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**ÚRSULA: Portraying Contemporary Women Across Cultures through Photographic
Portraiture**

A Thesis in Studio Arts
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Abstract.

Starting in the US and finishing in Colombia, Ursula is a body of work composed of twenty-eight black-and-white photographs, each of which are portraits of women. In this project, I investigated my practice, the methodology to make this series of portraits, and my inspiration for making these portraits. This series of portraits was made following three rules while I was photographing and then two factors that are my choice and heavily impact on the final result the viewer is seeing. My work was inspired by the main female character in the book, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Ursula Iguaran. She was a woman, like the women in my portraits who have dealt with sexism and this has marked her life; but different from my subjects, they have overcome it. I also consider my role in the contemporary art world; not only as an international artist in America and then going back to her homeland, in addition to as a woman making photographic portraits of other women. As I have to translate the work from the US to Colombia, I researched another artist who was also Latina like me, as well she felt some sort of displaced, and this was shown in her work, Ana Mendieta. Additionally, trying to understand my place in the photographic world, in a long line of photographers also making portraits, I concentrated on women photographers, especially researching on Julia Margaret Cameron, Justine Kurland, and Katy Grannan. In this paper, I will describe my aim to make portraits of common women, in America and Colombia, with the primary idea to highlight and empower them.

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Introduction.

The summer before I started this project, I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez—a book I started to read when I was fifteen but only finished six years later. Garcia Marquez has never been my favorite author, but coming from Colombia, the book is almost like a national bible: everyone has read it. For most Colombian readers of this novel, it narrates the story of a family and their strength. However, I found that this novel describes many details in Colombia's society from dreamy and melancholic landscapes, violence, big families, economic and social problems, egocentrism, selfishness, pride, envy, male “strength”, and women's beauty. Garcia Marquez uses magical realism to describe Colombia's society and history, the country in which I was born and raised. He describes delightful spaces, rich in details, colors and smells to narrate the struggle of the Buendia family.

After reading the novel, I had several discussions with family and Colombian friends about the book. Their interest in the novel was mostly about the Buendia family men and the more lurid scenes in the book like one of the sons running away from home seeking the love of a woman or incest between siblings. Feeling unsatisfied with the responses that I received in Colombia, out of curiosity, one day I started discussing this book with friends in the US and found a clear difference in their point of view. People in the US tended to find the story of the main female character in the book, Ursula, the most interesting part of the novel. Ursula is the strongest character in the overall storyline: she keeps her family and town together until the end, even though all the difficulties she endures. Back in Colombia, everyone I spoke with had a strictly male-privileged perspective on this book. As I read and thought about the book, Ursula always stuck with me. She was an example of the strong women in the world, fighting for equality and being unafraid to stand up for any issue. I was conflicted by the way people in

Colombians talk about the book saying it is like reading a portrait of a typical Colombian family. However, men and women describe Ursula, the mother, town leader and head of the family as insolent and dominant, even when she is the symbol of the women of Colombia.

It is so casual in everyday Colombian life to see a single mother being the head of a home, constantly working and taking as many jobs as they can to sustain their families. Often “good mothers and wives” have to forget about their own desires or even values in order to fulfill their roles. Either single or in a marriage, women are always judged. As another example, women who have been sexually, physically or verbally assaulted by a stranger, someone in their family, their husbands, a co-worker, or anyone else are blamed because of what they said, wore, or where they were. People say “they wanted all these actions to happen”, but in reality who wants to be in this position? Why would someone want to be attacked? Jokes are habitually made about women's behaviors, while the few prominent women in the government are also mocked. Women are treated like sexual objects, being used or discriminated against, based on their bodies. Women often study various subjects to accomplish their dreams or aspirations, but the majority forfeit these goals in order to marry and sustain a family. It is normalized for women to be unable to express themselves, participate in the government, large organizations, and not be the main voice in their homes. The discussions that came from reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are only the symptoms of the sexist problem in cultures like Colombia's. My lived experience in Colombia as a woman who has lived and witnessed sexism had led me to create this project.

Before I started shooting this project, I took a portrait of a close friend of mine, *Inji* (fig.1) which became a turning point in my work. At the time my purpose was only to make portraits of people around me, illustrating different spaces and locations and how those influence

the subject. Making this portrait taught me how photographs could help depict the many emotions and experiences of women around me. In this photograph, Inji is lying down on top of her bed with a melancholic yet determined expression looking at the camera. The contrast and light accentuate her facial features and the area where she is placed, evoking the image of a memory, rather than a candid snapshot. It became my wish to start photographing all of the women in my life: like Inji, they had to confront the stereotypes of their own culture towards women.

Inji is Korean and described how she grew up idolizing the Korean stereotype of womanhood. Only accessing these images through TV and Kpop because she was in Turkey, she always compared and beat herself up for not having or accomplishing what she saw on the screen: skinny bodies, pale skin, another's standard of beauty. Now overcoming this situation, she sees herself more like a modern Turkish woman,



(Figure 1) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Inji*, Inkjet Film Print, 24 x 30 in., 2019.

having a very complex and varied understanding of womanhood, being liberal, building her professional career and embracing intellect over physical “beauty.” Sometimes women need to abandon their culture in order to become the person they want to be. I established a process for myself: one step was to invoke Ursula’s qualities of independence, femininity, strength, empowerment, equality, through the subjects I photograph. At the time that I shared my thoughts about Garcia Marquez’s novel, I realized how many women have dealt with the effects of stereotypes or had to follow an idealized role that male dominated society bestowed upon them.

