

SEARCHING
FOR

EVE

Maryam Eisler
Essay by Anthony Downey

IN THE
AMERICAN
WEST

SEARCHING FOR EVE IN THE AMERICAN WEST

'I feel there is something unexplored about woman that only a woman can explore.'

Georgia O'Keeffe

A fascination with the American West has exercised a profound attraction for artists and photographers for over two centuries.

Ansel Adams' work in particular is regarded as part of a tradition of Western American photography that began in the late nineteenth century and included the works of Carleton Watkins, Eadweard Muybridge and Edward Curtis; Curtis spent thirty years on an ambitious photo-anthropological exercise documenting eighty Native American tribes west of the Mississippi. Edward Weston also needs special mention for his unique American approach to modern photography, having dedicated a large part of his life to focusing on people and places of the American West. The *Daybooks* of Weston in particular have inspired me enormously, concentrating principally on the forms of the body rather than its sexuality. With such obsession has grown much fascination with the region's spectacular nature and wilderness.

While working on a major book on American artists and their studios during 2012 (*Art Studio America: Contemporary Artist Spaces*, co-published by TransGlobe Publishing and Thames & Hudson), I followed in the footsteps of the great Georgia O'Keeffe, experiencing first-hand a little of her journeying among the grand dinosaur-fossil-bearing New Mexico landscape, even visiting Ghost Ranch, her home and studio near Abiquiú. The experience with its memories of rugged cliffs and craggy pinnacles haunted me for the intervening years, alongside O'Keeffe's own echoing words: 'Such a beautiful untouched lonely feeling place, such a fine part of what I call "the Faraway" ... It is a place I have painted before ... even now I must do it again.'

And the light – oh what light!

I could not resist the urge to go back, and last summer I finally took the plunge. Not as a recorder of art history but more as an artist in search of the ultimate aesthetic adventure. Camera and lens in hand, I ventured forth to seek some spiritual urge of union with untouched and untroubled nature, always battling the elements of time in their transforming presence.

I spent days in the majestic, inhospitable New Mexican landscape, from the high desert to canyons, from plateaus to arroyos, once again experiencing that unique light and a little of Native America's spirituality, born in the temperament of colourful legends – a unique visual and sensory feast to archive.

On returning home, I immersed myself in modern American poetry and found connections both to the images I'd taken as well as to the land that so inspired the journey. It was only then that I realised the purpose of my own poetic adventure: the search for Eve, my muse, somewhere between the majestic heavens and Mother Earth, standing atop the rocky inclines, as sensual and powerful as the monumental nature that had surrounded her.

Is this how she would possibly have been depicted, at the origin, in the bareness of essentials?

Maryam Eisler

London, May 2016



FARAWAY
(AND YET SO CLOSE):
EVE
AND
THE
SPIRIT
OF
THE
AMERICAN
WEST
ANTHONY
DOWNEY

In 2012, while researching a book on artists' studios, Maryam Eisler found herself near Ghost Ranch in Abiquiú, New Mexico. Situated in an area renowned for the quality of its light, its colossal landscapes and its fossil-rich terrain, Abiquiú was where the painter Georgia O'Keeffe chose to live from the late 1940s, only leaving (due to deteriorating health) two years before her death in 1986. Although you can visit O'Keeffe's house on a guided tour, the immediate area is now a conference centre, and unannounced visitors are dissuaded from roaming the land freely, as Eisler and her companions on that day were soon to find out. Arguably, it is the surrounding land, effectively the source of O'Keeffe's inspiration, that is of interest here; undeterred, Eisler decided, unannounced but with her cohorts' encouragement, to 'visit' the area through the simple expediency of scaling a fence. Thereafter they walked, not without trepidation, until they found O'Keeffe's home in a clearing. The house, an old adobe hacienda that has become one of the most important artistic sites in the south-western United States, is a fine example of Mission Revival design that gives way to a light-filled, unassuming, yet beguiling interior. It was this simple, unadorned house that served O'Keeffe as the sanctuary where she produced, using the surrounding landscape for inspiration, some of the most iconic paintings of the twentieth century.

