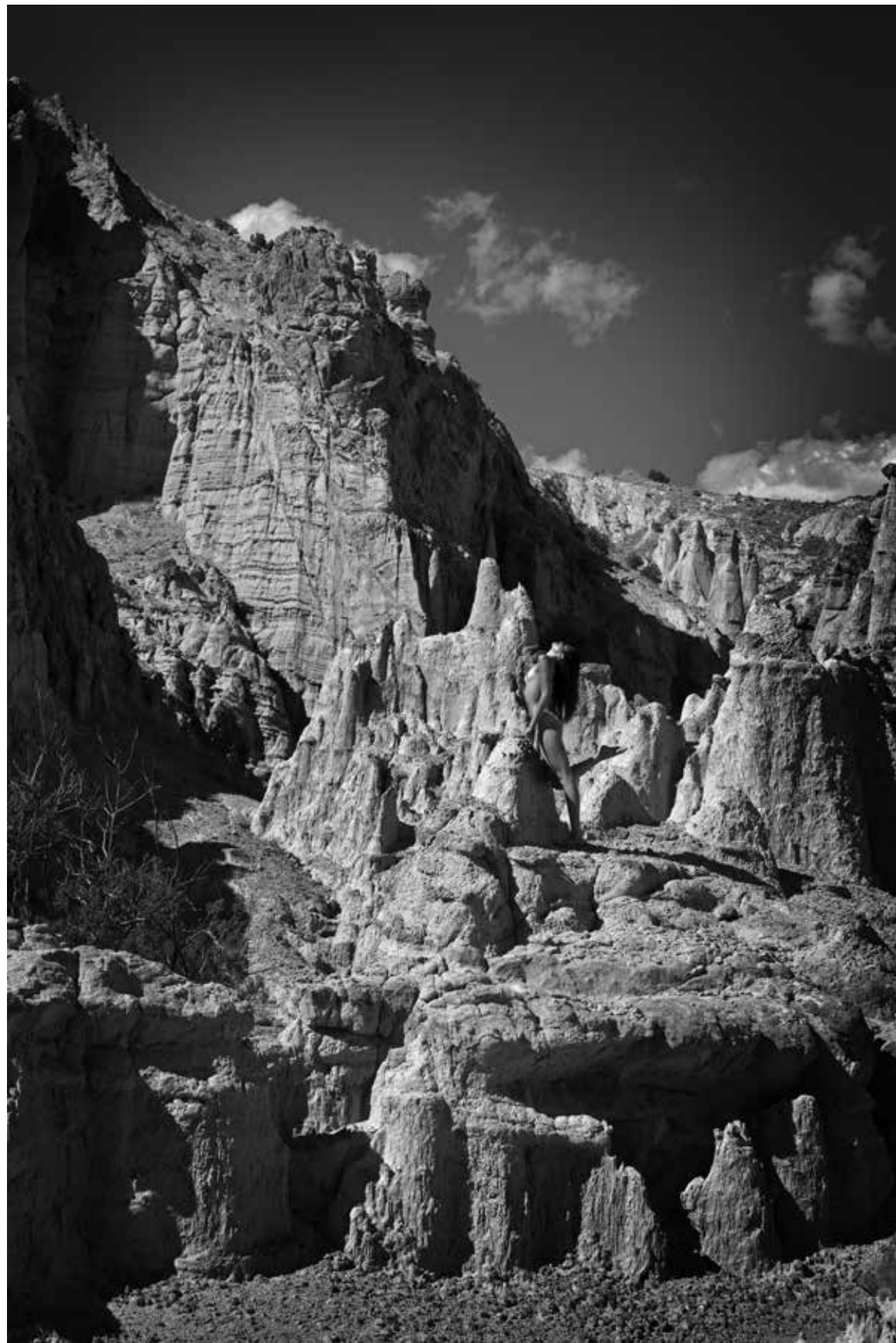
I just miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way. Oh my dear, I can't be clever and stand-offish with you: I love you too much for that. Too truly. You have no idea how stand-offish I can be with people I don't love. I have brought it to a fine art. But you have broken down my defences. And I don't really resent it.