Machismo is a word and idea that has been present every day of my life from the moment that I was born. Men occupy a principal role in the culture I was raised in and women are always secondary: the ideas and actions of women do not have much value in this cultural hierarchy. I was raised thinking that there is a designated role for women to fulfill and to prepare myself to clean a house, be a good supportive wife and mother, and repeat the typical cycle. We might not be in the nineteenth century, but there is still a culture in which women are undervalued and expected to put everything aside in order to become wives and mothers. Coming and speaking from my personal experience, growing up in this kind of culture made me feel powerless, categorized, and silenced many times. With this body of work, I want to discuss the idea of depicting identity, gender, and the influence of culture in shaping a person. Using photography, I aspired to highlight women through portraiture. These women are not only from my country, but different backgrounds who have experienced these lived realities that affect women on a daily basis.

My investigation began by looking at contemporary female artists whose work has also been in the same area of portraiture and womanhood: Ana Mendieta, Francesca Woodman, Justine Kurland, LaToya Ruby Frazier and Frida Khalo among them. Looking at and reading about their work started giving me ideas to point me in the direction I wanted my portraits to evoke. Evolving from photographs like *Inji*, I began asking my subjects to wear something specific, or to pose in a certain place, or tell them what to do with their bodies; I aspired to treat this project differently. In *URSULA*, I wanted something more spontaneous, free and authentic from my photographs. In the process of creating this work there is a conversation between subjects and photographers, overall it is more natural and spontaneous. I am portraying these

women with the idea of empowerment: they are the future of our world and sometimes touchstones to the past, deserving recognition and appreciation for being who they are.

This thesis will start by discussing the content of my work: selecting my subjects and narrating my process of photographing while citing specific portraits as examples. The discussion will continue with the experience of photographing within two different countries, the United States and Colombia, where societies approach and see women's empowerment in different ways. I will discuss the work of Ana Mendieta, who was also a Latin artist that lived in America and Cuba and shared the experience of having two cultures across her work. In her practice, she discussed the disconnection that she felt from the world not knowing where she was actually from, while she also criticized gender and racism in both cultures. Lastly, I will discuss women photographing their "own" communities from the beginning of photography to our days by looking at artists who photograph family, other women, or communities like Julia Margaret Cameron, Justine Kurland and Katy Grannan.

Chapter I: My Photographic Practice and the Content of the work

Practice and photographing

"There's this idea that in portraiture it is the photographer's job to set the subject at ease. I don't believe that." - Annie Leibovitz

Directing my own encounters, my practice includes reaching out to women who have dealt with sexism and overcome it: they are the main subject of my images. During the past two years of my practice, I have explored portraiture using 120mm black and white film. These elements have guided me to create a body of work that consists of a portrait series of twenty-

eight black-and-white photographs. In this chapter, I will first describe my methodology to create the portraits of this series. Secondly, I will talk about the character that inspired my portraits, the main base of this project: Úrsula, principal female character from Garcia Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

In the past, I have focused on technical elements like tonality, contrast, and focus to achieve the desired composition and make successful photographs. In the process of developing this project I inserted other steps that became a method, which are a sequence of steps before making the image. These new steps are rules to myself in order to make the image. First, I ask these women to choose their own clothes. I want them to wear something in which they feel themselves. When it comes to my body of work, authenticity is an important detail in my photographs.

In the photograph *Camila*, 2020 (fig.2), the subject is in the bathtub of her apartment



(Figure 2) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Camila*, Madison, NJ, 2019.

wearing underwear. When I went to photograph her she decided that she wanted to be photographed in this space. This is a special environment for her, however, she clarified to me she did not want to be naked. I photographed her looking like she wanted. I believe this photograph enriched my body of work by opening a section of women owning their own person and taking control of her own sexuality. She is in a vulnerable position, in this

space barely clothed, however, her expression reflects no intruder in this personal space. Again, I do not make decisions about my subjects' clothing, it is their own election to wear what they

decide to wear—pajamas, gym clothes, fancy dressing, or any other—because my idea is to depict them in the most natural way possible.

The next step in my routine of photographing is to avoid photographing my subjects smiling. I ask my models not to smile at the camera and to be serious in their expressions.

Initially, I decided to stay away from smiles so the collection would not appear like commercial or editorial work, differing from graduation photos or other images like this. In the conversations I have with my subjects, at first they are concerned by how they look. Women usually worry about defects that they feel a need to hide in our patriarchal society, like wrinkles, under-eye bags, freckles, or fat areas. At first, the subjects of my



(Figure 3) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Lina & Valentina*, Orlando, FL, 2020.

photographs feel awkward being so aware of the camera in front of them and not being told what to do. I never have a plan for them, nor explain to them what to do. One of the cases was *Lina & Valentina*, 2020 (fig. 3), who are mother and daughter. When I photographed them, I waited until I had my camera set up in front of them to tell them that I wanted them to be serious, to avoid smiling. Surprisingly, Lina, the mother, seemed very uncomfortable with my request as if she did not know what to do with herself while a camera was pointing at her. Meanwhile, Valentina was immediately serious, with an almost unwelcoming expression on her face. It was unexpected to see the different responses from the two different generations. I thought it was going to be more complicated to photograph the daughter seriously, whereas the mother was going to be more adaptable. However, it was the other way around. These two women are not only from different

generations, they have also been raised in two different places. Lina was raised in Mexico while Valentina grew up in America, shedding light on cultural differences in the standard of both women and appearance.

