Cherine Fahd

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Cherine Fahd's Impersonal Portraiture

Annamarie Jagose & Lee Wallace

My mother's rest-home room is much larger than the usual tight arrangement, selected by my sisters for that reason and for its second-floor vi w over the garden, one corner of its bank of windows crowded out each spring – there have been two, so far – with the dense blossom of a fl wering cherry tree. As if in a historical reconstruction, her room captures the feel of the living room in her former house. The extra width of the hospital door opens, as her front door previously did, on to a lobby edged by a bookshelf crammed with the novels and poetry collections she loves to read. And behind the bookshelf in equally familiar arrangements are her couch and armchairs, the enormous low coffee table cent ed on the same rug, the hefty mahogany dresser we grew up with still displaying her collection of British and Indian silver, although its cutlery drawers now hold her lingerie and a Chinese lacquer cupboard, acquired from one of her favourite antique shops in her former town, kitted out now for her much reduced wardrobe, the whole effect nailed d wn by her transplanted paintings and photographs. The nursing staff – and en the odd visitor lured into my mother's room by the surprising slash of its *World of Interior* style when glimpsed from the corridor – frequently compliment my mother on her taste, which she, preferring only to leave her room if she is leaving the property on an outing, seems to regard as her due.

The e is something queenly about my mother in these moments that is very recognisably her social disposition but had not been much evident recently: welcoming, engaged by others but well pleased with herself, driven by a sense of the dramatic occasion and floating contentedly ab ve the various details required to make everything work. The day before she moved from her two-storey, three-bedroom townhouse in the town where she had lived for nearly fifty ears to the city some 500 kilometres distant where two of my sisters have made their homes, my mother and I lay together on her bed, chatting in the gaps between her naps. Lee and I had come over from Sydney to help her get ready for the flight to Wellington with my brother and to pack up the house once she had left.

'How are you feeling about moving to Gavot House?' I asked her. The e was quite a pause.

'It's a rest home, really', she said in a measured way I couldn't quite plumb.

'And how do you feel about it?' She had her eyes closed and lay so quietly I thought she had slipped into sleep again.

'Sad', she said, which made us both smile and cry at the same time.

Talking with my sister across this time as we planned, with the scale drawings her girlfriend had mocked up for this purpose, which pieces of furniture to ship to the city, we acknowledged that our mother would likely fall into a despondency after arrival in her new room. For the last couple of years, she had been subject to low spirits as her manageable world shrank in scope. Having managed geriatric hospitals and rest homes herself for the last decades of her nursing career, we figu ed she knew better than anyone what this kind of shift meant.

'No matter how hard she finds i ', we would say to each other but really to ourselves, 'we have to remember that it is the right choice'. We needn't have bothered. Our mother touched down in her new room well, referring to it as 'home' on her third day. Physically frail, shrunken perceptibly each time I see her, she is often still in bed when I call her on the weekends, reading her way through the Booker Prize shortlist.

Nothing diminishes her interest in the contemporary, most tangible now in her dress sense and modish haircuts. She still kits herself out as someone who is comfortable as the object of attention and so, when Sydney artist, Cherine Fahd, suggested including her as the oldest subject in her videographic series-in-progress, Lee and I recognised a germ of potential beneath the patent craziness. Shooting the three-minute video would require carrying a lot of kit to New Zealand and there was always the possibility that my mother might be indisposed at the time and not want to meet someone new, let alone struggle with them physically as the video required. Even with Cherine promising to be gentle, we were uncertain whether my mother would be able to hold herself upright on a backless stool for the three-minute duration of the shoot. In preparation I sent my sister a video clip of me in Cherine's work to show our mother. Like every other of the dark-haired, dark-eyed women in the work, many of them recruited, like me, by open call on Instagram, my stricken face looms out against a black dropcloth, while Cherine, hidden from view behind me, attempts to strip me of a blue jacket, only her arms visible and indistinguishable from mine except for their tattooed markings. My mother was reported to have watched the clip several times through with interest, recognising it as art.

Several weeks later, the three of us turned up in my mother's room direct from the international airport. She was expecting Lee and me but I hadn't told her anything else, since we thought that she might be anxious that something was expected beyond her usual deft performance of self.

'Mum, this is our friend, Cherine.'

My mother rose to her feet and the occasion, looking around brightly, taking Cherine's hands in her own to ask almost coyly: 'Are you from Bombay?' My father was from Bombay and my mother had lived there for several years after their marriage in the late 1950s. Spelled diffe ently but pronounced the same, Shireen was a common Parsi name and my mother was tentatively making the connection.

We explained that Cherine was hoping to video her the following day and my mother seemed unfazed.

'All you have to do is dress in black.'

'Yes', said my mother, looking pleased with herself, as if this was all coming out as she had intended.

The next day I rang ahead to check in.

'Are you still OK about being videoed?' I asked. 'Did you remember to wear black?'

'Yes', said my mother. 'Yes.' But when we turned up, it was clear that she had bent

that requirement to the more familiar strictures of her own style and was wearing an ensemble the blackness of which was in the service of a dizzying array of white polka-dots coordinated from her scarf to her shoes to create the vertiginous optical effects of a ridget Riley painting. It is not necessary here to describe how she sat for Cherine's camera because that weird mix of composure and exhilaration was captured in one take and is evident even in the single photograph taken to check light levels. Always beautiful, my mother engages a stranger's camera at close distance with ease, her suddenly art historical frontality standing in for her more usual social front.

It is one thing to know my mother, another to encounter her in the Fahd video portrait. Even for me. One of the unexpected effects of being drawn into ahd's photographic orbit, as we were in November and December 2019, is to be confronted anew by the impersonality at the heart of human relationality, even relations with those we most love. Perhaps those of us who grow up outside the normative structures of sexuality and their easy claim to future human belonging have more reason to know this truth than others. After all, LGBTQ+ folk have long had a vexed relation to the field of social visibilit . The historical experience of social invisibility or the mandato y closeting once required of gay and lesbian life has sometimes led to a conflation of LGBTQ+ visibility with actualisation, agency, and self-determination, as if being seen could in itself secure political presence or validity. Fahd's work, however, or at least our experience of it, focuses on the field of epresentation not because of its emancipatory potential but rather because photography's complex practices and counter-practices are a rich resource for understanding the pervasive operations and impacts of social power in liberal regimes that promise to recognise all equivalently.