To consider any one of these women in isolation, it is difficult not to be filled with exhilaration and admiration. To look at just these three linked – as they are here – casually through the arc of history, one cannot fail to be reminded of the prescient place women – those whose lives and work are well recorded and those which aren't – have occupied at the cutting edge of history and progress of society. It is these and many other examples that compel us to pursue freedom, creativity, justice and good work – harder, longer, faster.

Hannah Barry

London May 2018

earth.

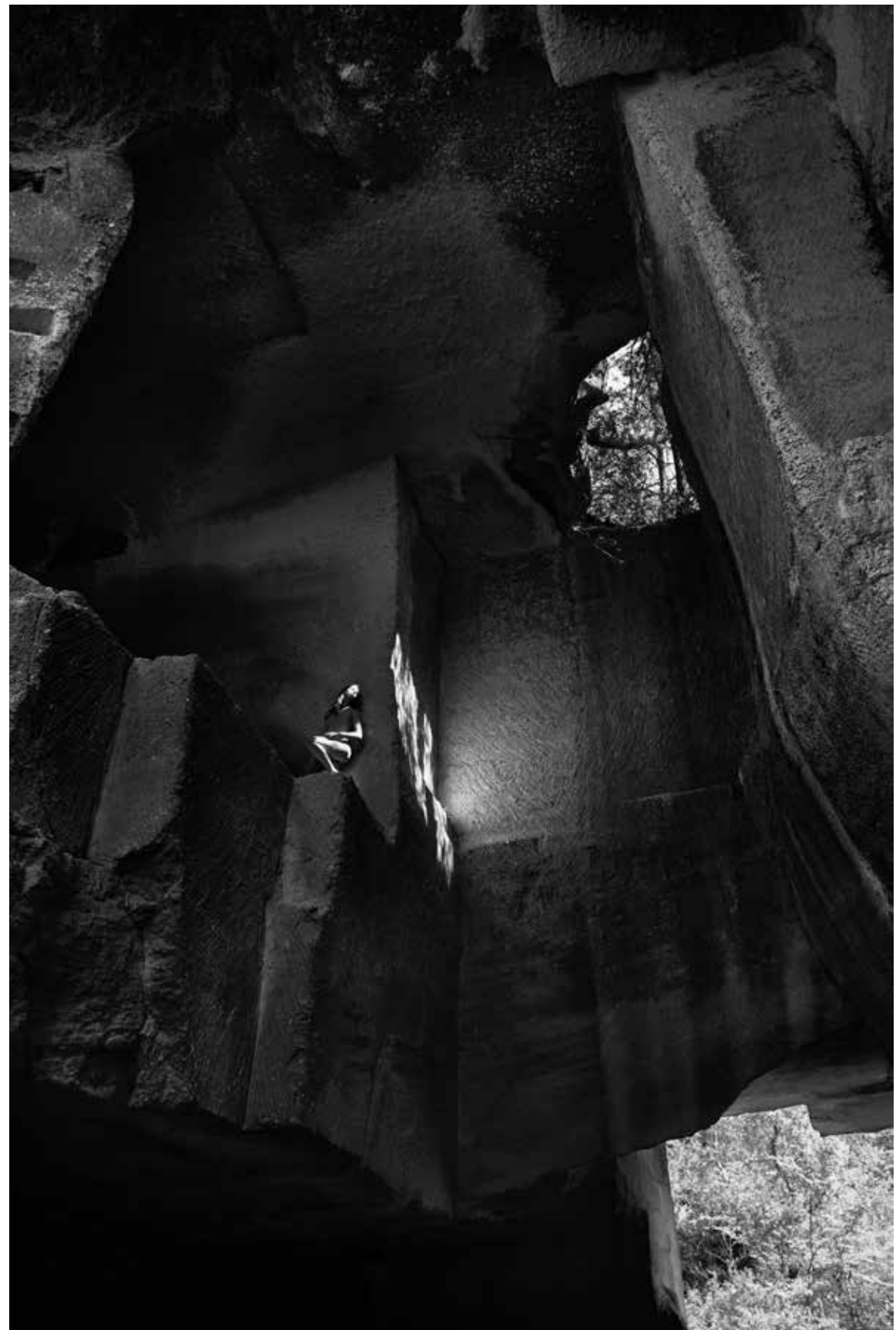


I've been absolutely terrified
Every moment of my

Life

And I've never let it keep me from
A single thing I wanted to do.

