Lydia Panas: Poet of Latent Power
by Phoebe Hoban

Lydia Panas is a master of the Anti-Ophelia. Even when supine, her female subjects refuse to take it lying down. Unlike the tragic beauty in the famous pre-Raphaelite painting by John Everett Millais, Panas' women hold the key to their own secret strength. It is manifested in their eyes; while their pose may seem vulnerable, their gaze is subtly defiant. They will not succumb.

A photographic poet, Panas perceptively parses the latent power lurking beneath the skin of the people she examines through her lens, including herself. The gaze between the artist and her subject is palpably interactive, capturing images that reflect the hidden feelings of both. As she has put it, "While my subjects turn their gaze towards me, it's as if I turn the camera onto myself, both in the present and back in time."

As a child in Greece, Panas became adept at reading the subtle signs of emotion in the face of her often withholding mother. Greek was her first language, and she began to learn English when her family moved to America when she was six. "Becoming an artist was my way of saying what I couldn't say as a girl," she has said.

Panas' work, whether still images or videos, which she calls "extended portraits," is a visceral immersive experience. Rather than boasting fancy high-tech bells and whistles, they mesmerize the viewer through their intensity of focus, color, and composition. The artist's instrument for probing her subject's inner lives in her large- and medium-format still images, is, surprisingly, analog rather than digital.

Her tools, a Hasselblad and Horseman Woodman, create "something more deliberate, slower, more magical. And there is a certain quality of light. But the most important part is something about the process itself. With analog something different happens. There's a simplicity to it, of how you are getting to the bottom of something. Since I was very young, I have been interested in trying to understand what is really going on beneath the surface of relationships. It was a very important ingredient of my own survival. It is also a very, very important part of my work."

Panas' pictures of women clearly project a feminist perspective, especially seen within the context of the #Metoo movement, which exposed the shocking extent of secret abuse women have historically suffered. But her vision is universal. "My work is about human issues," she says. "It happens to be about women because I am woman . I am interested in secrets and how secrets can mark us. It's what we don't say that has always interested me. The elisions in our stories. What I am interested in is what we are hiding. It's the contradiction between what appears on the outside, and what has been shut down inside. It is really about how we pull out and access our own power."

An exquisite colorist -Panas' palette ranges from the subtle to the supersaturated - the artist shot exclusively in black and white for twenty years. She first turned to color in 2005, when she and her husband converted a barn on their 70-acre Pennsylvania farm into a large studio, and she wanted her work to "expand to equal the space."

Expand it does, leading viewers not only on an interior journey of her subjects, but on an interior journey of themselves. For Panas, a key element of her work is that it enables her to use her subject's potent gaze as a triple magnifying glass: on them, herself, and on her viewers.

"I like to include some discomfort in my work. To encourage us to look at ourselves," she says. "A lot of the work is 'Are you safe? Are they safe? Are you safe as a viewer when you look at this? Is she safe? Are you afraid for her? Are you uncomfortable? All those ideas of discomfort are embedded in my work. It's about psychological discomfort."

That discomfort is deliberate: Panas' photographs and videos, whether they are portraits or still lifes, are essentially confrontational. "My still images are very different than most photographs, they force you to have a reaction," Panas

says. "You are not just looking at an image, you are forced to deal with what is in front of you. The videos force the viewer to be more collaborative. But they extend that feeling that happens with my stills, that the viewer is confronted with something very enigmatic. You have to pay very close attention. It's about looking and about paying attention to what goes on beneath the surface."

Although her work is highly conceptual, Panas has the eye of a painter, and her large still-life images, which she began doing during the pandemic, when models weren't readily available, showcase her considerable skill. "A lot of my pictures look like paintings. Rembrandt and the Dutch painters is work that I am very interested in. Partially because it has no fluff," the artist says.

