

FIRECRACKERS

**FEMALE
PHOTOGRAPHERS
NOW**

**FIONA ROGERS &
MAX HOUGHTON**



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Specification

- 240 pages
- c. 300 illustrations
- 24 x 27 cm (9½ x 10¾ in)

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Firecrackers

Female Photographers Now

Fiona Rogers and Max Houghton

An inspirational showcase of more than thirty of the world's current leading female documentary photographers. Presents a diverse range of creative image-making engaged with contemporary issues from across the globe.

Marketing points

- **Outstanding work by more than 30 young female photographers** working today across 25 countries.
- **300 photographs of global stories:** the most pressing social, political and personal issues seen through the female lens.
- **Redresses an imbalance in the photography world.** The most original photographic talents in contemporary photography are women – this book demonstrates this and provides a much-needed platform.
- **Insightful and expert authorship and curation.** In their respective well-established roles in the industry, Rogers and Houghton understand, champion and shape contemporary documentary photography.

Description

There are many outstanding female photographers working today, yet the photographic industry – its exhibitions, galleries, publications and auctions – continues to be a male-dominated world. Established in 2011 by Fiona Rogers, Global Business Development Manager at Magnum Photos, Firecracker (fire-cracker.org) is an online platform dedicated to supporting female photographers worldwide by showcasing their work in a series of monthly, online gallery features, by organizing events and by awarding an annual grant to enable a female photographer to fund a project.

Building upon Firecracker's foundations, this book brings together the work of over 30 of the most talented contemporary female photographers from around the world. Each profile presents a text that explores the photographer's creative practice, along with around ten photographs that showcase a key project in the photographer's career and a further selection of images that offers a wider view of her work. The images encompass an eclectic variety of styles, techniques and locations – from German Alma Haser's futuristic series of portraits that use origami to create 3D sculptures within the frame, to Egyptian Laura El-Tantawy's filmic and intensely personal series on political protest in Cairo. There is a recurring theme throughout the book that serves to unite these extraordinary women and their work: the exploration of marginalized individuals and under-discussed subjects, seen by fresh eyes.

Not only does this book redress the imbalance between men and women's prevalence in the photographic industry, but it is a celebration of some of the most inquisitive, stylish and daring photography being made today.

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PREFACE

Firecracker is an online platform dedicated to supporting women photographers. It was established in January 2011 to celebrate the many fantastic women working in photography who are, in many ways, overshadowed by the industry dominance of their male counterparts.

During my career in photography the under-representation of women photographers has struck me on several levels. While there is an abundance of women studying photography, it would appear that a large percentage then take on administrative, organizational or nurturing roles within the visual arts. Perhaps I am just seeing a reflection of my personal experience, of how my own career has developed since leaving photographic study at Surrey Institute of Art & Design, but this does also seem to mirror the choices made by many of my photographic colleagues. In light of this, I founded Firecracker as a way of supporting women photographers and linking them with both a wider public and an industry audience.

Firecracker assists in the promotion of women photographers by exhibiting their work in a series of online gallery features. Photographers are brought to our attention via a network of industry professionals and guest curator spots from high-profile individuals.

To commemorate Firecracker's first birthday we established the annual Firecracker Photographic Grant, which has since enabled four international female artists to complete a documentary photography project.

With a growing community and ever-evolving opportunities the future looks set to be bright for photography. Through the activities of Firecracker we hope to provide ongoing support and encouragement to a new generation of female visual artists.

Fiona Rogers
Firecracker founder



HALEY MORRIS-CAFIERO

...the photographer empowers herself, cleverly turning the negative gaze back onto the viewer...

In *Wait Watchers*, American photographer Haley Morris-Cafiero acts as part performer, part provocateur, to raise questions about society's prejudices and preferences. Her work is an unflinching, brave and bold reassessment of 'the gaze' and a study of the audience as an implicated party.

Using a camera mounted to a tripod with a remote-fire trigger, or an assistant, Morris-Cafiero travels to high-footfall areas such as the Champs Élysées or Las Ramblas, and records people's reactions to her, and, unavoidably, to her physical size and shape. She began the project in 2010, when she noticed that a man being photographed in Times Square was more focused on sneering at her than on paying attention to the task in hand.

The repeated success with which Morris-Cafiero captures palpable disdain for her body is at once shocking and depressing. But the photographer empowers herself in these situations, cleverly turning the negative gaze back onto the viewer, and, in doing so, makes a spectacle of the audience itself.