Georgia O'Keeffe





That was her

magic

She could still see the sunset,
Even on those darkest days.

Robert M. Drake





You were
wild

once.

Don't let them tame you.

Isadora Duncan



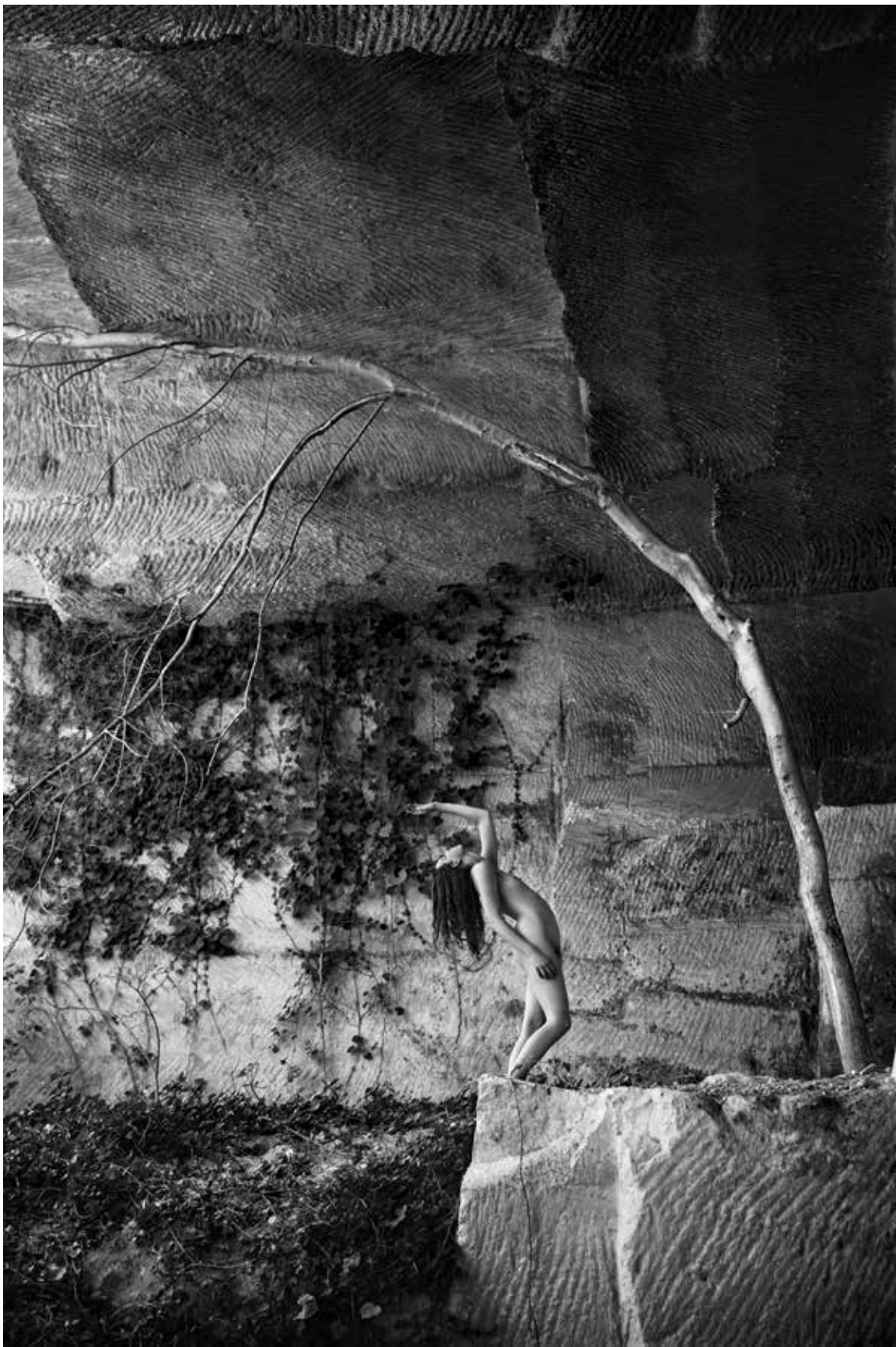
Be a woman other women can

trust

Sophia A. Nelson









I accept the
great

adventure

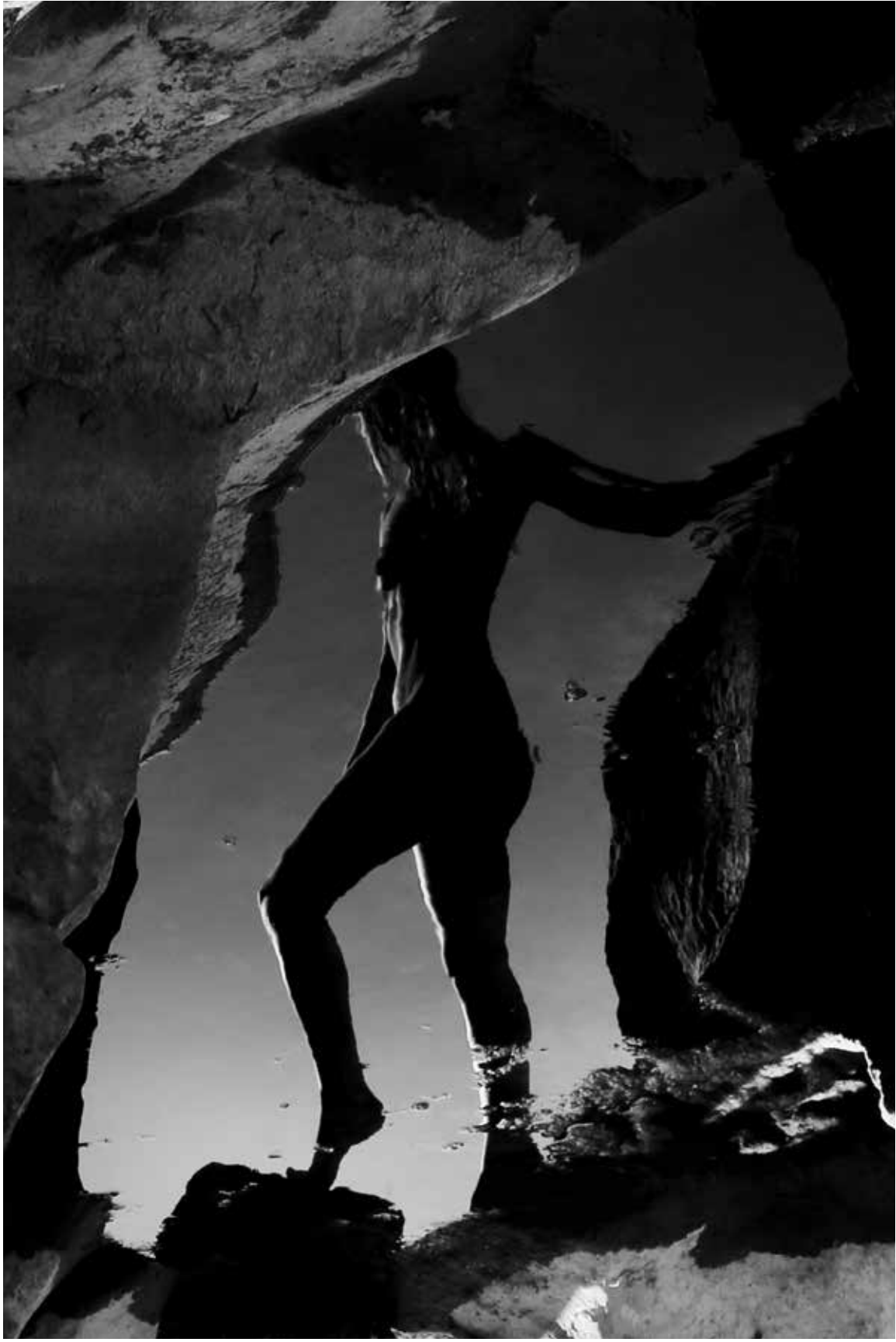
of being me

Simone de Beauvoir





water



A woman in harmony
with her

spirit

Is like a river flowing

Maya Angelou







Find that

flame

That existence

That wonderful woman

Who can burn beneath the water

Hafes



My women are always

victorious

Helmut Newton





Feet, what do I need you for
When I have

wings

to fly?

Frida Kahlo





Never let go of that
fiery sadness called

desire

Patti Smith







light