While photographing, I am talking to them about the idea of this project, asking about their everyday lives and about how this is a celebration of them. These women are battling to reflect beauty standards, while I depict the most genuine aspects of them and embrace who they more naturally are. I want to show women's natural features: capturing their facial features, cheekbones, eyebrows, eyes, and highlight characteristics which make them unique like their own histories. The serious expression not only makes the complete series more cohesive, but brings a new aspect to the depiction of women. These subjects are not scared to be seen in this way; they are not looking for viewers' acceptance. I am avoiding cultural beauty standards and depicting their most genuine and natural aspects. In conjunction with the serious expression, I decided to have my subjects look directly at the camera when they were being photographed with the idea of creating a directly engaged environment. The gaze of my subjects is direct with the camera, establishing an immediate and intense connection between image and receptor; by looking at the camera the effect of the final print is the subject staring at the viewer. I want to represent the strength that each of the women I photograph has inside of them, I want to illustrate all their capacity and potential.

Since the nineteen-seventies through the modern day, there has been a shift in photography in which black-and-white has become secondary to color in practice. Color film and then digital color is the dominant medium of our era. Nowadays, it is the decision of the photographer to use black and white, rather than this being a given. One female photographer who prefers photographing in black-and-white is Sally Mann, who talks about black-and-white

as a practice that takes away the ‘snapshot’ look of a photograph. The idea is to abstract this picture of life, taking away color, separating this scene from our daily world. In addition, she describes the importance of avoiding color to show the main idea of the photograph, making it more the photographer's intention clearer and more direct (“Sally Mann in “Place”” 26:36 - 27:43). I use black-and-white with two intentions. First, I do not want the work to look like a snapshot—a photograph taken quickly to document a moment in time. For me each portrait is a person, not a moment. Secondly, in her essay *The New Color: The Return of Black-and-White*, the author Charlotte Cotton, talks about the use of black-and-white in the contemporary world in two ways. One is the connection between monochromatic tones and the history of photography: it sets the image in a context of nostalgia while also having “the ingredients for cognizant, challenging photography” (Cotton 2). Cotton then discusses black-and-white as an artifact, where in a world where everything is about functionality, this medium makes one momentarily forget the push towards function and instead concentrate on the pleasure of the physical image (Cotton 2). It is a space where one is confronted with something that it is not in today’s everyday language. This leads me to my second intention with this medium, which is to highlight these women, exporting them away from our mundane world.

This project was not the first time I worked with black and white film. Two years ago I produced a body of portraits and self-portraits. One of the photographs that belongs to this work is *College Girls I*, 2018 (fig. 4). In my mind, I had the idea to show the experiences I was going through in college. *College Girls I* takes place in a dorm room with a group of four girls drinking and smoking. Each one of the girls displays a different emotion and activity associated with this kind of environment: from innocence and naivety to experience, from carefree to insensitive. The black and white scene creates a cohesive atmosphere, but also downplays details in the scene that

would be too glaring in color. For example, all the girls in the scene are wearing black clothes, except the girl in the center of the composition who is wearing a floral gray dress. She is the subject clashing the most in this scene.

Another element at play in the environment is that the girls all have their hair down, except the girl in the middle and the girl in the far left of the composition. These two are opposites: one being an outsider in this environment and the other having more of a captivating and inviting expression into this disorganized world. The girl on the far left, and the girl sitting on the top of the couch holding the wine bottle in offer to the other are the only two gazing directly at the camera. Their confident expressions are unashamed of being seen in the scene surrounded by all these different substances. The photograph deals with alcohol and others seem to be implying peer pressure. I

enjoyed the results of *College Girls I*: I was able to accentuate the contrast in facial features, bringing up highlights and shadows through the lighting.

Commonly, different

societies have different meanings for different colors, like red's

association with passion or pain or blue's with tranquility or sadness. Without color, everything is defined within the range of grays, the deepest blacks and the purest whites. Another factor to make this body of work was to avoid color, not wanting my viewers to make any assumptions of these women, by the color of clothes they are wearing or the space that they located.



(Figure 4) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *College Girls I*, darkroom print, 8 x 10 in., 2018

Monochromatic spaces where cold or warm tones become a different tone of gray takes away distractions and helps the viewer concentrate on features and expressions of my subjects. For



(Figure 5) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Ximena*, Cali, Colombia, 2020.

instance, in *Ximena*, 2020 (fig. 5) the photograph was taken in her children's favorite playground and she was dressed formally due to her job. She was worried the photographs would look weird because of the contrast between the color of background and her outfit, yet she liked this space. Keeping it monochromatic removed the worry about color.

The third rule of my practice is to ask my subjects if I can photograph them in their own safe and comfortable space. Like *Jazmyn*, 2020 (fig.6),

in the photograph, she is lying down in bed, and instead of wearing pajamas as normal, she is wearing casual clothes. She is majoring in biology and while I photographed her she talked about how her only moments of relaxation are her afternoon quick naps after she is done with classes. Not even night time leaves her feeling as well rested as when she sleeps in the afternoons. She said she wakes up multiple times at night thinking she forgot something, while the afternoon is a reward of the day. Jazmyn also decided not to



(Figure 6) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Jazmyn*, Madison, NJ, 2020.

wear make-up in her photograph: she said that she was not afraid of showing how tired she

looks. I believe a way to represent these women authentically is to give them the choice of where they want to be photographed and how they want to generally appear. However, I do my own arranging of the space by using a square, medium-format camera.

The Hasselblad 500CE, the camera I am using, creates 6x6cm square frames instead of rectangular frames I had used before and which are more common in photographic practice. The square format helps bring the viewer and the subject closer, by shortening the perception of the environment in which the subject sits and generally centering the subject in the frame. The challenge of this framing is trying to create variation in the compositions. This means the subject must be posed in different angles and locations of the composition. For example, comparing



(Figure 7) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Christina*, Somerville, NJ, 2019.

Christina, 2019 (fig. 7) and *Juanita*, 2020 (fig.8)

these two pieces have different compositions even while one person dominates the frame. In *Christina*, she expressed that her preferred environment was the pool at the house, she is in the middle of the composition. She spoke of how many times she lays down on the paddle board that she is on top in the photo like a gateway or just looking for relaxation.