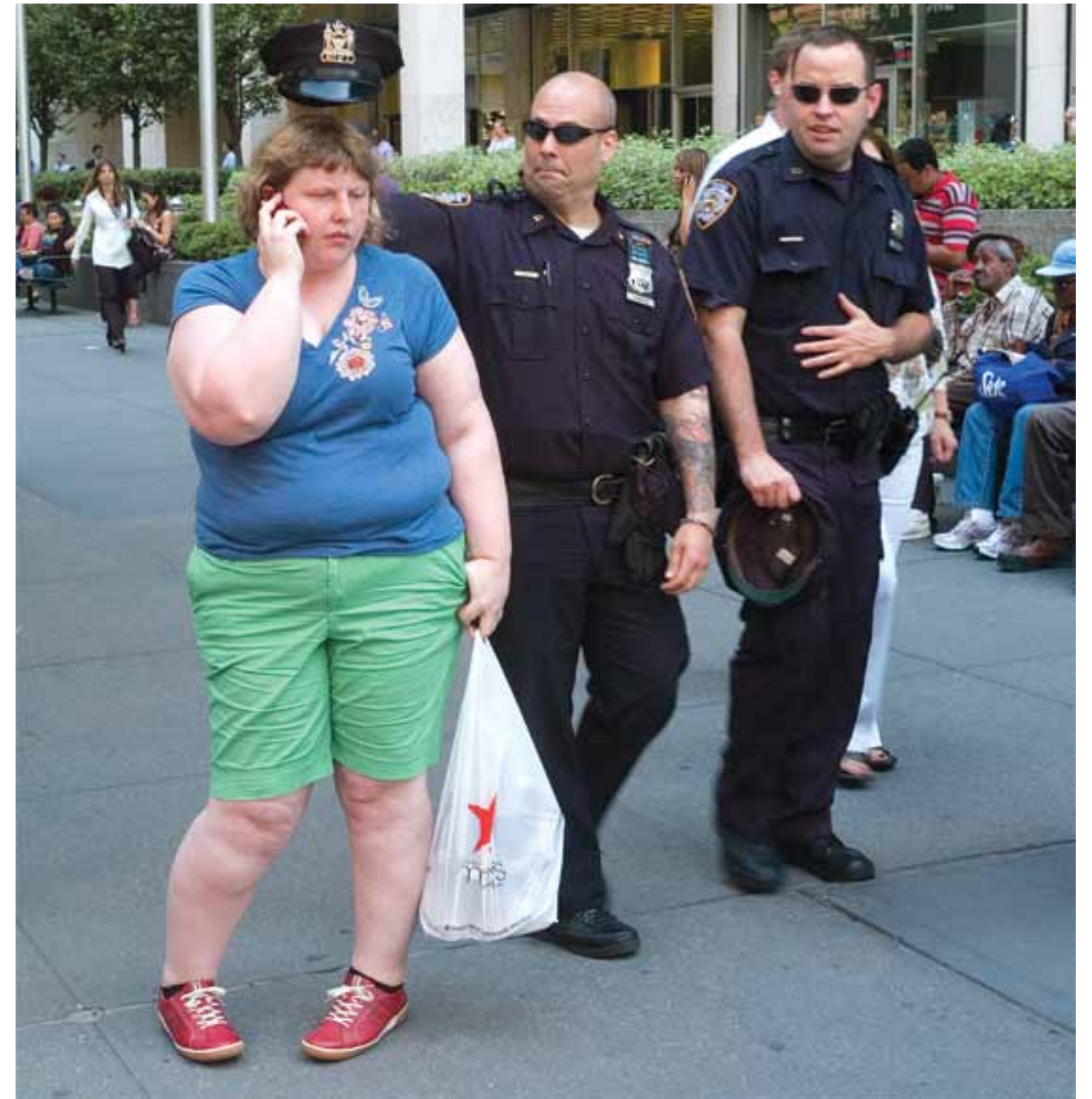
There are three gazes within this complicated and layered story. The first is from the often-contemptuous eyes set on Morris-Cafiero; the second is ours – we the viewers – and our interaction with those scornful eyes.

The third gaze belongs to Morris-Cafiero herself: her eyes on us, the invisible or future audience. Her penetrating gaze seems to be a challenge, a provocation to take a stand. The story brings to mind a modern-day Narcissus; except that rather than falling in love with our reflection, we are horrified at what Morris-Cafiero shows us about our own prejudices, stereotypes and societal norms.