There is no beast, no rush of fire,
Like woman so

untamed.

She calmly goes her way
Where even panthers would be shamed.

Aristophanes



Love,

the poet said,
is woman's whole existence.

Virginia Woolf





Be not ashamed woman ...
You are the gates of the body,
And you are the gates of the

Soul,

Walt Whitman





Et Dieu Crea

La Femme

Roger Vadim







You
have
seen
my
descent

Now
watch
my

Rising

Rumi



Non
de
Non, Je ne regrette
**Rien
Rien
Rien**

Edith Piaf





She,
In the dark,
Found light

Brighter

than many ever see

Langston Hughes



I dwell in
possibility

Emily Dickinson





I became a woman
who learned her own

skin

And dug into her soul
and found it full

Anne Sexton





For me,
sculpture
is the

body.

My body is
my sculpture.

Louise Bourgeois





Fleeting Beauty



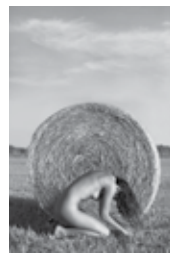
Maralah



A Passage, Dark and Steep



The Wheel of Time



Circles of Love



A Muse Glimpsed



A Field of Dreams



Amidst Elysian Fields



Windswept



Double Take



Forever Lost



Bending the Will of Hades



Makawee



Ode to the River Styx



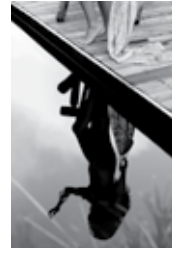
Odina



water



The Illusion of Beauty



Ponderings



Reclining Naiade



Tallulah



Crossroads



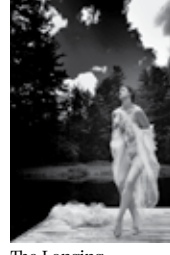
Lady of the Lake



Dare to Stare



After Ophelia



The Longing



Water Maiden



Summer Reverie



Tormented



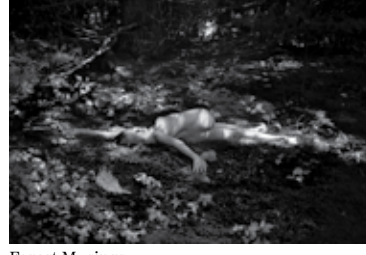
light



Shaded Passion



A Daughter of Eve



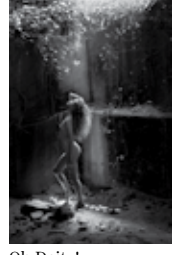
Forest Musings



Witashnah



Peaks & Troughs



Oh Deity!



