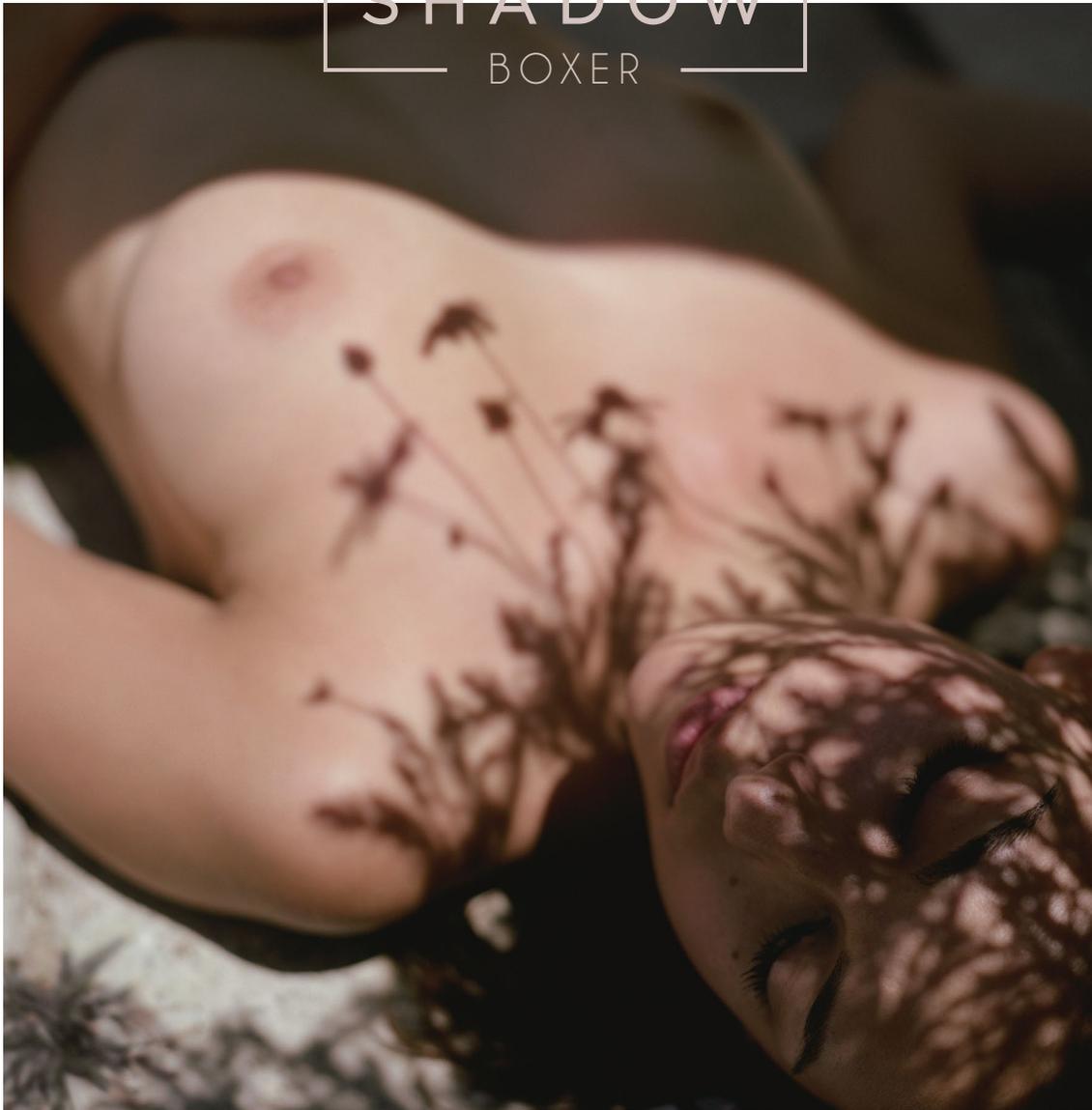


SHADOW BOXER



— Photographer Mona Kuhn wants you to stand right there... —

"It has one of the most beautiful lights I have ever seen. Its vast city spread gives a sense of freedom and an illusion that nothing is impossible. However, I could do without the underlying sense of impermanence." If I hadn't known she was talking about the city of Los Angeles, I might think Brazilian-born photographer Mona Kuhn was referring to some fleeting, mystical landscape; where perfectly lit pillow palaces abound, 'nude' is never 'naked,' and it's always one of those forgiving golden hours of the day. Then again, she has made her mark capturing those precious little whiles.

Mona Kuhn produces intimate images of colors. Although it may be difficult to not first notice the undressed persons in her photographs. "I start my creative process by imagining colors . . . From there, I tie in emotion, then location, and last, the people. I might be working six months into a project before I find the right person to photograph." She goes on to revere her collaborators: "It is a privilege for me to be able to photograph my close friends and extended family in the nude, honest and free. I photograph the nude as a natural essence of who we are."

While having been inspired by the sensualist works of fellow Brazilian Mario Cravo Neto, Kuhn distinguishes her lifelong folio, from what a more myopic mind might consider erotica; "Although we are sexual beings, I am not interested in erotic photography. I am very respectful of my sitters, and take care to develop a unique visual vocabulary, apart from the mundane. There is enough of that already out there in the world. I stay away from it. For me, there is a huge difference between 'naked' and 'nude.' Someone feels 'naked' when caught off guard or in a vulnerable situation. The 'nude' to me is always clothed, clothed with art history references all around, almost in a way that it cannot escape it. The nude I am interested [in] presents an inner strength and confidence that keeps them from 'feeling naked.' You can see that in my work, in the natural positions and in the confident eyes of the people I photograph." In a society that largely scoffs, heedless of looking like knuckle draggers, at mothers breastfeeding in open spaces, it's easy to suggest that the neutralization of nude could come as a public service. Literal definitions aside, amidst 'nude' and 'naked,' you'll find nuance.



text VIJA HODOSY

Languid and layered, Kuhn's vignettes promote a sense of tranquility and confidence. It empowers her subjects and aids in Kuhn's argument that nudity can be neutralized and used to convey more than sexual fantasies and arousal. It can be used to focus on the essence of the human condition—in that, when stripped of our excess, we are simply animals with extraordinary complexities. In other words, it's not what you say, but how you say it.

In the parlance of Western times, the emotionally indulgent distinction between 'naked' and 'nude' points to the fact that we judge nudity contextually. And when considering the value of a particular "work of art", how we perceive motives plays largely into our conclusions. To say that the distinction between types of cloth-less-ness is purely semantics is an oversimplification. If not in art and in love, where are we free to be emotionally indulgent? Where can we be wowed by nuance? We have developed and nurtured these spaces for those very purposes. Let there be distinctions, let there be emotions, let there be light!

Kuhn's forthcoming *Private* and *Untitled*, her fifth and sixth books of photography will be published in 2014 by her fans at Steidl. In between her personal work, she also manages commercial projects, including luxury fashion campaigns and numerous editorial spreads comprised of sessions with James Franco and all those other thoughtful dreamboats floating the pages of international print. Currently (and through February), her photograph entitled, "Boy By The Door" (2002) is part of a special exhibit at the Louvre in Paris, an unprecedented showing of contemporary works curated by American theater creative Robert Wilson.

Overflowing with sensitivities, Mona Kuhn's montages seize all effective lambency, while omitting all unnecessary accessory. As she embarks on what is already set to be a full year, she reminisces on her journey thus far: "It has been like swimming in a river with strong currents that follow [their] own nature." Whilst skinny-dipping, we dare.

monakuhn.com