Eisler's tenacity on that day had its rewards: familiar with O'Keeffe's work for many years, in conversation she recounts the moment of coming upon the house in its natural setting as an epiphany of sorts – a singular, manifest and revelatory moment of insight into why O'Keeffe, a denizen of the East Coast of the United States (born in Wisconsin but resident in New York for many years), alongside other major artists and photographers, would choose to live in what for many remains a relative wilderness. This is a landscape of primal meaning, redolent with prehistoric artefacts and the remnants of more recent crossings and passages. This is also a land of light, an almost too real – surreal – light that focuses the eye and brain on the immediacy of objects in the sheer vastness of a landscape that does justice to the over-used term *sublime*. This brilliant light also activates terrain that, with its rugged, craggy cliffs and pristine pinnacles, recalls a phrase used by O'Keeffe herself: 'Such a beautiful untouched lonely feeling place, such a fine part of what I call "the Faraway".'

For many of us less intrepid and less determined wayfarers, this epiphanic moment, wonderful in itself, would have remained just that: a second in time, both disconcertingly faraway and yet vertiginously imminent. However, for Eisler, and this will come as no surprise to anyone who has made her acquaintance, this moment in time became part of a broader ambition to return to the region and attempt to inhabit, through imagery, something of its uniqueness. Further inspired by the modernist American poetry that she had been reading (which included, among others,

work by Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath and E. E. Cummings), Eisler returned four years later and engaged closely with the environment in question, often working throughout the day, literally from dawn to dusk, to capture the light. Venturing further and further into the canyons, plateaus and arroyos of the New Mexico desert, this condensed exercise in image-making sought to capture the landscape that had inspired O'Keeffe and the impression of what, for many, remains an immeasurable and untold environment.

To punctuate this feeling of immersive helplessness, Eisler worked with a series of models, subjects and fellow-travellers who would at least anchor elements of the terrain before her. This approach answered the need to understand the discombobulating landscape through the reassuring presence of human figures. In its isolated and sparsely inhabited environs, the region is perhaps almost too much to experience on one's own. The surrounding countryside is, moreover, loaded with meaning, from the spirit memories of the Native American cultures that thrived there to the prehistoric tribes that once roamed the plains and, of course, the frontier wilderness of the so-called American 'West'. This is a much traversed and mythic place where a degree of awe and reverence goes with the scenery, so to speak. To this, we need to add the dauntless Eisler. Lost in the landscape, the scenario conjures up a quixotic quest to find a way to understand a landscape through corporeal form, or a way to understand the relationship of the transient body to a seemingly unchanging landscape. And all the while there is the sweltering heat to contend with – the average high temperature in the region being 90 degrees Fahrenheit over the summer months.

For anyone who has travelled across this terrain, the ghosts of other photographers are inescapable, just as they were for Eisler. We could recall here the work of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, both of whom looked to New Mexico for inspiration. In Adams' case, some of his most famous photographs, including *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* (1941), were taken while travelling there. However, it is to Weston that Eisler's photographs arguably owe their biggest debt. Edward Weston moved to Mexico City in 1923 and opened a photographic studio with his apprentice and lover Tina Modotti. Before making the move he travelled in 1922 to New York City, where he met, among others, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Charles Sheeler and Georgia O'Keeffe. It was O'Keeffe's photographs, alongside Strand's, that were to greatly influence Weston's subsequent work. Later he would write, 'The camera should be used for a recording of life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh.' Weston's *Cloud, Mexico* (1926) and *Hill and Clouds* (1933; printed 1937) are but two pertinent examples of this philosophy being visualised. This philosophy likewise speaks to Eisler's ambition across her entire series of photographs.

In *Maralah* and *Wakanda*, the model becomes one with the landscape in both tonal and formal terms. She is self-contained and confident, sensual but not overtly objectified or sexualised. The staged element of the figure, however, does not seem either fanciful or automatic; rather, there is an instinctive quality to such a pose that is not at odds with the rounded rock formations of the region (which include continental Paleozoic and Mesozoic formations alongside volcanic rocks). There is a poise here, an equilibrium of sorts, that is continued through the other images, an enquiry into, to paraphrase Weston, the essence of things and one's surroundings. The light on the central figure is in sharp contrast with the heat-filled sky that gives added compositional resonance to the simplest of subjects: a figure in a landscape.