Responding to the ubiquity of visual media in contemporary social worlds, Fahd's work investigates both the elective and the constrained aspects of visual self-fashionings, particularly for those subjects more commonly consigned to culture's peripheral vision. Women, minorities and LBGTQ+ folk all know what it is to fall in and out of visibility across the life course, being sometimes the fetishised focus of attention, while other times ignored.

Using the relational methodology built into portrait photography, which connects photographer and subject, Fahd's experimental practice simultaneously amplifies the personal and impersonal dimensions of social subjecthood. So common across her body of work that it stands as something of a signature gesture, Fahd often relinquishes her position behind the camera as photographer to appear before it as its vital but obscured subject. From the 100 portraits of *Hiding—Self Portraits* (2009-10) where Fahd appears in a series of domestic scenes with her face concealed by everyday but out of place objects through *Plinth Piece* (2014) where she strikes eight statuesque poses, the hero-artist rendered cartoonish by being almost completely covered in blobs of coloured modelling clay, to *You Look Like A…* (2016-17) where she ghosts each portrait in a series of young men by digitally sporting their beards, Fahd puts herself in the frame of vision in order to draw our attention surreptitiously to the machinic quality of the unattended camera. Although as modern citizens we are primed to value individuals over institutional systems, agency over structure, voluntarism over determinism, in *Ecdysis* it is the automatism of Fahd's camera that continues to capture the more impersonal, less individualising, representational capacity of photography to build social trust.

Taking as its title the zoological term for shedding an old skin or outer cuticle, *Ecdysis*—like much of Fahd's earlier work—mitigates the power diffe ential classically posited between the subject and agent of photography. Again, Fahd partially includes herself in the field of vision, this time as a pair of distincti ely tattooed arms attempting to wrest a blue car-coat from each of her subjects. Not drawn from any recognisable archive of everyday bodily techniques, the prospect of the artist strenuously working to separate each subject from the same coat resists interpretation. While it could be turned to the service of arguments about gendered self-presentation and

social camouflage, mo e importantly, the coat stands for nothing. Distracted from the business of being photographed by the MacGuffin of the s uggle for the coat, each subject is transformed in those three minutes into a richly interpretable fluid po trait, the camera capturing a succession of facial expressions that seemingly speak to the determination/disappointment/grief end of the affecti e register.

Sustained for the duration of a pop song, each of Fahd's video portraits captures sequentially facialised expressions that seem emotionally recognisable but not narratively coherent beyond the familiar transitional verse—chorus—bridge patterns that we associate more with music than visual art.

The personalising familial likenesses that initially seem central to ahd's practice are less significant or epresentationally impactful than the established rules of portraiture aesthetics via which Fahd's subjects lay a collective claim on visibility. The opposite of social media selfies that wo k in the service of microcelebrity, Fahd's portraits profile the social field itsel , the temporal ground against which we come in and out of figur - tion as agents of feeling and subjects of change.