For the large-scale image Red Still Life with Blood Orange and Tatiana's Hand, (2020), Panas deftly used what she readily had on hand-at home and in her studio -to create a lushly colored still life with an odd, uneasy edge. Her niece Tatiana's disembodied arm and hand are displayed, trophy-like, on rich folds of lush, blood-red fabric, strewn with an array of dissected fruit: blood oranges, passion fruit and pears. "There was a sense of the majestic that started to pop into this, a kind of regal sense," the artist says of the work.

Although it is strikingly beautiful, the image exudes a disturbing, diametric quality. "One of the things that always comes up in my work, is this kind of combination that can't be split, between something that is really beautiful and something that really has an edge. I think that combination is also in every portrait I make." That combination is also evident in Red and Pink Ranunculus I|I (2022). While it is a classic image of flowers, they range from blooming to drooping blossoms to withered stalks. "It's like the various stages of life. I think there is some kind of glory in these, " Panas says. "They remind me of swimming, of falling, this beautiful tangle of life that combines ups and downs, and it's complicated like a jungle. I think my work is so much about life, what it feels like."

An earlier image, Corinne, (2019) veers slightly from Panas' characteristic portraits of young women, her subject of choice since 2014. Instead of being supine in a field or forest, the beautiful blond head and partial arm and torso of her model reclines on royal-blue velvet, on what looks like a pedestal. Corinne, her eyes wide open, is depicted both as an object of sheer beauty, and one, it seems, in imminent danger of decapitation. Her face is simultaneously serene and wary. But the message telegraphed by Panas' models remains the same. "There's a lurking vulnerability, yet the look in their eyes is defiant."

In the 10-minute continuous loop video, Passion Fruit with Kiwi Berries, (2020) a bunch of dried fruit is haphazardly arranged against a backdrop of draped gold fabric. At first, it seems as if nothing is happening. But then a hand and arm sneak into the picture, carefully placing another piece of fruit in the existing pile. Then everything is still again, until an unseen hand begins tossing more fruit into the pile, each time with an audible thump. In one instance, the hand removes a passion fruit. Mostly stripped of color and in muted tones of gold, the piece evokes decay, a kind of memento mori, while somehow at the same time being playful and slightly mischievous. Towards the end of the video handfuls of fresh fruit are dropped into the scene .

"Things happen and all of the sudden are not happening anymore, very unexpectedly. It's about the idea of doing something that is very deliberate, very careful, very fragile, very balanced, and the hesitation right before. It's almost like a map of impulses. It's spontaneous. It's like a dance," Panas says. "It's this visual staging of the movement of internal thoughts and impulses and hesitations and bursts of passion or anger." (Not unlike the masked and hidden feelings in her portraits.) Panas created "extended portrait" videos of the young women in her acclaimed 2017-2018 Sleeping Beauty series, including the 1-minute video of Layla, in which an exotic young woman stares directly at the viewer, her intense gaze interrupted only by her blinking. The Layla, Pomegranate video extends her silent story to 10

minutes, embodying that contradiction between exterior surface and internal strife. In it she sits perfectly still, holding a handful of pomegranate seeds. Then she begins eating them, at first delicately and politely, before becoming increasingly messy and casual, and eventually tossing whole handfuls into her mouth, until she ultimately uses both hands to stuff her mouth and even smear them on her face. After she has eaten them all, she resumes her stance of calm repose.

The young woman in the 6-minute video, Shasha, is the essence of stillness and repose. She is seen in triplicate, her dark hair and bangs framing her pale face, her black turtleneck covering her upper body, as she stands, virtually immobile. "For me the fact that this woman doesn't do anything in front of you for this long is pretty incredible. It shows a certain strength of character I rarely see," Panas observes. But it is this certain quiet strength that is at the core of the artist's work. The thread that weaves through all her images is its distinct declaration of defiance. Her photographs clearly communicate her subjects' latent power, the secret weapon that enables them to overcome the trauma they are likely to encounter as women.

"Becoming an artist ended up being a form of defiance," Panas says. "It was basically me allowing myself to say all the things that I was prohibited from saying before. My work over all these years has certainly taken different phases, but I became an artist because I needed to speak."

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