

Asylum inmates and asylum seekers in Israeli photographer's AU exhibit

By **Lisa Traiger** - November 11, 2019



Michal Heiman, Plate 34, My Self, 2013. Digitally manipulated readymade and stamp on a photograph by Dr. Hugh W. Diamond, Surrey County Lunatic Asylum, London, 1855. Photo courtesy of Michal Heiman

The black-and-white photo from 1855 shows a young woman with long hair, parted in the middle and draped over her slightly curved shoulders, her mouth unsmiling, her gaze direct.

“I was stunned. I thought I was looking at myself, my 16-year-old self,” Tel Aviv-based multimedia artist Michal Heiman said of when she first saw the photograph. “It was me.”

She found that photograph, labeled “Plate 34,” in Jewish and medical historian Sander Gilman’s treatise, “The Face of Madness; Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography.”

The photo became the inspiration for Heiman’s latest project, “Radical Link: A New Community of Women, 1855-2020,” which is on view at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center through Dec. 15.

It offers a series of still and video portraits of women and men reflecting the guise that stunned Heiman nearly a decade ago and set her on a path to delve into 19th-century insane asylums for women — and what they mean for us today.

Her goal, “time travel,” as she calls it, is to bring about a social or cultural change in current society.

“Plate 34” recalls a period when the then-developing field of psychoanalysis used the early technology of photography to identify, categorize, diagnose and, ultimately, provide a reason to incarcerate those who suffered from mental illness.

Heiman noticed that later drawings were made of some of those same photographs, yet the artist changed the demeanor of the subjects. In one drawing, the direct gaze was adjusted downward, the hands contorted, a partially hidden necklace became a cross and the caption stated a diagnosis: “religious melancholy.” This shifts the diagnosis from the real demeanor of the subject in the photo to a mediated one, sketched by the artist.

This intrigued and disturbed Heiman as she considered vast photographic collections of patients in 19th-century asylums and compared them to present-day tracking of political asylum seekers.

Using money she received from the Israel Museum's first Shpilman International Prize for Excellence in Photography, Heiman set out to photograph people in the guise of these women held in 19th-century asylums.

First, she made the checked dress that the subject of "Plate 34" wore. Then she invited people from all walks of life to her south Tel Aviv studio, to pose and she shot a range of photos meant to engage the viewer in a series of questions about time, gender, space, race, psychological institutional practices, asylum seekers and the line between art and madness.

"I decided to go to the 19th century, to penetrate through photography this world," Heiman said at the gallery opening last week. Photography, she said, was "a tactic" for going back in time and for re-envisioning a new community for the 21st century.

"These photos of women from the 19th century give voice to women who had no rights over their bodies, their children, their lives," she said. They resonate still, reminding us that women continue fight on many fronts for full rights and access today.

On the top floor of the museum, the results of Heiman's seven-year, and still continuing, journey into the past unfolds. There are "ready-mades," borrowing from a concept of found art initiated by Marcel Duchamp: Diamond's and other's photographs re-framed and hung, sometimes with a notation or marking added by Heiman.



Noureldin Musa, asylum seeker, photographer, lives in Toronto, 2015. Photo courtesy of Michal Heiman

The artist also tweaks psychoanalytic practices with faux diagnostic tests —remember ink blots and playing cards showing faces expressing various emotions, which psychologists used to diagnose and categorize patients? Heiman made her own. Called M.H.T., the Michal Heiman Test, one in the series includes the following warning: “Contains graphic and distressing material.”

Another is titled “My Mother-in-Law: A Test for Women.” Displayed in glass museum cases, these tests subjugate the diagnostic practices of psychologists and psychiatrists with their playing-card like photos of faces, assessment sheets and sharpened pencils and their arch queries and investigative topics.

For the large portraits, Heiman invited some members of the Israeli intelligentsia and cognoscenti — many are Heiman’s friends — artists, writers, critics, social activists. Most don the check dress, like Asmai Yohannes, who wears an African print headwrap with that dress and recalls Vermeer’s “Girl with a Pearl Earring.” She is an asylum seeker. Said Abu Shakra founded the Umm el ahem Art Gallery while Roe Rosen is an artist. Both men also wear the dress, challenging expected gender identity.

Heiman wants to force us out of our comfort zones, radicalize us to into reconsidering all those, women and men, who have been subjugated, then and today.

It raises questions: who are the gatekeepers, who are the asylum seekers, who are the artists, who the activists? Who would we be then, if we took Heiman up on her notion of time travel? And, ultimately, if Heiman’s work makes you uncomfortable, where do you stand? And what will you do to move forward to build a 21st century community that is not a utopia, but a realistic vision of a world for all.

“Radical Link: A New Community of Women, 1855-2020,” by Michal Heiman runs through Dec. 15 at American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington. Open Tuesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. – 4 p.m. Free. Visit american.edu/cas/museum.