Although they invite unbidden empathetic response in the viewer, the video portraits do not point to a singular story or identity. Experienced as a series, they suggest instead the commonality of gendered personhood as a conduit for experiences that feel personal but are most meaningful to the degree that they are shared by others who remain unknown to us. This principle of impersonality is the basis for sociality be ond the family. After all, it is what keeps us open to others in the first place.
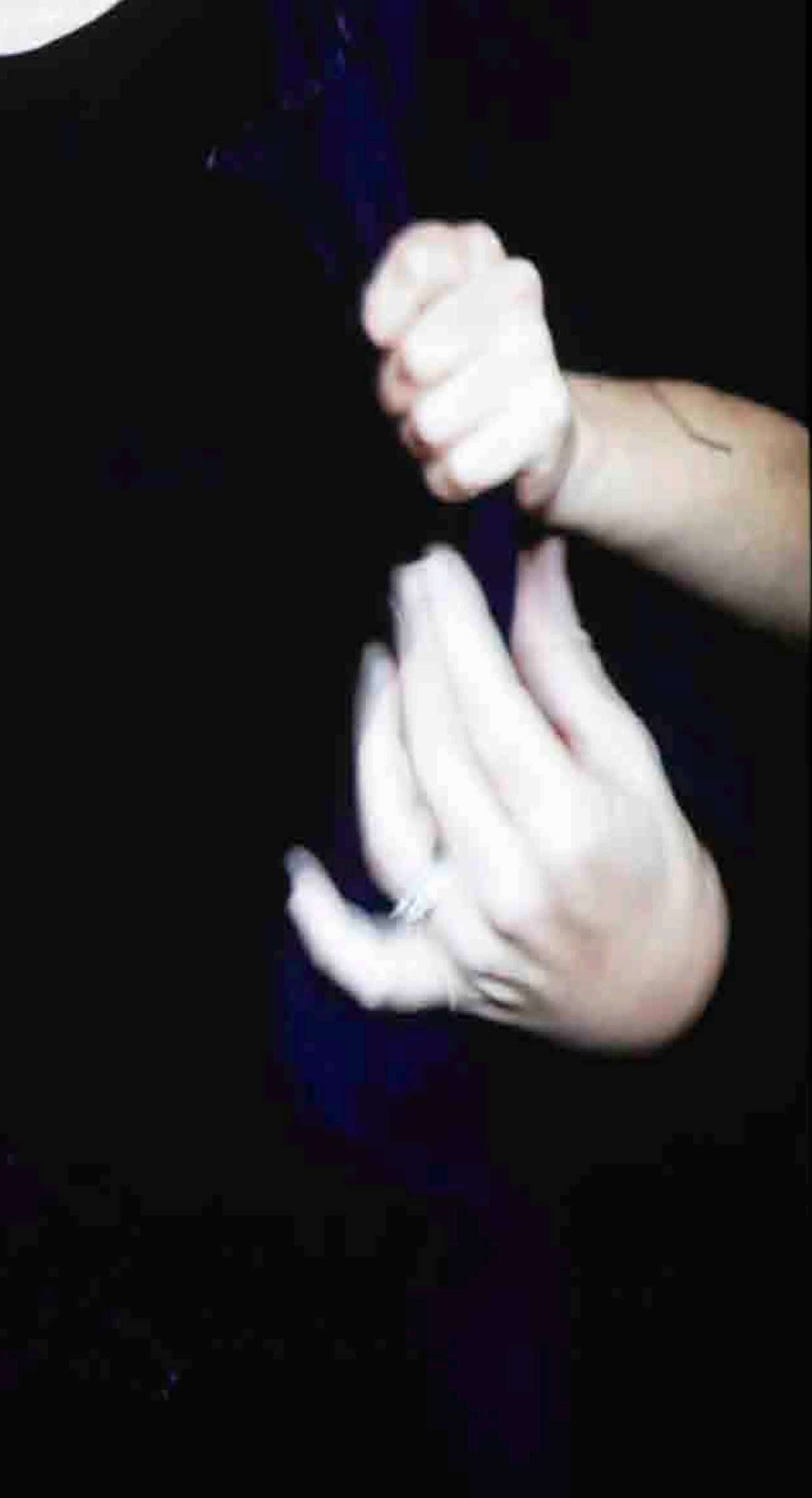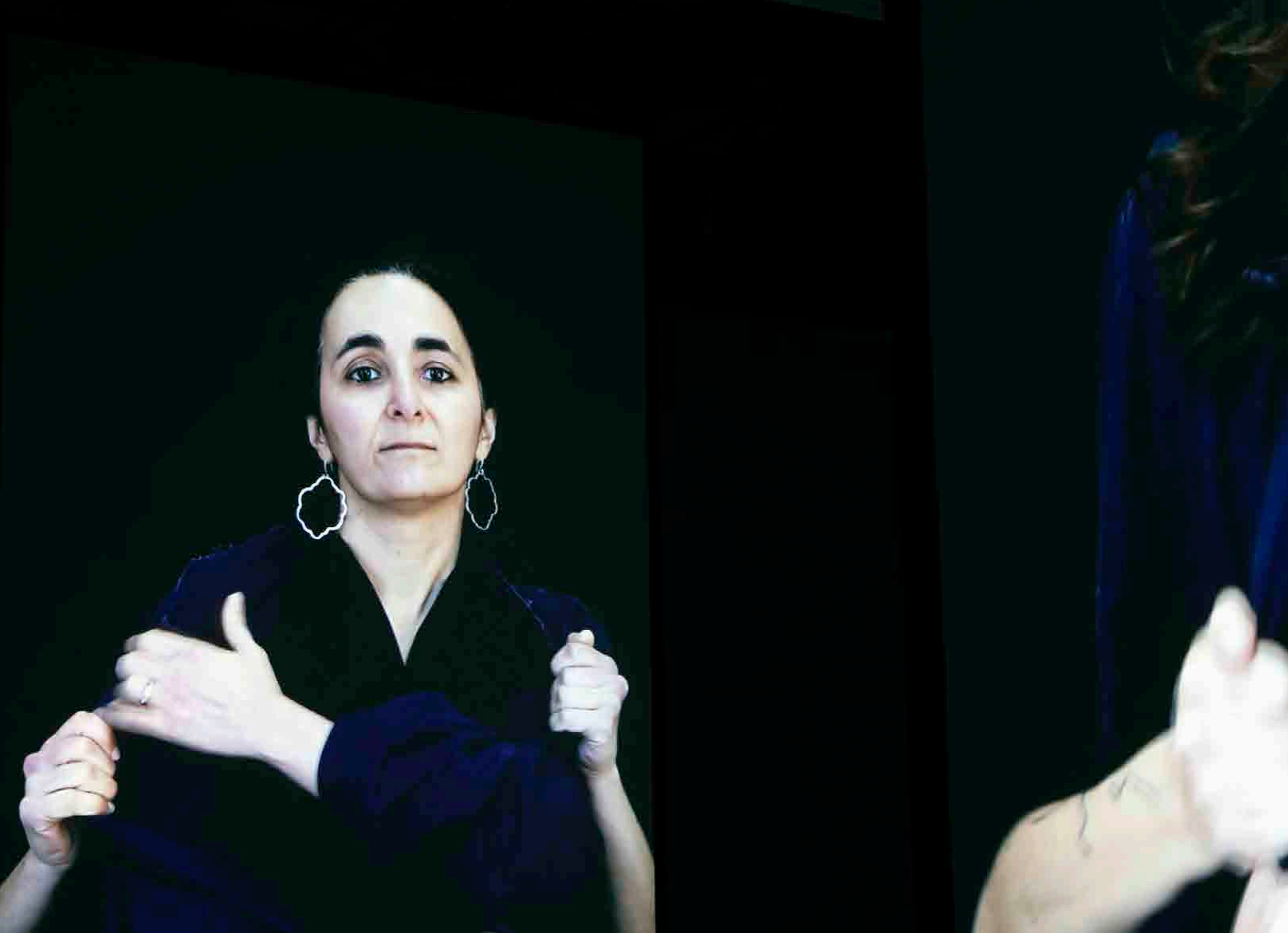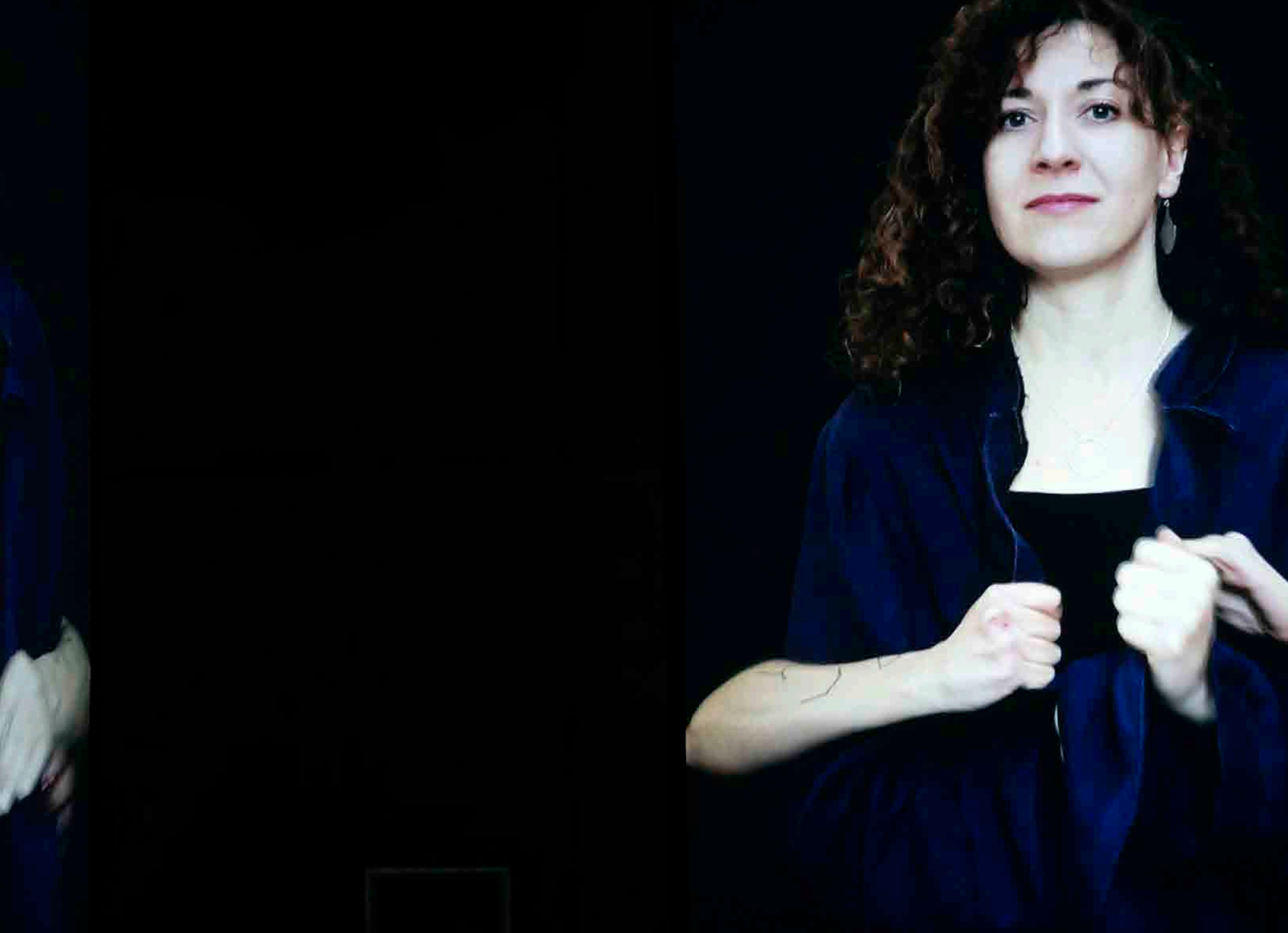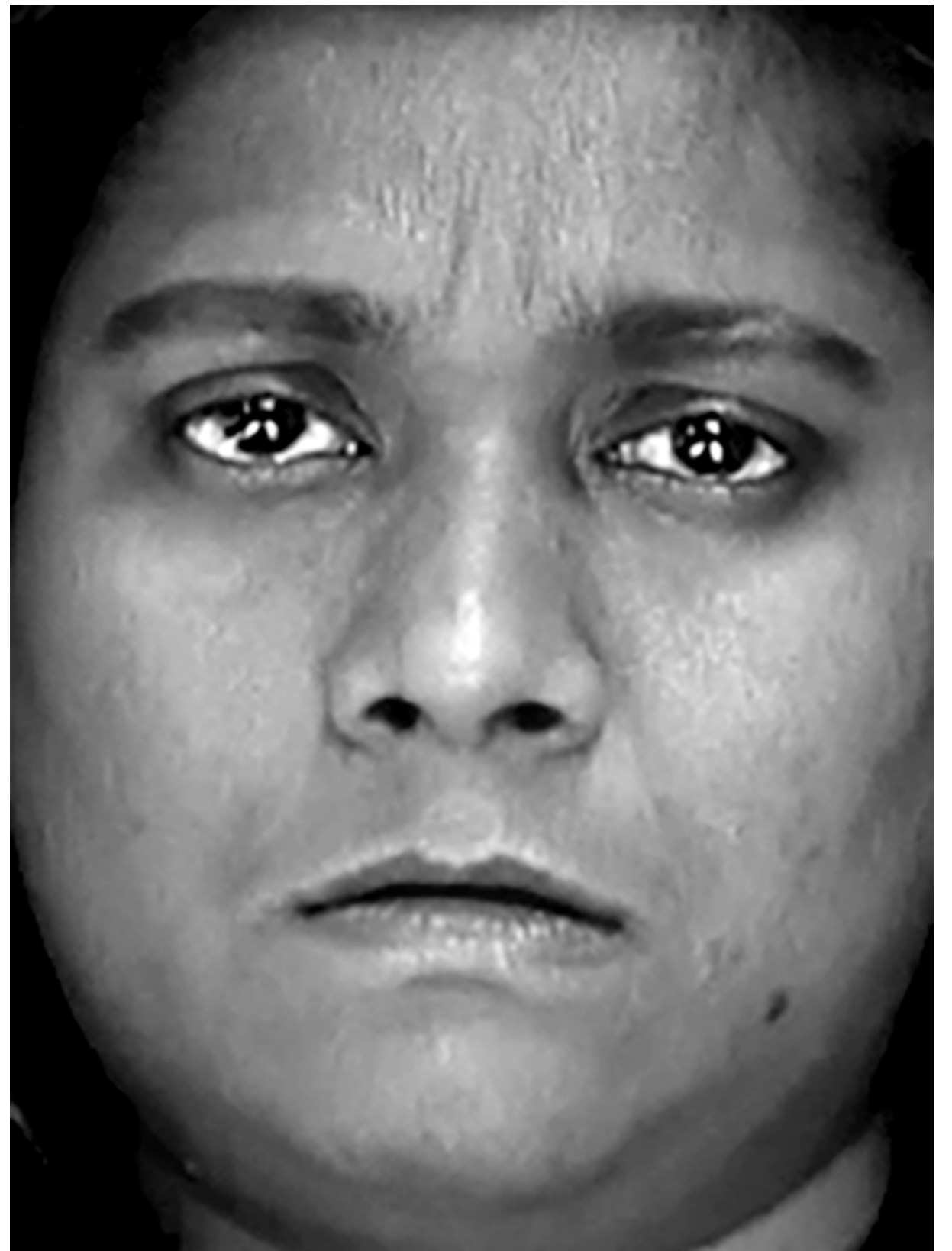
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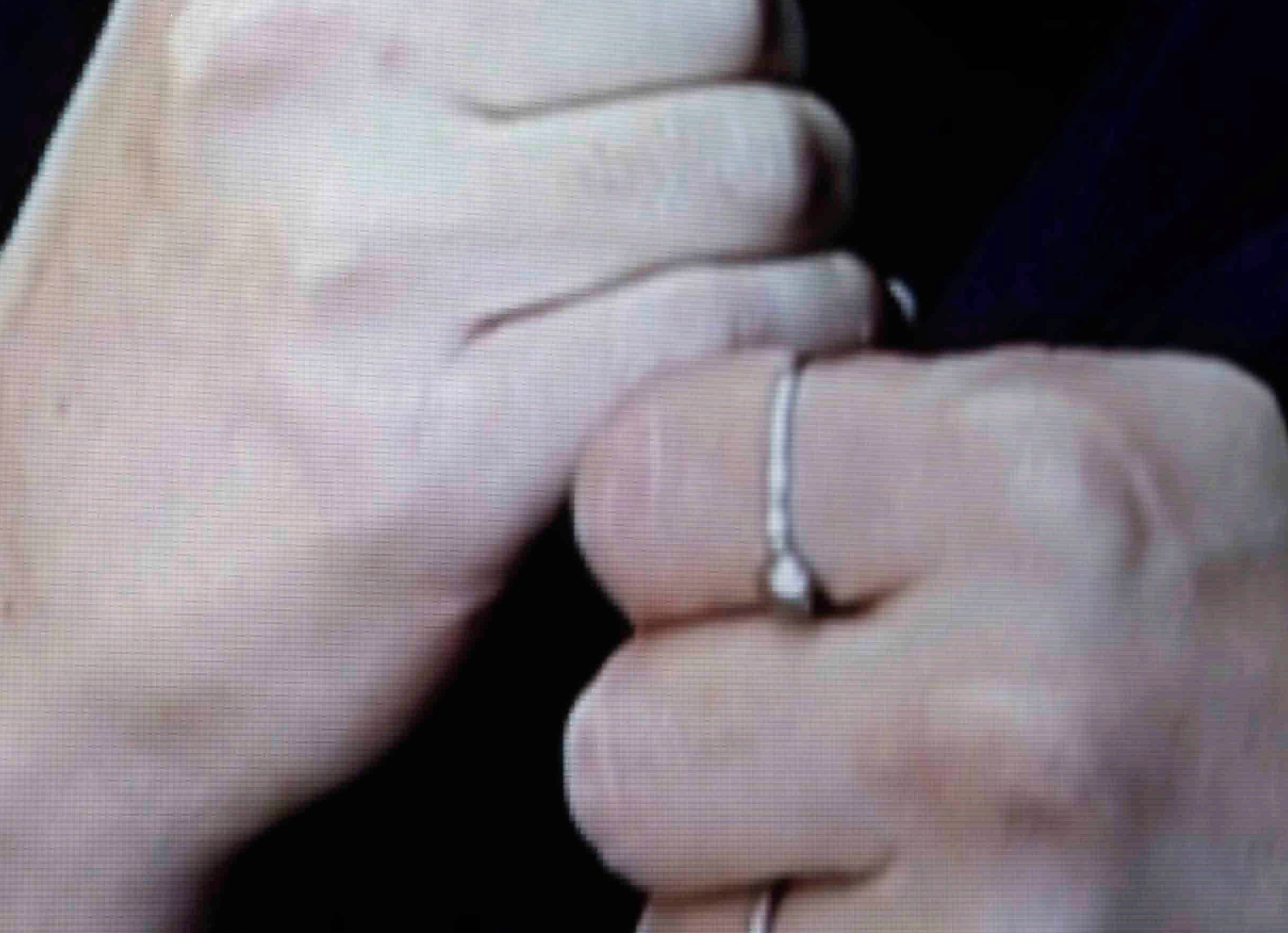
ECDYSIS