We cannot read the thoughts of Morris-Cafiero's subjects, and it is entirely possible that those caught in the act of staring were and will be equally horrified by their own reactions. Perhaps even more telling than the photographs themselves, however, is the mixed reaction that followed when the series went viral online. The artist found herself hailed simultaneously as hero and villain. Comments varied from predictable responses relating to her 'needing' to style her hair, do some exercise, stop eating doughnuts and put on makeup – 'Fat lump of lard. Stay off the donuts and go running. Makes me ill just looking at her' – to ardent messages of support telling her that she was advocating fat-activism and empowering a community of lesser-heard voices: 'You are brilliant and amazing and courageous and I wholeheartedly understand the intent of this project.' These comments sit together as polar opposites in her book *The Watchers* (Magenta Foundation, 2015).

Morris-Cafiero decided to use the negative responses as a catalyst for a current work-in-progress tentatively titled 'Self Improvement', where she takes the 'advice' of her fat-shamers and documents herself exercising, having a makeover and shopping for clothes. She again looks to raise issues about societal norms, but in this new series also addresses the counter-intuitive responses from those mocking, rather than encouraging, her attempts to engage with society's expectations and conform.

In sacrificing herself through her work, Morris-Cafiero becomes a representation of anyone who has been made to feel uncomfortable under the gaze of another; indeed totemic for anyone who has ever felt like an outsider.





44 Firecrackers

Sunscreen



Gelato

Haley Morris-Cafiero 45



ALMA HASER

...Haser adopts the role of the plastic surgeon...

With her memorable series *Cosmic Surgery*, Alma Haser offers us a peek into a future in which there are so many versions of ourselves that our physiognomy has altered to fit. She has created a portrait series *de nos jours*.

The title came about as a result of a slip of the tongue, when Haser was explaining the idea to her family. Like so many photographers, she is dyslexic, and using a word – cosmic – similar to the one she intended – cosmetic – is a frequent occurrence; it was a happy accident here.

Each work in *Cosmic Surgery* has several stages of making. First, Haser photographs her subject, before printing multiple copies of the face of the sitter. Next, she folds the prints into intricate origami sculptures. It is a meditative process; hours pass in a moment. Haser then places these sculptures onto the original print of the subject's face and rephotographs the whole, bringing her fine art training into her photographic work.

The haptic folding process is a kind of taking care, enfolding a version of the self back into the self, over and over again. Haser adopts the role of the plastic surgeon, so frequently asked to reshape a natural face to render it clone-like, and instead creates an original work of art. The results are as unsettling as

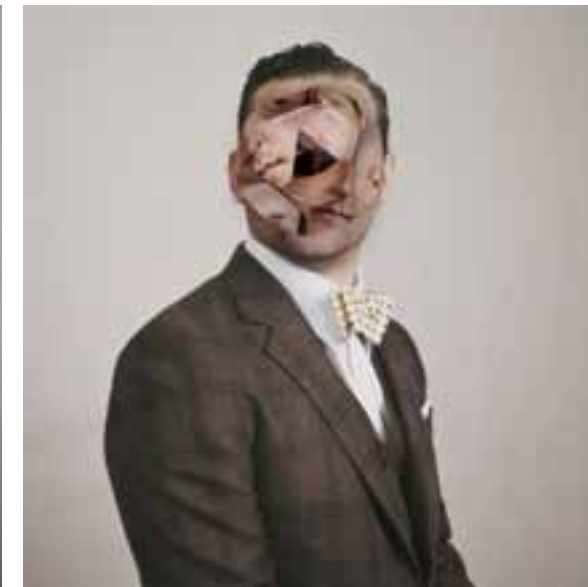
they are beautiful. In her hands, Haser's subjects blossom into uncanny, futuristic flowers, in a style that she has made her own.

Haser embarked upon her photographic journey with self-portraiture, which she manages to undertake without necessarily revealing her identity. In *Ten Seconds Project* she sets her camera on a timer, and (as in a childhood game of her own invention) has ten seconds to conceal her body, before she is 'discovered'. This series bears a disquieting similarity to Claude Cahun's body-work, notably to her *Self Portrait (in cupboard)* (c. 1932), perhaps an unconscious antecedent here. We see the adult body uncomfortably squeezed into a tight space. We seek the face; it remains hidden.