This element “draws” a straight diagonal into the scene, as if directing attention towards the subject, starting large right at the edge of the frame and going smaller moving towards her, almost like an arrow. It appears as if she is being pushed to the extreme left. The paddle board is an instrument to guide the viewer towards the subject that is not as close to the camera. On the other hand, in *Juanita*, the subject is also located in the center of the photograph. I decided to capture her closely, guiding the viewer to this more

intimate photograph. It captures a sharp look to her face, emphasizing her emotions and body language by focusing on her upper body and face. Different than *Christina*, the shallow depth of field barely provides a sense of the outdoor environment where Juanita is. Her expression and gaze are the main factors that create an interlocution with the viewer. Another remarkable factor in my photographs that is mixed with the frame is the angle in which I am taking these portraits. Some of them come from above while other ones are straight in front of the subjects. These vary depending on the level of intimacy I have with the subject and their personalities. For example, Juanita is my sister and is a more open person; meanwhile, Christina is my friend who prefers having her own space. The angles and distance in this project are different depending on the person I am photographing, and also asking them what makes them feel more comfortable. Both portraits are taken from different distances between camera and subject,



(Figure 8) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Juanita*, Winter Garden, FL, 2020.

but still illustrate these women in spaces comfortable for them looking straight at the camera, while the composition directs the viewers' eyes to their gaze.

Inspiration, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

“We will not leave,” she said. “We will stay here, because we have had a son here.”

“We still have not had a death,” he said. “A person does not belong to a place until there is someone dead under the ground.”

Úrsula replied with a soft firmness:

“If I have to die for the rest of you to stay here, I will die.” - Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

My second point in this chapter is to discuss the image of Úrsula and my choices of the subjects I am photographing. I built my work from the image of Úrsula Iguarán the matriarchal protagonist of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Gabriel García Márquez, without drawings or images, transmits the full essence of his characters to the reader. He described the character's personality, as well as their citizenship and customs. For example, Úrsula Iguarán is the clearest example of how Latin American women are formed by a patriarchal society and live in it, always being criticized and not recognized. Úrsula Iguarán is a Colombian woman who, together with her husband José Arcadio Buendía, founded Macondo the place in which the novel takes place, an environment rich in resources as well as problems. She was so determined and strong that she started her town by giving birth to the first villager, arranged the order and place of the houses, decided on the colors that would decorate the town, and planted the flowers that would fill the atmosphere with smells, covering the blood and decomposition from the villagers that died due to the fights started in the town.

Úrsula is strong, rebellious, persistent, romantic, and she still gets to be a mother and a leader not only for her family, but for her town. Men hate or misunderstand her due to all these aspects that make her who she is; even though he is a Colombian man, Garcia Marquez, created and celebrated this image of a strong woman. Sexism has “empowered” women by creating standards that women today have to accomplish in order to have a value in society. A variety of Ursula’s characteristics, not to say all, are attributed to the profile of a contemporary woman. However, with her case one can also see the burden of “having it all” and still not being good

enough for society. Few of the ideals from Ursula and the stereotype are: an outstanding career and family, always looking “pretty” and avoiding emotions, even pain (physical or emotional). However, even when women accomplish all of these ideals, there is no sense of liberation from society; these ideals cause double or more the amount of work for women. Judgment is always present towards women accomplishing the roles of mother, wife and successful career. Society calls women bossy, while they call men strong-minded. Other words only women are referred to are feisty, abrasive, hormonal, to name just a few. It is bad to be strong and ambitious for a woman, but it is also bad to feel or show emotions because this tags women as weak or irrational. Women are not allowed to have a moment to stop and feel and even more prohibited from pursuing professional or non-maternal or wifely duties without people using the words mentioned before to describe them.

Ursula is the main inspiration for my work. My art aims to visually animate characteristics of this literary character, while also presenting changes in gender roles that women have been working towards in recent decades. These portraits are a space for my subjects to be who they are, pushing their own expectations of themselves, not caring what is conceived of as “good or bad”, because in this space they are recognized for their own meaning of womanhood. For instance, *Mary Nelsy*, 2019



(Figure 9) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Mary Nelsy*, Tulua, Colombia, 2020.

(fig.9), is a Colombian grandmother who has dedicated her whole life to raising her children and was absolutely dedicated to them. She was married at a young age taking away her chance to go

to college, which at the time just a few “rebellious” women would pursue. Mary is not a typical Colombian grandmother, instead of baking and knitting all the time she has become an activist in her town. Today, she works hard for a network advocating for kids who have suffered from sexual or physical assault at home. Her large house has become a place to help others. She speaks of her life as different rooms. Today she is in the room where she comes first: her work and studies in psychology which she concluded just two years ago are her priority now. Mary is just one of many women in this series of portraits and she embraces strength by going against societal expectations based on both gender and age.

Through portraiture, I want to illustrate how different cultures, religions, or personal experiences (family and others) come together to influence a person, their personality and beliefs. I photograph women who are close to me in both Colombia and the United States, where I currently reside. My subjects come from different backgrounds and cultures but I identify common life experiences, emotions, or feelings with each of the women I portray. We have all been through an experience that has diminished us just because we are women, but we’ve also worked to overcome sexism.

Chapter II: Between two lands, my own identity and the practice

Immediate experience

“A photograph is not just the result of an encounter between an event and a photographer; picture-taking is an event itself, and one with ever more peremptory rights- to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore whatever is going on.”- Susan Sontag, *On Photography* 11.