After Fragonard



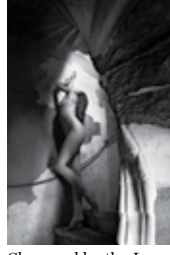
Delirious Love



Reversion to Form



The Divine Feminine



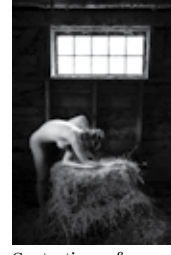
Charmed by the Lyre



The Siren's Call



Light Forms



Contortions of the Mind



Womb(an)



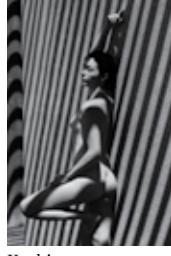
Light's Embrace



Day Dreamer



I Wonder ...



Kachina

Biographies

Photographer Maryam Eisler holds a BA from Wellesley College and an MBA from Columbia University. Eisler is a member of the Tate International Council and co-chairs Tate's MENAAC acquisitions committee. She is a trustee of the Whitechapel Gallery, sits on the advisory board of Photo London and is a nominator for the Prix Pictet photography prize. She is also a contributing editor to *LUX* magazine, a Condé Nast publication. Eisler shows her work with Tristan Hoare in London. *The Sublime Feminine* at Harper's Books in East Hampton is Eisler's first solo exhibition in the US. She has shown her photographs at Photo London, at Unseen Amsterdam and at the Dallas Art Fair. She has had executive editorial roles on several publications including *Sanctuary: Britain's Artists and their Studios*; *Art Studio America: Contemporary Artist Spaces* and *London Burning: Portraits from a Creative City*. Her 2017 book *Voices: East London* (for which she supplied both text and photographs) was co-published by Thames and Hudson and TransGlobe Publishing.

Hannah Barry is the founder of Bold Tendencies Community Interest Company and Hannah Barry Gallery, both of which are based in South London. She is on the board of Artangel; a member of the Science Gallery's Leonardo Group, the Foundling Museum Exhibitions Advisory Group and the Serpentine Future Contemporaries Committee; and was Founding Co-Chair of the Chinati Contemporary Council in Marfa, Texas and a member of the Mayor of London's Night Time Commission.

Acknowledgements

This is a book of inspiration, pure and simple. Both personal inspiration and the inspiration of others who have over recent years helped to excite and reignite my passion for photography.

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Major thanks go to the one and only Peter Fleissig, whose mind and friendship I genuinely care for; he is the main culprit behind my introduction to Harper last summer while I was visiting the Hamptons. His guidance is always constructive, appreciated and put to good use.

I would also like to thank my dearest and most trusted friend Hannah Barry, whose intellect I so respect (not to mention her wicked sense of humour). Her knowledge has informed the wonderful essay for this catalogue, giving it credible purpose and contextual perspective.

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alongside the incredibly skilful and accomplished photographer George Holz, for their support and guidance in the Catskills. Last but not least, the project would not have been completed without the wonderful artists/models (Angelika, Claire, Erica and Tara in New Mexico; Khiara and Laurine in Provence; and Gwendolyn Jane, Georgie, Monique and Anna in the Catskills) who've shared their time, creativity and trust with me.

The production of this volume and the accompanying exhibition has been a collective effort that has involved numerous people at different times. As such, it goes without saying that I owe everything to the professionalism of several individuals without whom I would have never achieved the level of quality I have reached in both my work and its presentation. One is Roger Fawcett-Tang of Struktur Design, with whom I have worked for more than seven years on various book projects. I would like to thank him for his brilliant design mind but also for his patience and continued support and collaboration. Also, my esteemed colleagues Eric Ladd and Julia Bettinson of XY Digital for their second-to-none attention to image and print production quality. Andrea Belloli for her editorial support. And Fenton Smith of Boss Print for his intricate attention to catalogue print detail and unique production quality.

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Maryam Eisler
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'She is so bright and glorious that you cannot look at her face or her garments for the splendor with which she shines. For she is terrible with the terror of the avenging lightning, and gentle with the goodness of the bright sun; and both her terror and her gentleness are incomprehensible to humans.... But she is with everyone and in everyone, and so beautiful is her secret that no person can know the sweetness with which she sustains people, and spares them in inscrutable mercy.'