In another series, Haser's fascination is directed at the concept of the automaton. A self-portrait in a wig allowed her to retain her anonymity; she then continued the work by photographing other willing models in the same wig and clothing, thus creating a cloning process. Interestingly, her other projects have included twins, in which two women are often pictured as conjoined, and the idea of ventriloquism. Such subjects dwell very deep in the psyche.

In her portrait *The Ventriloquist* (2012) one man is seated behind another, whom he

embraces. The man being embraced does not look at the camera. He is considerably smaller than the man who is holding onto him. The latter's gaze meets that of the viewer. Both men have severely cut fringes, an echo of the detail that Roland Barthes famously theorized as the 'punctum' in *Camera Lucida*: the partial object that 'wounds', creating a relationship with the image entirely personal to the viewer, smashing the codes of the 'studium', its wider cultural interpretation. We learn from the accompanying text that James, the bigger man, used to bully Luke, the smaller, at school. Now they are the best of friends. Haser captures the tension of their embrace – of all embraces – with the precision of a marksman. Who is holding and who is being held? Who is the beholder?





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Sisters



Lily and Anastasia

Alma Haser 85



ANJA NIEMI

...all is at once familiar and deeply unsettling...

When Anja Niemi arrived on the London photographic scene, it was as though Hitchcock had been reborn as a female stills photographer.

In her purposeful *mise en scènes* and endless incarnations, Niemi invites us to consider the construction of the female both in society and in its mirror image – film. The excessive femininity of her women, with their coiffed hair and pristine dresses, poses as many questions as it makes statements. Is she vulnerable or powerful? Desirable or deadened? Real or illusory? Bride or showgirl?

While making seductive use of cinematic tropes, Niemi traps the viewer inside a single frame, where all is at once familiar and deeply unsettling. So elaborate are the costumes and sets that the viewer cannot help but judge by appearance. The flat plane of the photograph is the perfect vehicle for this apparent superficiality. Overwhelmed by visual input, we see everything at once.

In *Starlets*, the series predominantly featured here, Niemi frequently uses the device of doubling. Otto Rank theorized the concept of the double as a representation of the ego in a 1914 essay that Freud would draw upon heavily in *The Uncanny* (1919). While the double can assume various forms, such as a shadow, a reflection or the superego

as observer of the self, in Niemi's work the double is always an exact replica, though often assuming a contradictory position to its twin. 'The Wife', for example, from *Starlets*, is engaged in an act of potentially fatal domestic violence; the double on the verge of obliteration. Yet both women remain expressionless, so sartorially immaculate that they could be automata. Similarly, 'The Bride' strikes a pose, barefoot, shoulder exposed, white furs immaculately draped; beneath her, inscrutable under a chair, lies the double. The way we look, and the ways in which we assume authority – even authorship – are all thrown into sharp relief in these works, at once both deeply complex and delightfully superficial.

Says Niemi: 'I do often multiply myself, sometimes to look at inner conflicts or to show the contrast between what we show and who we are. We have a tendency to cover up our flaws and decay, hiding all the ugliness of life, and I try to have a bit of humour about it.'

The darker side of her imagery follows a thread that traces back to Surrealism and its obsession with fragmented body parts, but her most vivid antecedent is surely the filmmaker David Lynch. 'Maybe it's that severed ear found in the grass in *Blue Velvet*. It's an image that just never left me. I love

the way David Lynch blends the surreal into mundane everyday life.'

As photographer, model, stylist and director, Niemi retains an exacting control over her imagery, which in turn grants her creative freedom. For a mind brimming with stories, photography has turned out to be a useful medium, in which a dyslexic perfectionist can create exquisite fictions, prompting us to imagine what might be crawling just beneath the glossy surface.









LAURA EL-TANTAWY

It is rare to see the personal and political colliding so effectively...

'I am Egyptian.' These stark words opened Laura El-Tantawy's immersive three-screen installation for the 2016 Deutsche Börse Prize at The Photographers' Gallery in London. She was nominated for her self-published book *In the Shadow of the Pyramids* (2015), which combines an intensely personal narrative with imagery from the extraordinary sequence of events of January 2011, which saw President Mubarak ousted in a popular revolution.

