

Jocelyn Lee's photographs  
interrogate traditional notions about  
beauty, nature, women,  
& aging.

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by Debra Spark

authentic  
states



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*Riding the Apple Tree* by Jocelyn Lee

**j**ocelyn Lee didn't want to throw the flowers from her October wedding in the trash—the ranunculus were too gorgeous for that—so she put them in a tub of water in her backyard, not thinking about the temperature. They froze overnight then defrosted, changing shape and texture, turning, Lee remembers, into “something super beautiful and strange—part laboratory and part surreal science experiment.”

“This is a subject,” she realized.

Later, Lee started different tubs with her husband's sunflowers, seaweed from the nearby beach, blossoms from her property's dogwood, apple, and pear trees, and even a pomegranate. By day, the tub's water reflected the sky and also revealed subterranean layers, the pooled and exquisitely colored vegetative matter becoming increasingly complex.

Jocelyn Lee is not a still-life photographer. The work that has brought her recognition from the Guggenheim Foundation, as well as inclusion in major art museums and exhibitions at galleries stateside and in Europe, has always been portraits, often nudes, and frequently nudes in the natural world. Sometimes those nudes—draped on moss in a forest, hair tied to a tree, or even visually merging with the surrounding vegetation—suggest landscapes. But still life? No, that was something new.

And yet, Lee's backyard project clearly paralleled her portrait

practice at the time. In 2015, when she married for a second time, she had been photographing female nudes over the age of fifty-five, often—though not exclusively—in or near water.

**n**ow, five years after she married her second husband, the results of her twinned exploration of how time complicates (rather than eradicates) beauty have been published in *Sovereign*. The collection pairs Lee's post-wedding, decomposing still lifes with nudes of older women and an essay in which Lee pays tribute to her mother, a sensualist who lived comfortably in her body throughout her life, even finding a late life lover, after her husband died. Of the inspiration for the images, Lee (who is in her late 50s herself) says, “I use photography to help me understand things I don't understand and that I am curious about. I am looking for role models and a way to not find it limiting to be a woman in my 60s and 70s.”

The body is, of course, the source of all our experience. Everything comes down to it. For Lee, the body is a visual starting point, but also means to a narrative, allegory, or idea. As a younger woman, she used her body for art. She was a diver in high school and a professional dancer in the years between studying philosophy and studio art (as an undergraduate at Yale) and photography (as a graduate student at







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*Dark Matter 5 Sunflower and Sky* by Jocelyn Lee.





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*Sinking White Dahlia* by Jocelyn Lee.

Hunter College). She might have continued on with modern dance, but she “did not want to be the source of someone else’s expression,” as she says. She wanted to be doing the expressing herself. And to be doing so as honestly as possible: “For me, taking clothes off strips you down to the essential self, standing on the earth. This is what we are: a body standing on the earth.”

*This is the truth of the human condition*, her photos seem to say. What do we, as viewers, make of it? What do we make of it when we are looking at bodies traditionally hidden from public view?

In the early aughts, Lee received one answer while visiting with an internationally known curator—a man long supportive of Lee’s work. Back then, Lee shared a nude of Rita, a Holocaust survivor in her 90s, and the curator’s hand immediately shot out to cover the black-and-white image, an implied “ugh!” in his gesture.

Another artist might have been instantly disgusted with the curator’s response. *Here is a woman who has been through the worst of what the 20th century has to offer, and who has chosen to frankly reveal herself (save for a large Band-Aid over the number tattooed on her arm), and you find her too repellant to look at?*

Another woman might have raged about how men are all too happy to look at naked women when they are young and nubile (and offering themselves up as sexual objects) but not so much when they are old and depicted in a stance that suggests their own comfort or

pleasure, rather than someone else’s.

But Lee is much like her work: empathetic and complex, never happy with easy interpretations. She knew the man didn’t consider his gesture before he made it, that he’d simply been presented, as she puts it, “with too much information.” In the silence that followed his response, she suspected her worldly colleague was as ashamed by his instinctive reaction, as she was troubled. Men, after all, are as trained as women to view certain bodies as acceptable and others as unacceptable.

Even before her most recent spate of work, Lee’s artistic practice focused on bodies that were, in some way, vulnerable. One particularly compelling image (from her solo show *The Appearance of Things*, most recently exhibited in 2018 at London’s Huxley-Parlour Gallery) is of a woman with one beautiful round breast, standing in a forest, her legs sunk so deeply into moss that she might be a tree herself, her mastectomy scar an afterthought but plainly visible to the viewer. Another nude is of a heavy, sunburnt young woman, sitting on a brightly colored blanket before a hedge of daylilies, her body and the landscape’s lushness contrasting with the woman’s firm, somewhat inscrutable gaze, and the dark gap in the vegetation behind her, an indication, perhaps, of a cave of trouble.