In *Onatah*, this compositional equilibrium is pushed even further as the model envelops the cragginess of a lone tree. Human limbs mimic arboreal limbs, and the bleakness of the tree is offset by the posed, contained figure. In this image we cannot but recall antediluvian time, a time before the biblical Flood that speaks of innocence and perhaps a oneness with the earth that has long since been sundered. This prelapsarian state of purity associated with the Garden of Eden, before the Fall of Man, seems nevertheless to be awaiting a key figure: that of the Serpent, its shadow presaging banishment and ruination. It is difficult, when looking at this image, not to see precursors in, for example, Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder's *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man* (c. 1615), with its figure of Eve bedecking a tree, or the many other images of Eve in her mythically unspoilt state.

All of this is, of course, the result of a carefully constructed tableau vivant. It is notable that Eisler chose – having started out working with colour – to produce these images solely in black-and-white. This choice maintains a tonal, formal feel in the images. Black-and-white also plays to a sense of atemporality, a time beyond or outside of time, that proved a significant draw for the many photographers who found the desert region irresistible. The images hark back to another moment, and while they do speak to an Eve-like purity of tone, they are also exercises in form. The sharpness of contrast in *Kachina*, captured in the linearity of shadow as it falls across an undulating form, speaks of an architectural sensibility at work in this and other similar images. The architecture is organic, not unlike the formal undulations of O'Keeffe's adobe hacienda, and the nude figure is both caught in and expanding upon the play of light and shadow. There is a sense of impermanence here, despite the readily attestable presence of a corporeal being that is likewise present in *Kiwidinok*, with its enigmatic figure reaching hopelessly for the sky. Suspended somewhere between the often-encumbering earth and the unbounded firmament, there seems to be an innocence of sorts to such an act of reaching, an almost child-like glee in testing the limits of the self, only to be found wanting.

In *Witashnah* and *Mahal*, this sense of formal experimentation is further explored via the technique of foreshortening, whereby a reclining figure becomes an abstraction – an immediately recognisable and yet increasingly intangible form. The palpable sense of withdrawal and relaxation is heightened by the sense that the subject, eyes closed, has withdrawn somewhat from the scene. And yet, in other images, there are tensions that speak of a performative element to these images, a sense of playfulness that recalls the work of photographer Francesca Woodman, in part, and her focus on the figure as an ethereal source of movement rather than fixity in an image. Elsewhere, Eisler seems to intentionally orchestrate her models in a manner similar to Weston's work with Tina Modotti. An accomplished photographer in her own right, and a revolutionary activist, model and actress, Modotti was one of the first models to pose nude for Weston. The success of one of his first shows, in Mexico in 1923, was due in no small part to his seminal images of Modotti. In *Satinka* and *Winona*, some of this influence can be seen in Eisler's models, particularly in the tension between figure and landscape and its formal composition.