Forgetting my roots is something that always terrified me since leaving my birthplace. I have always embraced the culture I grew up in, keeping festivities, trying to find some of the

food, and maintaining contact with my far flung family. Nonetheless, America has unfettered me: I find the culture in this country is more accepting and understanding and it is a land where everyone can find a place and community. Confusion and mixed feelings have been part of the experience of immigrating to another country, where everything is so new and feels welcoming. Before working on this project, I worked on a mini-series of photographs of a small Colombian community in New York, located in Jackson Heights, Queens in 2017. At the time I was in the middle of a personal crisis, in which I was ashamed for disconnecting in some sort of way from my origins. I could not bear the way that Colombians were depicted around the world, however it is a problem that old generations in the country had originated. Seeking to reconnect with what I thought at the time as my “community,” I traveled to Jackson Heights looking for people or a place I could find welcoming as I thought of my own home.

Regardless of my initial expectations, this experience took another path. Visiting this place made me feel the complete opposite of what I was looking for. There was no sense of home or nostalgia. I did not belong to the community even though I was Colombian like the rest of the people there. Most of the people at Jackson Heights are Colombians who left Colombia a long time ago, still thinking about the country as this place full of war; different from me that grew up in the new generational movement that believes in peace and forgiveness. They seemed sad yet not forgetful about their past in the land they left and never looked back to it, nor were they satisfied with their present status in another place where they were supposed to find peace. The photographs explore the disconnection that I felt being in a place where I thought I could fit in. In *Jackson Heights II*, 2017, (fig.10) this photograph was one of the few scenarios where I could be the closest to people without being pointed at. This place created a misplaced feeling in me. In the photograph, the rain reflects the emotions of sadness and loss that I was experiencing

at the time. People showing their backs and looking away from the camera mirrored the feeling



(Figure 10) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Jackson Highs II*, digital print, 8 x 10 in., 2017

of me as an intruder along with the rejection that I felt. The many colors are what I remember of my country, colors everywhere; however, gray and dark tones dominated this situation. After this experience, I focused on another approach to photography.

As my research started developing and taking me to a different place, something unexpected happened: a pandemic. COVID-19, also known as the Coronavirus, presented the need for a drastic change in this project. Since I started living in America, I started opening my mind to a contrasting mind-set than the one I was raised with. In the US I felt unchained to follow a stereotype, creating spaces where I could do as I wish without feeling attached to the definition of women that I was taught while I was younger. I began this body of work in the United States, photographing my friends, neighbors, family who visited, and other women I knew. For precautions and safety reasons I had to leave the country and go back to Colombia, my homeland. Meanwhile my project was not done yet. The body of work that I started building in a land where women are freer, more recognized, and where there is a louder fight for defeating stereotypes, had to shift to a different place where the majority of women are more submissive and still afraid to stand up to patriarchy. There were challenges to be confronted like finding subjects; explaining to Colombian women the motivations of the project and the methodology of it has not been simple. Women are not as

eager to be photographed as they are in America and many were uncomfortable being photographed without their husbands or a male figure in the composition.

Opening my project to women from my homeland has unexpectedly enriched the idea of this project, juxtaposing how women adapt in different ways to the same role, like being a mother. For instance, *Sarah & Shannon*, 2020 (fig. 11) which was taken in Winter Garden,

Florida, depicts two women, a little girl and an adult. The mother and daughter were my neighbors during my trip to Florida, always running around, playing and laughing with Sarah's younger brothers and father. In this image there is a traditional scene of a mother and a daughter, where the mother is protective and supportive. Her actions are engaging with her daughter, not with the camera. Her eyes are closed and she is softly kissing her little girl's



(Figure 11) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Sarah & Shannon*, Winter Garden, FL, 2020.

head. Right next to her, there is Sarah whose gaze is directed right at the camera. Her expression shows calm and serenity; she is tranquil with her mother's arm surrounding her. The photograph was taken in their favorite park close to their house in the suburbs—there was a swing where they both normally sit down to watch the birds fly close to the lake that is in front of it. They described this as their tranquil space, not far away from home, calmer than the little boys screaming and joking around and the silly fights between siblings.

On the other hand, I also photographed a few of my neighbors in Colombia since returning home. I was able to photograph one of them with her sons [*Mabel*, 2020 (fig.12)], which was her request. Two boys of different ages stand at her sides with their mother right in

the middle of the frame. The photograph was taken in the living room of their apartment, where in the back one can see lights of nighttime in the city. The gaze of the three subjects in the photograph is directly to the camera, confronting whoever is looking at them. Different from the last photograph, here they are all in a protective environment, where the mother is not the only one confronting the situation, her sons are too. Mabel is a journalist and a single-mother. Being by herself, she has always taken care of her children, making sure they have everything they need. In this photograph they are all watching each other's backs, assuming care of each other. There is the same protective sense from the mother as from her children, even more so from the elder, who expresses more solidity.



(Figure 12) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Mabel*, Cali, Colombia, 2020.

These two photographs showed me the different sides that my artwork was touching: different emotions and different ways to live. In both cases I am approaching motherhood, an important aspect of many women's lives. As afraid as I was to re-encounter this culture in which I felt so worthless as a person, I slowly realized it was important to portray more women and to expand the culture in which women can be who they want to be. As Eric Bottet

proposes in his essay about artistic experience and immigration, *Partir y volver. Cuba la tierra natal de Wifredo Lam y Ana Mendieta* (Depart and return. Cuba, birthplace of Wifredo Lam and Ana Mendieta) there is the necessity of leaving a motherland in order to encounter new culture and grow not only as a person but in experience and mind and to adapt to a new being that is the mix of both living experiences (Bonnet 15).