# AR

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*The Bath* by Jocelyn Lee.

That these images are meant to be read as beautiful rather than about how cancer disfigures or society demands slimness is apparent. Lee's gaze is loving, but it is more than that. Her portraits reference Old Masters, and the images *they* found beautiful—Lee's nude of an older woman standing before crashing waves winks at Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, the orange-black lighting of a different night-time nude seems Caravaggesque, and Lee's multiple images of older women floating in the water (not to mention her general obsession with lush hair, often seen from the back) seems a clear nod to the pre-Raphaelites in general and John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* in particular.

**L**ee's nudes are often personal yet anonymous, identifying details of place or dress kept to a minimum, the focus on what all human bodies share: a frame, and flesh subject to aging.

In one photo that she eventually cut from *Sovereign*, "Nancy" stands next to her grandniece on an empty beach. The young woman's body is slim, her skin unlined and luminous, undeniably beautiful. Wind blows her hair across her face, entirely obscuring her features. Meanwhile, Nancy's face and body are fully revealed. The similarities between the women are plain—same frame, same curly hair—but Nancy's skin and body are textured by a life lived.

Unlike the grandniece, whose absolutely smooth, uniformly colored skin stands in opposition to the surrounding scene, Nancy appears apiece with the sand below and the ocean behind her. Time has written on one woman, and not yet on the other, and that is not a fact to be regretted but noted with an awareness of the merits of both youth and experience.

When she was younger herself, Lee sometimes photographed in anonymous interior spaces, as in the days when she found models through newspaper ads and later Craigslist. Back then, she'd simply meet strangers at a motel in Albuquerque or Portland or New York Chelsea's Hotel. In the photographs published in Lee's second book *Nowhere But Here*, the motel rooms' bare bones accoutrements and natural lighting give a Vermeer-like quality to images that include an older man naked save for his bunched, white underwear and oxygen tube, or a contemplative, older bearded man, his chest and arms covered with aging blue tattoos.

But more recently, and especially since she moved to Maine full-time in 2014—after living in Brooklyn for eleven years and teaching (for most of that time) at Princeton—Lee has photographed outdoors. Here, location can be more complicated, given the absolute privacy Lee requires to shoot her subjects. Her two-acre back yard has been a great plus in this regard.

"I approach photos a little like a choreographer," Lee explains. Also







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Wedding Flowers by Jocelyn Lee.





# Art

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*Raising the Cherry Tree* by Jocelyn Lee

perhaps like a filmmaker: she scouts locations and then considers her chosen space as if it were a stage set that a dancer will enter. Once her model is present, the “shoot” is, for both Lee and her subject, “weirdly contemplative and quiet,” Lee says. Though Lee works off an idea formulated before she composes, her images come together organically. Lee and her model work together till they have a suitable gesture or stance for the space. Lee finds herself telling her models things she first heard as a dancer: “Let your weight fall into the earth.” “Don’t hold your rigidity.”

One of Lee’s subjects in *Sovereign* is Katarina Weslien, an artist whose work Lee will showcase in a spring 2021 exhibit at SPEEDWELL projects, the Portland gallery that Lee established in 2015—a side endeavor that is side, in the way, parenting her two children, i.e., not side at all. (SPEEDWELL is now a gallery focused on exhibiting the work of female, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ artists.) Katarina is a breast cancer survivor, so she knew that posing for Lee would involve revealing her mastectomy scar. This did not bother her. Even so, she felt somewhat shy and wanted to be partially submerged in water during the photo shoot. In other words: no full-frontal nudity. In the moment of being photographed, however, Katarina felt so at ease, that she emerged from the water to fully reveal her body. “I felt really strong and beautiful,” she remembers. “I felt so good standing there.”

This is the truth, she had thought in the moment, *this is the truth of what I look like*.

Later, she says, “Not that I actually looked good,” an assessment (and bit of self-deprecation) that viewers of the image are unlikely to share.

As “Judith,” who Lee has been photographing since 1995, notes, Lee’s talents aren’t just about her ability to make others comfortable or her visual acumen. “When Jocelyn is working,” says Judith, “she is totally present to the moment. As a model, you kind of share in that moment.” Judith pauses and says, “Sharing in a present moment ... that is how you define intimacy, isn’t it?”

The answer? Yes.

There are layers and layers of things to admire in Lee’s photographs—visual echoes within individual images and correspondences across the body of work that emerge the longer you look, and suggest what a lifetime in a female body is actually about—but in the end, it’s Lee’s intimacy that compels.

Whether you observe Lee’s work in a book, a gallery, or at a museum, she gifts you the opportunity to look at an authentic self, not a nude so much as a person as openly herself as she can possibly be.

An exposure of an actual exposure, the very thing that historically degrades younger women manages, in Lee’s hands and when focused on mature women, to uplift us all. ■