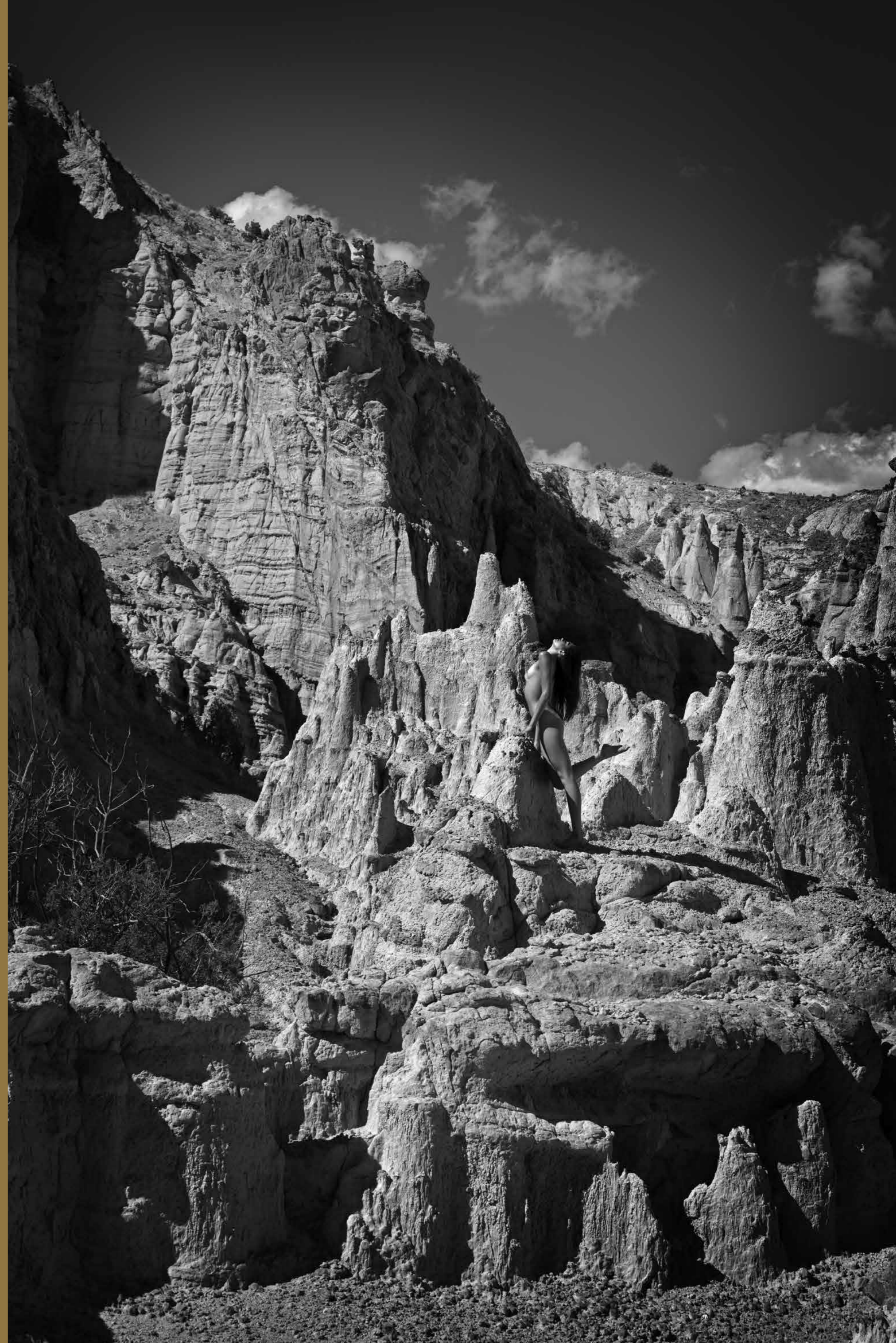
This performative element, while recalling Woodman's work, also alludes to the performances of Ana Mendieta, who, in works such as *Silueta* (1974), combined the figurative form with the visceral, pulsating sense of the ground beneath her feet. Performed in the ruins of the Palace of Six Patios at Yagul in Oaxaca, Mexico, where Mendieta created a silhouette of herself using blood, the figure of the artist and the terrain literally become one in the *Silueta* series. The shape of Mendieta's body, as in a number of her other performances, is a direct reference to the Minoan Snake Goddess, and their associations with feminine empowerment and place-making also speak to Eisler's images of prelapsarian self-containment.

Known locally as 'Pedernal', the Cerro Pedernal is a narrow mesa, an elevated area of land with a flat top and steep cliffs where Georgia O'Keeffe stipulated that her ashes be scattered after her death. The Pedernal is also a source of chert, a flint stone used by the pre-Hispanic Gallina people to fashion tools and knives. It was a means of trade that allowed the Gallina to live and prosper on and from the land they inhabited. This sense of locality, this autochthonous – the term refers to a geological deposit or formation formed in its present position as well as to indigenous inhabitants – state of being, goes some way to explaining O'Keeffe's relationship to the Pedernal and its environs, which formed the subject of many of her paintings. It is all the more fitting that Eisler's images reference this geological reality as much as they depict the human form in that landscape. This is a faraway place, there is no doubt about that, but such distances are relative. In its unique geological formation, and given its equally unique play of light and air, the Pedernal and the area surrounding Abiquiú are perhaps but one version of the propinquity of the primordial – the prelapsarian, antediluvian past to which some of us still hold, for better or worse.

Anthony Downey

'Both the grand and the intimate aspects of nature can be revealed in the expressive photograph. Both can stir enduring affirmations and discoveries, and can surely help the spectator in his search for identification with the vast world of natural beauty and wonder surrounding him.'