El-Tantawy was born in Worcester, UK, to Egyptian parents, and has lived variously in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United States. It was the death of her maternal grandmother in 2005 that was the catalyst for starting to create work in the land to which she feels so strongly connected. Her grandparents had been as essential to her childhood as her parents, living on the floor above in an apartment block in a middle-class suburb of Cairo. Her grandfather's health, on the death of his wife, was very frail, and El-Tantawy, who was studying for a master's degree in Media Arts Practice at the time, turned her camera towards him. At the same time, she began to take photographs from her childhood bedroom window, looking down onto the streets below, through laundry blowing in the wind, which seemed to be ushering in a kind of change.

El-Tantawy had returned to Cairo at a time when the political atmosphere in the country was becoming increasingly febrile. 'In Tahrir Square', she says, 'I found myself.' That sense of passionate belonging inspired an unforgettable series of photographs, which are by turns blurred, witnessing a volatile situation, or so tightly focused on a human face that every pore is visible. With this technique, El-Tantawy has developed a signature style that is often referred to as 'filmic'. Her photographs oscillate between past and future, pausing in the present to register a deep empathy with individual grief. When El-Tantawy freezes the frame, it is as though she stops the world for that moment. This may be the unique power of photography, but in her hands it is especially potent. Her use of the written word (transformed into spoken word in exhibition installations) bears the traces of the formative words of Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz. 'I buried something there,' she says of Tahrir Square. Five years and two presidents since the revolution, and with state terror on the march once more, that 'something' sounds a lot like hope, yet remains indefinable, slightly out of reach.

The imagery from *In the Shadow of the Pyramids*, created over a nine-year period, is interwoven with family photographs. The book opens with two single images, facing each

other – one of each parent as they looked at an image of the time they first fell in love. Without this encounter, El-Tantawy seems to say, there would be no me. It is rare to see the personal and political colliding so effectively in a single photobook. Nostalgic images of parents, grandparents and siblings punctuate the present, reminding us of the inextricable bonds of family and personal geography, and, perhaps, of our individual responsibility in the political fortunes of the country we count on as our home, wherever that may be.







YUNYA YIN

...the precision of a miniaturist...

Sometimes, rarely, a new photographic talent appears in a graduation show and everybody notices. So it was with the work of Yunya Yin, a twenty-six-year-old photographer from Sichuan, China.

During the summer of 2015, she returned from her studies in London to China, only to make a much slower journey back west on the famous Trans-Siberian Express. Over 126 hours, Yin observed poignant vignettes of life unfolding. Her unthreatening and gentle presence made her the perfect compassionate voyeur, a welcome guest at the tables of others. The photographs, shot through with clear light, have an oneiric quality that Yin herself associates with a kind of timelessness. She photographed a tiny baby, unaware of its journey on board this historic train, which has linked cultures and people for decades. She photographed friends, families, dreamers and lovers, united briefly in time and space.

Yin wanted to capture the very essence of this epic voyage. She wasn't interested in the demographics of the passengers, or even the reasons for their trips. In addition to her delicate interior shots, Yin also captured the views outside as the train cut its path through changing landscapes. With the precision of a miniaturist, she observed scenes playing out: fleeting moments of exchange between

fellow humans who inhabit this planet. Inside her viewfinder, Yin held each moment, captured in motion as though she were catching a falling star.

It is apposite that she found her inspiration in the work of acclaimed photographer Sun Jun, who learnt the art of traditional Chinese painting when he was just seven years old. Often working in fashion – as well as art – photography, Sun Jun fuses traditional elements with modern techniques, in a distinctive style that has clearly influenced Yin's own aesthetic.

Yin studied for her undergraduate degree at the Beijing Film Academy from 2009 to 2013. In 2014, she moved to London, to take up her place on the MA in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography at the London College of Communication. After her graduation show in January 2016, Yin was nominated for the Magnum Photos Graduate Photographers Award, won the 'student' category in the prestigious PDN 2016 awards, and was the recipient of a coveted residency at the Planche(s) Contact Festival of Photography, Deauville, 2016. Her new project, made exclusively for Deauville, was displayed in the city in November 2016.

Her second longterm project, *Beyond the Soul*, focuses on Myanmar, a country she

experiences as being a hundred years behind China, developmentally. Yin observes a contentment and peace among the predominantly Buddhist population, yet remains aware of the superficiality of her understanding. The gap between reality and her own perception of this changing country allows her imagination to play freely, and to create more of the exquisite imagery that is fast becoming her signature.