Daniel Mudie Cunningham

The sensuality of behind-the-scenes power: the art of making the other disappear.
That requires an entire ritual.
– Jean Baudrillard

Women run in an ominous woodland setting. Their pa tial nudity is concealed by grass skirts that pad their elfin forms with mythic infe ence. Interiority is made flesh as the weight of the crushing world recedes from view. Cherine Fahd's dreamlike series *A Woman Runs* (2003) conveys an affecti e process of release in motion. These enigmatic photographs, a key element of Fahd's early oeuvre, invoke private rituals of ecdysis through a feminist recasting of avant-garde performance and spirit photography.

Though it is used in scientific and oological contexts to explain a process of growth through the shedding of skin for a reptile, ecdysis could just as easily apply to a significant act of creative transformation. The genesis of Cherine ahd's *Ecdysis* (2019-21) dates to 2018 when the artist, then in her mid-forties and feeling very much like she had hit a mid-life/mid-career impasse, dreamed up a proposal for a new project. It began: '*Ecdysis* is born from a human desire for change, for reinvention, and a total rethink of the creative possibilities available artistically at this defining mid-ca eer moment. I can continue as I always have, or I can "shed my skin" and reinvent what the next twenty years may look like.'

An artist's career is like a slow boiling pot for a frog. Lifespans resist measure when an end is unknown, and yet, somehow, a mid-career awakening can come like an existential jolt against the ever-warming waters of comfort and convenience. Becoming mid-career is to be certified with maturity and achie ement at the same time it points to age as a creeping barometer of obsolescence – especially when gender is thrown into the mix. Myths of male genius are bolstered with age. Conversely, invisibility is a cloak bestowed by the clock for women and gender diverse minorities.

Having established a track record as a photographer whose work consistently challenges dominant perceptions of portraiture, Fahd's vision of ecdysis was one that saw her expand her practice in a move towards live performance, as seen in *A Proxy for a Thousand Eyes* (performed at the Sydney Opera House in 2020). Ephemeral actions transcend quotidian life in Fahd's photogenic world and act as a place where she can hide in plain sight.