Ansel Adams



I first glimpsed your image in the Sky
blood-red was the setting Sun,
your Moon already rising.
Entranced, I glanced into your Grace,
the face creating waves,
those elliptical shadows moving across the fastness of Rock.

Queen of the Sky, Empress of Mountains,
the Rocks of Time greyed as you stood still.
Tinged with colourful fancies: a little mauve,
touch of fiery oranges tumbling down the sloping sides.
I reached out groping for fire-dust,
and my breath touched your breast.

Bare as Nature commands, and Eve demands.
My teeth felt the fury of the volcanic stone,
crack'd molars turning to gold dust at your feet.
Unmasked, this Mastodon fell through the cracks,
crevice filled up with the menace of desire.
My heart for hire, I fell deep into eternal sleep.

Eyes wide-open, Evolution stood still forever,
my ambition unfulfilled.
Frozen into fossil,
I stared in despair as men came and prayed at your feet,
preying on your amber flesh.
You creature of Heaven; you make men weak,
raise their ire and stoke their fire,
then let the Coldness of Time freeze desire.

You are impregnable, and I wanted nothing but to touch;
just a touch, was all.
Your mountain fast is not breached,
yet I see my teeth embrace your skin.
Man Tiger's fangs hanging by a thread;
at last closeness.
Hostage to beauty, I am shorn of life,
but not of your earthly touch.

Anonymous



'Beauty is everlasting
And dust is for a time'

Marianne Moore





**'Walk tall as the trees,
Live strong as the mountains,
Be gentle as the spring winds,
Keep the warmth of the summer sun in your heart,
And the great spirit will always be with you.'**

Native American proverb



**'Be not ashamed Woman
You are the gates of the body
And you are
The gates of the soul'**

Walt Whitman



**'When I think of art I think of beauty.
Beauty is the mystery of life.
It is not in the eye, it is in the mind.
In our minds there is awareness of perfection!'**

Agnes Martin





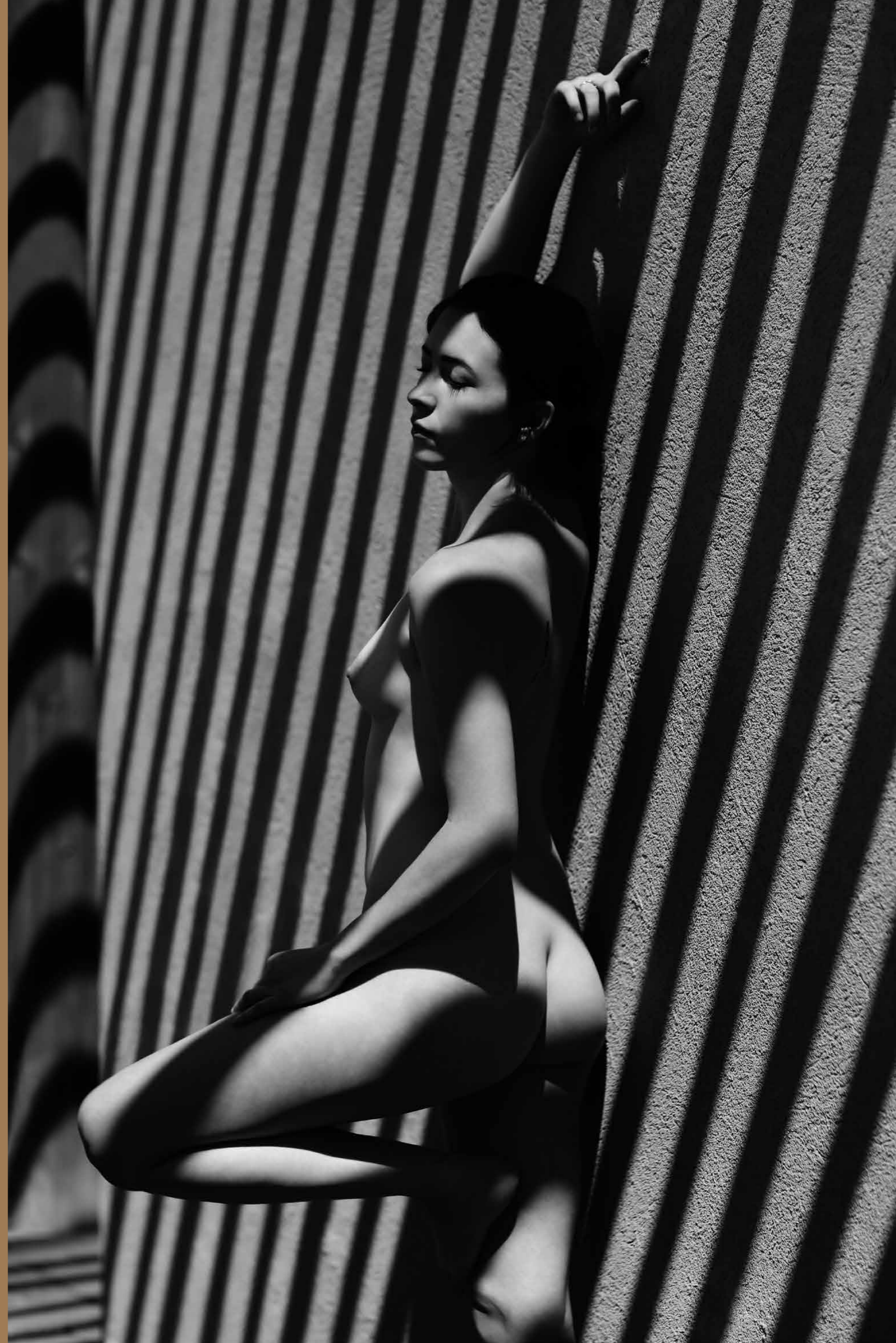
'This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,
I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a helpless vapor,
All falls aside but myself and it,
Books, art, religion, time, the visible and solid earth,
And what was expected of heaven or fear'd of hell,
Are now consumed'