Ana Mendieta, the work between identities

Immigration is a theme present in the work of many contemporary artists, influencing their own artwork. For my research I decided to focus specifically on Ana Mendieta, a Cuban artist, whose work explored different themes around ethnicity, sexuality, morality, religion and politics. Many of her series of work centered on the female body—the abuse of it and its connection with life and death. Ana Mendieta was born in Havana, Cuba. She escaped the country at a very young age, supported by the Catholic Church who was trying to evacuate as many children as they could right after Fidel Castro took over the control of the country. Living in different parts of the United States, Mendieta studied at the University of Iowa, focusing on arts. At first she started her work in painting, but then like many artists at the time, she decided to move on to performance. In her work, she included the female body, to discuss notions of gender mixed up with her indigenous roots (Bonnet 49). Her art has been described as “raw”, because of her use of untypical art materials, like blood, dirt and fire, but also for displaying edgy and unsettling scenes. She was engaged in leading the viewer to recognize the value of humanity, ignoring such factors as gender, race or any other social factors. She showed different scenarios where the female body was so degraded until being lost, not only physically but emotionally, too.

In 1851, the newspaper started publishing several obituaries, however the majority of them were of white men. At the beginning of 2018, *The New York Times* started publishing their new section of obituaries, *OVERLOOKED*; in this section, the obituaries are written about remarkable people whose deaths were “overlooked” by The Times, plus expanding the recognition to women from the past. In the *New York Times*’ obituary *Overlooked No More: Ana Mendieta, a Cuban Artist Who Pushed Boundaries*, published in September of 2018, the writer Monica Castillo talks in depth about one of Mendieta’s better known pieces, *Rape Scene*. Made

while she was in college, Mendieta reconstructed the crime scene of the sexual assault and murder case of a nursing student at the college. Using her body as the prime subject, in this performance scene, she adapted the living room of her college apartment to be the crime scene. When people walked into the living room, she was displayed laying down on top of the dining table, appearing lifeless, with a bloody fluid going down her legs (Castillo). This performance was open for everyone to go and see. Mendieta was recasting an impression of the tragedy that had happened onto the viewer. The objective was to dehumanize herself as the attacker of the victim's original case did.

Another important element that Castillo describes is Mendieta's disconnected feelings as an immigrant. Mendieta never felt like she belonged in a place, leaving Cuba as such a young creature, she questioned her identity because she was also not American. Her series *Silhouettes*, or *Siluetas* is her body of work in which she most clearly expresses this sense of transition between two lands, "her new home and her homeland" (Castillo). In this series she uses earth elements and her body to create ephemeral sculptures, however today we only have photographs of these. Her work is the conversation between landscape and the female body, in these pieces her own silhouette combined with the environment that she chose until it disappeared: representing the life cycle, how we come from earth, and at the end we go back to it. In her retrospective, *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, 1988, the curator Petra Barrencas and John Perreault discuss how this theme might have come to Mendieta's mind by leaving her homeland, "overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature)" (Tate). Mendieta described how making art was her best link to the universe and finding a sense of belonging to something: a society, a community.

With her sculptures she becomes part of the earth, a part of nature and at the same time nature is forming part of her body (Tate). An example of one of her pieces is *Untitled (Silueta Series, Mexico)*, 1974, (fig. 14). This piece shows a rich landscape in which one can see the mountains in the background, then there is a set of ruins in which the main subject of the photograph is located. Inside of what was a temple there is the registration of her silhouette, which was marked on the sandy ground (Tate). As in this image, Mendieta is creating a ritual in which she aspired to land her own location to belong in a place with the final result being ephemeral; it would disappear at some point, decaying, becoming once again part of the earth.



(Figure 14) Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Silueta Series, Mexico)*, 1974. Photograph, colour on paper, 254 x 203 mm. Tate. London, UK.

Through her work, Ana Mendieta constantly negotiated the idea of belonging to somewhere, however she did not stop criticizing or making work about inequality in factors like gender and race. Returning to Bonnet's essay, he brings Ana Mendieta's words to the discussion, she says: "Reconocerse a sí mismo es conocer el mundo y es también paradójicamente una forma de exilio fuera del mundo. Yo reconozco que esta presencia en mí misma, este conocimiento de sí es el que me permite dialogar con el mundo alrededor mío acerca de la práctica del arte." (To recognize oneself is to know the world and it is also paradoxically a form of exile outside of the world. I recognize that this presence in myself, this knowledge is the one that allows me to dialogue with the world around me about practicing art.) Mendieta's work affirms that there is no

such thing as one identity: the reality is all experiences shape a person. In this approach which I have adopted in my own work, there are expanded and extended paths to depict the empowerment of my subjects.

Chapter III: Women Photographing

In trying to understand my own relationship to photographing and portraying a community in my work, investigating the work of others has been important. This research has been a guide in the creation of my work. While these artists have influenced the direction of my work, they have also made me question what new things I am bringing to the extensive field of photographic portraiture. Therefore, in this last chapter I will discuss the work of three different women photographers who have influenced my work who are also important figures in historical and contemporary photography, especially for their portraits of other women.

Discussing the history of photography and portraiture, it would be impossible not to mention Julia Margaret Cameron, a British artist who started photographing when she was forty nine years old. Cameron is one of the first recognized women photographers, concentrating on portraiture, she photographed high class men and typical young women (“'Men Great thro' Genius... Women thro' Love': Portraits by Julia Margaret Cameron”). The women in the photos showed neutral personalities. “It seems to me that Julia Margaret’s heart was not in these ‘straight’ portraits of conventional women. The individuals who demanded her fullest attention, apart from heroic men, were immature young women and enchanting children - in whom she could see the ‘Beauty’ which was the ultimate target of all her work” (Ford). The majority of her female subjects were family, like nieces, daughters or her neighbors. Expressing sadness, the majority of Cameron’s female portraits transmit ideas of suffering, desperation, and anxiety as if

they were going through misery silently. Along with their expression, Cameron also played with the environment where these women were depicted, selecting it and adding different plants; she also decided their clothing, like long white dresses.

