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Israeli artist Michal Heiman's solo show "Radical Link: The New Community of Women, 1855-2020" is in its last week at the American University Museum at Katzen Arts Center. (Photo by Athena Naylor)

ART GALLERIES AND MUSE...

In AU Museum exhibit, Israeli artist uses photography to span centuries while confronting questions of belonging

By Athena Naylor

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The American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center offers a powerful personal-political journey through the looking glass with Michal Heiman's solo show *Radical Link: The New Community of Women, 1855-2020*.

The exhibit, curated by Sarah Gordon of the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and on view through Sunday, Dec. 15, meditates on Heiman's use of the camera lens as a passageway through which boundaries of space and time dissolve. Heiman's multimedia art invites viewers to investigate questions of subjugation, identity, community and belonging through visuals that connect the past to the present, the familiar to the strange.



PLATE 34

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 (Courtesy of the artist)

Radical Link encompasses various projects Heiman has pursued since 2012, when the Israeli artist encountered a striking black-and-white photograph of a young woman in the book *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*. Posed in 1855 at the Surrey County Asylum in England, the woman looks warily at the camera in wordless objection, her hands in her lap. As Heiman told *Washington Jewish Week*: "I was stunned. I thought I was looking at myself, my 16-year-old self. ... It was me."

This moment of identification with a long-dead anonymous woman — whom she calls Plate 34 due to the picture’s placement in *The Face of Madness* — launched Heiman into a time-traveling venture. Through photography, Heiman endeavored to revisit the world of 19th-century asylums in order to reconsider this community of women of the past — alongside present-day communities of women and asylum-seekers unseen and suppressed around the world.

After re-creating the distinctive checkered dress worn by Plate 34 and other inmates of the Surrey asylum, Heiman invited friends, artists, writers, critics, social activists and contemporary asylum-seekers to don the costume and have their portrait taken. A selection of these images — on view in an expansive grid in the Katzen exhibit — show an array of unnamed sitters against an identical, dark gray studio backdrop. In these staged portraits, Heiman repositions the checkered dress as a symbol of solidarity, rather than a tool of compulsory conformity.



The “Radical Link” exhibition at the American University Museum through Dec. 15 includes 30 archival inkjet prints of portraits. (Photo by Athena Naylor)

One primary issue *Radical Link* considers is whether we can reimagine the concept of asylum in our current fraught era of immigration and emigration as one of refuge and sanctuary rather than detainment. How can we examine the often politicized concept of belonging? And more fundamentally, how can we use empathy and identification as a radical link, as Heiman advocates through her time-traveling community of women?

The political undercurrent of *Radical Link* is clear through Heiman’s terminology. She describes the desire to reimagine the communities of women represented by Plate 34 as a “right to return.” The phrase plays with both Israel’s Law of Return (the statute decreed in 1950 ensuring any Jew has a right to settle in Israel) and the continued fight of Palestinian refugees for their right to return to the land they were driven from 70 years ago. Heiman

also refers to her artistic return to the 19th-century asylum as an “infiltration,” reappropriating Israeli government terminology for asylum-seekers as a term of protest and community.



Michal Heiman, "Noureldin Musa (b. Bendisea, 1976), asylum seeker, photographer, lives in Toronto," 2015 (Courtesy of the artist)

Despite their uniform arrangement, Heiman’s portraits demonstrate a striking diversity. Some sitters look down or away from the camera; others engage the viewer directly. Hands rest on laps, support chins, carry pets and stuffed animals, or hold images that serve as masks. Sitters hide their faces with pictures varying from photographs of Surrey County inmates (in her self-portrait Heiman holds the face of Plate 34 over her own) to portraits of Frida Kahlo and drawings by other artists.

Small monitors in the Katzen exhibit show recordings of Heiman's earlier performance *Can You Help Me?* from her 2017 exhibit at Israel's Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, where she donned the checkered dress and engaged visitors in discussions about *Plate 34* and the other themes of her project.

Meanwhile, larger monitors show short films like *Plate 34 Line, London, 2016*, where Heiman filmed her daughter in the checkered dress riding the London tube, and *Doublecheck, 2016*, which presents a tour of the former Surrey County Asylum, now the Springfield Hospital in London. A third monitor plays her more recent short film *Female Infiltrators, Venice, 2017-2019*, which represents Heiman's expansion of the project to include considerations of 19th-century female patients of the San Servolo Asylum in Italy.

In *Radical Link*, photographs, films and display cabinets filled with primary materials comprise a visual record of an artistic practice whose foundation is ultimately conceptual rather than tangible or material. Photography, rather than an end unto itself, is a tool for Heiman to create imaginary realms in which to envision meetings of communities through space and time.



Michal Heiman, "Mask: detail from a photograph by George Charles Beresford, 1902 of Virginia Woolf (b. London, 1882-1941), writer," 2016 (Courtesy of the artist)

Before gallery-goers ever see the videos and other materials on the back wall of the exhibit, they're confronted with a desk covered with a scattering of books and records to peruse, including the exhibition catalog. If one reviews the catalog, the impressive theoretical depth of Heiman's work comes into clearer focus. Heiman's *Radical Link: A New Community of Women* not only confronts current political and social issues, but engages the fraught history of photography. Namely, Heiman challenges how the implied objectivity of photography was wielded over 19th-century patients; her work instead reveals the medium's ability to harness the imagination as well as its inherent role in how we — often misguidedly — perceive others as well as ourselves.

The abstract layers to *Radical Link: The New Community of Women, 1855-2020* may hinder its accessibility to those without the time to fully delve into Heiman's psychological time traveling. But this is not a serious detriment, as the exhibit can be appreciated from many different angles. Whether visitors are intrigued by Heiman's photography, videos or 19th-century source material, the exhibit's success is measured by the questions it raises, not the answers it offers.

Radical Link: The New Community of Women, 1855-2020 opened Nov. 9 and continues through Dec. 15 at the American University Museum in the Katzen Arts Center at 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW. Hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is free.



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