From 'I Sing The Body Electric'
Walt Whitman



**'You are whatever a
Moon has always
Meant and whatever a
Sun will always sing'**

E. E. Cummings



To see her is a Picture –
To hear her is a Tune –
To know her an Intemperance
As innocent as June –
To know her not – Affliction –
To own her for a Friend
A warmth as near as if the Sun
Were shining in your Hand.

'To See Her Is A Picture'
Emily Dickinson





Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies.
I say,
It's in the reach of my arms
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.
I say,
It's the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can't touch
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them
They say they still can't see.
I say,
It's in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.
I'm a woman

Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing
It ought to make you proud.
I say,
It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
The palm of my hand,
The need of my care,
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

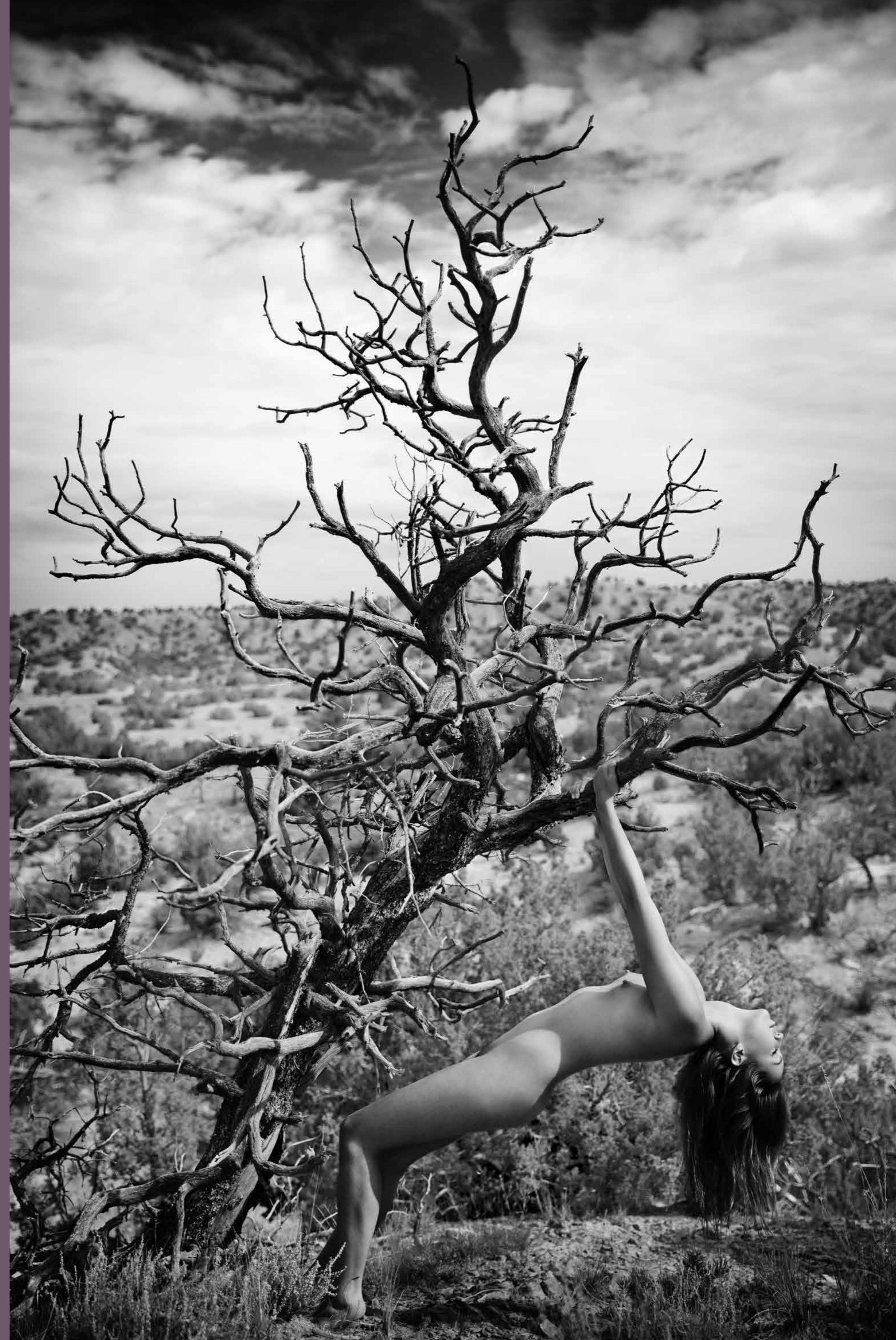
'Phenomenal Woman'
Maya Angelou



The tree has entered my hands,
The sap has ascended my arms,
The tree has grown in my breast –
Downward,
The branches grow out of me, like arms.

Tree you are,
Moss you are,
You are violets with wind above them.
A child – so high – you are,
All this is folly to the world.

'A Girl'
Ezra Pound



There is a purple flower
Between her marble, her birch-tree white
Thighs,
Or there is a red flower,

There is a rose flower
Parted wide,
As her limbs fling wide in dance
Ecstatic
Aphrodite,
There is a frail lavender flower
Hidden in grass;

O God, what is it,