Since her series *Hiding (*2009-10), Fahd has been secreting herself within familial tableaux of her own staging. Over 100 consecutive days, Fahd toyed with self-portraiture by concealing her face with various items found around the house as she went about domestic and maternal labour. Sheets, shirts, towels, and other fabrics turn into veils that make her both a saint and ghost in her own home.

During art school, Fahd majored in painting and dabbled with sculpture. This helps

explain how she mediates the human body as a classical monument with abounding references to art history. Two bodies of works made concurrently, *Plinth Piece* (2014) and *Shadowing Portraits* (2014-16), incorporate the formal staging device of the white plinth to treat the body as figurati e sculpture. For *Plinth Piece* she playfully posed for the camera, only to disguise her form with the application of children's modelling dough to prints that were then rephotographed for a series of prints. The black putty applied to one of these prints, shadow study, obliterates her body as self and shadow merge into a single fleshy form – a body double for the oid.

Fahd silhouettes others for *Shadowing Portraits*, a series depicting reputable Australian artists and curators with a known relationship to photography and for many – like myself – to the artist. Fahd inserts herself into the scene, lurking behind each subject as they pose, her mimicry visible through an uncanny doubling of limbs. The cu vature of each body expands as Fahd's barely hidden form penetrates their space. By shadowing the other, Fahd gives her subjects a double life or parallel reality that is controlled from behind and in front of the camera.

Created during a residency at the Clothing Store Artist Studios at Carriageworks over 2019-20, *Ecdysis* inherits the formal logic of the *Shadowing Portraits*. Forty-four female identifying subjects were invited to participate. They include famil , friends, and artworld peers alongside several strangers who responded to a call out on Instagram. In the attention economy of social media, shadowing is now enacted digitally by 'followers' online.

Culturally and generationally diverse, each participant for *Ecdysis* is seated facing the camera. In a wink to the grass skirt of *A Woman Runs*, each is given a blue jacket to wear over their black attire. Discretely, Fahd takes a seat behind each woman, hidden from view. As in the *Shadowing Portraits*, her form conjoins with her subjects. At first like a hug, she reaches around their bodies and a doubling of arms recalls that of a Hindu goddess. In the ensuing three-minute action, Fahd attempts to disrobe her subjects. Instructed to face the camera, gazing directly at the lens, their intense stillness is ruptured by the tussle of two bodies waging a silent war.

Performed before the COVID-19 pandemic, *Ecdysis* commenced as a metaphor for psychic transformation at the service of touch. A process of shedding manifests as a trust exercise, untapping a reservoir of affect. ahd fashions public intimacy for the camera as a choreography of soft power. Each woman responded diffe ently by revealing personal pain: 'I should warn you, I haven't been touched for a very long time,' disclosed one. Others entrusted Fahd with accounts of love and loyalty, loneliness and loss. Wordlessly, the residue of their experience is emotively framed by a shared ritual of shedding.

Presented for Liveworks Festival of Experimental Art as a large-scale three-channel video installation, each portrait becomes deific at scale. nitially, *Ecdysis* incorporated a live performance component. Fahd had planned a nightly ritual of 'public intimacy' performed with strangers wherein the shedding action would be repeated as a live event within the installation of video portraits. It became clear ahead of the festival that the performance element, based as it was on human touch, could not proceed.

