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Portraits and why people take them

Meet photographers featured in one LIC Arts Open show

by Josey Bartlett, qboro Editor

May 9, 2013

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ARTS, CULTURE & LIVING

PEOPLE
BEHIND THE
PORTRAITS

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photographers
featured in one LIC
Arts Open show

Clockwise from top left, Ananda Lima, Annalisa Iadicicco, and Junenoire Mitchell show their photography in "Strength of Character" at the LIC Arts Open show.

Clockwise from top left, Ananda Lima; Michelle Cheikin; Annalisa la Nadia Saburovwill show their photography in "Strength of Character Arts Open.

It's about people — where they live and what they stand for, or what they could stand for or appear to stand for.

“Strength of Character,” a group photography show, is one of the many exhibitions open for viewing from May 15 through 19 as part of the LIC Arts Open, a week in which most of Long Island City's art studios, stores, galleries and performance spaces open their doors to show off — not in a braggy way but in a “you might have not known our neighborhood had such a high concentration of artsy talent” way.

Many artists who don't have a designated studio space or opt to show elsewhere apply for curated group shows, as was the case for Queens artists Ananda Lima, Michelle Cheikin and Annalisa Iadicicco, and photography team Nadia Saburov, a makeup and design specialist, and Junenoire Mitchell.

These artists took a different approach to portraiture.

“We pulled these four proposals out,” Strength of Character curator and LIC Arts Open co-founder Karen Dimit said. “There's a dialogue between them instead of letting it be dissipated in a big show. They are all capturing an energy from the person or place. They speak to each other or are speaking a version of themselves.”

LIC resident Ananda Lima is delving into the world of mini celebrity with her exhibition “Covers,” one of the four photography series shown in “Strength of

Character.” She liked the idea that people could be a celebrity in their neighborhood for being a knitter or the best sandwich maker, or that a neighbor could be a YouTube phenomenon with one of those viral videos with thousands of views unbeknownst to anyone they live near.

Lima then thought about how “celebrity-celebrities” — the Jennifer Lopezes and Beyonces of the world — are presented to the public. Originally she wanted to photograph people in the neighborhood such as the fruit vendor or dog walker she walks by on a daily basis, but dressed up in suits and bow ties — a glamorized spin on neighborhood celebrity.

She ultimately decided to start her foray into analyzing micro-celebrity on a smaller scale, and that’s how “Covers“ was born.

Magazine readers and flipper-throughers know models and actors were not born with dark eye shadow and toned abdomens, but sometimes we forget because of the barrage of Vogue covers.

Lima’s photographs, 10-by-15 prints, capture her friends, other mothers who live in LIC. First, she photographs them in their everyday clothes and makeup. Then, without any makeover component, she has them do that stereotypical slack-mouth, sultry-eye pose seen on the cover of fashion rags.

It struck her how much that changed the viewpoint and how it seemed “normal” when it really wasn’t.

“Those poses can be so awkward,” Lima said. “He’s

holding her. She has her lips just lax. Who does that?”

Next she worked with a makeup artist and hair stylist to create the celebrity look.

The women in the photos look like different people. In both works they are beautiful — some with big eyes, or sharp features, and thin — but in different ways.

The juxtaposition allows the audience to think about the images we see, Lima said, and put in perspective the level of work that goes into that photography and the level of reality it conveys.

“It’s nice to think about these things to level up,” Lima said.

Michelle Cheikin began her series “Domestic Arrangements” with the intention of photographing her neighbor, but found herself more interested in the objects he chose to fill his apartment with.

“The interior settings allow for a personal view of someone’s private world,” Cheikin said.

It’s a different spin on the genre of portraits, because the audience never sees the subjects in the flesh; nevertheless, a lot can be inferred about them.

The picture of a bright pink hula hoop on a futon suggests a child and a photo of a storage room with old black-and-white photographs of movie stars

suggests a collector, someone who perhaps spends his or her nights watching “Chinatown” and “Casablanca.”

Cheikin, a Sunnyside resident who teaches digital photography at Hostos Community College in the Bronx, describes her works as quirky. As a teacher she is drawn to formal composition — movement, shapes, the golden rule of thirds — but at the same time she likes surprise.

“The movement of the hula hoop animates the scene and gives it movement,” she said.

A photo of a giant stuffed-animal cat is shot from below. Cheikin remembers her cousin playing with the toy when they were both children. The shot-from-below angle is used to convey that kid-like perspective.

Besides the personal tie, she likes the idea of capturing a moment in time. Most of the people who live in these places have moved on, and they have taken these objects, or the objects that meant something to them, with them.

In more recent works Cheikin continues to play with that idea of “time slowed down.” She photographs small businesses and documents their stories during a time when objects are being mass-produced for less and sold at bigger stores. Some of the small businesses have closed down since she documented them, just like some of her neighbors and relatives have moved on.

“This is a moment in time that was captured before it disappeared,” she said.

Annalisa Iadicicco combines photographs of her global travels with discarded metal and wood she finds around the corner from her apartment in LIC.

“I realized there was a connection,” Iadicicco said.

Whether she was in India with the nonprofit Artefacting, in Peru working with children who have moved to the city in search of jobs or on a farm near where she grew up by Naples, Italy, she saw corrugated metal.

People use this material for their homes or for pens for their livestock, and in Long Island City, scraps of it are discarded while constructing the skyscraper condominiums that are springing up around the neighborhood “like mushrooms,” Iadicicco said.

So in Iadicicco’s eyes, the photographs she took — such as the one of a curious little girl who peeked around a curtain at home in a village in India to check out the visitors — were not complete until they were mounted on the metal or framed with a discarded window.

By connecting the material with the photograph, she completed the story of the setting, as well as pointed to environmental and social problems that can be further conveyed through the rusty materials.

ladiccio says it's personal as well. The materials remind her of the simpler and earthier life that she grew up in.

"It just all connects," she said.

About a year and a half ago, Nadia Saburov, a makeup and design specialist, and Junenoire Mitchell, a photographer, founded Studio 7 NYC, which specializes in headshots and commercial shoots.

On a daily basis they create images for fashion campaigns, but as they started sifting through the outtakes they discovered some uniquely candid shots.

"They had a spontaneous magical feel," Saburov said.

For example, the pictures of two models, a woman and man, reminded them of Tinkerbell and Peter Pan, respectively.

He conveyed a youthful feel while hovering slightly above the ground, Mitchell said. The woman, caught in that classic S-shaped flying pose of Tinkerbell with hair springing out in spiky points, reminded the duo of the little fairy from the classic fable.

They also found outtakes that reminded them of a king, a queen, Rapunzel and Dorothy from the "Wizard of Oz."

All the pieces in the show were unexpected, but for Saburov and Mitchell, who is the official photographer for the LIC Arts Open and will be capturing all the

different shows running next weekend, they looked like fairy tales.

“It’s the fashion version of childhood characters,” Saburov said. “No political undertones, just really, really fun, playful views of these characters.”

‘Strength of Character’

When: May 15 through 19, noon to 6 p.m., reception
May 15 from 6 to 9 p.m.

Where: Reis Studios, 43-01 22nd St.,3rd floor, LIC

Tickets: Free, (718) 784-5577