This flower
That in itself had power over the whole earth?
For she needs no man,
Herself
Is that dart and pulse of the male,
Hands, feet, thighs,
Herself perfect.

'The Master'
H.D.





**'Keep your face always toward the sunshine
and shadows will fall behind you.'**

Walt Whitman





Maralah
(Born during an Earthquake)



Nizhoni
(Beautiful)



Watseka and the Beast
(Beauty and the Beast)



Onatah
(Daughter of the Earth)



Almika
(She of the Sun)



Witashnah
(Virginal)



Odina
(Mountain)



Tallulah
(Leaping Water)



Kiwidinok
(Woman of the Wind)



Kachina
(Sacred Dancer)



Mallina
(The Sun Goddess)



Mahal
(Woman)



Satinka
(Magical Dancer)



Makawee
(Earth Maiden)



Millaray
(Golden Flower)



Winona
(First-born Daughter)



Wakanda
(Possesses Magical Power)

Biographies

Iranian-born photographer, Maryam Eisler, holds a BA from Wellesley College and an MBA from Columbia University. She has had executive editorial roles on publications including *Unleashed: Contemporary Art from Turkey*; *Art and Patronage: The Middle East*; *Sanctuary: Britain's Artists and their Studios*; *Art Studio America: Contemporary Artist Spaces* and *London Burning: Portraits from a Creative City* (all co-published by TransGlobe Publishing and Thames & Hudson). She is currently photographing for *London East: Glitz and Gritz*, for which she is also the author. 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.

Anthony Downey is an academic, editor and writer. His research focuses on the politics of contemporary cultural production in the Maghreb, Middle East and Global South.

Acknowledgments

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