The connection between the person and their role in society is not established in these portraits, it is hidden, and one can only see the sensibility of these women. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 56 describes in its article "Men Great thro' Genius... Women thro' Love": Portraits by Julia Margaret Cameron how Cameron's photographic approach and influence



(Figure 14) Julia Margaret Cameron, *The Rosebud Garden of Girls*, June 1868. Albumen silver print, 29.4 × 26.7 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA.

comes from the High Art paintings such as Pre-Raphaelite artists. She said, "to ennoble Photography and to secure for it the character and uses of High Art by combining the real and the Ideal and sacrificing nothing of the Truth by all possible devotion to poetry and beauty" (34). Cameron not only produced realistic portraits of people but also created scenarios based on famous literature and religious texts at the time like Catholic, mythological, and Shakespearean characters. Like *The Rosebud Gardens of Girls*, from June 1868,

(fig. 14) in which she depicts one of Tennyson verses from the poem Maud (1855) "Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls." (Getty). In her composition, she arranged a group of four young girls dressed in white gowns, who are located in front of a floral background. Each of their expressions in some way reflects loss and sadness. Critics have established how her representation of the verse might not be the most direct. However, the details in the composition

like “lush floral background”, and group of drowsy and hypnotic women are part of Cameron’s endeavors to have the quality of Pre-Raphaelite Paintings by artists such as Rossetti and Burne-Jones (Getty).

Contemporary artists have also worked with staged narrative-like appearance. Like Cameron, their work appears as if it is influenced by literature or other media, one of them being Justine Kurland. In his review in *The Times*, Mark Irving describes how she (Kurland) is looking at the hippy utopia from the nineteen-sixties, like nineteenth century photographers looked to Shakespeare, the Renaissance and earlier. Kurland said: “the act of photography for me is about making a perfect world that can’t exist. It’s a romantic gesture, a personal choice” (Irving). Moreover, she creates these “fictional” images located in real-life places, and groups of people. Carey Lovelance describes Kurland’s work in her *Art in America* review from September 1, 2007 as having a resemblance to the Pre-Raphaelite paintings along with a sense of nostalgic feeling and love for nature (Lovelance). From 1997 to 2002, Justine Kurland set off on a five-year-long road trip for her series of photographs *Girl Pictures*.

In this project, she depicts adolescents with messy hair, free, smoking, hanging out in parking lots, forests, play grounds, following their mysterious routines (Fry). She is representing teenage girls non-adherent to adult rules, different from the typical depiction of teenage girls as vulnerable and sexualized. Her photograph, *The Wall*, from 2000 (fig. 14), shows a group of five girls, all dressed in dirty clothes and disorganized hair, crossing a river that passes under a bridge. They look like they are coming out of this black empty place, which could be the space under the bridge. Some of them are supporting each other, while others are on their own. None of them are looking at the camera, and by their expression we could infer they do not care, they are in their own world or reality. They could be careless of this world that is looking at them;

however, this is all staged. Nonetheless, it looks natural, like how one would imagine “runaway girls.”

Some elements of Kurland’s composition are key to understanding her social statements present in her work. Dead animals are often present in Kurland’s photographs in this series of work. In her article, *The Lawless Energy of Teen-Age Girls* by Naomi Fry in *The New Yorker*, Fry makes a connection with America's brutality and violence. This element builds on the idea of these American girls, through their rough clothing and dirty uncared-for



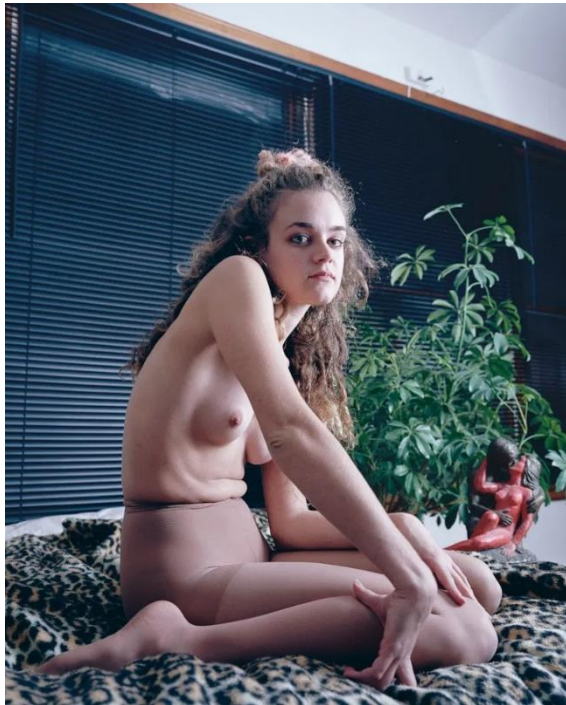
(Figure 15) Justine Kurland, *The Wall*, 2000. C-print, 11 × 14 inches. © Justine Kurland. Image courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York City, NY.

appearances, show the difficulties many go through in this country when they rebel. Kurland directed several aspects of her photographs, heavily staging compositions and taking care in every detail. “I channeled the raw, angry energy of a girls band into my photographs of teenagers” (Fry). Understanding Kurland’s work implies the connection between her “runaway girls” who are free and live in their own way, and herself. To make this project, she is working independently of assistants and producers, which is commonly used by other photographers who also work in staged environments. She worked with the spaces she found during her road trip and also with the people from whatever town she was in. Even though everything is staged, as if from a utopian reality which is not our world, Kurland’s atmosphere makes the scenes feel as if they are everyday moments.

