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A view of women's bodies, by 12 female photographers, that is by turns playful, provocative and profound



“Frick Park,” from the series “100 Little Deaths” by photographer Janaina Tschäpe. The series is on view in its entirety for the first time as part of the exhibition “Live Dangerously” at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. (Janaina Tschäpe/National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection)

By

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The National Museum of Women in the Arts exhibition “Live Dangerously” features the work of a dozen female photographers, but more importantly, it’s a showcase for one enormous — and captivating — installation: Janaina Tschäpe’s series “100 Little

Deaths,” on view in its entirety for the first time. The German-Brazilian artist’s powerful meditation on life and death takes up nine adjoining walls, which are lined with large-format photographs often mounted three high, without wall text or labels.

At first glance, the vibrant, colorful images resemble some jetsetter’s Instagram feed, including views of such exotic locales as Angkor Wat, Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and the Greek isles. But on closer inspection, they all show the artist herself, lying facedown, her lifeless-looking body sprawled out in forests and fields, on bridges and roadsides, inside apartments and hotels, on beaches from Montauk to Fiji. (A printed schematic lists each location). Shot between 1996 and 2002, well before the rise of social media and selfies, the photos range from humorous to uncanny in tone, while also revealing a certain vulnerability. (The phrase “little death” is sometimes used as a euphemism for orgasm.) Each encapsulates a moment in Tschäpe’s life and her feeling of having left part of herself behind — a little death — in every place she has visited.



“Yara, Cairo, Egypt,” from photographer Rania Matar’s “She” series. (Rania Matar/Robert Klein Gallery) “People are a little bit thrown off by seeing a woman’s body in this way, particularly if you just see one,” says exhibition curator Orin Zahra. “But I think when you see it over and over and over again, it becomes more performative. It’s very deliberately kind of theatrical.”

“100 Little Deaths” serves as a counterpoint to a range of works by 11 other modern and contemporary photographers that engage with female bodies in mainly outdoor landscapes and the natural environment. Most are in the museum’s permanent collection, and some are on view for the first time, although the NMWA has shown work by several of

the artists before.

As in “100 Little Deaths,” water in its various forms run through many of the photographs, including several from other series by Tschäpe in which female figures, some with surreal biomorphic appendages, hover like nymphs in and around bodies of

water. “Water Ballet (Vertical),” a 1981 photo by Laurie Simmons, shows fellow artist Cindy Sherman floating underwater, topless and mermaid-like, in an ode to classic Hollywood synchronized swimming routines.

In “Rayven, Miami Beach, Florida” — one of three portraits on display from Lebanese American artist Rania Matar’s ongoing “She” series — a young woman stands at the edge of the waves on a stormy beach, her mane of curly hair blowing in the wind. Her gaze is turned away, her demeanor assertive yet inward-looking.

Three self-portraits of Kirsten Justesen in 2000 show the Danish visual and performance artist, then in her late 50s, posing on top of a block of ice, naked except for black boots and gloves. Justesen’s baring of her body in such a harsh setting is a startling departure from how many of us may be used to seeing women’s naked bodies in museums: idealized and youthful.



“California Desert,” a 1948 photograph by Louise Dahl-Wolfe, is included in the exhibition “Live Dangerously.” (National Museum of Women in the Arts/Gift of Helen Cumming Ziegler/Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents) To that point, several small black-and-white photographs taken in the mid-20th century by the influential fashion photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe show young women lounging nude or partially covered with towels or bathing suits amid desert dunes. Though unmistakably of a certain era, the shots nonetheless convey the women’s unfettered sensuality, their curves often mirroring their surroundings. Particularly striking are six prints by 20th-century Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta, a pioneer of body art, from her

1979 series “Volcán” (“Volcano”). The only works in the exhibition devoid of visible human subjects, they nonetheless carry vestiges of the artist: Mendieta traced an outline of herself in gunpowder in a mound of soil, then set fire to it, capturing its transformation into ash and earth.



“Jungle Gym” by Justine Kurland. (Justine Kurland/National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection/Mitchell-Innes & Nash) Perhaps the most deliberately unsettling single image is “One Day and Back Then (Standing),” the first work by Xaviera Simmons to be shown at NWMA. In the 2007 photograph, the African American artist, wearing blackface and a dark trench coat, stands amid a field of tall, dry grasses, her gaze meeting the viewer directly.

“She raises a really important point, which is that not everyone has had access to the landscape, to the land around us, in the same way historically,” says Zahra. “It’s dependent on what you look like, where you come from, your race.”

Whether provocative, profound or playful, these works resonate deeply, inviting visitors if not personally to “live dangerously,” then at least to contemplate the immense variety of female bodies and experiences they chronicle.

Live Dangerously

National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1250 New York Ave. NW. nmwa.org.

Dates: Through Jan. 20.

Admission: \$10; \$8 for seniors and students; free for members and ages 18 and under. Admission is free for all on the first Sunday of every month.