

AN EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCE

PHOTOGRAPHING THE FEMALE AT THE BEACON

Being a woman by society's standards means presenting a face of beauty to the world, one brushed with makeup and a smile. It means keeping up with fashion, spraying perfume to smell like sweetness, staying slim, keeping her inside processes discrete, being a wife, caring for kids, cooking and cleaning, all while holding down a job to support the family. But being a woman carries much more than this. Being a woman truly means strength, having confidence in her own skin. In "Photographing the Female," on view at Beacon Gallery through June 2, the photographs curated by Danish photographer and writer, Sarah Høilund, show how different cultures mold a woman in various ways. But, there is an underlying feeling of unity, a kind of cosmic connection, a harmony between all of the women in focus.

"It's been an exceptional experience just putting the show together from the point of view as a woman," said

Beacon Gallery owner Christine O'Donnell. "To have this experience really brought me to reflect upon my own sense of self."

When visitors step into the gallery, the first photograph they meet is that of "Sheets" by Birthe Piontek. It is difficult to ignore the contrast in this image with the shadowy background and white sheets covering all nine women whose heads only peek out to rest on one another's shoulder. They appear sleeping or floating as the sheets cover their feet, creating a dream-like, almost disturbing, mood. The image elicits Pictorialism themes of the later 19th- and early 20th-century-like haze, women in white dresses and orbs, while showing a sense of connection or intimacy.

Italian Vogue photographer Alexandra Von Fuerst's "Birth of a Divinity. Girls are Made of Scorpions" presents a haunting woman clothed in white linen, cinching a garter

FEATURED GALLERY

PHOTOGRAPHING THE FEMALE

BEACON GALLERY

524B HARRISON AVENUE

BOSTON,
MASSACHUSETTS

THROUGH JUNE 2



LEFT: Alena Zhandarova, *City of Brides*, 2017, photography, 47" x 31.5".

RIGHT: Alexandra Von Fuerst, *Birth of a Divinity. Girls are Made of Scorpions*, 2018, photography, 48" x 30".



...t around her waist, a piece of sensual lingerie, while
...red, funnel-shaped lamp stands in front of her. An egg
...a nest of greenery rests on the ground beside her,
...uminated by the red light. The scorpion title elicits a
...ymbol of rebirth, fertility and passion, where the eye
...akeup conjures an image of ancient Egypt.

Visitors also are invited to view a piece of Russian
...ture in Alena Zhandarova's "City of Brides" collection
...at captures modern-day Ivanovo, an old factory town in
...the 19th century where girls found work. The image of hair
...s through each photograph as a feminine icon, where
...the girls challenge a sense of confinement in domestic
...aces. In one piece, a girl hides half of her face, clutching
...tight braid. Her somber expression aligns with the
...adows in the background, but she remains in the light.
Another showcased artist is Abdollah Heidari, whose
...Want My Face" set of photographs, including "Asma
...roofi," depict the effects of northwestern Iranian school
...es caused by unsafe, oil-burning heaters on children like
...-year-old Asma, whose burns covered about 50 percent
...her body. Her burn marks almost meld into the floral

curtain behind her as her eyes meet the camera lens. Her
hand on her shoulder acts as a sense of shielding in this
garden-like aura. Many burn victims seek face and hand
surgeries to restore their skin, traveling over 600 miles
to receive it, although the treatment's outcome remains
uncertain. The image blends innocence, tragedy and
female identity into one.

Self-expression resonates through the works of South
African-born photographer Paul Shiakallis in his Botswana
series, "Leathered Skins, Unchained Hearts," that
portrays African women in Botswana's heavy metal music
scene, known as the Queens of Marok. Women like Debbie
in "Debbie Barone Superpower," who wears an AC/DC
graphic tee shirt, sleek leather with a cowgirl hat and boots,
defy gender roles. They belong to the rock scene, where
men hold a predominant role and Botswanan women are
expected to obey the patriarchal structure as submissive
beings. Debbie's clothing and confident pose highlights
her assertion of self. Shiakallis additionally provides small
anecdotes of his photographing experiences, which in
this piece, included when Debbie's pastor father angrily

**Birthe Piontek, *Sheets*,
2014, photography, 31 1/2"
x 39".**



came into the room of the photoshoot, showing a clash of conservative and progressive beliefs.

Visitors also explore a hidden part of South Asian society through Candace Feit's "Woman in My Heart" photos, which zoom into the life of Hijras or trans women that Feit captured during a 10-year-long trip to West Africa and South Asia. Many experienced forced prostitution and prejudice due to their identities in Indian transgender villages, but the Hindu Mayana Kollai festival is a place of refuge for them, as they become the gods or goddesses they worship. Feit creates narratives through photographs like a person applying makeup to another for the celebration with pink eyeshadow and sparkly earrings. There is a sense of connection between the two as the one with makeup sits upright with closed eyes and the other deeply concentrates on the application.

The exhibit also incorporates short films and slideshows to further expand the notions of being a woman in the modern day. "Blood Speaks" by Poulomi Basu reveals a hidden western-Nepali human rights violation towards young girls, where menstruation is seen as an impurity

or as pollution to the earth, rather than a natural, life-giving process. The photographs of girls confined to makeshift huts, and married young and abused, illuminate on this horrific tragedy. "Duet" by Andy Margetson also addresses patriarchal society, but that of the ballet, where men dominate the field in choreography and directing. By filming a duet of two female ballerinas at London's Royal Ballet who mirror each other, break into their own rhythms and unite again, Margetson highlights a sisterhood in dance, a deep emotional connection.

Gallery owner O'Donnell admires the exhibit's richness in "diversity of experience" and finds visitors' conversations surrounding "what does make a woman, what makes us feel the way we do, what kinds of obstacles are we up against" rewarding to hear. Running through June 2, the show, which originally exhibited in India, welcomes guests to visit different parts of the globe and learn how cultures shape one's perception of womanhood, leaving a long-lasting impression.

| Olivia MacDonald

Abdollah Heidari,
Asma Maroofi, 2019
photography, 29"