At a time when so much creative labour is suspended along with our ability to gather as a community, it is necessary to acknowledge the spark of liveness intended for this project as it enters the archive. Forming out of the current moment is a storehouse of knowledge built on sensory contact and the consequences of its deficits. *Ecdysis* shows that with necessary renewal comes great connection. What good is having skin if it can't be touched and touch others?
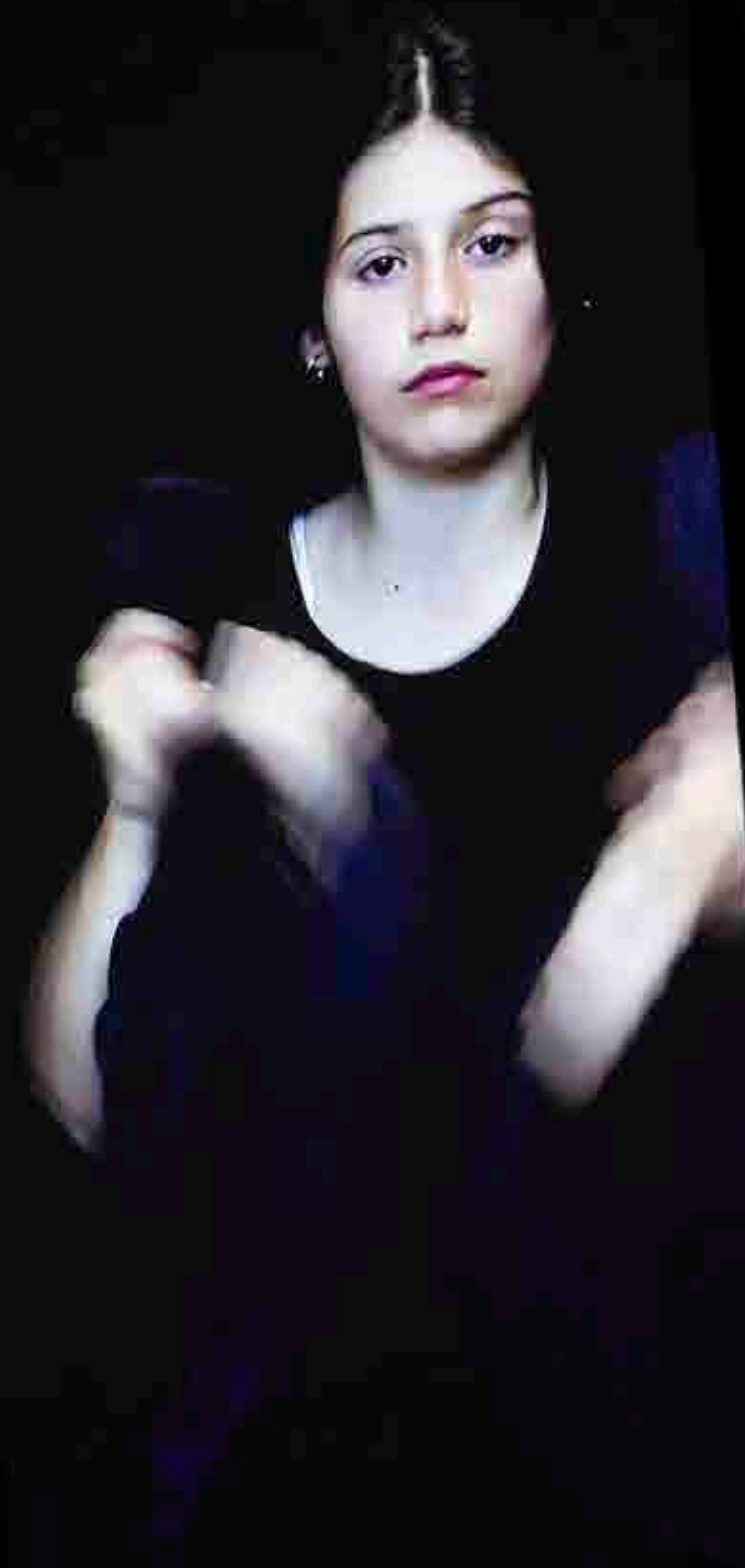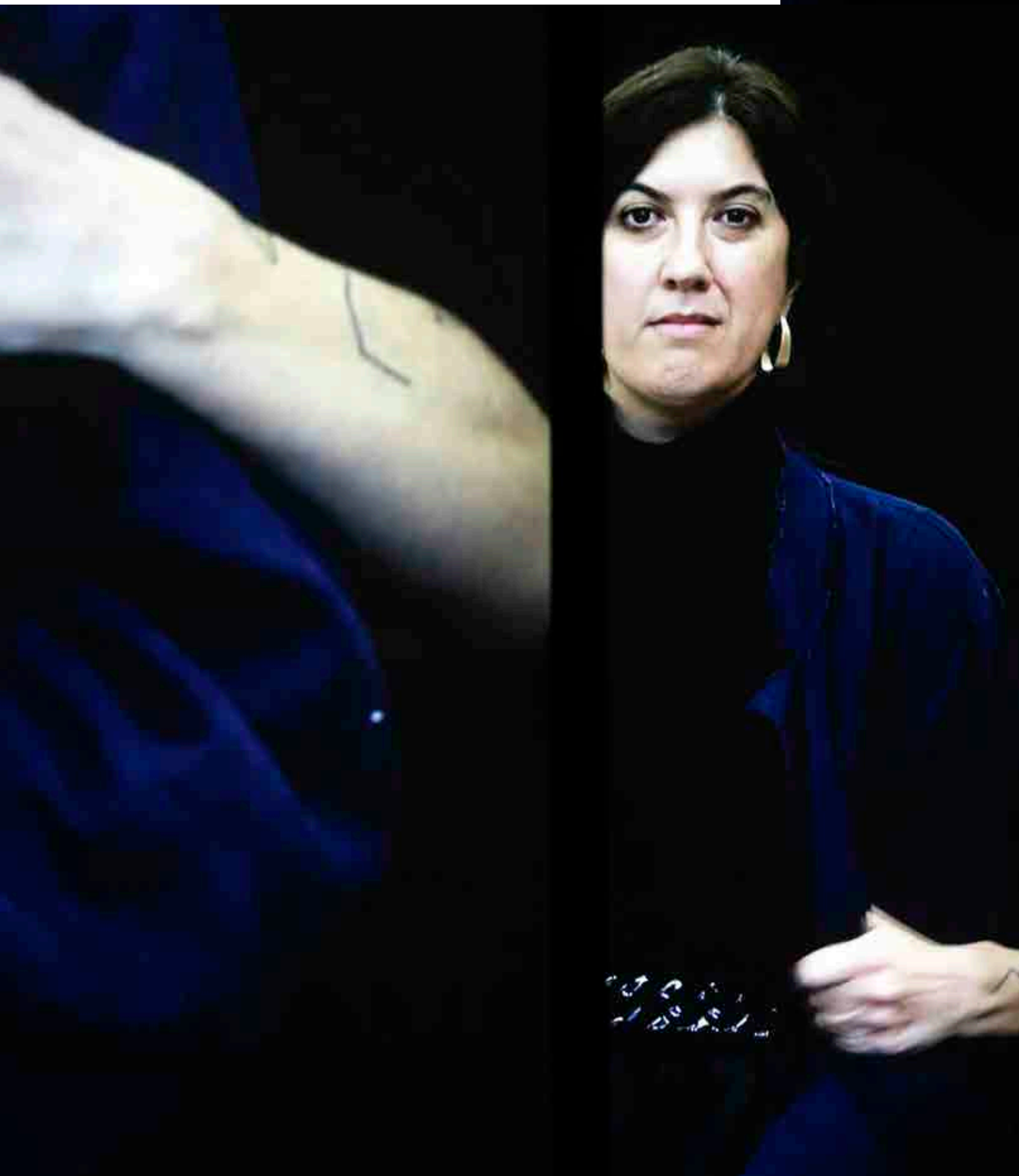
Not Fighting, Sparring

Interview with Jeff Khan

Jeff Khan Your work often incorporates your own presence—it is either directly visible through the placement of your body within the frame, or implied through other kinds of interventions. For me, this feels like a drive to complicate the supposed objectivity that has long been associated with photographic images. Can you tell me a bit more about this drive in your work, and about how it plays out in *Ecdysis* (2019-21) in particular?

Cherine Fahd By being in the frame, I can visualise an undoing of the convention requiring the photographer to stand behind the camera. I can also capture the processes of portraiture. Rather than stand behind the camera, I like to be with the subject in front of it. Although I may be hiding behind something or someone, this simple move from behind to in front changes relations. The po trait goes from being about someone to being about the photographer and subject coming into contact.

I think when you point a camera at a person or a thing that pointing entangles you (the photographer). For example, we assume that the portrait is about the person it portrays. I don't think that's the case at all. The photographer brings a vi wpoint and an agenda.

My drive isn't to complicate objectivity as much as responsibility. I have a responsibility to show up, to know how it feels to be in front of my own lens. Before I point a camera at another person, I must

be able to know how it feels to be photographed by me. Have I subjected myself to my own demands? Photography, rather than the photograph, is about that contact.

Jeff *Ecdysis* began with your call-out for participants. What were you seeking with this? Can you describe that process, and offer some eflections about the response?