A handful of the photographs from *Girl Pictures* were part of an all-female show at Van Doren Waxter in New York City in 1999. Organized by Gregory Crewdson and Jeanne Greenberg, the show *Another Girl Another Planet*, displayed the complex approach of the truthful, non-altered documentary photography apart from the constructed contemporary photography of that era. Documentary was known for its “underlying ambition” to record universal truth through photography; while contemporary photography at this time was concerned with representing truth in photography with unbelievable fiction (“Another Girl Another Planet”). For instance, one of the organizers of the show, Gregory Crewdson, is highly known for his heavily staged photographs that resemble highly elaborate stills from film productions. The work of the artists in the show engage with narrative documentary style, making storytelling portraits. Many of the artists in this show anticipated our own era’s photography of the female gaze. While Justine Kurland’s work had a highly Romantic nature, other artists such as Katy Grannan were selected for their escalated realism.

Katy Grannan is known for her portraiture work with strangers. She photographs people from different social and economic backgrounds, treating cultural differences as a primary theme to compare but also bring together the distance between them and us. The essay by Jan Avgikos, *Some Other Place Than Here* in Grannan’s photo book *MODEL AMERICAN*, explains Grannan’s concentration on people’s personal values being in a big city or a small town (Avgikos). Part of her practice from this era was to post announcements or ads in small towns, looking for people who would be interested in being photographed. In her ads she gives the information of her being a woman photographer. She wants the model to make a series of assumptions related to her being a woman. Some of those assumptions could be her being more sympathetic than a man would be, her inviting more female subjects to be photographed, and

another one could be inviting a woman it is safer than a man into the model's home. As a woman, Grannan presented less risk for subjects than a man would (Avgikos). Grannan, as some of the women photographers in the mid-nineties, started depicting women in an innovative way.



(Figure 16) Katy Grannan, *Untitled*, 1998. Chromogenic print, mounted on paper, 49-1/8 x 39-5/8 inches. Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, C.A.

Her first series of work, *Poughkeepsie Journal*, was made mostly with the young women who replied to her ads published in small towns in Upstate New York. Most of them just have moved back after finishing college (Gefter). Even though all these women were complete strangers to her, she connected almost immediately with them due to the common situations: she had just graduated from Yale's MFA Photography program and the areas that she was photographing in New York resembled the area where she grew up outside of Boston. "She would meet a model, she recalled,

"feeling like I was meeting an old friend, or at least empathizing with a time in someone else's life from which I had just emerged" (Gefter). All the young women in the series live in similar middle-class houses, and also try to hide the situation of the photographs from their parents. As Grannan said in her interview with the New York Times, "the girls weren't ready to be adults yet" (Gefter). Her intended glamorous photographs were made using a 4 x 5 camera, a light and a fan, almost to imitate a low-budget, stripped down magazine photo shoot for the subject.

One of the most important feelings that Grannan describes in this body of work is the intimate relationship between photographer and subject. She spent time with each of her models,

getting to know them, exploring their houses, clothing and objects, to find the best way to show them to the world. In *Untitled*, 1998 (fig. 16), the girl is almost naked, as are many of her other models in other photographs, wearing only skin color tights. She has half of her hair up in a ponytail and wears big earrings in the shape of hoops. She is being photographed in her bedroom, over a leopard cover, the blinds of the room closed, with a plant in the background right next to a sculpture of a man kissing a naked woman. Like other photographs in *Poughkeepsie Journal*, Grannan is capturing the ambition of this woman who wants to be seen as glamorous, and seductive, even when this middle-class environment is unglamorous. Katy Grannan opened a space for these women to be the people they wanted to be, even when they are photographed in spaces that might not reflect these ambitions.

Conclusion

The final piece of this body of work is a self-portrait titled *Majo*, 2020 (fig. 17) made in Colombia. I followed all the rules that were used for the other portraits. My decision in making it was to expose myself as I have exposed the rest of the women in my work, while empowering myself by looking through the camera, not at it. The practice of my work has allowed me to understand the world where I live today even more. Photographing all these women has



(Figure 17) Maria Jose Navas Espinal, *Majo*, Cali, Colombia, 2020.

not only permitted me to grow as a person, it has also made a small change in the way all my subjects see themselves. With my methodology of work (being open to any clothing subjects choose, maintaining a serious expression, and subjects choosing their own environment to be photographed), I have created a space for women to be themselves and own their bodies,

empowering them towards acceptance and honor. My inspiration is a woman who has been judged by everyone in a literary work—no man or woman has any good comment on Ursula Iguraran in the book. The women I am photographing accept themselves for who they are and what they do. They do not embody the stereotypes foisted upon them by society and at the end of the day they all have something in common: they have worked to overcome sexism through the lives they choose to live.

By exploring the different perspectives than artists like Julia Margaret Cameron, Justine Kurland, and Katy Grannan have depicted women, I could see the different meanings of both women's roles and the different methodology that each artist uses. They are all different from each other, showing the variety of understanding of womanhood and the diversity of the term. Finally, as I thought and worried about how much the pandemic would affect my body work, the reality is that the situation has enriched it. Returning to Colombia has allowed me to understand there is not one culture to which I belong: I am the result of two cultures and from both I have learned a lot. I photograph my community of women in cross-cultural contexts of the United States and South America creating a sense of sharing and immediacy in both locations. My plan was to capture my subjects in their most natural self or behaviors. I photograph while I chat with my subjects, acknowledging the importance of my subject and my opportunity to photograph them. Then, I realized that in both cultures women are just a powerful community that needs to be further highlighted.

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