Cherine I made a call-out on Instagram in 2019: "Wanted: women with dark hair and dark eyes to collaborate with me on a project." It was the first time I have done that. I usually work with people I know: friends, family, and colleagues. For *Ecdysis*, I wanted to continue to do that, but to add strangers to the mix. I worked with strangers in my very first p oject, *Operation Nose Nose Operation*, in 1999 in Beirut, Lebanon. But I hadn't done so since. I needed a lot of women and the call-out for dark hair and dark eyes was a way of asking for women to be my double and the darkness was a stand-in for racial appearance.

For weeks I received messages from women wanting to take part. I got a little notebook and started making appointments. Each portrait session was like planning for a date. Of the forty-four participants, twenty-three were new acquaintances. It was a somewhat random process – some women were Instagram followers, but others had received the call-out from

friends. Daughters brought mothers and mothers brought daughters. Friends came with friends and relations. It was an extremely sociable process.

Jeff The way ou filmed each po trait involved yourself and each subject performing the action in front of the camera, for three minutes at a time. In this situation, the camera becomes a surrogate for both yourself—the artist, creating the work—and for the viewer of the work. The uncanny effect in th final po traits is that each subject seems to be gazing directly at us as we watch them struggle with you. Did you have a conscious intention in setting up this dynamic?

Cherine Their gazing' at you, the viewer, was intended. I worked this out when I filmed the firs woman, Sophie, my cousin. On holidays from university, I asked her to help me to nut the performance out. During the first pe formance I gave her little to no instruction on where to look. When we watched the footage back, she was looking all over the place, a bit lost. She looked at her hands and downwards mostly, but in an instant, she looked up and made eye contact with the camera. In that second, she was commanding.

Jeff And did the resulting video portraits reveal something to you that you hadn't consciously intended or anticipated at the work's inception?

Cherine Making portraits with people always reveals something unintended. I welcome this. What I love about working with others is what they bring to the project. Collaborating opens my work up beyond my initial idea. This opening' produces knowledge. As such, each of the women 'felt' diffe ent to touch. When I sat behind them and rested my head on their backs to begin wrestling off the jacket, I was attuned to my body feeling their movements and rhythms. The e were ripples, textures, flutters, pauses, for exa - ple. In the three-minutes, I could register hard, soft, strong, weak, light, heavy, unmoving, wispy, giving, taking, wanting, needing, free, constrained, at ease, guarded. Are these 'moods'?

I work iteratively. With each repetition I gather more information, more knowledge, more understanding of what I am doing. What I understood after forty-four repeats is that being two bodies entangled in a game for three minutes is diffe ent every time. And it is as much about what the camera captures as what the camera fails to capture.

Jeff The central p emise of each portrait, the subject's struggle to keep the jacket on while you

attempt to remove it, is imbued with a sense of subtle violence. But it also strikes me as quite tender, a kind of symbiosis between tension and release.

Cherine I became aware of this in time. I didn't start the project thinking 'I want this to be both tender and violent,' but I recognised that was how it read. The first four p formances, with Sophie, Serina, Gilda (my mum), and Emi, revealed this. At first, this bothe ed me. I didn't want the women to look (or feel) violated. Tenderness I am at ease with, but the violent gesture made me uncomfortable. But I also understood that it was implied subtly in the struggle and that this ambiguity was the strength of the work. I also realised that the three minutes we performed was the duration of a boxing round. I love boxing as a sport – not watching it as much as doing it. I used to box for years, not fighting, but sparring. At the school I trained at, we sparred in a ring for three-minute rounds. For ninety-minutes, we would rotate through the group of about six to eight boxers, fighting each other for th ee minutes. It was tough and affectionate, ne er aggressive, always controlled. That is what *Ecdysis* is. Exacting and restrained.

Jeff The installation of *Ecdysis* magnifies each portrait to substantially larger than human scale. The subjects tower above us, in a way that for me brings to mind ancient statuary—images of gods and warriors from classical mythology.

Cherine The scale pe forms a deification. I want each of the women to appear larger than life, to tower over us. At that scale everything is amplified – their vulnerability, strength, eroticism, uncertainty, resistance, and willingness. Also, the entangling of two bodies was influenced y my travels to India in 2018. Everywhere I encountered images and statues of Hindu gods and goddesses. I was drawn to their many arms. I wondered what it would be like to have a multitude of limbs. I've often thought I would like to have two pairs: one pair of arms to function in the world, to be the doer, and the other pair to hold onto me, to act as the arms of care to keep me safe.

Jeff *Ecdysis* commenced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has since complicated all of our physical and social relationships, especially as they relate to touch and its (now lengthy list of) discontents. Has our post-pandemic reality changed your view of the work? And how has it influenced subsequent works you've created?

Cherine *Ecdysis* performs contact through physical proximity. The bodies a e in close contact, but the faces move in and out of ambivalence. It's

strange how the pandemic, especially social distancing, has exaggerated the contact aspect of the work. Given we had to postpone it and then cancel the live performance because it exacted too much contact between my body and the bodies of strangers, it's hard not to read the work through the pandemic lens.

Certainly, *Ecdysis* has influenced other wo ks, like *Held* (2021) and *A Proxy for a Thousand Eyes* (2020). Both of these works are interconnected with Ecdysis. Held is a ten-channel video work where I can be seen embracing other people. We stand on a rotating stage like statues. We hug – that's it. The chia oscuro lighting illuminates us as we turn. Again, a simple gesture made meaningful by the elimination of close contact during the pandemic. *Held* visualised my longing for the embrace of those I love, but also the inadvertent touch we receive from strangers on the bus or at a party on the dancefloo .

A Proxy for a Thousand Eyes (2020) was developed for the Sydney Opera House in direct response to the pandemic and to the social distancing protocols. You were part of that performance, Jeff. Despite the plastic that separated us, we were able to act in ways we otherwise wouldn't. For example, we kissed tenderly on the lips and rubbed noses. Had the plastic not been between us, would we have done so even in ordinary times? Performing with others, in close contact, seems totally reckless in these times, whereas pre-COVID, it was built into performance. By that, I mean that the body and performance are inseparable.

CHERINE FAHD
ECDYSIS

Ecdysis was performed *with*

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